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CORPSE CRUSADERS

THE ZOMBIE IN AMERICAN COMICS

CHERA KEE

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For Glenda and John

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Acknowledgments

While I was working on my first book about zombie media, *Not Your Average Zombie: Rehumanizing the Undead from Voodoo to Zombie Walks*, my research led me to a magazine-sized comic book from the 1970s called *Tales of the Zombie*. I started reading it, and something about Simon Garth, the titular zombie, intrigued me. Why hadn't I heard more about him? Looking around at the available zombie scholarship, there was a bit on *Tales of the Zombie*, but not much, and I was sad to discover that there wasn't much written on zombies in comics at all.

That didn't quash my love for zombie- and voodoo-themed comics, though. *Tales of the Zombie* led me to *Brother Voodoo*, which led me to Marvel's wonderful zuvembies. Later, I found *iZombie* as well as *Marvel Zombies*, yet I still couldn't find much on comic book zombies in academic books and journals—at least not the zombies *I* was interested in. There was plenty to be found about comics where the zombies were unthinking, ravenous flesh-eaters—basically gory plot devices—but there wasn't much on comics where the zombies were more than background decoration, where they were the stars.

While this seeming gap bothered me, nothing really happened until I was sitting in my office one afternoon with my then-student and now good friend, Adam Yerima. Adam asked if I had ever read one of the Milestone titles called *Xombi*. As they told me about it, something clicked. I was not only going to go out immediately and find every copy of *Xombi* I could, but I realized that someone needed to talk about this kind of zombie in comic books. And I had a sinking suspicion that that someone was going to be me. I can't thank Adam enough for sending me down a rabbit hole that afternoon; this book wouldn't be here if they hadn't.

In the years since that conversation, I have found support from a wide variety of sources as I researched zombies in comics. At Wayne State University, I have benefitted from strong institutional support, including the Josephine Nevins Keal Faculty Fellowship in the English Department and

a Career Development Chair from the university. I am also indebted to the WSU Humanities Center Resident Scholars program, led by the indomitable Walter Edwards, whose 2014–15 members helped me think through some of my earliest forays into writing about comic book zombies. The English Department chair, Caroline Maun, has also been a tremendous supporter during the writing of this book, and I am eternally grateful for my WSU colleagues Sarika Chandra, Lisa Ze Winters, and Jaime Goodrich, who are all exceptional scholars but who have also been amazing friends and supporters as I've written this book.

Outside of Wayne State, I want to thank the incredible librarians at the Stephen O. Murray and Keelung Hong Special Collections department at Michigan State University. I am also grateful to my fellow conference-goers at the American Studies Association, the Society of Cinema and Media Studies, and the Fan Studies North America annual conferences, as well as those at the Monstrous Women in Comics conference, for their feedback on various presentations that later became chapters in this book. I am also fortunate to be part of the advisory board for the Zombie Studies Network, and this book has benefitted from the amazing observations provided by my fellow Zombie Studies scholars at the Zombie Studies Network's *Theorizing Zombiism* conferences over the years. I also want to express my gratitude to Erika Kvistad, Line Henriksen, and Megen de Bruin-Molé of the Internet Ghost Collective, who inspire me academically and creatively.

In the middle of this project, I was fortunate enough to sign up for Laura Portwood-Stacer's Book Proposal Accelerator program. During the weeks when I worked on a book proposal for this book, I found the exercises Laura crafted helped me clarify exactly what I was doing—I had a much stronger sense of this book and its arguments as a result. I can't thank her enough for the program, especially because it also helped me write a proposal that led to publication. Similarly, my editor at the University of Michigan, Sara Cohen, has been an invaluable ally throughout the entire process of writing this book. Not only did she show an interest in this project when I was still unsure just how I was going to fit all my disparate ideas together, but she has shown me nothing but unconditional support at every stage of writing, revising, and publishing. I hope that all academic authors have the good fortune to work with someone like Sara during their careers.

I've had the tremendous honor to work with many remarkable students over the years, and this book is also the product of my interactions with them. In particular, I'd like to thank Adam Yerima, Shelby Cadwell, Matt

Linton, Kevin Ball, Steven Proudfoot, and Miranda Keyes. I'd also like to thank the students in my "Horror and Gender" classes in 2018 and 2021, who were always amenable to letting me work through my ideas about zombies in comics, as well as the students in my other courses where I managed to sneak zombie content in from time to time.

As I was trying to finish this book in April 2022, I ended up in the ER. After the ER doctors found something in an ultrasound, I underwent a month of testing. Eventually, we discovered that I had endometrial cancer. Thankfully, we caught it extraordinarily early. I was able to have surgery a few months later, and as of now, I am cancer free. Words really can't convey the deep gratitude I feel toward all the healthcare professionals who worked with me during those very scary months when this book was, honestly, the last thing on my mind. I appreciate their kindness, compassion, and dedication, and I am beyond grateful that I was fortunate enough to come out the other side and finish this book.

I cannot forget to thank my family. My partner, José Guzman, is my staunchest supporter and my best friend. I can't imagine a life without him, and it is so reassuring to know that no matter what, he has my back. Even though they'll never be able to read this, I also have to thank Mae and Jonesy, who are the two best dogs a person could ever ask for and whose soothing (often napping) presences were nearby during the research, writing, and revision of most of this book.

Finally, I also want to thank Glenda and John Kee. My late mother, Glenda, was the person who originally got me into comics back in the 1980s. This book wouldn't exist without her first showing me just how awesome reading comic books could be. My father, John, is the person who started my whole academic fascination with zombies. Dad has always had faith in me, and he tells me at least once a week that he is proud of me. I was very lucky to be born to these two people who encouraged me to be a creative and independent thinker and who have never made me doubt their love for me. Thank you so much, Mom and Dad.

Note to the Reader

The citations I employ for comics vary. Clear pagination isn't always used in comic books of any era. Where there is clear pagination, I have included page references. Where there is no pagination or potentially confusing pagination, I have not. Also, many comics writers and artists of the Golden Age were not credited on their stories. In some cases, we may know who wrote or drew a particular story; in some cases, we may have a good idea, but in many cases the creators remain unknown. I am using the information available on the comic itself, so if there was no explicit creator credit, I did not include one. The only exception to this is when there was credit present, and I can further clarify it (such as Siegel and Shuster being credited as Leger and Reuths).

Finally, this book examines comic book material spanning nearly a century from a wide range of authors and artists. Readers may find some of this material offensive. I am not condoning any of the views presented in the comics I discuss, but I do believe that to better understand both the history of comic books more generally, as well as the history of the zombie figure in U.S. pop culture, it is necessary to examine these materials and the contexts under which they were produced.

Introduction

A Brief (and Heroic) History of the Zombie in Comics

A pale blue face stares out at the reader. The irises of its eyes are bright red, and its skin is pulled tight around its face (fig. 1). Its mouth opens in a plea, and just above it are a set of wavering words splashed across the top of the page: "I Am a Zombie!" That is our introduction to Morto, the narrator of the final story in *Adventures into the Unknown* #50 from 1953. Yet Morto is no ordinary narrator. He is a novice zombie, forced to do the "most menial and grisly" tasks for his master, things he hates but that he "must do," for he "cannot rebel."[1]

Morto tells us that he once was a white, millionaire oil speculator named Roger Hanks who forced the residents of a lonely Louisiana bayou out of their homes. There was one holdout, old Mother Harana, who simply wished to remain in her cabin until she died, but Roger wouldn't listen to her. As he tried to tear her from her home, she died. Soon after, in the middle of the night, a group of zombies grabbed Roger, dragging him into the swamp and forcing him to the feet of their master. The reanimated old Mother Harana fed Roger a potion, and he became "one of the **undead . . . forever!**"[2] In the final panel of the story, rain strikes against a casket protruding from the ground. Morto speaks of the sweetness of his daily rest and the dread that fills him each night when he must arise, and the story ends as it began with his pronouncement: "I Am a Zombie!"

While talking zombies with skeletal faces might seem out of place to anyone familiar with American zombie films of the 1950s, "I Am a Zombie!" is typical for comics of its time. In the 1950s, gristly decomposing corpses who were either the bringers of justice or the end result of it were common in comics—as were talking zombies—but they weren't the only zombies one might see. From the beginning of their tenure in American comics, zom-

Fig. 1. Morto the zombie tells the reader about his pitiful plight in "I Am a Zombie!" (*Adventures into the Unknown* #50, Dec. 1953).

bies came in a variety of styles. Some were tragic figures, bowing to the will of their master; others were beings seeking revenge against those who did them wrong. Others were menacing creatures sent after a hero by a malevolent zombie master. Still others were heroes themselves. There were even space zombies, and all other sorts of variations on the zombie theme, but almost without fail, zombies existed in worlds where there was a clear sense of right and wrong—and while the zombies might have signaled what was wrong with the world, as often as not, they also helped to make it right. In comics, zombies often ended up reinstating the status quo rather than upsetting it.

In my previous book, *Not Your Average Zombie: Rehumanizing the Undead from Voodoo to Zombie Walks*, I identify *extra-ordinary* zombies

in U.S. popular culture: figures of resistance who unsettle normal life and push back against racial and gendered systems of oppression. My analysis of films and television from the 1930s to the 2000s found that *extra-ordinary* zombies were disruptive figures who could stand in for marginalized bodies resisting the systems that would try to silence them. These zombies have appeared in U.S. media far more frequently than one might expect. In television and on film, more often than not, audiences like their zombies with personalities and passion.

For instance, if one looks at the zombies of George A. Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005), one finds a postapocalyptic zombie army that marches against the fenced city of Fiddler's Green, a stronghold for the living, which throughout the film is presented as a racist and classist space where the (mostly white) *haves* live in splendor while the (more racially diverse) *have-nots* starve. When the zombies, led by the zombie Big Daddy, attack the city, it may be the living against the undead, but the zombies are also disrupting a system that held on to preapocalyptic systems of oppression. One can find zombies similarly disrupting the status quo in films such as *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943), *Voodoo Island* (1957), *Sugar Hill* (1974), *Les Revenants* (*They Came Back*, 2004), and *Zombie Strippers* (2008), among others.

Yet, in comic books, while readers can find a great many zombies who think, talk, and seek revenge on evildoers—just as you could in film and on TV—most zombies serve a far more conservative function: rather than challenging systems of oppression, these zombies work to stabilize the world for the living, implicitly keeping those systems in place. This made me wonder what impact the medium of the comic book itself had on the zombie.

I discovered that the earliest zombie stories in comics appeared in action/adventure and superhero stories in the 1930s and 1940s. As I'll discuss later in this chapter, horror didn't really become a stand-alone genre in comics until the late 1940s and early 1950s, meaning that zombies typically existed under an entirely different set of generic conventions early on. That made me ask: Did the zombie's early beginnings in these nonhorror genres color its characterization? Did a bit of the superheroic rub off on the zombie?

Some of the zombie's differences in comic books certainly grow out of the nature of the medium itself. Comic books are a nonindexical visual medium, and there was a relative lack of censorship in the 1940s and early 1950s when zombies were first appearing in comics—meaning creators had much more freedom than filmmakers in crafting their zombies. These factors led comic book zombies to develop into gruesome characters much earlier than zom-

bies in film.[3] In fact, I would suggest the plasticity of the zombie body in comics is almost entirely due to the medium itself. Yet, for all the variety of visual zombie types, zombie stories in comics have remained remarkably consistent, and while there have always been those stories that treat zombies as mindless figures who threaten the heroes or heroines, there have also been many stories where zombies try to right a world that has gone wrong.

This book sets out to explore the history of zombies in American comic books to address the formative influence that the medium has had on the character. I argue that beyond the ways that the comic book medium may have encouraged experimentation with the zombie's looks and its characterization early on, early appearances of zombies in superhero and action/adventure titles shaped the zombie in comics from the 1940s forward. Like superheroes, zombies in comics became tied to notions of justice, and this book seeks to analyze the ways these notions of justice and the reestablishment of the status quo have shaped the zombie in comics across a wide stretch of time, and in particular, the ways in which these ties to justice and maintaining the status quo have brought readers a number of heroic zombies over the years. When most of us think of zombies, we likely think of threatening figures who devastate ordinary day-to-day life: contemporary zombie media is full of apocalypses, after all. Yet, in comics, there aren't as many rebellious zombies—or even destructive zombies, really—as you might see in other media; rather, there are many zombies committed to making the world safe for the living.

To see how this sort of zombie came to populate American comic books, in this chapter I examine the relationship between the superheroic and the zombie by tracing their shared origins in a frontier mythos that suggested Americans needed to be wary of what lurked beyond their borders alongside a Depression-era cultural desire to explain the state of a turbulently changing world. I will then show how the lack of generic stability in the early years of comics production provided a serendipitous space for the growth of a particular kind of zombie molded by a heroic logic that has shaped the zombie in comics to this day.

AMERICAN SUPERHEROES

There are several different paths one could take to trace the history of the modern superhero, depending on where and when one wanted to start.

There are clear connections between early superheroes and the pantheons of gods in ancient mythologies, literary costumed crusaders such as the Scarlet Pimpernel, and folkloric heroes like Robin Hood. Yet, in approaching the superhero as an American phenomenon, Julian C. Chambliss and William L. Svitavsky suggest that superheroes have strong roots in stories of the American frontier and the subsequent search for new versions of frontier adventurers as the U.S. shifted from an agrarian society to an industrial one and the frontier closed. They argue that, in the late nineteenth century, "in light of modern stresses, the popularity of American adventure heroes can be explained by their ability to personify and reassert the racial and civil superiority of the United States as it had been understood in the frontier ethos."[4] Transforming tales of exploration and the civilizing of the untamed wilderness to fit with expanding urban centers as well as the U.S.'s growing imperialist agenda, the heroes of dime novels, and later pulps, were brave, independent, white men who protected America's traditional values in the face of rapid change. These men would serve as templates for the superheroes that followed.

Rob Goulart ties the growing popularity of heroic figures—both real and fictional—in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the increasing accessibility of printed materials; as the American population became "more literate and printing grew faster and cheaper," more and more people could read about the likes of Davy Crockett or the Shadow.[5] While, in the 1830s, newspapers were the cheapest format for popular fiction, by the 1880s, they were facing competition from dime novels, and by the 1920s, from pulp magazines—named for the cheap paper on which they were printed.[6] M. Thomas Inge notes that pulps in particular "contained more accessible stories that spoke to the public need for adventure and escapism."[7] While readers could find any number of genres printed in the pulps, adventure stories were especially popular in the mid-to-late 1930s, and many scholars note that adventure pulp heroes, such as Edgar Rice Burrough's John Carter, Robert E. Howard's Conan the Cimmerian, and costumed avengers like the Shadow and the Spider, were direct antecedents of the comic book superhero.[8] Many pulp writers and artists later became comic writers and artists, which meant that the heroic traits they'd been writing and drawing in the pulps transferred over into early comics.

Chambliss and Svitavsky note the similarities between the pulp heroes of the early twentieth century and the frontier heroes of the previous century, observing that "the pulp heroes of the 1930s and 1940s followed the

recurrent theme of the hero, always a white male, who rejected the corruption of society and took it upon himself to correct societal problems."[9] Gary Hoppenstand likewise notes that "in these formulas, traditional law enforcement agencies were unable to deal with crime; thus the pulp hero adopted vigilantism to deal with the problem."[10] In reducing the complexities of Depression-era crime to the simple and straightforward formula of good vs. evil, pulps, and later comics, could produce clear heroes and villains and bypass ambiguous endings for endings where good triumphed over evil. These were comforting stories that provided clearly legible worlds with a strong dose of cause and effect—if one did bad, one was punished. If one did good, one had nothing to fear.

Intertwined with this need to translate early American values into a more modern American mythology was the rise in the popularity of eugenicist thought in the early twentieth century and subsequent fictional searches for perfect human specimens. Scott Jeffery notes:

> The changes brought about by modernity—such as industrialisation, urbanisation and medicine—aided and abetted changes in how the human was conceptualised. As [Mads Rosendahl] Thomsen argues, "the rising influence of secularization and the development of the theory of evolution in the mid-nineteenth century helped to create a vision of a new and improved human being who cast away self-imposed limitations."[11]

Alongside the rise in the search for the perfect human body "was a public hunger for displays of unusual human bodies, in the form of the freak show."[12] And in both impulses—toward the human body as sign of perfected genetics and as spectacular oddity—there are distinct traces of the superhero, who is often imagined with a perfect physique but who also exists as a visual spectacle in the form of their superhuman abilities and costumes.

Gerard Jones observes, "The 'superman' was scarcely a new idea, and was in fact a common motif of both high and low culture by the early thirties, the inevitable product of those doctrines of perfectibility promoted by everyone from Bernarr MacFadden to Leon Trostky."[13] In particular, Jones points to Philip Wylie's 1930 book *Gladiator* as a formative piece of pre-superhero history. Following the life of a genetically modified child born with superhuman abilities, the book was a direct influence on Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Superman and other 1930s pulp heroes.[14] Continuing the eugenicist ideas of perfect human bodies, pulp heroes, such as Tarzan

or Conan, who were examples of physical perfection, eventually gave way to heroes such as Doc Savage, who combined physical perfection with an impressive intellect—brain and brawn.[15]

During the 1930s, the problems these heroes faced became more and more fantastic in nature. As Chambliss and Svitavsky observe, "The symbolic confrontation with the frontier could no longer offer the same reassurance for Americans facing global economic depression that attacked cherished values and institutions. Thus, heroes anchored in reality . . . did not offer the satisfaction craved by an audience increasingly jaded about the world."[16] But the departure from reality also meant that these heroes were no longer "hampered by limitations of realism."[17] This turn toward the fantastical opened the doors for characters less rooted in the mundane, like aliens, monsters, and superheroes.

At the same time that the pulp heroes were becoming more fantastical, the popularity of comic books was on the rise—and this is key to the development of the superhero, because the superhero genre is, first and foremost, a comics genre. Modern American comic books were born in the early 1930s when publishers started collecting and reprinting newspaper comic strips in magazine form. By the mid-1930s, more and more publishers were producing comic books, and some were jettisoning the comic strip reprints for original material. As the comic book as we now know it took shape, publishers often turned to pulp writers and artists to pen their new stories, and many of them stuck to familiar pulp themes and genres.

In 1938, Superman first appeared in the pages of *Action Comics*, initiating the superhero genre, and soon, "superhero characters . . . became synonymous with the comic book form."[18] Superman is a prime example of the different threads of the American hero coming together in a new form: while an alien, he is brave, independent, and defends *truth, justice, and the American way* like his frontier hero brethren. Like the supermen of the 1920s and 1930s, he is a perfect specimen, with an idealized body and good looks, as well as a superior intellect. Like earlier costumed heroes, he has a secret identity and a special costume to wear when enacting his superheroics, and like the pulp heroes of the mid-to-late 1930s, he lives in a fantastical world where men can fly.

While there is no one standard definition of a superhero—and the genre didn't emerge fully formed in 1938 but has evolved and changed over time—many scholars begin with the work of Peter Coogan when trying to delineate what makes a superhero different from other types of heroes, especially

those who immediately preceded the superhero's appearance.[19] In "The Definition of the Superhero," Coogan ties superheroes to three defining traits: mission, powers, and identity. While any of these traits may be present in other heroic figures, it is the combination of the three that makes a superhero unique.[20] For Coogan,

> the superhero's mission is pro-social and selfless, which means that his fight against evil must fit in with the existing professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further himself. The mission convention is essential to the superhero genre because someone who does not act selflessly to aid others in times of need is not heroic.[21]

The superhero also needs extraordinary abilities—the superpowers that make the hero "super"—and a code name or costume, or both, that help communicate the superhero's identity.[22] Hence, there is the Flash, who runs as quick as a flash, or Captain America, whose costume emphasizes his ties to the U.S. with its use of red, white, and blue stripes and stars. The costume becomes a key part of superhero iconography, marking the superhero as different while giving some indication of their powers or identity.

While there were heroes who may have embodied some of these traits before Superman appeared in the pages of *Action Comics* in 1938, the superhero was different from its forerunners in combining all of these elements, and it seemed to speak to the particular moment of its birth: in a world on the brink of war still dealing with the effects of a worldwide depression, superheroes represented hope that problems could be solved. In the midst of Depression-era America, superheroes symbolized a world that made sense: where good triumphed over evil and bad guys were punished. Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl link comic books in general to "notions of justice."[23] But this is an especially strong theme running throughout many superhero stories: the superhero's compulsion to protect the community and its ideals in as fair a manner as possible. But more than that, the superhero is a visible reminder that chaos can be tamed and that the world can make sense.

Yet, for all the ways in which the superhero represents a reinstatement of an uncomplicated world where justice is a given, the superhero most often exists outside the law as an extrajudicial arbiter of justice, suggesting that contemporary institutions may be incapable of this work. Still, even with this nod to possible institutional inadequacy, as many scholars note, super-

heroes often work to maintain the status quo.[24] At least in their earliest incarnations, superheroes weren't about upending society but rather maintaining it—and maintaining it so as to suggest that all problems were black and white with no gray areas in-between.

THE RISE OF THE COMIC BOOK ZOMBIE

Stories of the Haitian *zombi*[25] circulated in the West since at least the time of Haitian Independence in 1804, but most American audiences didn't become familiar with the figure until 1929. That year, William Seabrook's book, *The Magic Island*, debuted, and in it, Seabrook documented his time in Haiti, sharing stories of his exploits as he learned about the nation. He devoted an entire chapter of the book to zombies, and his descriptions of blank-eyed automatons working the Haitian sugar fields soon influenced films, short stories, and even stage plays.[26]

The zombie as it entered American popular culture was not much like the zombie audiences are familiar with today. It was an *enslaved* zombie, influenced by stories from Haitian folklore and Vodou beliefs connected to the long history of slavery and colonial exploitation on the island.[27] As I note elsewhere, "These zombies are slaves without a will of their own."[28] They may or may not be dead, and as such, they are rarely physically altered from their living appearance, but they are always under the control of a zombie master—a figure who has taken over the zombie's will and dictates their actions. As such, these zombies represent the nightmare of the loss of individual free will, and while the figure was born out of Haitian memories of colonial plantations, when it entered American culture, the zombie became more explicitly tied to fears of wage slavery and racial contamination.[29]

The zombie also quickly made its way into the pulps. As Roger Luckhurst observes, "The first cluster of recognizable pulp zombie stories is in the late 1920s and early 1930s, from magazines like *Weird Tales* and *Thrilling Mystery*."[30] Luckhurst explains that these stories resemble the stories published by William Seabrook, and this mimics what artists were doing in other media at the time: borrowing from Seabrook for the initial premise of mind-controlled bodies and then embellishing with an author's own personal touches. This meant that most versions of the zombie in the 1920s and 1930s—whether in film, radio, or the pulps—focused on white heroes and

heroines who traveled to foreign lands where "natives" could turn people into zombies. These stories of suspense and horror almost always pitted Black culture against white.

Lawrence Watt-Evans observes that while early comics borrowed from pulp magazines, they "were surprisingly slow to pick up on" the romance and horror genres.[31] Rob Goulart likewise suggests that "civic pressures, and the real horrors of the new World War" spelled the end for horror pulps in the early 1940s, and it is not outrageous to suspect that this may have been a reason why horror didn't translate wholesale into comics until well after the war.[32] In fact, David Annwn Jones notes it was *literary* horror that first took root in comics with adaptations of *Frankenstein* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in the early 1940s.[33]

Horror's slow uptake as a comics genre may have also had to do with horror's generally fluid place within the pulps: many of the pulps that showcased horror stories also produced stories in other genres, including science fiction, fantasy, and suspense, and horror was often mixed with other genres. This is reflected in early comics where, even when there were original horror stories in the early 1940s, these stories didn't exist in stand-alone horror titles but rather as one-offs in anthology comics that included all sorts of other types of stories.[34]

This points to the generic instability of horror in comics of the early 1940s. N. Labarre suggests that while "the genre of horror in comics had been developing at least since the early 1940s," it "had not cohered into a single genre with an agreed-upon label" yet.[35] Horror may have existed in certain spaces in comics at this time, and Watt-Evans even describes several titles in the early 1940s that experimented with horror elements—such as *Suspense Comics* and *Mask Comics*, as well as literary adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe and Washington Irving in *Classic Comics*—but it wasn't until the late 1940s that horror started becoming a clearly identifiable genre.[36] Thus, it was unlikely that a reader in the 1940s would pick up a comic, such as *Detective Comics*, *More Fun Comics*, or *Classic Comics*, expecting horror. Even with titles such as *Adventures into the Unknown* or *Suspense Comics*, the expectations of "horror" were far different from what a reader would come to expect in the early 1950s when the horror genre boomed.[37]

This generic instability goes a long way toward explaining the zombie's earliest appearances in comics. While I won't claim to have a definitive list of *all* zombie appearances in Golden Age comic books,[38] I can make some general observations: as early as 1937, zombies were appearing in comic books.

That year, readers could find zombies in several issues of *More Fun Comics*. In 1939, zombies appeared in *Detective Comics*, and as the 1940s progressed, zombies made more and more appearances in action/adventure and superhero titles. This is because there really was no home for zombies in the horror genre before 1947–48, simply because the horror genre didn't firmly exist in comics yet.[39] This means that while artists and writers could use the zombie as a horrific element transplanted into other genres, they might also use it without the generic influences of horror.

More often than not, early zombies appeared in superhero and action/adventure titles—and whether they seemed more horrific or criminal depended on the theme of the work. Thus, zombie stories could be found in titles that skewed more toward science fiction, fantasy, and the strange, such as *Weird Comics*, *Adventures into the Unknown*, or *Mystic Comics*, but they also showed up in more traditional action/adventure and superhero titles, including *Active Comics*, *Detective Comics*, *Uncle Sam Quarterly*, or *America's Best Comics*. By the end of the 1940s, as the horror genre was starting to gain traction, zombies started appearing more often in titles such as *Eerie Comics*, *Phantom Lady*, and *Thrilling Comics*, signaling the zombie's transition more firmly into the supernatural and uncanny.

This might seem like a discussion of semantics, but in noting that horror wasn't a recognizable comics genre when zombies first appeared in the medium points to the fact that genre colors *how* readers engage with certain titles. Genres are all about expectations and ritual, even when artists are pushing the boundaries or experimenting, so saying that horror didn't exist yet in comics—at least not as a clearly identifiable genre—means that the ways in which readers would've been encouraged to "read" zombies was different than it might have been elsewhere. Readers weren't necessarily called on to read these zombies as horrific because the zombies' purpose wasn't necessarily to make the story scary, especially if the point of these stories wasn't to be scary (inasmuch as action/adventure genres aren't intended to scare but to thrill). Thus, zombies might be scary or unsettling, but they were placed within a framework that recontextualized them as obstacles for a hero to face more than anything else. Certainly, in comics that were more in line with the supernatural, fantasy, and the "weird," a reader's engagement with zombies might not have been drastically different from what they would encounter in film or on the radio at the time. But in superhero and action/adventure titles, the ways in which a reader would have been encouraged to interact with zombies would've been different. While Labarre notes

that several superhero titles imported monstrous figures and situations throughout the 1940s, this wasn't enough to signal a generic change; rather, it took advantage of popular characters and tropes and added horrific elements to stories while still retaining the generic integrity of the superhero or action/adventure genre.[40]

If one examines Dr. Occult, an early DC comics superhero who is a private investigator with a proclivity for supernatural cases, for instance, there is a zombie-themed storyline in 1937 that seems to fit with the supernatural elements of zombie stories elsewhere. Over the course of six issues of *More Fun Comics* (vol. 2, #18–23), Dr. Occult faces the Lord of Life, a villain who kills people and then revives them as his zombie servants. Except, as Dr. Occult discovers, the zombie angle is a hoax—the Lord of Life is simply drugging and reviving these people to extort them into his service. During the story, there are car crashes and fist fights, and even though Dr. Occult is a "ghost detective" and there is a zombie theme, the zombie master works out of a laboratory. Aside from two initial panels that present this zombie master as green with red eyes, there is nothing physically different about the zombie master or his zombies either. In other words, even with the trappings of the strange and supernatural, this story could just as easily be about a criminal blackmail scheme as it is about zombies. The zombies may add an element of the weird to the story, but their presence doesn't shift the comic into the realm of horror, especially as the existence of zombies is eventually debunked.

The zombies-as-criminal-henchmen motif also appeared in a 1939 Crimson Avenger story in *Detective Comics* #23, as well as a Fiery Mask adventure in *Daring Mystery Comics* #1 in January 1940. In a Captain Nelson Cole of the Solar Force story from that same month, Cole faces the "power-mad dictator Zan" of Volcus, who is turning beings into an "army of the living dead."[41] Thus, zombies could be fitted into a number of different situations in action/adventure titles without necessarily coding the stories in question as "horror." And while the recurring use of zombies as henchmen, servants, and willing armies for villains generally fits with what one could see in other media at the time, in moving the zombies into action/adventure genres in comics, the tenor of the creatures changed. They were less likely to function as set dressing for an eerie mood and more likely to be utilized as the brawn at the disposal of a zombie master. As Labarre suggests, in early comics "horror . . . functioned as a peripheral attraction, not as an aesthetic or

narrative center of gravity."[42] This may explain why in each of the examples mentioned above none of the zombies looked remarkably different from the "living" people they encountered.

During this time, zombies in U.S. media were enslaved zombies: those zombies whose roots lie in Haitian Vodou who have lost their free will and instead must follow the commands of a zombie master. In comics, as in other media, what form this took—be it zombies as henchmen, workers, or armies—was less important than the master-zombie relationship. Zombies were essentially tools used by their master in his schemes.[43] In order to create their zombies, zombie masters often used "voodoo" or some sort of "native" belief system. Yet, whether the zombies were created by voodoo or something else, the zombies were essentially a road bump standing between the hero and the zombie master, and, at least in comics, whether they would be read as more horrific or more criminal typically had more to do with the hero of the story than any inherent characteristic of zombiness. Thus, in some instances, the hero might have ties to the occult or magic—like Zanzibar the Magician; Tabu, Wizard of the Jungle; or the Phantom Lady—but less supernatural heroes, such as the Deacon, Buck Farrel, and Boom Boom Branigan, also faced off against zombies.

Moreover, while zombies were born of stories connected to Haiti, and in films they were often found in foreign spaces, zombies could easily be moved into less "exotic" spaces in action/adventure and superhero storylines in comics. To illustrate this, one need look no further than a Crimson Avenger story from 1939. In the story, the Crimson Avenger is investigating the murder of a prominent gangster when he follows a tip that leads him to a group of zombie henchmen. These are not "native" zombies in some faraway place, but rather white men in an urban setting. Each wears a button-up shirt and pants, and there is no visual indication that they are zombies—besides the narration telling us so (see fig. 2).

A man dressed in a lab coat and wearing large glasses is the zombie master of the story. He conducts a ceremony with a cobra and "the wild beat of a drum" to create zombies to help him secure his spot at the top of the local underworld. The drum and cobra are conventional zombie tropes that could've been found in other zombie media of the time, but they are the only indications of ties to voodoo in the story, so the original elements of zombie lore are here fused into a more conventional action/adventure setting and story—voodoo is still involved, but it is transplanted into an urban

Fig. 2. The Crimson Avenger fights "henchmen" zombies (Jim Chambers, *Detective Comics* #23, Jan. 1939).

American locale and contained within two panels of the story. This sort of fusing happened throughout the 1940s, and it illustrates again how easily the zombie premise could be used in nonhorror genres.

In the three zombie feature films preceding the Crimson Avenger storyline, 1932's *White Zombie*, 1935's *Ouanga*, and 1936's *Revolt of the Zombies*, zombification centered on plantation-style labor and sexual conquest—using zombies as labor but also as a means of forcing someone to love the zombie master. The idea of using zombies as criminal henchmen was a means of moving zombies more in line with the generic conventions of action/adventure and superhero stories by simply recontextualizing their enslavement—trading plantations for urban crime syndicates. It also refocused the perils of zombification more on how zombie masters might use their zombies (for crime) than on fears of possibly being turned into one, although plenty of comic book villains would still threaten heroes and their friends with zombification.

Without fail, those who created zombies were evil and faced off against a hero who often worked not only to foil the evildoer's plan but to free the zombies as well. The villains of these comics could range from Haitian voodoo priests to gangsters. Given the fact that this was the era of World War II, there were also Nazi and Japanese zombie masters appearing in American comic books. A recurring theme in much early zombie media was the threat that zombie masters would pose if they had control of a mindless army that could be set against American interests. Fitting in Nazi and Japanese zombie masters, then, wasn't a great stretch and fed into narratives that would paint America's enemies as ready to enslave the rest of the world.

Whether the zombies were criminal henchmen or the unthinking armies of the Axis powers, there was clear experimentation going on with comic book zombies. Not only was there evidence of the influence of action/adventure conventions on who made zombies and where, but as I'll discuss at more length in chapter 2, some early zombies had robust physiques and super-strength. Zombies in most films at the time weren't physically imposing and often looked like the living. But in the 1940s, comics produced what I call *strongman* zombies: zombies with noticeable muscles who were often depicted as shirtless and bald and who displayed incredible strength.[44]

As World War II wound to an end, the superhero genre's popularity began to wane, and other genres, such as crime and later horror, started to take off. As this happened, zombies began to change. Some zombies with muscles remained, as did urban henchmen zombies, but over time, grue-

some decomposing corpses came to be the norm—yet this too was a deviation from the zombies seen elsewhere in American pop culture where zombies were usually not physically differentiated from the living: they looked, more or less, just like the living.

In the 1950s, crime and horror titles would be the targets of campaigns to censor comics, as both genres supposedly presented readers with increasing violence and gore. Nicky Wright, in describing the crime comic *Crime Does Not Pay*, which began telling true crime stories in 1942 and ran up through 1955, observes that while violence wasn't new when crime comics started gaining popularity in the mid-1940s, *realistic* violence was new. As Wright says, "Here was brutality in real settings, with people drawn as realistically as possible."[45] As I argue elsewhere, one clear transition in comic book zombies during the later 1940s and 1950s is the change in the look of zombies—moving away from strongman bodies and the types of zombies that didn't look much different from the living to decomposing corpses.[46] I tie this transition, in part, to the after-effects of the war and in particular the likelihood that artists and writers who had served in World War II had come face to face with dead bodies and knew firsthand what death could do to a body.

Yet, it also bears mentioning that while zombies themselves might be fantastical creatures, the turn toward realism in crime titles starting mid-decade may have influenced the zombie's depiction in horror titles, as the horror and crime genres were closely linked. Moreover, as horror became a more clearly recognizable genre within comic books—starting with stand-alone horror stories in the late 1940s and then moving into titles dedicated specifically to horror in the 1950s—the zombie's physical appearance became more horrific. As zombies came to reside in horror comics more exclusively, the uses to which they were put changed as well. While zombie armies and henchmen would continue to populate titles, new zombies—zombies out for revenge—became quite popular.

ZOMBIES IN HORROR

In 1948, EC Comics—the publisher that would become synonymous with horror in the 1950s—published its first zombie tale, "Zombie Terror" in *Moon Girl* #5. The same year, "American Comics Group (ACG) came out

with what was to become the first of the long-running horror comics when they began publishing *Adventures into the Unknown*."[47] The horror genre was gaining ground as more and more comics started featuring stand-alone horror stories. Then, in 1950, EC transformed three of its titles into horror comics, producing *The Vault of Horror*, *The Haunt of Fear*, and *The Crypt of Terror*, which later became *Tales from the Crypt*. These anthology-style titles featured darkly comic tales with twist endings told in an increasingly gory style, and as the EC titles became popular, other publishers moved to emulate them. The market was soon flooded with horror titles, and while zombies were never the most popular monsters of the horror menagerie, there were dozens of stories of the walking dead appearing each year in the early 1950s.

There were enslaved zombies in these comics—and strongman zombies and henchmen did not disappear—but zombie bodies overall were becoming more emaciated. Soon, most zombies in comics would be decomposing corpses. Plus, in horror comics, zombies were fast becoming figures of the moral good: many zombies in the 1950s were the murdered returned from the grave seeking (and finding) justice. Philip Smith and Michael Goodrum suggest that comics during the 1940s were "broadly committed to maintaining hegemonic power structures in U.S. society."[48] By the end of the decade, superheroes "had been replaced by new genres that did not all share the sense of buoyant optimism" found in the earlier superhero genre.[49] Yet themes of justice remained a constant throughout many genres of comic books, including horror.

Phillips and Strobl suggest that law and order themes and lessons such as *crime doesn't pay* have always colored a wide range of genres in comics. Discussing the grisly violence in crime titles of the late 1940s, they observe, "Despite the depravity depicted in these books, the criminal always meets his or her comeuppance."[50] Thus, even if the modes of justice and its implementation might be more extreme, the need to maintain the status quo remained. This was as true in zombie-centric stories as it was elsewhere. In many ways, zombie retribution looked like what one might see in crime-fighting comics of the same era—it was just that the zombies were the ones dispensing justice.

Smith and Goodrum suggest that horror comics of the time were "more complex than straightforward morality tales," arguing that by showing the dirty underbelly of 1950s American culture—where parents might be mon-

sters and readers couldn't trust authority figures—these comics pushed back against a vision of an uncomplicated and content 1950s America.[51] I posit that Phillips and Strobl's suggestion of the overwhelming influence of law and order rhetoric across genres, coupled with the early dominance of the superhero genre in particular—a genre that foregrounded *truth*, *justice*, and *the American way*—colored what came after, and that regardless of the ways in which particular genres might have questioned McCarthy-era American values, the fact remained that even the most disturbing monsters were often a means of reestablishing the norm.

For instance, in "Creature of Doom," from *Web of Evil #8* (1953), nuclear physicist Paul Allen's assistant Renni Serb kills him. Serb is an undercover Communist agent working with Paul's wife to steal U.S. nuclear secrets. Renni incapacitates Paul and leaves him in the middle of a nuclear testing range just before a new test, but the exploded atomic material reanimates Paul as a radioactive ghost/zombie rather than killing him. Making his way back home, Paul frightens his wife to death and kills Renni and one of Renni's accomplices with his radioactive body before ascending to the afterlife. Paul's body is misshapen and melting and his reappearance after his death disturbs the world of the living, but only inasmuch as it disturbs the world of the evildoers. Once he incapacitates them, Paul leaves, and all evidence of his presence burns away. Thus, the monster doesn't disrupt the status quo so much as save it, and if Paul had been revived as a well-muscled man in a spandex suit, the narrative outcome would've been much the same. The only difference is his status as a zombie.

Many contemporaries didn't recognize the conservative moral lessons in these kinds of comics, though, and by the 1950s calls for censorship were getting loud enough that comics publishers were taking note.[52] By 1954, fears of governmental interference pushed publishers to form the Comics Code Authority (CCA) and the Comics Code, which would lay out the acceptable boundaries for comics form and content. While membership in the CCA (and thus adherence to the Code) was voluntary, most publishers joined up—if for no other reason, it was a way to project a clean and wholesome public image, but also distributors and sellers refused to sell non-Code-approved titles.[53] Crime and horror were particularly hard hit by the Code, which banned the words "horror" and "terror" from titles. Vampires, werewolves, and zombies were likewise forbidden, and strong rules against gore and violence were also laid down. Horror titles dried up, and comic book zombies, to pardon the pun, were dead.

COMING BACK FROM THE DEAD

In the wake of the Code, monster magazines, which focused on classical and contemporary horror films, were the new source of horror for many comics readers. They were soon joined in the early 1960s by black-and white magazine-sized titles, which weren't regulated by the Code[54] and thus started reprinting pre-1955 horror stories, meaning that some pre-Code content was being recirculated. The late 1960s also saw the rise of underground comix, which didn't produce a lot of horror content but did see a few new zombie stories reach a limited audience.[55] DC and Marvel also had supernatural-themed titles, such as *Strange Tales* and *Strange Adventures*, that were covered by the Code but still managed to work in horrific elements from time to time. Yet it was a stagnant period for zombies in comics overall.

Still, Robert Michael (Bobb) Cotter observes that the mid-1960s saw a monster boom in American popular culture: "There were monster games and monster toys; there were the inimitable, much-beloved Aurora monster models . . . There were monsters on TV, and not just on the late, late show. There was TV's First Family of Fright, *The Munsters*, as well as the live action version of Charles Addams' darkly humorous cartoons *The Addams Family*."[56] Cotter claims that this boom was due to several different factors: Hammer horror films in England, older horror films being broadcast on American TV, and magazines such as *Famous Monsters of Filmland* all contributed to this monster mania. Yet mainstream comic books couldn't cash in because of the Code.

Bowing to pressures from publishers—as well as the realization that comic books needed to deal with social issues, including drug abuse and crime, in realistic ways—the CCA revised the Code in 1971. They lifted the embargo on monsters, and a brief new horror boom was born, with new titles including *Dracula Lives*, *Tomb of Dracula*, *Blade*, and *Jonah Hex* appearing for the first time. There was one exception, though: citing the zombie's lack of a literary antecedent, the CCA remained firm on their ban of the undead. But that didn't stop publishers from finding creative ways to reintroduce zombies to readers.

For instance, Marvel found two opportunities to revive zombie characters. Starting in 1973, they introduced Simon Garth, "The Zombie" in *Tales of the Zombie*, a black-and-white magazine-sized title.[57] They also introduced zuvembies, which were zombie stand-ins, in some of their standard-sized four-color titles, including *Strange Tales*. As I note elsewhere, this came in the

wake of the rising popularity of zombies after the release of 1968's *Night of the Living Dead*.[58] After its release, filmmakers of the 1970s started trying to copy its blueprint, and we see a subsequent rise in *cannibal* zombies. Unlike their enslaved cousins, these zombies are the dead reanimated—often by a virus—who come back from the dead with a taste for living human flesh. These zombies aren't controlled by a zombie master, but rather follow the drive to eat, so their threat to living humans is much more pronounced.

Both Simon Garth and the zuvembies thus inhabit a strange liminal space, between pre-Code horror comics and the more gritty, darker realism of independent comics in the 1980s and 1990s, but also between enslaved zombies, tied to ideas of mind control, exotic spaces, and slavery, and cannibal zombies, tied to ideas of decomposing bodies and more overt violence. Thus, Simon Garth, a reimagining of a 1953 pre-Code character from the comic *Menace*, looks a lot like the early 1940s strongman zombies but is a decomposing corpse, even though voodoo reanimates him. The zuvembies, likewise, act as henchmen to a variety of villains, but often are emaciated or decomposing, even though they usually aren't dead.

While from the 1960s forward, and especially in the wake of the rise of independent publishers in the 1980s, there is a fundamental shift in depictions of superheroes as less perfect and more multifaceted in comics, zombies didn't change as much as their superheroic cousins in this era. In part this is because of lingering censorship from the Code, but it is also tied to the ways that changes in other media didn't mean changes *across* media. Namely, while zombies in film and television saw a paradigm-shifting transition from enslaved zombies to cannibal zombies in the wake of the 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*, zombies in comics had already looked like decomposing corpses in the 1940s and 1950s. They had also posed an overt threat to the living since then. In many ways, film and TV were simply catching up to what zombies in comics had done decades earlier.

While zuvembies and zuvembie-like creatures appeared in mainstream comics throughout the 1980s, publishers also started ignoring the Code's ban and integrated zombies into their stories. Yet these zombies weren't radically different from what one could have found in 1940s and 1950s comics. In short, in the nearly three decades from the implementation of the Code to the mid-1980s, the zombie character in comics didn't really change. Even with the influence of George A. Romero's cannibalistic undead from *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), the zombie in comics seemed stuck.

One of the first comics to fully embrace the post–*Night of the Living Dead* cannibal zombie was the cult-favorite independent comic *Deadworld*, which is an ongoing series that began in 1987.[59] Focused on survivors of a zombie apocalypse, it features threatening decomposing corpses, but departing from the typical mindless hordes of many cannibal zombie films, it also includes the sadistic motorcycle-riding villain King Zombie, who I'll discuss in chapter 2. As I suggest in *Not Your Average Zombie*, talking and intelligent zombies are not an oddity in films—even as early as 1943, there were zombies who could talk on screen—and many zombies in radio dramas and in pre-Code horror comics were also verbose and intelligent. Thus, King Zombie might have looked new to some audiences in 1987, but he was actually part of a much longer tradition of *extra-ordinary* zombies.[60] While in other media, cannibal zombies felt fresh and original, in comics it was more of the same, and even when comics caught back up to what zombies in other media were doing, it wasn't necessarily new. It just hadn't been seen in a long time.

More and more cannibal zombies populated the pages of comic books as the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, but there was also a wide range of experimentation with the zombie figure at this time. In 1994, for instance, Milestone published *Xombi*, imagining a "xombi" created via nanotechnology. There were also undead villains, including the X-humed, who were a group of mutants resurrected by the villain Black Talon in *Sensational She-Hulk* in 1991–92, and the Legion of Dead Heroes, who appeared in the *Legion of Super-Heroes* in 1993.

The turn toward zombies as out-and-out villains in comics was something relatively new. Even though some of the zombies of the 1940s were the henchmen of villains and even though many zombies in pre-Code horror comics of the 1950s hunted humans, in neither case were the zombies themselves looking to destroy humanity. The henchmen zombies were being coerced by a zombie master while the zombies of 1950s horror comics were often serving the cause of justice: hunting down evildoers to make the world right again. But given the influence of *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and *Day of the Dead* (1985), as well as any number of imitators, the idea that zombies were an inherent threat to the living was starting to seep into comics as well as other media. This meant that there was a subsequent rise in villainous zombies.

Moving from the 1990s into the 2000s, the trend of threatening zombies continued, spurred on by a zombie renaissance in media following the successes of 2002's *28 Days Later* and *Resident Evil* and the 2004 remake of

Dawn of the Dead. In some cases, this meant comics where the zombies were threatening background material, such as *The Walking Dead* (2003–19) or any number of comics based on popular video games, like *Left 4 Dead: The Sacrifice* (2010) or *The Last of Us: American Dreams* (Dark Horse, 2013). In other cases, this meant more zombies as outright villains, such as the Black Lantern Corps of DC's *Blackest Night* in 2009–10. But there were still *extra-ordinary* zombies around as well, including Gwen Dylan, the titular character of *iZombie* (Vertigo, 2010–12), Jared Kabe of *Star-Spangled War Stories Featuring G.I. Zombie* (DC, 2014–15), and any number of zombies from *Marvel Zombies* (2005–present).

Thus, zombies have come full circle in comics: from their early days in superhero and action/adventure titles when comics creators experimented with what a comic-book zombie could be to the contemporary moment when zombies exist across a spectrum from noble to villainous and from physically unaffected to gruesomely decomposed. Unlike film where—despite the fact that creators have often broken the rules of zombidom to produce rebellious *extra-ordinary* zombies—there have been, generally speaking, two main types of zombie (the enslaved and the cannibal), with comics, despite the stagnation of the later 1950s up through the 1970s, zombies have never been as stable a concept as they have been elsewhere.

ZOMBIES, HEROES, AND HEROIC ZOMBIES

In "The Zombie as Barometer of Cultural Anxiety," Peter Dendle argues that the cinematic zombie exposes several twentieth-century American anxieties: from the enslaved zombie's parallel to people standing in Depression-era bread lines to the mass terror of cannibal zombies acting out apocalyptic scenarios in post-9/11 zombie films, zombies have come to embody a host of existential fears in American culture.[61] In *Superheroes and American Society, 1938 to the Present*, Jeffrey K. Johnson makes a similar argument about superheroes, calling them "social mirrors" and "barometers of the place and time in which they reside."[62] While I don't believe that zombies and superheroes reflect American society in the same ways, considering when they both appeared in American mass culture—1929 for zombies and 1938 for superheroes—the very similar cultural moments into which both zombies and superheroes were born speaks to the ways in which both zombies and superheroes initially seem to respond to very similar anxieties.[63]

At the end of the 1930s, as superheroes appeared, they seemed a perfect answer to an era in which the true precarity of American life was laid bare. Superheroes were initially envisioned as near godlike beings who wanted to help those trampled by unforgiving systems; they were going to save "the little guy" and set everything right. As Johnson describes, "Superman's value was that he was one of the only people in late 1930s American that could help fix society."[64] Chambliss and Svitavsky argue that twentieth-century American adventure heroes, and later superheroes, were born out of a nineteenth-century frontier mythos that sought to reimagine the stalwart guardians of traditional values in a modern, urban setting.[65] American civilization "taming" the West and American frontier heroes and cowboys protecting (white) women, children, and property from the supposed threats of Native Americans, Mexican Americans, Black Americans, and immigrants eventually became costumed crusaders protecting urban centers from mad scientists, aliens, and power-hungry criminals. This happened alongside a growing eugenicist fascination with racial purity and the perfecting of the human body that became translated into the very bodies of superheroes—perfect bodies that were seemingly indestructible and served the national interest. Thus, with the nineteenth-century frontier stories and the superheroic tales that later followed, the world called out for idealized saviors who could be counted on to protect those things the U.S. supposedly holds dear—family, home, and a narrow definition of who should be considered "American"—and these saviors wouldn't be ordinary men, but men who applied their perfect bodies and minds to the betterment of their race and country.

Zombies first appeared in American popular culture in 1929 as mindless bodies working the plantations of Haiti. As Dendle notes, in the 1930s this sort of character may have resonated with Depression-era audiences and their feelings of powerlessness accompanying the economic downturn; American audiences may have seen themselves reflected in the vacant eyes of these zombies.[66] It didn't hurt that in early enslaved zombie films, heroes often rescued their friends from zombification and found a way to thwart the zombie masters. These were ultimately stories about solving problems and rescuing people from their seeming subjugation.

But, also, historically, the zombie arose in popular culture after over a century of attacks on Haiti and the Haitian people that began in the wake of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804). The revolution was born out of the first successful slave rebellion in the Western Hemisphere, and Haiti, its people,

and their belief systems had quickly become convenient scapegoats for racist tirades against Black governance and Black culture. The zombie, then, fit into a worldview that already saw Haiti and Haitians as threatening. It merely proved what over a century of demonization had already suggested: Haiti, its people, and its religious beliefs were dangerous and completely at odds with (white) American civilization.[67]

Most zombie media of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s revolved around white characters being threatened with zombification—either a zombie master intended to send zombies after them or the zombie master threatened to zombify them. Either way, there was a sense that these zombie masters, who were often either foreign or criminal (or both), were a danger to U.S. interests, and zombiism became a sort of contaminant that the white, American characters were trying to protect against. This was exacerbated in those films, radio dramas, and short stories where the zombie master used voodoo or some voodoo derivative, because underlying the master's threat was their use of foreign or Black culture, or both, to try to "control" white American bodies.

In many ways, then, what we have in the 1930s is the zombie acting as an apt metaphor for feelings of impotence in the face of the Depression and coming war but also as a figure around which fears of foreign cultures and nonwhite peoples could be twined. At the same time, the superhero could represent a fantasy of rescue from the impotence and possible contamination embodied in figures such as the zombie. In both cases, one of the underlying impulses that most likely spurred on their popularity was an ongoing need to create a fictional response to real-world fears of a changing American society. In both instances, a figure was created to encapsulate the dread that America's traditional values were being forgotten, leaving normal folk unprotected in the face of new dangers—be they invading cultures, new technologies, or other peoples.

Moving into more modern conceptions of both zombies and superheroes, in his essay "Are Zombies Superheroes?" Henry Kamerling suggests that putting aside the modern cannibal zombie's appearance and lack of free will and evaluating zombies as superheroes illuminates the degree to which superheroic bodies often blend "the heroic and horrific."[68] Focusing on comic books, Kamerling notes not only the zombie's preternatural powers and the superhero's roots in fantasy, but the bodily changes that many superheroes and zombies undergo to become what they are. Kamerling concludes that while superheroes and zombies share similarities in bodily formation and

strange split identities, superheroes save urban centers (representative of modernity) while zombie tales often celebrate the apocalyptic destruction of these centers—seeming to reject modernity, destroying its more liberal politics as a result.[69]

Like Kamerling, I am not arguing that zombies and superheroes are the same—although there are superheroic zombies and the zombie and the superhero arise out of similar cultural moments—but I am using the superhero to situate the zombie's history in comic books, and I am likewise using the zombie to interrogate superheroism. If zombie identities and bodily formations echo those of the superhero, then the ways in which these two figures depart from one another should provide insight into both. Especially given the zombie's roots in the action/adventure and superhero genres in comics, one can identify similar logics shaping both superheroes and zombies to this day. It is for this reason that I disagree with Kamerling's assertion that superheroes are progressive figures while zombies are inherently conservative creatures, as at least in most media, zombies are often disruptive, rebellious figures. But also, in comics, early shared generic conventions meant that zombies and superheroes were sometimes far more alike than one might think.

Barbara Creed, building off Julia Kristeva's work on abjection, suggests that the abject is at the heart of horror. Abjection, in Kristeva's estimation, troubles borders. Creed suggests that monsters often fulfill this role in horror films: existing in the in-between spaces separating supposedly fixed categories. They exist between living and dead, between repulsive and desirable, between victim and villain.[70] Monsters also often trouble the boundaries between human and inhuman and whole and fragmentary. And this is exactly why monsters are so unsettling: they shatter any illusion of stable, naturally occurring categories, exposing them as artificial creations that can be breached. Therefore, part of the zombie's inherent awfulness is that it represents this sort of abjection; it is a being stuck outside of clear categories. The zombie is not living nor dead, not human nor inhuman. It exists in a nonfixed state. It troubles borders. But superheroes trouble borders as well—in very similar ways. Superman appears human but is actually an alien. Peter Parker is, at once, a normal teenage boy but also not. Kamala Khan's body looks "normal" until it stretches into shapes no human body should be able to endure.

This sort of bodily abjection is especially pertinent for both superheroes and zombies. Creed notes that "most horror films also construct a border

between what Kristeva refers to as 'the clean and proper body' and the abject body, or the body which has lost its form and integrity."[71] Abject bodies are bodies that, for one reason or another, do things that bodies aren't supposed to do. With monsters, this might mean that the insides are on the outside or that they show those bodily functions that polite society tells us we should hide (e.g., blood, spit, feces). But this could also refer to bodies that are able to stretch or transform or that exist somewhere between animal and human. While this can be read as wondrous in certain circumstances (say, a superhero comic), there is an undercurrent of the horrific at play as well.

Superheroic bodies may trouble borders, but they often do so in ways that seem to inch them closer to some idea of human perfection. They may be abject, but they are also often conventionally attractive, representing what society reinforces as the paragon of humanity, what we should all be trying to achieve. Zombie bodies, on the other hand, usually move in the opposite direction. Contemporary cannibal zombie bodies have lost their integrity—they are literally falling apart—but even enslaved zombies whose bodies are intact have lost their integrity. These are bodies that don't have control over themselves; they are penetrated and invaded by an outside force that mucks up the supposed connection between body and mind (or body and soul). They are bodies that have failed.

Yet it is precisely because of their abject status—their inability to fully inhabit the "human"—that zombies can serve as progressive figures. In 1978 George A. Romero used the zombies aimlessly wandering around a shopping mall in *Dawn of the Dead* to critique mindless consumerism. In 2007, filmmaker Grace Lee used zombies as stand-ins for immigrants and people of color in the film *American Zombie*: as the mockumentary progresses, we see zombies being exploited as sweatshop labor because they don't have the ability or the representation to fight for better pay or working conditions. As I write elsewhere, we can read the town-wide pushback to zombified teenager Johnny trying to date living high schooler Missy in the 1993 film *My Boyfriend's Back* as a metaphor for fears of miscegenation.[72] As a body that stands in-between human and not-human, the zombie becomes an apt metaphor for any group that has been dehumanized. But this often depends on a strange sort of zombiness that departs from the typical mindlessness one might expect.

In *Not Your Average Zombie*, I claim: "At its most basic, a zombie—in any of its forms—is a body that appears functionally alive but that has lost those qualities that would otherwise make it human. Often, these qualities

are directly connected with expressions of free will."[73] I note this is complicated by zombies who still have their free will intact. American media, after all, is full of zombies who talk, zombies who fall in love, even zombies who dance. I call these zombies *extra-ordinary*, and I conclude that "if we step back and reconceptualize zombihood as a state existing somewhere between the human and the not quite human, as a state of liminality associated with—but not entirely dictated by—a loss of free will, then we have a broad definition of zombiness."[74] This is a flexible enough definition to allow for the variety of zombies that have come to populate U.S. media over the years.

As this book will show, comics are no different. From the very beginning, comics have showcased zombies who could talk, zombies who could think, and zombies capable of making the world right again. These zombies are the particular focus of this book because it is these zombies that most thoroughly embody notions of justice and order. Whether zombies are *extra-ordinary* or mindless, in most media, they disrupt everyday life—if for no other reason than, typically, narrative worlds are constructed around the premise that zombies *shouldn't* exist. Yet in comics what we find is that this disruption is often offset in two ways. First, in those comics where zombies are servants or henchmen, their disruption is part of the justification for the hero's actions. The zombie master creates chaos (in the form of the zombies and the actions he orders them to do), and as the hero's function is to reinstate order, he must free, destroy, or unmask the zombies, usually by vanquishing their master.

Second, other zombies are the vehicles for justice in their stories; they are the ones reinstating order. Thus, Zoro, the Purple Zombie, who first appeared in 1940 and who is the focus of chapter 1, takes on criminals, Nazis, and all sorts of historical villains in his quest to keep American society—and his "master" Dr. Kim Hale—safe. *Revenge-from-the-grave* zombies of 1950s horror comics returned from the dead to seek out those who killed them, and in the process, they end up setting the world right by ridding it of murderers. Quite often, these more pro-active zombies exhibit what might seem to be decidedly unzombilike behaviors. They talk; they think; they plot and plan. But even some zombie henchmen and servants are quite verbose and have clear ideas of their own.

Thus, the zombie's departures from its zombiness become far less important than the uses to which zombies are put in comics. The zombie body is, in many ways, a carnivalesque inversion of the healthy human body, and as such, it should represent a rupture with the ordinary and the normal state

of things—and this is exactly what happens in many films and television shows; yet, in many comic books, the zombie's physical appearance obscures the discursive work that happens when the zombie body becomes a vehicle for heroic justice. Guided by a (super) heroic logic, comic book zombie tales often co-opt the carnivalesque zombie body as a tool for the status quo, using it to assure readers that the powerful or disgusting bodies they see are only temporary—aberrations that then go on to reassert the supremacy of whiteness, masculinity, and "normal" bodies. Thus, if *extra-ordinary* zombies in other media can signal a rebellion against white, heteronormative patriarchy, then these heroic zombies in comics have been reined in: linking them to *truth*, *justice*, and *the American way* confines the zombie's inherent willful disobedience as a being that defies categories and turns it to work to maintain the status quo.

CORPSE CRUSADERS

In exploring how this process works, I have broken up the zombie's tenure in comics into five chapters, which are roughly chronological in nature. In chapter 1, "The Purple Zombie: Superheroes and Strong-Man Zombies," I analyze the ways in which the zombie's roots in action/adventure and superhero titles have shaped the character's physical appearance. Examining the first zombie comic book hero, June Tarpé Mills's[75] Purple Zombie, who appeared in *Reg'lar Fellers Heroic Comics* from 1940 to 1942, I suggest that several comic book zombies throughout history have challenged conventional notions of the zombie body as one that is both under the control of an outside force (either a zombie master or virus) and somehow depleted.

In fact, the zombie's early connections to superheroic conventions led to an atypical zombie body type: the *strongman* zombie. Strongman zombies are well muscled and strong, but there is a clear racial divide separating strongman zombies from more threatening zombie bodies. With an early white strongman zombie, such as the Purple Zombie, muscles served to inscribe the zombie's position as heroic. In early comic book depictions of zombies of color, however, the use of exaggerated muscles was used to depict a threat the hero needed to neutralize. Racist assumptions that painted Black men as brutes were exaggerated by turning them into *mindless* brutes set against a hero's journey. Thus, unlike a zombie such as the Purple Zombie, who actu-

ally benefits from his zombified muscles, zombies of color don't benefit from having muscles; they are made (more) monstrous by them.

In chapter 2, "Vengeance and Villains: From the Horror Comics of the 1950s to *Deadworld*," I explore what, at first glance, might seem to be the opposite of the heroic zombies of the previous chapter: zombies set on vengeance or outright zombie villains. Moving from the zombie's earliest days in action/adventure and superhero titles, this chapter investigates zombies in pre-Code horror comics.[76] A common storyline in these comics involved people returning from the dead as zombies to avenge a wrong done to them in life as *revenge-from-the-grave* zombies. Comics artists imagined the undead as forces of reckoning, yet unlike the earlier strongman zombies, these were decomposing corpses—a feature of comic book zombies that preceded the decomposing corpses of cinematic zombies by nearly two decades. While these vengeful, decomposing zombies might appear physically horrific, they protected and reinforced the status quo.

These zombies were vehicles of justice, focusing on individual transgressions against the moral good, reaching out from beyond the grave to punish murderers, adulterers, and other evildoers to make the world safe for the law-abiding living. Yet, even when readers get a truly villainous zombie character—such as King Zombie from *Deadworld* (1987–present), whose goal is to eradicate all living humans—his villainy reinforces the normality and goodness of preapocalyptic society, once again rendering the status quo as the ideal the living should be aiming to reachieve.

Chapter 3, "*Tales of the Zombie* and *Xombi*: Or, the Curious Case of the Suffering Zombie Hardbodies," focuses on Simon Garth (aka "The Zombie"), the titular antihero of *Tales of the Zombie* (Marvel, 1973–75) and David Kim, the titular hero of *Xombi* (Milestone, 1994–96). While Simon Garth is a white character, he is literally infused with voodoo when he is resurrected as "The Zombie," and David Kim is one of only a handful of Korean American superheroes in American comics. Race tempers how each of these characters is read, and I argue that when the superheroic body is grafted onto a racialized zombie, it produces a masculinity shaped by violence and suffering. This violence and suffering is neither wholly connected to the character's zombie state nor his superheroic one, but is illustrative of a larger sense of loss of control over the self.

In the case of both Simon Garth and David Kim, becoming a zombie grants them unimaginable power and reproduces them as heroes. Yet this

power comes with a correspondent loss of agency that turns their hard bodies into a mockery of individual power. In this way, racialized zombies can never fully inhabit the superheroic, but rather must continually suffer to mark the ways they can't achieve the white masculine ideal.

Chapter 4, "Gwen Dylan Is Not the Girl She Used to Be: *iZombie* and Female Zombies in Comics," builds on the themes of chapter 3 to explore gender and the zombie body through an analysis of Gwen Dylan, the titular character of Vertigo's *iZombie* (2010–12). Contrasting her with female zombies of 1950s comics, the chapter studies the gendered implications of zombification. Comics of the 1950s often showcased the hardships men faced in staying faithful to decomposing zombie wives and girlfriends: whereas with male zombies, decomposition could be part of their arsenal against the living—shocking evildoers with evidence of their bad deeds—decomposing female zombies were typically tragic figures, losing the one thing that gave them value: their physical beauty. In contrast to these zombies, Gwen Dylan is a zombie who doesn't bear the physical traces of zombification, as long as she eats, and this marks her as a foil to other zombies of *iZombie*, who are rotting corpses.

Exploring the beauty culture surrounding zombidom, this chapter argues that there is a gendered aspect to the zombie's decomposition that holds female zombies to a different standard than their male counterparts and reinforces stereotypical notions of physical appearance determining female value. Female zombies are rarely presented as heroic and when they are—as in the case of Gwen Dylan—their heroism is tied to self-sacrifice for the good of the community. With Gwen—as with many of the zombie girlfriends and wives of the 1950s horror comics—the status quo only returns once the zombie dies, proving that heroic zombidom is typically only open for male zombies.

Finally, in the conclusion, "*Blackest Night* and *Marvel Zombies*: The Hero as Zombie," I explore the first series of *Marvel Zombies* (2005) as well as DC's *Blackest Night* (2009), both of which were limited series that saw Marvel and DC zombify some of their most popular superheroes. This chapter interrogates the process of zombifying existing characters to suggest that this playful reframing of characters offers up an opportunity to explore the ways in which the zombie state—despite a long history of zombies in comics as heroes and forces for the moral good—serves as a marker for disenfranchisement. Not only does this sort of reimagining obscure a long history of heroic zombies in comics by imagining the

zombie state as one that strips heroism away, but by zombifying popular characters, creators can reimagine them in outrageous scenarios—hungry for human flesh, turning on each other—without disrupting the canon. While this may create lucrative new revenue streams, treating the zombie as a costume ends up reinforcing the very logics that end up equating superherodom with whiteness and masculinity.

Thus, while they might seem to exist on opposite ends of the spectrum, the zombie in comics is in many ways a warped double of the superhero—like the superhero, the zombie is often someone given an alternate identity who is physically altered by that identity; in comics, they may also be ascribed with new powers and compelled to protect their community while always remaining outside of it. Yet, as the superhero's double, the zombie illuminates the many ways in which superheroic logics work to the advantage of some at the expense of others. The zombie becomes, then, an excellent means for considering what our assumptions of heroism—and horror—really are.

PART I

Mission

CHAPTER ONE

The Purple Zombie
Superheroes and Strongman Zombies

At first, the scenario from the first issue of *Reg'lar Fellers Heroic Comics* in 1940 seems typical for zombie tales of the time: evildoers are trying to build an army of zombies to do their bidding. However, the story takes a strange turn as these men begin work on their first zombie. The zombie breaks free of his masters' control and begins hunting them down. Later, when the police capture the zombie and he is executed for his crimes, he doesn't die—his electrocution just turns his skin purple. What is the law to do? Kindly scientist Dr. Kim Hale steps forward, offering to take full responsibility for the zombie, who he claims has been misunderstood, and with Dr. Hale's help, the zombie, named Zoro, becomes a staunch defender of democracy in uncertain times. Thus is born perhaps the first zombie superhero, the Purple Zombie.

While Zoro's journey from "monster" to hero is a bit unconventional, his transformation makes much more sense considering his home in an action/adventure setting, especially as in his case, zombification is more akin to a superpower than anything else: it grants Zoro not only a new identity but new abilities as well. Zoro's body is also shaped by superheroic logics, defying typical expectations of zombiness: it is a powerful, muscular body, in no way decomposing or weak. In the 1930s and 1940s, the zombies in most media were slow, passive creatures, physically unmarked by their zombification but dull-witted all the same. Yet Zoro is none of those things, so while he fits the conventional superhero mold, Zoro doesn't fit the conventional mold of the zombie. Zoro is not silent, nor without his free will, and his body proclaims his physical strength. He is something of a conundrum.

While many comics artists of the 1930s and 1940s reproduced the settings and tropes one might find in other zombie media of the time, others were influenced by the genres in which they found themselves working, and this led to an array of different zombie body types. As comics creators

tried to figure out just what zombies were, they played with the zombie body. This meant that while there were conventional enslaved zombies as well as decomposing corpses in comics, there were also zombies who defied the notion of the zombie as a presence that has somehow broken down. Rather, these zombies were evidence of the body not only remaining whole but somehow exceeding the typical human body, and as such, these zombies communicated a paradoxical sense of self-control on the part of the zombie that could be used to underline the zombie's threat.

These were *strongman* zombies: zombies with physical bodies that visually reinforce their positions as heroic or imposing figures while undermining their very zombiness. Strongman zombies were a product of early experimentation in comic books in the 1930s and 1940s, coupled with the influence of the same sorts of generic conventions that gave so many superheroes their fantastic physiques. And while today the general expectation might be for zombies to be decomposing corpses, the strongman zombie type hasn't completely faded away. Rather, we can continue to see the influence of early strongman figures in such well-muscled zombie characters as Simon Garth ("The Zombie") and Daniel Kim (aka "Xombi"), who are the focus of chapter 3, but while Garth and Kim are both clearly zombie heroes, in the 1940s and into the 1950s strongman zombies were not only heroes. Some were threats.

Unlike Zoro, who was a white man before he became the Purple Zombie, strongman zombies of color in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s weren't able to break out of their masters' control and become heroes. Rather, they remained enslaved, but they were then slotted into superheroic and action/adventure conventions by becoming beefed-up henchmen. Given the roots of the zombie myth in the U.S., these strongman zombies of color appeared with some regularity during the Golden Age: as zombies originated from stories about Haiti, many of the earliest zombie tales in American pop culture set their action in Haiti or other foreign places that were tied to Black or brown cultures. Comic books followed this inclination, which meant that a number of zombie stories featured zombie masters who operated in foreign spaces—often jungles or Caribbean islands—and controlled a horde of (usually Black) zombies ready to do their bidding.

As the typical enslaved zombie storyline revolved around a zombie master either threatening to zombify a white person or threatening to use zombies against a white person, a stark contrast between how zombification affected Black bodies and white ones was made clear: a zombie mas-

ter's zombie horde—made up of people of color—was full of objects, not real people, and these objects were little more than background set dressing. These were not the zombies a hero was trying to rescue; rather, they existed mainly to provide atmosphere.[1] The "important" zombies, the ones in need of rescue, were *always* white. They had names and individual identities. Moreover, their servitude was almost always short-lived.

Yet, as far as my current research shows, with the exception of Zoro, white zombies were hardly ever beefed-up. Rather, it was zombies of color who were often imagined as strongman zombies. In making these "background" zombies of color into strongman zombies, not only did comic book artists muddle what zombification meant by producing zombies whose bodies seemed to defy zombification, but they fed into racist stereotypes envisioning Black men as monstrous (muscled) threats. Physical strength in Black and brown zombies didn't work to make them more heroic—as it did in the case of Zoro—it underscored their racialized threat: they became the monsters that the hero must defeat to save the day.

Exploring the wide variety of zombie body types in the late 1930s into the 1940s before focusing on Black strongman zombies and Zoro, the Purple Zombie, this chapter examines how zombification, when combined with superheroic bodily conventions, worked differently on Black and white bodies in the Golden Age. While Zoro's strongman status seems to help him in becoming a hero and eventually shedding his zombie identity, the bodies of the strongman zombies of color work to reinforce their dehumanized state, emphasizing how whiteness and "life"—or one might say, full humanity—are made compatible in ways that Blackness and "life" never are. In other words, not all zombified bodies are created equal.

ALL SORTS OF ZOMBIES

In films of the 1930s and 1940s, zombiism usually didn't mark the body. In most films, zombies looked like "normal" humans.[2] In comics of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, however, there was a wide array of zombie body types, including zombies who were not physically altered, as well as those who were decomposing corpses or somehow otherwise made monstrous by their zombiism.[3] In pre-Code comics, how monstrous a zombie appeared to be often had to do with its role in a given story. If the story was about a zombie master creating zombies to threaten the local community where the hero

needed to find a way to foil the zombie master's plans, the zombies were usually little more than props or stock characters used to help explain the hero's motivation in stopping the master. These zombies might be physically altered to visualize their threat or the corruption of their bodies by the zombie master, but they might not. For example, in "The Zombie Summons," a story in *Adventures into the Unknown* #18 (April 1951), the zombies in question look mostly normal, save for their hollow eyes and, in some panels, slightly emaciated faces. But these zombies—while technically bowing to the will of an evil zombie master—are pitiful creatures who want to be free of their master's control and try to help one of his victims. Two issues later in the same comic, the zombies of "The Zombie Death" are clearly marked as different from the living—they sport bald heads, white skin, red eyes, and bony, claw-like fingers. These zombies act far more menacing than the zombies of "The Zombie Summons," and this is underscored by their far more gruesome features.

When zombies were an obstacle the hero faced on his way to the villain, the likelihood rose that the zombies would in some way be visually coded as a threat. Sometimes this meant making over zombies as clearly monstrous. For instance, in a story from the Canadian comic *Active Comics* #8 in 1942, a zombie master creates what is, according to the text, a scarlet zombie to do his bidding and kill his enemies. As the comic is in black and white, the zombie's skin pigmentation is easy to forget, but he also has claws and a pinhead, with fangs and recessed eyes set deep in his face. This illustrates his inhumanity and his potential threat without the text having to tell the reader explicitly.[4]

In fact, in the 1940s, zombies were found in several different colors in comics—in "The Scarlet Zombie," mentioned above, the zombie was supposedly scarlet.[5] The zombies in a story in *Uncle Sam Quarterly* in summer 1943 were a ghostly white.[6] Other zombies throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s would be black, pink, purple, or blue, but one of the more popular colors associated with zombies and zombie masters was green. For instance, although the zombies in the Dr. Occult stories in *More Fun Comics* in 1937 looked like humans, the first panel showing the zombie master has a man staring into a window. His hair is white, his eyes are bright red, and even though he is described as having a white face, his skin appears green.[7] Throughout the rest of the comic, the zombies have no noticeable physical zombie features, but the first panel introduces their master as physically different, visually announcing this difference before moving on with the story.

The zombies in the Fiery Mask's origin story in 1940 are likewise physically unchanged, except for the initial zombie the reader sees, which is green and bald with pointy ears, again signaling a difference early on before presenting relatively normal-looking zombies later in the story. Zarro, the zombie master in the Mr. Justice story in *Jackpot Comics* #1 in September 1941, is also green, with fangs, red eyes, and wild black hair.

While the use of white coloring or paleness in zombies not only matches popular presentations of zombies in films such as *White Zombie* (1932), it also lines up with tales from Haitian folklore, which often described zombies as pale creatures. The use of green for zombies in comics might be explained by the medium's ability to present stories in color—something that was still very expensive in film—but it also might relate to the zombie's associations with evil-doing, as there is a trope in comic books that often links villains with the color green. It is, after all, an "alien color since it doesn't appear naturally in humans" that can mark the zombies as something *other-than-human*.[8] There is also the fact that green can be associated with sickness ("you're looking a bit green around the gills"), marking zombies and zombie masters as bodies that aren't completely whole or, at the very least, corrupted or compromised. Thus, while within about ten years, zombies in comics would generally become gruesome decomposing corpses that stood apart from the living in the disintegration of their bodies, early on, comics creators indicated the zombie's Other-ed status through a series of colors meant to visually separate zombies and zombie makers from everyone else—without necessarily fully distorting these beings' claims to humanity.

The zombies in "The Horror of the Haunted Cathedral" from *Marvel Mystery Comics* #28 in February 1942 and the first Blue Blaze story from *Mystic Comics* #1 in March 1940 are worth noting as the exceptions to this rule because they are actual decomposing corpses appearing well before corpses were the norm in zombie stories. The zombies in "The Horror of the Haunted Cathedral" are corpses at different stages of the decomposition process, depending on when they died. As the Nazi zombie master, General Henchel raises zombies in the Louisiana bayou, the dead from as far back as the sixteenth century rise, each dressed in a different manner of costume—Spanish conquistadors are recognizable, as are seventeenth-century French explorers—and while the zombies are all pale white, some are skeletal while others have faces that are rotting but not yet gone. In the first Blue Blaze story in 1940, the zombies are even stranger: hooded floating torsos with a skeletal appearance. While it would still be a few years

before decomposing corpse zombies were the norm in comics, these stories show how far zombies in comics were already departing from cinematic conventions and the descriptions offered up by William Seabrook in *The Magic Island* in 1929, which presented zombies as physically unchanged save pale skin and dead eyes.

Perhaps the strangest departure in the visual depiction of zombies in comics of the 1940s—even taking into account the floating torsos of the Blue Blaze story—is the appearance of strongman zombies. Strongman zombies were, first and foremost, zombies with incredibly robust physiques. They were also almost always male and bald and dressed in ways that showed "off their strapping chests."[9] Typically, even in their physically unaltered form, zombies have never been about achieving a human ideal but rather about becoming something less than human: if the superhero body is the epitome of human strength and beauty, the typical zombie follows the superhero trajectory in reverse; it is everything most people fear their bodies can become. But throughout the 1940 into the 1950s, zombies with prominent muscles popped up across a host of titles, and strongman zombies in comics weren't simply muscled; they had bodies that tended toward the exceptional, akin to what one might expect of professional bodybuilders.

This was, of course, a way for comics creators to emphasize a zombie's potential threat—by making it physically imposing and a proportionate force for a hero to face—but it was also in keeping with superhero bodies more generally at the time. As Michael Kobre points out, "the bodybuilding fad of the 1920s and 1930s" was a strong influence on the superhero physique.[10] In the introduction, I noted how the rise in eugenics at the beginning of the twentieth century spurred fictional searches for the perfect human being, including the superhero, and what one can see in the strongman zombie is the idealized human body of the superhero superimposed onto the zombie character at a time when experimentation, in both superhero comics and with the zombie character itself, was rampant.

Scott Jeffery notes that late nineteenth century interest in "healthy" bodies coincided with "a public hunger for displays of unusual human bodies, in the form of the freak show."[11] He argues that the rise of such popular monsters as Dracula and Dr. Jekyll at the time is evidence of a popular fascination with bodies that defied the norm.[12] What one can see nearly a half century later is a hybrid form that is much like Dr. Jekyll in that it seems to exist as a double of itself, taking elements of both extremes of the human body and fusing them together. Zombies already trouble clear bodily boundaries—by

being both alive and dead at the same time—so the addition of a strongman physique further troubles them, as it seems to combine elements of two diametrically opposed states of being: How can the zombie be both the epitome of the loss of free will as well as the visual representation of the results of a strong will imposed upon the body (in the form of muscles)? Likewise, how can the zombie be both monstrous and conventionally attractive at the same time? In taking elements of the superhero genre and transposing them onto zombies, comics artists created beings who disturbed not only notions of the idealized human body but also notions of how the zombie should look and act.

Much of this may have been the inadvertent transposition of one set of generic conventions onto a character from another genre. Some of it may have been a way to create a visual shorthand accentuating a zombie's physical threat to a hero without fully thinking through the implications of such on the zombie persona, and some of it may have arisen from the fact that there were very few hard and fast rules associated with the zombie at the time. If zombies could be purple or pink, look like "normal" humans or be floating torsos, then why couldn't they be well muscled as well? Yet the rise of the strongman zombie in comics also points to the ways in which the superheroic bodily template seems to fit more "naturally" with certain types of bodies than others.

BLACK ZOMBIES

Many zombie films of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s traded in racist tropes whereby white Americans ventured abroad into Black spaces and encountered some sort of "native" magic that threatened their free will (and hence what makes them truly American and human). Because in most media of the time, zombies were not necessarily dead bodies, this paved the way for a possible rescue from zombification, and a common pattern was to have the zombie master zombify a hero's friend or loved one and then have the hero rescue them. In those stories where zombie-making was rooted in magic, the magic in question was almost always born of a nonwhite belief system, such as voodoo, and the action was often set in a foreign locale. Thus, when the white American (male) hero appeared, the underlying premise pitted not only Black against white but foreign against American. These stories painted America as a bastion of rationality and freedom, and they did so in largely

racist ways: often Black bodies were tools of evil or expendable, or both, while white bodies were heroic or deserving of rescue.[13] There were films that complicated this formula, but the zombie's roots in Haiti (and over a century of Western stereotypes of the evils of Haiti and Vodou) haunted zombie stories for decades.

White zombies in films of the time were almost always somebody's friend or relative; they had names and individual identities, and they had people trying to rescue them. In comics, it was largely the same. Looking at zombies in comics of the late 1930s and 1940s, for instance, one can find white zombies who are physically unmarked by their zombification and who are individuated as well. In the Dr. Occult stories in *More Fun Comics* in 1937, for instance, Nita Crane, who becomes Dr. Occult's prime motivator in finding and defeating a zombie master, looks like any other living white woman, even though she is a zombie.

The reader's introduction to her comes as the narration relates that "suddenly, from the depths of hidden shadows, a figure hastily steps out and confronts" Dr. Occult.[14] Nita seems to be stumbling to the center of the panel from the left, her blue dress slipping from her shoulder and her blonde hair flowing behind her. She calls out, "Occult! Please listen! I've only a moment to speak!"[15] Her physical appearance and entreaty communicate her desperation, but there is nothing about her appearance that tells the reader she is a zombie—besides Dr. Occult's reaction: "But this can't be! You've been dead for a year! I, myself, attended your funeral!"[16] Not only is Nita not altered by her zombification, but the reader knows her name and sees her speaking with, and later helping, the hero, Dr. Occult. In this way, her humanity is communicated, compelling her rescue from zombification. To give a zombie a name and a relationship to the hero is often enough to start them on the path toward emancipation.

In films of the era, Black zombies often peopled the backgrounds; they were nameless figures used to provide atmosphere more than anything else, and in comics, Black bodies were often reduced to indiscriminate figures as well. Looking at three panels from a 1940 "Voodoo Man" story, for instance, one can note how in the first and third panels, the zombies do not have detailed facial features and are only distinguishable by the color of their clothing (fig. 3). Even when one of the zombies is singled out, as in the second panel, he does not have a name but is identified by his title. The reader can't easily pick him out from the mass in the third panel either. He also can't speak clearly in the way that Nita Crane in the above example can. Instead,

Fig. 3. Black zombies as indiscriminate, dehumanized figures in "The Voodoo Man" (Allen Spectre, *Weird Comics* #5, Aug. 1940, 47).

he makes nonsense noises. Black zombies often had their humanity reduced in these sorts of ways while their white counterparts were typically supplied with personalities and individual identities.

Even when white zombies weren't as differentiated, there could still be a stark difference in the value of Black and white bodies in zombie stories. For instance, in a 1941 Mr. Justice story, where a zombie master is "killing" Americans and then taking their bodies back to Haiti to work in his munitions plant, zombification physically alters the zombies controlled by the zombie master Zarro: some sport fangs; at least one shows clear stitching to his face like Frankenstein's creature; another is skeletal, and all have blank eyes. This seems to be a quick way of communicating their contamination—because why else would strong, young American men work to build munitions for the enemy? Yet, after the superhero Mr. Justice defeats Zarro, Mr. Justice offers the white American zombies an on-page rescue, and they are visibly returned to their original, unaltered physical forms. Mr. Justice then tells them, "You are no longer zombies! You're living breathing Americans! When Zarro died, you were reborn! Now destroy this plant that turns out war materials for our enemies! Then I shall send ships to take you back to America!"[17] While the story implies that all Zarro's zombies have been freed, the white zombies are the only ones the reader sees as such—the reader never sees what happens to the master's Black zombies. Mr. Justice gives them no speeches or promises.

In comics of the 1930s and 1940s, there was a fairly even chance that zombification would cause a physical change in a person, with the likelihood rising as the decade went on. With zombies of color, this physical change had the potential to reinforce racist stereotypes, especially when the zombies in question were made into strongman zombies. While there are examples of Black zombies in early zombie films who have visible muscles, these muscles don't move the zombies into the realm of the bodybuilder or superhero.[18] They aren't excessive. Moreover, their physiques aren't what makes these zombies potential threats—their masters are. As I note elsewhere, these zombies were instruments of zombie masters, so their strength is only useful inasmuch as it can be used by someone else.[19] Even then, these zombies were typically used either to kidnap people or to intimidate them—usually by having a group of zombies march toward a person in order to communicate a threat. The zombies weren't used to fight. However, when Black male bodies became strongman zombies in comics of the 1930s and 1940s, their threat was both the commands of the zombie master *and* the zombies' brute physical strength.

Fig. 4. Celie's well-muscled Black zombies in "Tabu Wizard of the Jungle and the Zombie Witch" (Ted Brodie-Mack, *Jungle Comics* 2, #24, Dec. 1941, 19).

Whether the muscles of strongman zombies of color in comics of the 1940s was a conscious exaggeration or an attempt to better conform to the standards of the action/adventure or superhero genres, the end result was zombies of color who were physically imposing nearly to the point of caricature, and as such, their bodies could amplify long-standing stereotypes that served to degrade people of color. To illustrate this, I first turn to "Tabu, Wizard of the Jungle and the Zombie Witch" from the second volume of *Jungle Comics*, issue #24, in December 1941. In the story, Celie, Queen of the Zombies,[20] is facing off against Tabu, a white jungle hero akin to Tarzan. Celie's minions are Black strongman zombies: male zombies, wearing only loincloths, who are bald and well muscled (fig. 4).

The overwhelming physicality of these zombies, and the fact that they are almost entirely body—as in figure 4, the reader cannot see their clothes—seems to double down on their threat. Not only are these zombies dangerous because a zombie master has turned their minds against (white) American interests, but in reducing these Black male bodies to their physical presence and stripping them of any trappings of "civilization" or individuality, their zombification has stripped them of any claim to civilized humanity as well. These aren't zombies in need of rescue; they are zombies that need to be destroyed. Zombification itself doesn't actually seem to mark the men in any derogatory way, rather it works to magnify what is already there, and in the combination of well-muscled bodies and a lack of clear differentiation

from one man to the next, the message is clear: much as cannibal zombies of contemporary zombie films are often a threat because of their numbers, here too, the zombies become a mindless mass, and while they aren't cannibals, they are menacing because of their extraordinarily robust Black bodies.

Strongman zombies of color are thus similar to the "black brute" stereotype, which Donald Bogle describes as "subhuman and feral" and as "nameless characters setting out on a rampage full of black rage."[21] This stereotype takes white fears of strong, Black masculinity and condenses them into a figure who is almost totally, animalistically body: the brute is an unthinking machine of violence, often represented by an exaggeratedly large and well-muscled Black body. Not only does this speak to fears of Black aggression and miscegenation—as the Black brute has often been used as an imagined threat to white womanhood—but it works to reduce Black characters to little more than the threat they represent. They aren't people; they are dangerous *things*, and while their threat certainly increases when they are part of a group, these zombies are also dangerous on their own.

Examining a panel from a Buck Farrel story from 1946, one can see that the zombie is rendered in the darkest possible shade of black with blank white eyes; he has huge muscles, which are reinforced by the fact that the chair Buck smashes over his head doesn't seem to affect him and the way he is effortlessly choking Buck's sidekick, Corny (fig. 5). The zombie is seemingly imperviousness to pain. He is also dressed only in a loincloth, accentuating his body, especially in contrast to Buck and Corny, who are fully clothed. Plus, the zombie is attacking a white woman, underscoring his physical threat while adding a sexualized undertone, especially given the placement of the zombie's hand near the woman's breast.[22] Not only is the zombie drawn in a way that renders him barely human (note the awkward turn of his right arm and his claw-like nails), but in making over this Haitian man as little more than a thing, we see a doubling of reductions working against him: zombification already works to reduce bodies to a less-than-human status, but in making this particular zombie over as a strongman, the body becomes a Black brute as well, further reducing his claims to full humanity.[23]

In Jeffrey Brown's examination of Black superheroes in *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*, he notes "the black man has been subjected to the burden of racial stereotypes that place him in the symbolic space of being *too* hard, *too* physical, *too* bodily."[24] Black men are thus, always already a threat to white society. But with the strongman zombies of color in the

Fig. 5. Buck Farrel (*right*) and his sidekick Corny (*left*) face off against a well-muscled Black Haitian zombie (*center*) ("Buck Farrel," *Crown Comics* #6, Summer 1946).

1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, this excessive physicality is exponentially exaggerated, both by overlaying the zombie label onto these bodies and the superhero physique. It is similar to what Brown notes of Black superheroes: "If comic book superheroes represent an acceptable, albeit obviously extreme, model of hypermasculinity, and if the black male body is already culturally ascribed as a site of hypermasculinity, then the combination of the two—a black male superhero—runs the risk of being read as an overabundance, a potentially threatening cluster of masculine signifiers."[25]

In these early zombie comics, strongman zombies of color represent a similar "overabundance," but one that is marked by the paradoxical combination of servitude and a superheroic physique. The perfected and contaminated bodies coexist. With white zombies, this paradox could be limited by reducing the "zombiness" of the zombie in question: by not physically

altering the zombies or ensuring they are magically cured. White zombies also have clear identities and names, and while these aren't the same as free will, they work to counter its loss. When the zombies are people of color, the same mechanisms that would work to reduce zombiness are absent, and in these cases, the superheroic body stops pointing toward perfection and instead becomes a threat. In other words, the transposition of superheroic muscles onto a zombie of color doesn't serve to make him over as heroic but rather serves to reinforce racist stereotypes that were (and are) in wide circulation in U.S. culture.

The use of simian features on zombies does this too, and it was much more likely to be used for strongman zombies of color than any other type of zombie in the 1940s. Allison Rudnick notes that, during World War I, "the motif of the barbarous enemy abounds in propaganda issued by the Allied forces, and the ape-like figure in particular—a precursor to the title character in the 1933 film *King Kong*—spoke to an audience familiar with Charles Darwin's theories of evolution."[26] While, in World War I, comparisons to primates might have been directed toward white enemies, they were also a popular way to suggest an inherent barbarity in Black peoples as well. While zombies are often treated as less than human, in films up through the 1960s, this rarely took the form of a physical change to their bodies and never rendered the zombies over as animals. Yet, in comics of the 1940s and 1950s, this was a very real possibility, especially for strongman zombies of color.

Examining panels from "Zanzibar the Magician," a 1940 story by George Tuska that appeared in *Mystery Men Comics* #12, one can see the apelike features of the most prominent zombies in each image (fig. 6). In the first panel, the zombie holding out his hands has low-set, rounded ears and prominent rounded cheeks. In the second image, the zombie saying "Kill Him!" also has low-set ears, although his are more pointed; he also has a mouth and jaw that are disproportionately large for his face. A panel from a 1942 *Spirit* storyline goes a step further: criminals hire a voodoo practitioner to create zombies. They call him a "monkey," and in a panel where he is working his magic, his posture and face seem to mimic those of a monkey, with his hands outstretched above him in what one might call an orangutan manner.[27] The fact that the voodoo practitioner is wearing only a loincloth while everyone else is fully clothed serves to reinforce his difference.

Moving back to 1933's *King Kong*, in his analysis of the film James Sneed notes the Western "tendency to identify blacks with ape-like creatures,"

Fig. 6. Simian features on Black zombies in "Zanzibar the Magician" (George Tuska, *Mystery Men Comics* #12, July 1940, 61, 62).

identifying how this is born of old conceptions of racial classification and evolution that suggest Black peoples are somehow less human and more animalistic than their white counterparts.[28] Ed Guerrero, talking about the same film, observes that it "presents us with a powerful, enduring metaphor for dominant society's barely repressed fears of black masculinity, sexuality, and miscegenation."[29] The Black threat to white womanhood is clear in one of the most iconic images from the film: Kong holding a supine Ann Darrow high above New York City. The size discrepancy alone indicates Kong's threat to Darrow, but Darrow's positioning—her legs and arms dangling, her head thrown back—further reinforce her powerlessness in this situation.

Elsewhere I discuss the ways in which filmmakers have used zombies as avatars through which to explore miscegenation.[30] I also discuss the ways in which, in early zombie films, zombies stood in for bodies of color, but those zombies often didn't pose a sexual threat to white women—the zombie master who controlled them did. In comics of the 1940s, there are still zombie masters using their zombies to capture unwilling (white) women, and often, the threat of strongman zombies of color was less an overt sexual

threat than a means for the hero of the story to prove his superiority (and with it, white American superiority as well). Yet, in comics, zombies of color could still communicate a sexualized threat even when simply acting on their master's orders.

In a Deacon and Mickey story from 1945, for instance, in a series of frames where the zombie master orders his zombie, Kuala, to kidnap a woman and then to fend off crime fighters Deacon and Mickey, the first panel shows the zombie holding the woman bridal style in an image that suggests her sexualized vulnerability—she is scantily clad and apparently unconscious (fig. 7). The image is similar to some of the most popular images of 1933's *King Kong* with Kong holding Ann Darrow in his grasp, and it foregrounds how large the zombie is. In this panel, the zombie's face is also almost completely obscured—there is no real detail to his features—he is simply a dark mass and threat.

In the second panel of the series, Kuala lurches toward Deacon and Mickey with his arms raised high, but the reader can't get a sense of his size in relation to theirs. It's in the third panel of the sequence that the size discrepancy between Kuala and Mickey becomes clear, making the zombie almost comically large. In each of these panels, while there may not have been a conscious nod to *King Kong*, the relationship of the Black male body to the white woman, as well as the size difference between the Black and white bodies, suggests a very similar rhetorical situation—and this is simply looking at four panels out of context.

Within the larger story, the zombie master announces his intention to complete a "blood sacrifice" to the "spirit of Khara-El."[31] The master then says that he needs a "white victim for the ceremony." He singles out Ellen Cole, a nightclub singer and the woman in figure 7. Not only does the reader see a hulking Black body holding Ms. Cole and fighting off the Deacon and Mickey as if they have no strength at all, but the reader knows the deeper threat: she is to be a blood sacrifice to a foreign deity. The use of some non-identified form of "black" magic here signals the zombie's ties to a barbaric belief system that poses a literal threat to white women.

But taking this a step further: in these panels we have a Black strongman zombie. He is dehumanized by his status as zombie; he is further dehumanized by his conforming to the Black brute stereotype; and if one reads his stance in the first panel as an allusion to *King Kong*, he is dehumanized yet again through his association with the giant ape. Even if the pose in the first frame isn't a reference to Kong, the zombie exists outside normative

Fig. 7. Kuala the zombie faces off against the Deacon and Mickey (Randy Palais, "The Deacon and Mickey," *Catman Comics* #29, Aug. 1945).

humanity—his hulking figure and the absence of any clear facial features magnify his difference, so that even with a name (Kuala) and the ability to speak, this zombie seems less like a human within this scenario and more like a creature to be feared.

THE PURPLE ZOMBIE

While the superimposition of a superheroic body onto men of color marked them as threats, which were only amplified by zombification, zombification

had far less sinister implications for white bodies. To see this, one merely has to go back to 1940, which seemed to be a year for zombie origin stories. For instance, in the first Blue Blaze story in *Mystic Comics* #1, readers learned that in the 1850s, Spencer Keen's father developed a blue blaze that could revive dead animals, but he feared its power. Before he could destroy it, a tornado hit, and the blaze hit Spencer. In the aftermath, everyone assumed that Spencer was dead, but he wasn't. Rather, "During his years of hibernation Spencer Keen gains strength a thousand fold."[32] When he awakens and crawls out of his grave in 1940, Spencer is ready to fight crime. He meets evil Professor Maluski, who is, ironically enough, creating a zombie army, and Spencer vows to vanquish him. Technically, Spencer might not be a zombie—he went into hibernation, after all, and has no master controlling him—and yet his superheroic origin is remarkably similar to a zombie's: to die (or appear dead) and be reanimated.[33]

In *Daring Mystery Comics* #1 that same year, Dr. Jack Castle investigates the disappearance of homeless people in his city, discovering a scientist using a machine to create zombies to "kill those who get in my way and help make me conqueror of the world!"[34] When the zombie master turns the machine on Dr. Castle, Castle resists. The zombie master then turns the machine up higher and higher until it explodes; Dr. Castle's body then starts glowing, and he feels stronger than ever. The Fiery Mask is born. While Castle was never technically turned into a zombie, he does represent the earliest comic superhero whose roots lie in zombie creation (although not the last). His powers derive from a zombie-making machine, after all.[35]

At the same time that the Blue Blaze and the Fiery Mask were getting their starts, a true zombie hero appeared: the Purple Zombie.[36] In August 1940, the Purple Zombie made his first appearance in *Reg'lar Fellers Heroic Comics*. Written and drawn by trailblazing female comics creator June Tarpé Mills,[37] the Purple Zombie storyline ran for twelve issues of *Reg'lar Fellers Heroic Comics* from 1940 to 1942 and centered on scientist Kim Hale and the zombie Zoro and their exploits facing off with all sorts of evildoers, including mobsters and Nazis. The Purple Zombie stories originally take place in the United States during World War II, but after leading an army of skeletons on the battlefield in Europe, Zoro and Hale end up traveling through time for several issues, only to end up working for the U.S. government in the final installment, with Hale entering research and development and Zoro enlisting in the armed forces.

In the first issue of the series, Dr. Kim Hale and Dr. Malinsky are work-

ing on a project to extend life expectancy, but Hale refuses to continue the research once he learns that Malinsky intends to create an army of zombies to do his bidding. Hale is aghast, claiming they have "already gone beyond the laws of nature!" and leaves immediately after the production of their first zombie.[38] After Hale leaves, Zoro—the zombie in question—gets the better of Malinsky, killing him and then going after Malinsky's "foreign" backers. Zoro kills them and then is caught by the police. In the second issue, he stands trial for his crimes and is sentenced to die. Zoro is electrocuted, but it doesn't work, simply turning his skin purple without killing him.[39] Dr. Hale returns, begging the governor to spare Zoro's life, telling him Zoro isn't "responsible for his acts" but that, in killing Malinsky and his backers, Zoro "has just rid the world of the four most cold-blooded and ruthless killers that ever existed!"[40] Zoro is handed over to Hale's custody with the understanding that Hale will control the zombie, who joyfully refers to Hale as "master." Zoro swears to follow Hale's rules and to "keep the peace" and is set free.[41]

While films wouldn't regularly start having zombies created by scientific means until the late 1950s, comics used science to create zombies throughout the 1940s. Yet, even with the scientific basis of Zoro's zombidom—and its departure from "black" magic and voodoo—the first issue makes clear that zombification is unnatural. There are Hale's misgivings about the project, and as Hale is quickly painted as the good guy and Malinsky the bad, this reinforces the sinister nature of zombification. Later in the issue, Zoro himself reiterates this by telling Malinsky, "So, I am a zombie without a conscience . . . aye, but not without a brain! You, and your backers sought to gain power by violating the dead. . . . But, you reckoned without me!"[42] Zoro classifies zombification as a violation, yet he is already attempting to put things right by destroying the people who created him. He is just going about it in the wrong way: his vengeance is lethal, bypassing the criminal justice system. Thus, even if he is ridding the world of bad men who were trying to do bad things, he oversteps. To further reinforce the warped nature of zombification, as Zoro is corralled by the police, one of them remarks, "He's not human!"[43]

In the second issue, the dehumanization of Zoro continues as the narration tells us that "the zombie became a veritable demon" while it recaps the first issue where Zoro hunted down Malinsky's backers.[44] Later, Zoro is called "soulless." To underscore his separation from the rest of humanity, as he sits in his jail cell awaiting execution, Zoro laments that "they think they

can kill me . . . but they can't! I—I wish they could!"[45] Not only is he criminalized and sentenced to death, but Zoro actively seeks death, underscoring how unnatural zombification is by showing how badly Zoro wants it to end.

Visually, Mills communicates Zoro's Othered state with the near constant scowl on his face. In the first and second issues, every panel with Zoro in it shows him frowning and angry until two panels on the final page of the second issue. In these panels, Zoro's demeanor changes. In the first of these panels, Dr. Hale comes into the execution chamber and Zoro is in awe as he exclaims, "Master!! You—You're alive! Oh, thank heaven! You've come for me, Master?"[46] Hale reassures him, and Zoro "throws himself at Hale's feet in gratitude" while Hale pleads Zoro's case.[47] The issue ends with the governor placing Zoro in Hale's care.

Within the first two installments of the Purple Zombie, then, Zoro is not only set up as less-than-human but also in need of a master, who will act as a conscience and steer him in the right direction. While zombihood in the Purple Zombie stories is not explicitly connected to voodoo, the underlying theme of a master-servant relationship remains. Furthermore, the ways in which characters describe Zoro link together the status of *less-than-human* with the absence of a conscience and a lack of restraint.

Robert C. Harvey notes that early comics were usually made up of rows of nearly identical panels without much variation, and they often depended on text to advance the story.[48] The Purple Zombie is no different, yet the text seems to be at odds with the visuals of the story. While the text portrays Zoro as some unnatural abomination who needs the guidance of a living man, what the reader sees is quite different. Not only is Zoro a verbose and eloquent zombie, but besides his purple skin, there seems to be very little that would mark him as different, and certainly nothing that would clearly mark him as a zombie beyond his title. Like the strongman zombies described in the previous section, Zoro is bald and well muscled—his body definitely mimicking a bodybuilder's physique—and until the seventh issue of *Reg'lar Fellers Heroic Comics*, Zoro is always shirtless (fig. 8). Unlike the zombies described in the previous section, though, Zoro wears pants instead of a loincloth. This, combined with his long speeches on freedom and fighting evil—and the fact that after a few issues he will no longer need Hale's guidance to do the right thing—would seem to dispute what the text tells the reader. Furthermore, the other main character of the series, Dr. Kim Hale, is a staunch supporter of Zoro's, acting first as his "master" and moral

Fig. 8. Zoro, the Purple Zombie, fights local mobster Joe Coroza (Tarpé Mills, "The Purple Zombie," *Reg'lar Fellers Heroic Comics* #4, Jan. 1941).

compass and later as his partner in fighting evil. If the conventionally handsome, blond-haired hero has faith in Zoro, shouldn't the reader as well?

The trajectory of the story is important in this regard. When the reader meets Zoro in the first issue, he is a being of vengeance, and while his killing of Malinsky and his backers may seem justified, as Robert G. Weiner, Robert Moses Peaslee, and Duncan Prettyman remind us, "historically, the hero does not kill. The boundary for superheroes is often killing," because crossing that boundary makes heroes too much like the criminals they face.[49] Given that this was a Golden Age story, far removed from the far grittier and ambiguous heroes of the 1970s and beyond, Zoro could be read as straddling the line between hero and criminal: at once, ridding the community of evildoers but taking things a step too far by killing them. This is why his tutelage under Hale is so important: if nothing else, Hale needs to temper Zoro's murderous impulses, or at least teach him when it is proper to act upon them.

By the fifth issue, Zoro is acting of his own free will. He decides to leave

Hale behind to go fight in the war, and in the series' final five issues, he and Hale are time-travelling partners. Thus, under Hale's tutelage, Zoro learns right from wrong and then immediately acts on his newfound morality, and by the end of the series, the two men are equals.[50] This isn't a trajectory that strongman zombies of color ever experience: even with Zoro's criminal background and purple hue, he is not only redeemable but afforded an individual identity and an opportunity to escape his criminal/zombie past.

Much of this has to do with Zoro's utility to his community. Zoro is a threat when bad people want to use him: first, Dr. Malinsky and his backers and, later, gang leader Joe Coroza. But in both cases, Zoro resists their control. He breaks out of Dr. Malinsky's lab and hunts down his backers. He likewise resists Joe Coroza's control to the point where the gang leader decides it would be easier to kill Zoro than try to use him (see fig. 8). Zoro is also a threat initially when left to his own devices, until Hale can teach him how to constructively use his strength. But once Hale accomplishes that, Zoro is ready to act on his own.

At that point, Zoro and another character, Chico, team up to fight for "the world's greatest cause . . . Democracy!!!"[51] They leave Hale and go to Europe to assist the military. Chico has developed programmable skeleton soldiers and Zoro is impervious to bullets, so they are the perfect duo to go up against a powerful death ray that is causing an unimaginable loss of life. However useful Zoro might prove to the U.S. Army, though, he is still a zombie. This means he won't be provided the safety of remaining back at base like Chico; rather, he leads a column of mechanical skeletons into battle. Zoro and the skeletons are there because they aren't technically alive and therefore, they represent the best chance the U.S. has against an enemy "death ray." Yet while the comic sets this up as heroic—and later Chico will ask that his skeleton soldiers be buried in "a hero's grave"—Zoro and the skeletons are also more expendable than living soldiers. They may succeed in their mission, but if they don't, the army won't lose anyone living.

The mission is a success, though, and in the sixth issue Zoro is already a wartime hero, awarded a medal for his service. Zoro has also grown as a character. Under Hale's tutelage, he has learned to turn his violence toward acceptable causes. Moreover, the shift from crime fighting to war shouldn't be a surprise. Allan Austin and Patrick Hamilton observe that many publishers were more than willing to turn to war themes in the early 1940s, both because it was profitable and because many felt it was their patriotic duty. They also note that what these war-themed comics could accomplish "was

twofold: they offered their audience exciting tales of violence and destruction but also made that conflict appear manageable and controllable."[52] Zoro's early adversaries—Dr. Malinsky and his backers—have ties to "foreign nations" that suggest they may have been trying to create zombies for an enemy power.[53] And Zoro's ascension from possible threat to savior seems to hinge on Hale's tutelage and Zoro's quick comprehension of American war values.

Yet Zoro eventually comes to outthink his mentor. In the seventh issue, Zoro turns the death ray on its creator, killing him. Dr. Hale arrives on the scene and tries to stop Zoro, but Zoro asks, "Would you have had me leave this beast to turn the death-ray on thousands of helpless people?"[54] Hale responds, "I—I guess you're right, Zoro!"[55] Not only is Zoro now advising Hale, but Zoro—as a being set apart—can do the messy sorts of things that have to be done in war while Hale's hands are clean.

The storyline then shifts to spend the final five issues with Zoro and Hale jumping through time as their friends Prof. Roy Elton and Chico try to rescue them. They first travel to the year 64 AD and end up facing off against Emperor Nero. They then travel to 1190 AD and battle Saracens before meeting King Richard. They then meet Sir Francis Drake and help him defeat the Spanish Armada. Zoro saves Hale from the guillotine during the French Revolution, and the two end up in prehistoric times before they are finally rescued. While some of the people they meet will comment upon Zoro's purple skin, it is often forgotten as Zoro and Hale face off against some of Western (white) history's most famous adversaries. The two always land on the side of righteousness, and while Zoro is still willing to give his life to protect Hale, they are always treated as equals by the people around them.[56]

In the final installment of the Purple Zombie, Chico sacrifices his life to rescue Zoro and Hale. As Hale considers trying to revive their friend via zombification, Zoro makes a confession: "You see, I WASN'T DEAD when you put me in the machine! I was in prison falsely accused of a crime, and escaped to hide in the prison morgue . . . faking death, I was taken, as a corpse to your laboratory for the experiment! You did give me great strength and the power of immunity to bullets and pain!"[57] It turns out Zoro was never a zombie at all—rather an innocent man (who is exonerated a few panels later) who has been gifted extraordinary powers by Dr. Hale's scientific advancements. In other words, he was masquerading as a zombie when he was, in fact, a superhero. The story ends with Zoro joining the army as

Hale heads off to Washington, reinscribing the war theme while tying both Zoro's and Hale's heroism to service.

Considering the elements Peter Coogan lists as essential to identify a character as a superhero—mission, powers, and identity—Zoro fits the parameters. His transformation into hero happens when he is brought under the control of Hale, who recontextualizes Zoro's previous violence as necessary, and none of what Zoro does after the first two issues is for his own personal benefit. His mission throughout the rest of the comic is prosocial and selfless, focusing both on Hale's safety and the safety of the U.S.A. Zoro is also granted special powers through a combination of the experiments conducted on him and his electrocution. These powers render him impervious to pain. And his identity is straightforward: he is supposedly a purple zombie, and he is known as the Purple Zombie. It may not be the strongest superhero iconography ever composed, but it still communicates who Zoro is.

As a strongman zombie but also as a superhero, Zoro differs from the strongman zombies of color not only in the fact that his is a story of redemption, but in that he is also an individual who can make his own choices. While Zoro may initially call Hale "master," Zoro can speak his mind, and the storyline focuses on him. Moreover, his change in costume throughout the series visually reinforces his growth. He moves from being shirtless with trousers, to the various era-specific pieces of clothing during his time traveling escapades, to donning a full military uniform in the end. He has sartorially civilized himself in becoming fully covered in appropriate contemporary clothing.

While Zoro's eventual redemption could be tied to the fact that he was never really a zombie, it also presents a utopian story of assimilation in which if one learns from his "master" and serves the nation, then one can rise above his situation in life—be that his zombie status or the color of his skin. Zoro may not be a real zombie, but he is still purple when the story ends. And yet that no longer seems to be an issue. Austin and Hamilton note that among the subjects that the Office of War Information suggested comic books "highlight" in their war-themed comics of the early1940s was the U.S. as "a harmonious melting-pot society."[58] Yet they note that not only was U.S. society of the time far from harmonious, but that comics often seemed to spout lofty ideals only to end up reinforcing "racist reasoning."[59]

With the Purple Zombie, it is important to consider Zoro within the context of other zombie media of the time, as well as the ways in which

Mills drew him—especially his coloring—as this worked to seemingly paradoxical ends. On one hand, Zoro is accepted and even lauded by the U.S. military, but this is mainly tied to his utility. Similarly, throughout the time traveling escapades, while Zoro may look different from the people he and Hale encounter, that is rarely a point of contention. The historical people treat Zoro's purple hue as an oddity that is often forgotten in light of his good deeds: in other words, his actions counteract his physical difference.

Yet part of the threat that Zoro poses in the first two issues of the series is that his is a strong body that could potentially be brought under the control of an unscrupulous master. Dr. Malinsky crafts Zoro to be a part of a zombie army funded by a foreign power. Later, mobsters will try to kidnap him to use him to commit crimes, and the conditions of his release from prison are that he remain in Dr. Hale's care. Even when Zoro's and Hale's relationship moves past one of supervisor and supervisee as they time travel, Zoro is still Hale's de facto bodyguard and still willing to sacrifice himself for his "master." In his willingness to put Hale's well-being ahead of his own, Zoro is an example of the faithful servant, not unlike Uncle Tom or Gunga Din, a typically Black or brown character in service to a white one.[60] This is especially troubling when we learn that Zoro isn't actually a zombie—there is nothing compelling his behavior besides some inner devotion to Hale.

SUPERHEROIC STRONGMAN ZOMBIES

In his essay "Are Zombies Superheroes?," Henry Kamerling suggests that surface level comparisons between the undead and superheroes will inevitably highlight their differences: zombies have decaying bodies; superhero bodies are "idealised"; zombies exist as creatures of the crowd, whereas superheroes are often solitary figures; and "Superheroes speed. Zombies shamble."[61] Yet Kamerling observes the ways in which "many post-1960s heroic and undead bodies have shared a broad range of fantastic identities. These extraordinary bodies often produce conflicted identities for both superheroes and monsters. Finally, we find that both heroes and the undead occupy worlds often perched on the edge of apocalypse."[62] Kamerling's ultimate assertion is that comparing zombie bodies with superheroic bodies illustrates the horrific roots of the superheroic body and points to the ideological ways in which undead apocalypses differ from superheroic ones. I would suggest that while Kamerling's comparison is apt, it doesn't account

for the wide variety of zombie bodies that have been on display in American media, and it certainly doesn't account for the strongman zombie.

In much pre-1960s media, zombies were physically unaltered, or, at most, the physical changes caused by zombiism were minor—the skin became paler and the eyes became glassy. Following the introduction of cannibal zombies in the late 1960s, more and more zombies in U.S. pop culture were decomposing corpses, and today, most contemporary zombies are physically differentiated from the living. Yet it is important to remember three things about the zombie's body. One, there have always been several ways to imagine the zombie's body in American pop culture. Hence, the wide variety of colors of zombies in 1940s comics or the existence of both strongman zombies and decomposing corpses in 1950s comics. Two, zombiism hasn't always been something worn on the body but rather has been an interior state; much like a superhero's superpowers might not be noticeable outside of their use, zombiism isn't necessarily visible. Three, in comics, the zombie's body was influenced by the generic spaces into which zombies were put—thus, strongman zombies make sense within action/adventure and superhero spaces, while decomposing corpses make much more sense in a horror setting. Not only do decomposing zombie bodies and superheroic bodies share a sort of horrific plasticity that renders them both uncanny, but early comics first imagined these two kinds of bodies under similar generic conditions.

The bodies of superheroes are often defiant and excessive bodies—they go beyond what should be physically possible in the natural world and are extraordinarily strong and durable. On the other end of things, there are decomposing corpse zombies, whose bodies are also defiant and excessive. They live in bodies that refuse to die and bodies that are also impossibly durable, but in an almost diametrically opposed manner to superheroes. Yet, with other zombies—the physically unaltered enslaved zombie or the strongman zombie—this distinction seems to disappear. Zombiness becomes almost like an alter ego, hidden under the skin, and while the zombie's body is still defiant, it is no longer visibly so.

I mention this because much of Kamerling's thesis—as well as a whole body of literature on superheroic bodies—focuses on the malleability of these bodies and the ways in which this malleability sets the superhero apart. Elizabeth MacFarlane, Sarah Richardson, and Wendy Haslem, for instance, discuss how the superhero body is "forever after *not quite human*. This is the gift and the burden the superhero's body must bear—to be remarkable and

remarked upon: capable of amazing feats, incapable of belonging, finding community, or the comfort of anonymity."[63] MacFarlane, Richardson, and Haslem nod toward Kamerling's claim that while the superheroic body may be idealized, it is also a source of dread. This positioning of the superheroic body as existing at the boundaries of both the wonderful and abhorrent seems to mimic the liminality of the zombie in any of its forms: the zombie straddles the line between living and dead. In both cases, the body exceeds the norm.

My point is not to suggest that zombie bodies and superheroic bodies are the same; rather, they both exist as indicators of a tension between the possible and the impossible. In some cases, this becomes more visible, as with superheroes like the Thing or the Hulk or with decomposing corpse zombies, and in other cases, this tension is more hidden. Yet, with the Purple Zombie and the strongman zombies of color, the tension changes: in both cases, we have zombified bodies that are literally shaped by superheroic conventions. They are bodies that are excessively excessive. So, what happens when comic book artists render the zombie in a superheroic body?

With the Purple Zombie, given the action/adventure thrust of the stories, the body seems logical: it fits the conventions in which the reader finds it. Zoro's muscles work against his zombification, to the point that, by the end of the story, he reveals he was never a zombie at all. The tension dissipates as he sheds both his zombie identity and his superheroic one to become a regular soldier in the U.S. Army. Discussing contemporary zombie heroes such as Gwen Dylan from *iZombie* (2010–12) and Jared Kabe from *Star-Spangled War Stories Featuring G.I. Zombie* (2014–15), Kamerling suggests, "By presenting us with human-like and heroic zombies, these tales ask us to consider expanding our idea of the human to incorporate beings who by look and habit do not at first appear as we do."[64] While this seems to be the case with Zoro, the strongman zombies of color never make the transition, and this begs the question of just what part of them—their zombiism or their race—bars them from full humanity?

Darieck Scott argues that there are "antiblack elements at the core of the superhero genre," noting "the pairing of 'black' and 'superhero,' . . . is conceptually difficult, especially because of blackness's association with criminality, monstrosity, and abjection, whereas the superhero is conceived as the innocent, all-good, usually beautiful victor."[65] The strongman zombies of color illustrate one aspect of this—that the physical rendering of a well-muscled body reads differently depending on the race of that body. What is super-

heroic strength on one body is villainous threat on another. When strong Black bodies were zombified in comics of the 1940s, it was a magnification of a threat. The racist assumptions that painted Black men as brutes was exaggerated by turning them into *mindless* brutes set against a hero's journey. Zoro's body turns purple, but that change isn't enough to mark him as a threat once he is taken under the wing of Dr. Hale and started on the path of assimilation. At that point, it is as if Zoro's zombiness ceases to matter. That is why it doesn't mean much for Zoro to admit that he never was a zombie; he has already been assimilated into the community, having proven he is willing to serve in the armed forces and potentially sacrifice himself for the good of the nation. But the important factor is that Zoro is white. He isn't doubly dehumanized. For the Black strongman zombies, no matter what they do, at the end of the day, they are still zombies and they are still Black, and as such, they are doubly trapped. For the Black zombies, their zombiism does nothing to help their status as outside the white, American norm. Their bodies don't benefit from looking like idealized strongman bodies; they are made monstrous by them.

As we'll see throughout the rest of this book, the superheroic zombie body did not die out in the 1950s. It has resurfaced in various titles over the years that focus on heroic zombie characters. Yet, in these instances, the body is tempered in ways that allow the zombies in question more leeway toward becoming fully accepted members of the white, American community. In *iZombie*, Gwen Dylan isn't a strongman zombie but rather a beautiful woman who is a zombie hero. Her body is largely unaltered, but the threat that her body might turn into something more clearly zombified looms throughout the run of the series. With *Xombi*, David Kim has a strongman body, and in *Tales of the Zombie*, Simon Garth does too, but their bodies are bodies of suffering, with each man looking to shed his zombie state (and the body that goes along with it). In *Marvel Zombies*, the zombies in question aren't so much strongman zombies but rather strongman figures who are zombified: zombiism doesn't provide a new body, it infects the old one. And in this instance, zombification acts as the device that will pull these superheroes down—yet, unlike their Black strongman counterparts, this doesn't mean that they are villains.

Zoro is an excellent example of the ways that the zombie character was continually shifting in comic books of the 1940s and 1950s. In an era that produced floating torsos, strongman zombies, purple zombies, green zombies, and zombies of the palest white, there was ample room for experimentation,

especially as the zombie hadn't become confined to the horror genre yet. As the zombie came to inhabit horror titles and its look became more codified and pronounced, the ability for zombies—even heroic ones—to exceed their zombiism and become integrated into the white, American community diminished, unless, as we will see in later chapters, their zombiism didn't physically mark them. But this was only the case for white zombies. Black zombies never had this opportunity. So, while superheroic conventions may have shaped early representations of zombies in comic books and given readers the strongman zombie, once the conventional look for zombies shifted toward decomposing corpses, then even zombies with muscles couldn't overcome their zombidom, no matter how heroic (or white) they might be.

CHAPTER TWO

Vengeance and Villains
From the Horror Comics of the 1950s to *Deadworld*

At the beginning of *The Chilling Archives of Horror Comics! Zombies* collection, Stephen Banes tells us that zombies

> LOVE to drag you underground—or underwater—to share in their miserable fate of life after death inside an agonizing grave. . . . Sometimes, they want to see you die brutally in some ironic "twist ending" manner just as they did—via simple relentless revenge. Other times, these fiends want to transform you to their way of un-life, signing you up for all eternity in Satan's shadow legion of the dead.[1]

Banes's description makes it seem as if most zombies have it out for living humans, as if they are the villains of the story. Yet, in Golden Age comics, while zombies might drag an evildoer underground or capture a person so that they might be made into a zombie, zombies were rarely out-and-out villains. More often than not, given their roots in action/adventure and superhero tales, they were either a villain's henchmen or unconventional forces for the moral good.

As I note in the introduction, the zombie that entered American pop culture at the end of the 1920s was not the zombie we are familiar with today: it was enslaved, bowing to the will of a zombie master. And most of the earliest zombies in comics reflected this tradition; they were servants or henchmen under the control of someone else. Typically, the zombie master was evil, but the zombies themselves were merely tools. They weren't inherently bad. In fact, they were sympathetic precisely because they had no way to fight back against the zombie master's control.

While zombies in comics began changing in the late 1940s into the 1950s, enslaved zombies remained a staple of zombie-themed stories. Sometimes, there was a single zombie being directed by a master. In "Dial 'Z' for Zombie," from May 1953, for instance, Prof. Oscar Bellows steals a voodoo houngan's special telephone—one that can call forth a zombie and control it.[2] He uses the phone's powers to force the zombie to kill his rivals, but his mistake is installing the phone in his office at the museum where he works. When his boss hears of the killings of Bellows's rivals, he fears that someone may be after local academics and uses the phone to call the professor to warn him, inadvertently sending the zombie after its master. Here, it is perfectly clear that while the zombie may be doing the killing, it isn't initiating the violence. Rather, it is simply the tool the professor uses to enact it, and in the end the world is put right as the zombie ends up killing its master. The zombie then disintegrates as its use as a tool is no longer needed.

Other zombie masters were far more ambitious than Professor Bellows. They wanted to control large numbers of zombies or potentially turn the rest of the world into zombies ready to do their bidding. One can see this sort of story in films of the 1930s and in comics published during World War II, but it was an especially popular story in postwar comics where zombie masters could serve as not-so-subtle stand-ins for the dreaded communist menace. In a Phantom Lady story from 1947, for instance, the zombie master explains how he imported his zombified "fifth column" into the U.S. so that they could "reassure my total power!"[3] In "Corpses . . . Coast to Coast" from 1954, a grave diggers' strike leads to "thousands of corpses" being left unburied, which is just what the zombies who have infiltrated unions, the government, and even "the F.B.I.!" wanted, as now they have "the raw material of one of the greatest revolutions ever planned." Their ultimate goal is a "zombiocracy" that will rule the world.[4] Even in this second example, where zombies are clearly the organizers of this plan to create a zombie army, there is still a sense that most zombies are merely servants to the few who act as zombie masters. Thus, zombification itself is still not necessarily the problem but rather it is a tool being used by evildoers for nefarious purposes.

Once cannibal zombies became the norm across media in the 1970s and 1980s, the typical zombie storyline still retained the threat of zombie hordes but dispensed with the zombie master. Viruses or other unexplained events were now to blame, and as such, the zombies were—and are—no longer controlled by an identifiable outside force, but that doesn't mean that they are consciously deciding to attack the living.[5] Rather, like the shark, they

are simply creatures following the drive to eat, and living humans happen to be very convenient prey. The underlying premise of zombie mythology remains the same whether it is enslaved zombies or cannibal zombies: zombies are people without a will of their own, and as such, they aren't inherently malicious.

Simply put, while audiences might assume that zombies are bad, they typically aren't. In fact, the number of true zombie villains is quite low. Zombies—especially in comic books—are more likely to be victims, and yet, across media, the zombie is still vilified. Much of this probably derives from the perceived threat of zombification—the idea of being turned into a zombie of any type is frightening—but it is also connected to the zombie's increasingly gory visage over the years. By the 1950s, zombies in comics were already rotting corpses, and their monstrous appearance led many observers to assume that they had similarly monstrous motivations.

At the heart of all of this is the simple fact that to make a zombie villainous is to remove what makes it a zombie: its loss of free will. To be inherently evil suggests desires and goals, things that zombies aren't supposed to have. And what we find in comics is that creators have often been willing to experiment with the degree to which a zombie can or can't have a will of its own. Yet, in reinstating that will, these creators—as many of the other chapters in this book show—have been more likely to imagine their zombies as good guys and heroes. This chapter explores zombies from a different angle, though, examining antagonistic zombies and their trajectory from zombie servants to zombie villains. Beginning with the zombie henchmen of the earliest zombie stories in comics in the 1930s and 1940s, through zombies seeking revenge in the 1950s, to truly villainous zombie characters—such as King Zombie from *Deadworld* (1987–present)—this chapter considers those zombies supposedly set up in opposition to the good.

In exploring these *antagonistic* zombies, what we discover is that zombies have often either been used as tools by evildoers or have been strange vehicles of justice, focusing on individual transgressions against the moral good and reaching out from beyond the grave to punish evildoers to make the world safe for the living. Even those zombies who could be classified as actual villains often end up reinforcing simplistic notions of good and evil, promoting the sort of status quo that the zombie heroes of the previous chapter also advanced. Thus, even as villains, zombies often end up doing the same sort of work that their heroic cousins do.

ZOMBIE JUSTICE

In the Phantom Lady story from 1947 that I mentioned in the previous section, a zombie master threatens to unleash his zombie army on the world. In many ways, this was a fairly typical formula for zombie-themed stories across media in the 1940s: the zombie master looking to use a zombie army to get his way. These stories imagined hordes of enslaved zombies being used as weapons or workers—mindless tools to do their master's bidding. Yet the Phantom Lady story is a bit different.

In one panel of the story (fig. 9), the master imagines what might happen when he turns his zombies loose on the world and they are left to "their own pleasure!"[6] The panel shows us zombies overturning cars and pawing at terrified women. This would seem to suggest, at least visually, some sort of inherent malice on the part of the zombies, not unlike the racialized threat I discussed from *strongman* zombies of color in chapter 1. These zombies, after all, are dark skinned, and two of them are attacking white women. So perhaps these zombies do present a threat. Yet, this is still their *master*'s imagination, and in reality, *he* retains control over the zombies. He has the power to let them loose or rein them in. Thus, even if the zombies are inherently evil, it is the master—and not the zombies—who remains the primary threat.

The Phantom Lady story appeared at the cusp of a horror boom in comics that lasted from roughly 1950 through 1954, and while this story might have had horrific elements, it is still set in the superhero genre. As horror started to become its own recognizable genre in comics in the late 1940s, zombies underwent an aesthetic change from *strongman* zombies and relatively untouched enslaved zombies to decomposing corpses. This makes sense when you consider the context of the horror boom: sometimes dozens of new titles were appearing each month as publishers rushed to emulate the early success of EC's horror titles *The Vault of Horror*, *The Haunt of Fear*, and *Tales from the Crypt*. The EC style combined dark humor, snappy writing, and twist endings to create comics that decades later are still remembered as trendsetting. In their attempts to copy EC, other publishers met with mixed results, with many aiming for ever more gruesome imagery instead of wit to sell comics. Gruesome decomposing corpses thus fit well in a period when publishers were trying to one-up each other to entice readers in an increasingly crowded horror market. Grisly visuals sold comics.

Fig. 9. A zombie master's imaginings of what his zombies might do if left to their own devices (Gregory Page, *Phantom Lady* #15, Dec. 1947, 7).

As rotting bodies became more prevalent, zombie-themed stories also underwent a narrative change. While there continued to be stories centered on villains using zombie henchmen, zombies out for revenge became more prevalent. As I observe elsewhere, these zombies were "no longer background material" in the same way servants and henchmen were, rather these zombies were "the point of the story."[7]

"The Ghoul and the Guest," a story from the August 1952 issue of *Strange Fantasy*, has this kind of zombie. Yet, as we will see, even when the zombie itself is the threat, this is restricted—in this case by *who* the zombie is threatening. In the story, a woman on a lonely farm tells a tramp begging for food that she'll feed him if he works for his supper. The man is sick and weak, but he tries to work. When he faints and begs for food, the woman calls him "lazy" and does nothing to help him. He dies, and she gets rid of the body, but later that night, it returns and starts completing its work. When the zombie's work is finished, he demands his meal. The woman screams and dies of fright. Here, the zombie is a threat but only because the woman's behavior dictates it—his threat only surfaces due to her bad behavior. This is what I call a *revenge-from-the-grave* zombie story, centered on the dead returning to mete out justice against the guilty.

In a 1954 story, "From the Graves They Crept," zombies punish the casket maker who charged outrageous prices for their cheap coffins, and in "Dust unto Dust," from *Chamber of Chills* that same year, Simon Locksley comes back from the dead to drag his murderer to the grave. In each of these cases, there is a one-to-one correspondence between doing bad things and being "punished" by zombies. Sometimes, though, the premise of revenge-

from-the-grave stories was stretched a bit thin in terms of whose sins were being avenged. In "Beasts of the Bog," from *Voodoo* in 1952, a honeymooning couple is surrounded by a group of bog zombies. It turns out the groom's ancestor "once commanded in this district! He ordered the peasants massacred in a fit of rage! Their bodies were thrown into the bogs!"[8] The zombies enact their revenge on their tormentor's descendant.

The typical plot of revenge-from-the-grave tales was simple, and it usually centered on murder. A murdered person would return from the grave—almost always as a decomposing corpse—and they would hunt down and kill their killer before returning to the grave. In these stories, there was a clear moral order to the world, wherein bad people met bad ends, but the vehicle for this moral punishment was the zombie. With this change in storyline, the villains of zombie-themed stories also changed. Petty thieves, career criminals, and mad scientists were still plentiful in comics, but alongside them readers could suddenly see corporate presidents or bored housewives as evildoers as well. These revenge-centered comics envisioned a new kind of villain—the mundane villain who proved that evil could wear any sort of mask, even the person next door.

While these revenge stories were often centered on very personal transgressions committed by regular people, that wasn't always the case. More horrific and far-reaching crimes could also be the impetus for a zombie's return. In one of the very few revenge-from-the-grave stories that I could find that directly acknowledged the Holocaust, "The Dead Remember" from 1954, a former Nazi celebrates past atrocities with his friends. Coming home from their partying, the group encounters a band of zombies who also remember the past (fig. 10). A fight ensues, but the zombies can't be killed and are thus able to pull the Nazi into their grave to pay for his crimes.

The crux of these stories was that the villain always *deserved* what they got. Qiana Whitted notes that EC titles "favored the blatantly *unsentimental* variations of eye-for-an-eye punishment more commonly associated with the Old Testament."[9] In a 1983 interview, the head of EC Comics, William Gaines, explained that "our stories were really quite moral . . . If somebody did something really bad, he usually 'got it.' And of course, the EC way was he got it in the same way he gave it."[10] Hence, zombies came back to retaliate against those who had wronged them. These stories were ultimately about justice being served—albeit from a very strange authority.

Jack Fennell notes that "revenge, honour and violence have formed the basis of the dominant Western conception of justice for centuries," and that

Fig. 10. Zombies recall Nazi atrocities in "The Dead Remember" (*Forbidden Worlds* #25, Jan. 1954).

these conceptions of justice are often tied to ideas of punishment wherein the punishment is rooted in "our need for vengeance, to hurt the ones who have hurt us."[11] Mikhail Lyubanksy agrees, observing that punitive systems of justice "are so widespread that most of us have a hard time even imagining any alternative ways of 'doing' justice."[12] He maintains that punitive logic is so ingrained in the logic of most superhero comics that it even underlies storylines where the main players have seemingly diametrically opposed ideologies about crime fighting. For instance, in the Civil War storyline in Marvel Comics from 2006–7, Captain America and Iron Man find themselves leading two opposing factions in a superheroic civil war. As Lyubanksy notes, "Even as they disagree about politics . . . Iron Man and Captain American never actually disagree on what justice ought to look like. Both seek to apprehend criminals and turn them over to the authorities."[13]

While punishment can take other forms, Western conceptions of justice are often tied to *violent* punishment. In exploring the history of Western forms of punishment, one can find an array of violent punishments, from cutting out tongues to locking people in stocks to the continuing use

of capital punishment today. Violence permeates Western conceptions of state-authorized punishment, but it should be made clear that this is premeditated or at least preconceived violence done through human agents: laws are set up determining what punishments fit what crimes and who has the authority to carry them out. In contemporary Western societies, violent punishment is supposed to be state sanctioned and administered, and at the very least, it is violence that operates under the assumption that "the punishment fits the crime." As David A. Pizarro and Roy Baumeister note, "There is a great deal of evidence that individuals have a basic and strong aversion to being treated unfairly. . . . People enjoy being treated fairly, and become distressed when treated unfairly."[14] Hence, a punishment seen as fair would be more comforting than a punishment seen as unfair, and violent punishment is only perceived of as just when it doesn't exceed (or fall well below) the violence of the condemnable act. Thus, with the EC and other horror comics of the 1950s, a zombie coming back from the dead to violently punish its killer wouldn't necessarily be read as a disproportionate response; rather, it was a fair turn of events: a life for a life.

In "I Was a Zombie" from *The Thing* #4 (Aug. 1952), Alden Blake is tricked by Dr. Raoul Perdu and his niece, Francine, into taking a zombie drug. They turn Blake into a zombie and force him to work for them, but a chance flood opens his grave, setting him free. He finds Perdu and Francine and kills them. He then announces, "My zombie vengeance was complete."[15] The story is told from Mr. Blake's perspective. It paints him as both protagonist and victim, and thus when he kills Perdu and Francine, the killing reads as justified. But to make sure that the killing can't continue, the story ends with Mr. Blake being placed in an asylum, and this is typical of revenge-from-the grave zombie stories: often, the zombies were destroyed, returned to the grave, or otherwise incapacitated so that their threat was contained, but this also underlined the one-to-one correspondence between crime and punishment. These zombies weren't out to punish *all* humans, only those guilty of a particular crime.

In the previous chapter, I discussed Zoro, the Purple Zombie, who is able to assimilate into "normal" American culture, in part through his growing grasp of the right times and places to apply lethal violence. He kills bad guys at the beginning of the series and is condemned for it, but Dr. Kim Hale promises to rehabilitate Zoro. Part of his argument is that Zoro's killing was justifiable and warranted for community protection: the people he killed were a clear threat to the community. Later, when Zoro kills the creator of

the enemy death ray, there is far less concern because (a) Zoro is working for the U.S. Army and (b) he is again killing a threat to U.S. interests. Yet, after this, Zoro's violence will never again turn lethal, and this may contribute to his ability to assimilate back into U.S. culture at the end of the series: he is a hero who has learned what his relationship to the state should be (enlisted soldier) and the appropriate limits to his punitive violence (nonlethal).

If one considers the Comics Code, one can even see how punitive justice becomes a baseline for dealing with criminals in comics: not only were there mandates to present crime "as a sordid and unpleasant activity" but the Code required that "in every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal [be] punished for his misdeeds."[16] The Code itself came in response to growing calls for censorship in the 1950s, spurred on by the popularity of horror and crime titles. The assumption was that these titles often flew in the face of traditional morality and presented crime and horror as glamorous. Yet the horror titles of this chapter already conformed to the Code's mandate: good triumphed over evil, and crime was punished. The biggest difference was in *who* was the vehicle for justice.

However, there was also the problem of the zombies using *lethal* violence against wrongdoers. As Peter Coogan notes, historically, killing was "generally regarded as a line that superheroes will not cross because it makes them too much like the criminals they fight. . . . [It is] too proactive, taking the powers of the jury and judge into their own hands."[17] Thus, while superheroes might use violence to capture evildoers, in the Golden Age they handed the evildoers over to a governing body that could then deliver justice. By taking the law into their own hands, so to speak, the revenge-from-the-grave zombies removed themselves from the heroic by taking their violence a step too far.

Thus, in 1950s horror comics, decomposing zombies could be vehicles for justice, but because of their ghastly visages and the fact that they were enacting violent (typically lethal) justice on "normal"-looking living people, the typical story of justice being meted out was skewed. Justice was still served; it was still punitive, but because those serving it had physical appearances designed to horrify, and because their violence was lethal, justice was overshadowed by spectacle. Fennell suggests that the Comics Code, which was enacted at the end of 1954, was a way to recontextualize crime and horror, making crime "unpleasant and nasty, never profitable, objectively 'evil' and totally unattractive."[18] But this is the irony in terms of zombies: they weren't the criminals of their stories. They were the victims, and they made crime

unattractive both in their visage and their punishment of evildoers. Yet most censors of the time were focused on the aesthetics of these characters rather than their motivations or the moral purpose they served.

This focus on the zombie's looks suggests that there was an assumption that bad-looking people (zombies) necessarily did bad things, and this seems to be an assumption that still follows the zombie to this day. In the real world, it can be hard visually to distinguish good people from bad, but in order to make good-versus-evil transactions more legible in comic books—at least in the Golden Age—the good characters (the superheroes and those they must protect) were typically distinguished from the "bad" characters (those who threaten) both visually and in terms of the actions of each player: villains threaten, superheroes protect, and the community is both threatened and protected (it is acted upon). Moreover, superheroes tended to occupy idealized human bodies while villains were far less beautiful.

Villains were often pictured as having some physical abnormality or disability, making them an inversion of the perfected superhero body. José Alaniz, discussing Silver Age supervillains, argues that "supervillains—following the gothic tradition of revealing the inner deformity of the soul through the disfigurement or spectacular otherness of the body—simplistically reify the ableist reader's unconscious anxieties and prejudices regarding difference (racial, gender-related, nationalist, class-based, or physical)."[19] Like Alaniz, Fennell points out that the ugly or disfigured villain trope is, at least partially, based on "aesthetic expectations of criminality" rooted in vengeance that often equate evildoing with evil-looking—the idea that criminals and other evildoers will somehow have their crimes and evil physically manifest upon their person.[20]

Like the historical roots of punitive justice, this "uglifying of crime" is based on historical practices wherein the sovereign or the state would punish criminality in ways that left physical marks on the criminal, such as branding them. Thus, Fennell notes that "villains who *are* disfigured bear scars reminiscent of mediaeval punitive mutilations, which simultaneously advertised an individual's essential criminality, and the nature of his wrongdoing."[21] This sort of presentation of good and evil can, of course, warp our understandings of real-world good and evil, leading readers to believe that good and evil are as easily legible in the real world as in comics. It can also—as in the case of many horror comics of the 1950s—obscure fairly conservative moral parables under an "ugly" veneer, such as what happened with the revenge-from-the-grave zombie stories.

With the 1950s revenge-from-the-grave zombies, it wasn't their criminality on display in the zombies' disfigurement. Rather, their decomposition at once marked them as zombies, but at the same time worked as visible evidence of the crimes committed against them. This takes the typical "deformed or disabled equals evil" trope and upends it as, here, the zombie's decomposing corpse becomes a clear indicator of the zombie's prior victimization. The fact that this "evidence" of wrongdoing (against the body) is then used, in part, to shock and scare their transgressors makes it a sort of punishment as well. As I note elsewhere, "The gruesome physical body of the zombie becomes part of its arsenal against those who wronged it; the zombie's body becomes a weapon in its campaign to terrorize and then punish the guilty."[22] Dead bodies aren't supposed to walk or talk and could thus be terrifying in that regard alone, but increasingly in comics, these dead bodies were also gory and falling apart—a truly disquieting image for anyone to confront, but especially troubling, one would imagine, for the person who originally killed them. Thus, the zombies were able to turn their disfigurement back onto those who killed them.[23]

In thinking about the increasing appearances of revenge-from-the-grave stories, the timing of these stories—in the late 1940s and early 1950s—is telling. In her analysis of depictions of the Holocaust in comics, Kathrin Bower notes how in the Silver Age there was

> a shift away from the moral clarity that had been the hallmark of the Golden Age superheroes to a condition of moral ambiguity. In the real world, expectations that the law would or could mete out appropriate punishment to the perpetrators of the Holocaust were greatly diminished in the aftermath of the Nuremberg trials of 1945–1946 and the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt from 1963 to 1965. The failure of the law to deal adequately with crimes against humanity led to a moral dilemma of how to approach questions of justice and revenge regarding the Holocaust.[24]

Elsewhere I suggest that stories of zombie vengeance may have been a way of "dealing with survivor's guilt" in the postwar period by "literally reanimating past guilt and returning it to the present."[25] But if, as Bower suggests, in the wake of World War II, Americans were becoming more cynical about justice, then the revenge-from-the-grave zombie stories might also serve another purpose.[26] In these stories, the dead can avenge their (usually vio-

lent) deaths and evildoers are brought to justice. After World War II and in the midst of the Korean War, the zombies could thus stand for any number of real-world dead bodies whose deaths would go unpunished. Readers could thus experience a fantasy of revenge in the immediate postwar era, and one that was far enough removed from reality so as not to pick directly at fresh wounds.

These stories of zombie revenge also provided simple worlds of good and evil where evil was punished and then the world returned to "normal." David Pizarro and Roy Baumeister argue that superhero comics are satisfying "in part because they satisfy a basic human motivation: the motivation to divide the social world into good people and bad, and to morally praise and condemn them accordingly."[27] One can assume that the revenge-from-the-grave zombie stories worked in much the same way. Yet these stories also provided a carnivalesque inversion of typical aesthetic norms—it was the "ugly" characters bringing justice. In many ways, these were underdog tales: those who shouldn't have agency (the dead) asserting their agency over those who robbed them of agency. In that sense, these were fantasies of righting the wrongs of the past in an era when the ghosts of World War II still loomed large.

ANTAGONISTIC ZOMBIES

Another type of zombie began to surface in the late 1940s and early 1950s in stories where zombification was a punishment for evil doing. Here, zombiism was not inherently evil but rather was the result of being evil. In these tales, one's bad character leads to one being made into a zombie, and just as in the revenge-from-the-grave zombie tales, good triumphs over evil. Here, too, readers are taught that people who do bad things deserve "bad" endings.

In "Canyon of the Living Dead," a story in *The Hand of Fate* #8 in December 1951, for instance, it isn't so much zombification but the subsequent deterioration of the body that is posed as a punishment for evil. In the story, Curt Thompson must bail from his airplane in the Andes mountains and discovers a hidden city where a princess has been forced to wait alongside Spanish conquistadors for 400 years, hoping for some sort of release. While the princess looks like a living human, the Spanish soldiers are zombies, and she explains to Curt that this is "perhaps because I was not guilty of the brutal marauding these conquerors engaged in while over-running my

country!"[28] Thus, even though she has been forced to live until the curse on her city is lifted, it is only the evildoers who must also subsequently suffer through zombie decomposition.

In "Beware the Undead!" from 1952, Nat Grear is trying to kill his rich uncle so he can inherit the man's fortune, but he accidentally falls off a cliff while trying to push his uncle over. Nat wakes up to discover he is a zombie—he will be reborn, die, and come back as a zombie for the rest of eternity. As the narration tells us, "Grisly punishment! All who embrace the ways of Satan, some way, some time, will be punished!"[29] This sort of eternal torment also befalls Goldie Ricon, the escaped Death Row inmate at the heart of "The Slithering Horror of Skontong Swamp," from June 1952. When he is finally caught and executed, Goldie wakes up as a zombie in the swamp where the other undead tell him, "We are the electrocuted dead—seeking vainly forever to cool our charred flesh in the swamp, from the burns of the electric chair!"[30] These *comeuppance* zombies weren't as prominent as their vengeful cousins, but their existence points to the dread surrounding zombification: the fear of losing one's health and potentially one's free will that is at the heart of zombie mythology.

It might be most useful, then, to think of most zombies as existing in varying degrees of opposition to their non-zombie counterparts. Enslaved zombies and cannibal zombies born of viruses exist in opposition to (living) humans not because of some inner desire or prejudice but because they are forced to act—either by a zombie master or a virus that controls them. Comeuppance zombies aren't in opposition to the living as zombies; rather, they become zombies because they are in opposition to the moral code as living men. Revenge-from-the-grave zombies are also antagonistic, but they exist primarily in opposition to living evildoers, so their threat is limited to one or two people who have already strayed from the moral right. They almost always disappear once their vengeance has been enacted, so their threat is further limited.

But what about zombies who are truly evil? Those do exist, but strangely enough, they are in the minority across most media—namely because the zombie state is *supposed* to be about the loss of one's free will. To be truly villainous requires the motivation to act in certain ways, which requires some sort of will. Thus, to be a zombie villain is to be an inherently suspect zombie.

Zombie villains inhabit their zombidom a bit differently than enslaved or cannibal zombies, but also—like their superheroic brethren—their zom-

bification often gives them power. In particular, with both zombie heroes and villains, that power often centers on that fact that zombies are undead. We can see in the zombie villain a distillation of "zombiness" down to the inability to die rather than the loss of free will, and we can only assume that this is labeled as zombification, as opposed to being immortal or any other variety of undead, because of the gruesome associations made with the zombie look.

The first true zombie villain in comics—at least according to my research—was Solomon Grundy, who appeared in *All-American Comics* #61 in October 1944 in a Green Lantern story entitled "Fighters Never Quit." The story opens on Grundy, a pale, grotesque figure looming over the Green Lantern. The image is accompanied by a rhyme explaining how the villain got his name (fig. 11). The reader soon learns that Grundy climbed out of Slaughter swamp with amnesia and met up with a criminal gang who christened him. Soon, the "Grundy Gang" are on a crime spree, and the city is helpless. Bullets don't seem to have any effect on Grundy, and even when the Green Lantern shows up, his power ring is useless against the man. It's only after the Green Lantern loses his ring that he can best Grundy, and even then his victory is only temporary, as the Grundy character would be revived in 1945.[31]

When he rises from the grave at the beginning of the story, Grundy is an unnatural shade of white with monstrous features and pronounced, nearly buck, teeth. His clothes are ill-fitting, making him look a bit like film versions of Frankenstein's creature. He is clearly differentiated from the other characters in the story by both his coloring and size. He is meant to be read as threatening, but he isn't a decomposing corpse like some of the later revenge-from-the-grave zombies would be.

The Green Lantern originally describes Grundy as "a distortion of nature," and while that may be, the implication is not that Grundy's zombiness causes his villainy, but rather that he was a villain *before* he became a zombie.[32] This is reinforced by the fact that when he rises from the "oozing slime" of the swamp, Grundy is wearing prison garb.[33] Thus, his zombiness doesn't influence his behavior, but rather it is what gives him his special powers—it is what allows Grundy to fight off the Green Lantern with impunity: he simply cannot die. In this way, Solomon Grundy's zombification is very similar to the zombification of Zoro, the Purple Zombie, or Simon Garth, who will be discussed in chapter 3. For all of them, zombification isn't about degradation so much as it becomes their chief weapon: an inability to be killed.

Fig. 11. Solomon Grundy's first appearance in "Fighters Never Quit" in 1944 (Alfred Bester and Paul Reinman, *All-American Comics* #61, October).

Over the years, Grundy's status as a zombie has been debated, but even so, if we count him as a zombie—at least in his initial iteration—he is still a bit of an anomaly. Almost all the other zombies of the 1940s and 1950s across media weren't villainous. Even as the conception of the zombie moved from enslaved zombies to cannibal zombies in the late 1960s and 1970s, the zombie itself was rarely villainous, and this is still the case today. Any reader familiar with *The Walking Dead*, in any of its iterations, knows that in cannibal zombie stories, it is usually the living who are the true villains of the piece.

KING ZOMBIE

While cannibal zombies began appearing in other media throughout the 1970s, they were much slower to gain traction in comics. As I mentioned in

the introduction, Marvel had their zuvembies, which were their attempt to circumvent the Comics Code. They also had Simon Garth, "The Zombie," but in both cases, Marvel seemed to be mixing both enslaved and cannibal zombie conventions. In 1973, Rick Veitch's story "Two-Fisted Zombies" appeared in *All New Underground Comix* #5, and in it, the reader witnesses a postapocalyptic Earth where radiation has caused the few remaining humans to produce "monstrous offspring" and where "the spirits of the dead could be controlled and enslaved!"[34] The story produces another interesting melding of enslaved and cannibal zombie conventions, as it imagines the living amassing hideous zombie slaves, but it ends with the zombies breaking out of the living humans' control and wreaking havoc on what's left of them (see fig. 12). Given the timing of its release and its overall nihilistic tone, one can surmise that *Night of the Living Dead*, with its zombie hordes and likewise bleak ending, may have been an influence on the tale.[35]

This sort of nihilistic worldview became more and more prevalent in the time between *Night of the Dead's* release in 1968 and the "zombie renaissance" across media in the 2000s. It accompanied a profound change in the relationship between zombies and other characters as well. In comics of the Golden Age up through the 1970s, zombies were largely either amoral tools or agents of the moral good, and if they targeted living humans at all, those humans deserved it. But in the post–*Night of the Living Dead* world, zombies largely became indiscriminate killers. Some holdovers of the enslaved zombie remained, but overall the zombie became a fixture in worlds that had lost their moral order and where it didn't matter if a person was good or bad; death came for all. A comic that has consistently utilized this nihilistic tone is *Deadworld*, and yet it, too, is something of an oddity, as it provides both threatening zombie hordes as well as zombies who can talk, reason, and who clearly feel emotions. It also provides another zombie villain: King Zombie.

Deadworld first appeared in 1987 as the brainchild of Stuart Kerr, Ralph Griffin, and Vince Locke. It was originally published by Arrow Comics before moving to Caliber Comics and then to Image Comics. Its original run (volumes 1 and 2) ran from 1987 to 1993, and since 2005, it has been released in limited series and one-shots. In the original run, which begins in a postapocalyptic world with a group of young adults who have taken refuge in an old school bus in Louisiana, zombies have overrun most of the earth. And while most of the zombies are the mute, decomposing shufflers that populate the backgrounds of many comics and movies, there are other

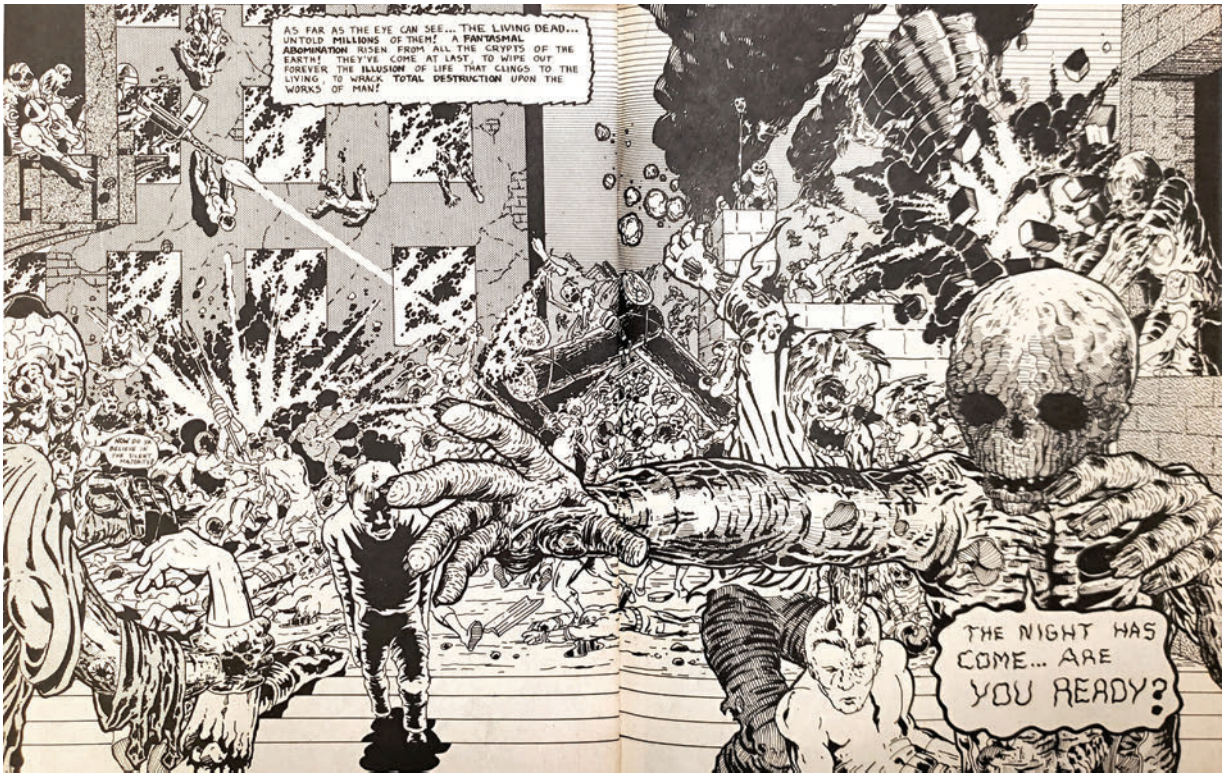

Fig. 12. The final two-page spread of "Two-Fisted Zombies" (Rick Veitch, *All New Underground Comix* #5, 1973).

zombies—zombies who are intelligent and control the other, "lesser" zombies. This second group of zombies is led by King Zombie, a motorcycle-driving, wise-cracking sadist who wants to eliminate the living and usher in a new supernatural presence on Earth.

The comic imagines a two-tiered hierarchy of zombies, which would seem to revive the idea of the zombie master within the cannibal zombie premise. The idea of a zombie as zombie master happened a few times in films and comics of the 1930s and 1940s, but it hasn't been a prevalent motif in post–*Night of the Living Dead* zombie media. As I'll discuss more at length in chapter 4, this sort of differentiation among zombies produces a zombie hierarchy, which in this case works to separate the "geeks"—zombies who are dangerous inasmuch as they are acting on the impulse to eat human flesh—from the higher class of zombies, who are dangerous both as zombies and as those who control the "geeks."

Solomon Grundy exists primarily as an antagonist within the confines of superhero narratives, operating as a foil to the superhero, and his villainy is tied more to criminality than anything else. In the Golden Age, Grundy's threat was largely toward property, and his violence was never lethal. So, while he may have technically been a zombie—at least as originally conceived—this was mostly a convenient means of making him hard to dispatch, a foe equal to a hero like the Green Lantern.

King Zombie, the leader of the zombies in *Deadworld*, however, is something different. By the time *Deadworld* was released in 1987, the Comics Code had already undergone one revision in 1971 and was about to undergo another revision (in 1989), and while mainstream publishers had been slowly making their titles grittier, underground comix and independent publishers had been going even further for nearly two decades—as is evidenced by "Two-Fisted Zombies." Thus, King Zombie, a character in an independently published title, necessarily had more leeway than his Golden Age zombie cousins. King Zombie also operates under a different set of generic conventions than Grundy—as *Deadworld* is firmly housed in the postapocalyptic zombie subgenre—so his zombiism needs to be read differently, at least inasmuch as he is a cannibal zombie in a postapocalyptic world.

Postapocalyptic zombie stories are rooted in *Night of the Living Dead* and George A. Romero's subsequent "Dead" films, most especially *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985). They usually envision scenarios where either zombies have already ushered in the "end of the world" or they are about to do so. In most cases, this provides an opportunity for storytell-

ers to dwell on how living individuals react when faced with the end of society as we know it, and the zombies—while potent threats—are often more background material than anything else.

In *Deadworld*, the story begins after the "apocalypse" with the zombies fully ensconced in the world of the living. In the first issue, the reader meets King Zombie and the other master zombies as they spy on the living protagonists, making plans to eat them (fig. 13). The group of zombie masters soon realize that they'll need to offer up some of the regular zombies as "cannon fodder" to deplete the living humans' ammunition. These master zombies are not only able to speak and to strategize, but their "look" is different from the other, subservient zombies. In the panel in figure 13, King Zombie is on the far left, and he is shown again in the smaller inset panel on the far right. He wears sunglasses and has a bandana around his "hair." The other master zombies also wear distinctive clothing. Later, the reader will see them riding motorcycles.

Meanwhile, the subservient, "geek" zombies are far more bodily in nature (fig. 14). The reader's first visual introduction to them is as a distant mob, and it is hard to discern any individualizing features even when they get closer, as there isn't much drawn to distinguish one zombie from another. Often, the subservient zombies are far more decomposed than their masters, marking them as less recognizably human and more monstrous. They drip, have holes in their torsos, and otherwise seem to be far more affected by their zombie state than King Zombie and the other intelligent zombies.

One of the most subtle differences between King Zombie and the subservient zombies (and even his fellow master zombies) is his sunglasses. The eyes are a prominent feature on many of the zombies in *Deadworld*. One might note the zombie that is being shot in figure 14 and its almost comically large eyes. Yet, in figure 13, King Zombie's eyes are obscured by his glasses, hiding that point of contact from the reader (and ostensibly, anyone else he faces). Only once in the original run of the series does the reader get to see behind his sunglasses (in issues #15 and #16) and even then King Zombie is different. Instead of eyes, he has maggot-filled holes where his eyes should be. If eyes are the windows to the soul, then King Zombie's hidden—later revealed to be missing—eyes would suggest that the reader can't discern what motivates him; we have no window to his soul. Yet the maggots would further imply that whatever we might find in that soul is probably rotting, further reinforcing King Zombie's position as a villain.

The reader also rarely sees King Zombie behave in typical zombie-like ways. Besides the fact that the reader is privy to his thoughts and to what

Fig. 13. King Zombie—on the far left, as well as in the insert—and his fellow "zombie masters" in *Deadworld* (Stuart Kerr and Vincent Locke, *Deadworld Archives Book One*, ed. Gary Reed, 2016).

Fig. 14. A group of skeletal zombie "geeks" from *Deadworld* (Stuart Kerr and Vincent Locke, *Deadworld Archives Book One*, ed. Gary Reed, 2016).

he's doing while the human protagonists are having their adventures, he is rarely shown eating the living like the other zombies do. Instead, he is more likely to utilize weapons and order other zombies to eat the living; throughout the first volume of the series, he uses a gun or an axe in facing off with humans more than anything else, and he seems less interested in eating the "warmies," as he calls them, than finding out information. Thus, while King Zombie might ostensibly be a cannibal zombie, his behavior suggests that

this is largely just the outward wrapping. He isn't driven by the need to eat; he has a higher cause.

In the original run of the series, King Zombie not only hunts the living and orders the subservient zombies to kill them, he also happily tortures the living: in one issue, he chops off a living person's fingers to extract information, and in another, he feeds a baby to one of his henchmen; it's even implied that he rapes living women. But none of this is tied to the zombie drive to eat. King Zombie is doing it for other purposes, including his own personal satisfaction. Therefore, what makes King Zombie a villain isn't tied to what we might term *zombiish* behavior—pursuing and eating the living—it is tied to his mission to try to reopen the supernatural gate that ushered in the apocalypse in the first place. His villainy exists independent of his zombie identity.

Thus, King Zombie's zombie state may not actually be that far removed from Solomon Grundy's. Like Grundy, it seems clear that zombiism itself isn't the cause of King Zombie's bad behavior, both because that bad behavior seems to exist independently of his zombie drives and because if it were a feature of zombiism, then the other "geeks" would behave just like King Zombie. Moreover, the one "power" that zombiism seems to bestow on King Zombie is that his body can take an incredible amount of damage and keep going.

Both Grundy and King Zombie present us with a strange conundrum as zombie villains: their villainy actually works to de-zombify them, perhaps not outwardly, where both men may *look* like zombies, but in action and deed. These zombie villains thus inadvertently help illustrate how incongruous zombidom and villainy actually are. But this also points to the tenuous claim to zombidom that many of the zombies in this book have. Even with the revenge-from-the-grave zombies, while they may look the part, they seem motivated by some desire to right a wrong. Thus, in almost any iteration where they are threats of their own accord, zombies must veer out of truly zombified territory in order to act. To make a zombie a villain, we have to humanize it.

THE ZOMBIE FAÇADE

At the beginning of this chapter, I noted that when most people think of zombies, they imagine malevolent creatures, but in most American media of the past hundred years, zombies have rarely been inherently evil—because

to be so would indicate desire and individual will, two things that zombies aren't supposed to have. The association of zombies with evil may be because they are "monsters," but it seems to have more to do with the zombie's increasingly gruesome visage than anything else. There is a long tradition in American popular culture, especially comics, of rendering evildoers over as ugly or disfigured, making the implicit argument that an "ugly" soul will show itself on the physical body.

In *Not Your Average Zombie*, I observe that for Barbara Creed "feminine sexuality is often made monstrous in horror films by showing the female body to be" fluid, able to cross boundaries, and as such, it threatens systems that rely on those boundaries being clearly demarcated.[36] I extend this thinking to zombies, noting that "the zombie is both destabilizing and threatening because it represents the 'clean and proper body' that has become a 'body which has lost its form and integrity.'"[37] Not only do zombies trouble the boundaries between living and dead and between human and less-than-human, but in their form as rotting corpses, they also disturb physical bodily boundaries as what is supposed to remain hidden is now seen: corpses are supposed to remain buried; bones and organs are supposed to stay inside the skin.

There is a very visceral aspect to this—bodies literally falling apart—and it exists in tandem with the zombies of chapter 1, whose bodies are those that seem to be supremely put together, those bodies that would seem to reinforce stable boundaries and clear categories. The zombie-as-corpse is destabilizing less in its actions, then, and more in its physical presence as something that *should not be*. And while in *Not Your Average Zombie*, I discuss the radical possibilities of such figures, the abject physical presence of the zombie here seems to obscure a conservative agenda.

The zombies in this chapter are all distinguished by the fact that they are clearly physically differentiated from the living: they are all corpses, in varying states of decay. And on one level, these zombies perform zombiness very differently. The "geeks" under King Zombie's command, just like the zombie hordes of *The Walking Dead*, are presented as mindless creatures, easily controlled and driven by a need to eat. But the revenge-from-the-grave zombies, Solomon Grundy, and King Zombie all depart from this sort of zombiness in their behavior, acting not out of a drive to eat or under someone else's command but through individual will. They are zombies with goals and desires—traits that should serve to reinforce how removed from zombidom they actually are. But this doesn't seem to be the case.

These gruesome zombies with agendas of their own underscore how tied we are to visual perceptions of good and evil, but they also illustrate the ways in which even the most abject of figures can be used to reinforce simplistic notions of good and evil. The revenge-from-the-grave zombies are forces of the moral good, going after murderers and other evildoers in a strict one-to-one correspondence: a life for a life, typically. While they may not *look* good, they *do* good. Solomon Grundy, in his earliest form, is a foil to the superhero, presenting a problem that can be solved through nonlethal violence. He exists so that the hero can come in and save the day; he does bad so that the superhero can do good. King Zombie is far more violent than Grundy, and unlike the revenge-from-the-grave zombies, his killing is indiscriminate—he isn't a force for justice, but for his own agenda. And yet, while he might exist in a world governed by a much less black-and-white morality than the comics of the 1940s and 1950s, he still operates as evil in order to reinforce the good of the protagonists of the story. Yes, there are other living humans who are bad; yes, some of the good guys do bad things, but King Zombie—as both corpse and sadist—is there to offer an extreme example of inhumanity. Unlike the "geeks" he controls, there is no puppet master on which to lay the blame.

Yet, for all the ways in which Grundy, in his way, and King Zombie, in his, operate as "bad," this is tangential to their existence as zombies. Either character could have been a vampire or a mummy or simply a living human person and they would still exist in the same narrative position. They might be easier to kill or far less gruesome to look at, but they would lose little else if they lost their zombie façades.

PART 2

Identity

CHAPTER THREE

Tales of the Zombie *and* Xombi

Or, the Curious Case of the Suffering Zombie Hardbodies

In the very first scene of the 1936 film *Revolt of the Zombies*, a general dismisses his translator's reports of zombies attacking French-Cambodian soldiers on the front lines. He laments, "when you try to tell me stories of . . . men without souls, hordes of supermen capable of annihilating armies of trained men, you make me wonder which of us is sane."[1] The general will soon learn that there are, in fact, zombie soldiers on the field—uncanny opponents who cannot be killed. As this was early in the zombie's tenure in American pop culture, these were enslaved zombies, physically unaltered but controlled by a zombie master and doing his bidding. And while, throughout the film, various characters will liken the zombies to automatons or robots, it is the general's use of "supermen" that has always caught my attention. A full two years before Superman would grace the pages of *Action Comics*, the term here carries with it a sense of menace. It also carries with it a sense of awe: these are supermen not because they have preternatural strength; they are supermen because they cannot be killed. Rolled up in this sentiment is the idea that to be *super*human is to be inhuman as well.

Exploring this link between the superhuman and the inhuman, this chapter focuses on two zombie heroes: Simon Garth, "The Zombie" of Marvel's *Tales of the Zombie*, which originally ran from 1973 to 1975, and David Kim, the titular character of Milestone's *Xombi*, which originally ran from 1994 to 1996.[2] Simon Garth is a man who is killed and then revived as a decomposing corpse controlled by a voodoo amulet. David Kim is a scientist killed and then revived as a perfect version of himself by nanobots. For both men, reanimation produces a well-muscled body and recasts them as heroes. For both, it also presents a strange conundrum—both men are at the mercy of their zombiness *and* their newfound heroic bodies, and neither want their

new abilities nor their immortality. Both men are reluctant heroes as well as reluctant zombies.

Comics creators have often used well-muscled bodies to represent physical strength and superhuman abilities—both to communicate visually the power held by superheroes and implicitly to point to an ideal (masculine) body type. In his examination of the posthuman body in superhero comics, Scott Jeffery observes that discourses of human perfectibility fed into the creation of the superhero: the rise of body-building culture, visions of modernity that promised "new and improved" versions of the self, and eugenics all rose to prominence at the same time as "a public hunger for displays of unusual human bodies, in the form of the freak show."[3] Hence, the superhero body was shaped by the desire for perfect human specimens wedded with a parallel desire to see spectacularly *different* human bodies. In early comics, for male superheroes, this typically translated into a supremely well-muscled male body. Yet, over time, the more freakish aspects of the superhero physique started to show through all those muscles.

Ramzi Fawaz states that, during World War II, "the superhero's robust masculinity served as a metaphor for the strength of the American body politic against the twin evils of organized crime at home and fascism abroad."[4] Meanwhile, in the postwar years,

> superheroes emerged as the monstrous progeny of the age of atomic and genetic science, no longer legitimate citizens of the state or identifiable members of the human race. Their mutated bodies and bizarre abilities . . . suggested that the innovations of molecular engineering might destabilize the biological integrity of the human, producing political subjects whose abnormal physiologies rendered them unfit to engage in national civic life.[5]

In the postwar years, more and more superheroes emerged whose bodies weren't necessarily formed as images of human perfection, but rather offered up highly malleable bodies that sometimes looked far more monstrous than "normal" humans. Heroes such as the Thing and the Incredible Hulk, alongside mutant groups, such as the X-Men, first appeared during this era.

In the introduction, I discussed Henry Kamerling's assertion that modern superhero and zombie bodies are similarly constructed—formed through an often traumatic change to the mundane human body that creates a split identity of sorts. Both zombies and superheroes, in Kamerling's opinion, point to the ways in which bodily transformation can be both "heroic

and horrific."[6] Michael Kobre also suggests that "the exaggerated, unstable bodies of virtually all superheroes can . . . be understood as monstrous."[7] With *strongman* zombies, the line between heroic and horrific was typically decided by race. While racist depictions in comics didn't disappear with the end of the Golden Age, what happened in the Silver Age and beyond was the creation of strongman zombie characters whose bodies—rather than cleanly marking them as heroes or villains—began to mark them as beings who suffer. With these zombies, their muscles do not make them impenetrable but rather seem to operate as ironic reminders of their status as zombies.

To engage with these zombies, I turn to Susan Jeffords's work on action heroes of the 1980s and 1990s. In her 1994 book, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, Jeffords suggests that the highly muscled heroes of action films of that era served as a "collective symbol" of Ronald Reagan's America, providing an idealized body that could save the U.S. from the perceived failures of the Carter era of the 1970s.[8] Jeffords argues that the bodies of action heroes, such as Sylvester Stallone in the Rambo films, crafted a masculinity based on loyalty, courage, and control whose exaggerated muscles became a symbol of their strength, endurance, and determination. These men had bodies of action that were going to rescue the nation from its malaise, and as such, these heroes existed in opposition both to the "soft body," which was often conceived of as lazy, immoral, and threatening (as well as feminine and not white), as well as those institutions and parts of government that no longer worked—the bogeyman of "big government" that Reagan so vocally opposed.[9] Jeffords notes that these "hard bodies came to stand not only for a type of national character—heroic, aggressive, and determined—but for the nation itself."[10] They offered up an alternative to a 1970s masculinity under threat from economic turmoil and second wave feminism "by themselves refusing to be 'messy' or 'confusing,' by having hard edges, determinate lines of action, and clear boundaries for their own decision-making."[11]

If, as I suggest in the previous chapter, zombie bodies are often read as monstrous in part because they are "messy" and "confusing," Jeffords's hard body stands in stark opposition: it is a body clearly defined, with none of the fluidity of the zombie. As such, it is a seemingly stable body that crafts likewise stable meanings. So, what would happen if we grafted this sort of body onto a zombie?

While Zoro, the Purple Zombie, and the bodies of color I described in chapter 1 possess strongman zombie bodies, they aren't hard bodies in the sense that Jeffords uses the term. Not only did they exist in a completely dif-

ferent historical context, but neither Zoro's body nor the strongman bodies of color are being used as proxies for the national body. The bodies of color are Othered—they stand against white America—and Zoro's story is one of assimilation. He doesn't represent something missing from the national character so much as one learning what it means to be a regular American guy. I am also not arguing that Simon Garth or David Kim, the two zombies at the heart of this chapter, are hard bodies in Jeffords's sense either. Rather, Jeffords's concept is a jumping off point for considering the ways in which the seemingly incongruous bodies of well-muscled zombies work on a symbolic level that helps us understand prevailing assumptions about both the zombie state and the superheroic one.

Rob Lendrum suggests that "superheroes have the hard body type; armored in muscle."[12] What I have found is that superheroic muscle isn't always armor but may, in fact, be more burden than blessing. In the Golden Age, with a figure like Zoro, muscles did equate to armor, but that armor only worked because Zoro was white (and not really a zombie). With Simon Garth during the initial run of *Tales of the Zombie* and David Kim from the initial run of *Xombi*, the well-muscled hard body doesn't work in the same way: the logics of superherodom are different, and in grafting the superheroic onto a zombie body, the preposterous logics behind the superheroic body are exposed.

In this chapter, then, I will explore the spectacular nature of the zombie body and how it is and isn't altered when the zombie is given a superheroic makeover. In particular, I examine how both the zombie state and the superheroic one interact when grafted onto the same body, producing a zombie that is both eroticized and repulsive while simultaneously creating a heroic character shaped by violence and suffering. This violence and suffering is illustrative of a larger sense of loss of control over the self—something one might expect for a zombie, but something that is also at the heart of superherodom. In the cases of both Simon Garth and David Kim, becoming a zombie grants unimaginable power and reproduces these men as heroes. Yet this power comes with a correspondent loss of agency that turns the superheroic hard body into a mockery of individual free will.

SIMON GARTH, "THE ZOMBIE"

With the coming of the Comics Code in 1954, zombies all but disappeared from comics—appearing mainly in reprints during the late 1950s and

1960s—and even when the Code was relaxed in 1971, zombies were still forbidden in four-color titles, so publishers needed to get creative if they wanted to have zombies in their comics. As I point out elsewhere, zombies were becoming popular in the wake of 1968's *Night of the Living Dead*, so it made sense for publishers to try to take advantage.[13] One way Marvel got creative was by taking a Bill Everett story from 1953 and updating it for a new black-and-white magazine-sized title called *Tales of the Zombie*.[14] The comic focuses on Simon Garth, "The Zombie," a man killed and resurrected via voodoo as a preternaturally strong zombie. The main thrust of *Tales of the Zombie* focuses on Simon's attempts to protect his family, but he is controlled via the voodoo Amulet of Damballah,[15] so over the course of the initial run of the series, he could be savior or threat, depending on the whims of whoever controlled the amulet. Eventually, the amulet falls into the hands of Simon's former secretary and voodoo priestess, Layla, who figures out a way for him to be resurrected as a living human and visit his family one last time to banish any threats befalling them before finding his eternal rest.

While the story is heavily imbued with voodoo elements, Simon is a strange sort of zombie. He arrives in the wake of *Night of the Living Dead*'s success when cannibal zombies were becoming popular, and while in "No Grave Can Hold Them: *Night of the Living Dead* and the Rise and Rebirth of Zombies in Comics," I detail the influence that film may have had on *Tales of the Zombie*, Simon ultimately blends traditions that were already apparent in 1950s horror comics. He is an enslaved zombie created by voodoo and controlled by it. However, he is also a decomposing corpse like most cannibal zombies. He is also heavily muscled and ridiculously strong, so he retains elements of the strongman zombies of the 1940s and 1950s as well. It is as if his makers took all the zombies of the Golden Age and mixed them together to create a new kind of zombie character.

Moreover, Simon isn't a straightforward hero the way Zoro, the Purple Zombie, was, nor is he simply out for revenge, the way the revenge-from-the-grave zombies of 1950s horror comics were. He is more antihero than anything else, caught between his strong urge to protect his family and the pull of the amulet, which sometimes falls into evil hands. Simon thus exists as both an odd zombie and an odd superhero.

Much of this has to do with Simon's physical presence. As I note in "Beware the Zuvembies: Comics, Censorship, and the Ubiquity of *Not-Quite* Zombies," while Simon is skeletal and decomposed, he is also well muscled and "more akin to the early *strongman* zombies than his decomposition might initially suggest."[16] This most likely reflects the influence

of the Marvel brand on the character. Mike Howlett observes that, in the 1970s, even when they were publishing horror, Marvel's storylines tended toward the superheroic.[17] So, while three decades separate the Purple Zombie from Simon Garth, the same superheroic logics influenced both of their physical bodies.

This is quite evident on the covers of *Tales of the Zombie*, but as is often the case with cover art versus the art inside a comic book, there is a slight physical discrepancy between the Simon Garth on the color covers of *Tales of the Zombie* and in its black-and-white pages (fig. 15). Generally, there were two ways Marvel presented Simon on the covers of *Tales of the Zombie*: in a heroic pose or as a dangerous threat. His stance on the cover of the first issue (fig. 15), for instance, is more traditionally heroic, with the wind whipping his hair behind him as he stands stoically upon a tree stump. In the next issue's cover (fig. 15), he is standing over a man, seemingly choking him while his arm muscles bulge. On the cover of the fourth issue, he stands between two doors, having just thrown them open—he is front and center, and again, his hair seems to be waving in the wind as he stands ready for action.

As if to underscore his threat, almost all the covers of *Tales of the Zombie* have a scantily clad woman either recoiling in horror from him or seemingly in danger from him (see fig. 15). This runs counter to his characterization in the series—as he never really represents a threat to women, and certainly not the sexual threat the covers imply. But the horror with which these women react not only counterbalances Simon's wavy hair and ripped muscles to suggest he is dangerous, it also helps reassert his status as a zombie—lest a reader forget by focusing on his musculature.

These differences may speak to the requirements of a comic cover—one of which is to draw potential readers in, so it makes sense that the Simon Garth on the covers of *Tales of the Zombie* might read as more visually dynamic than his in-story counterpart. And Simon is still very well muscled in the pages of the comic, but there, his decomposition becomes more prominent. Looking at fig. 15, for instance, one might notice the ways in which the ragged edges of Simon's clothing serve to reinforce his decomposing nature, looking almost like jagged pieces of flesh hanging off him. This isn't as noticeable on the covers where coloring can help distinguish between skin and clothing. The Amulet of Damballah is also missing on the covers. In the comic, it is prominent on Simon's chest, tying him much more clearly to voodoo (and the control it has over him). On both the covers and inside the comic, Simon is always shown with a naked chest—further drawing the

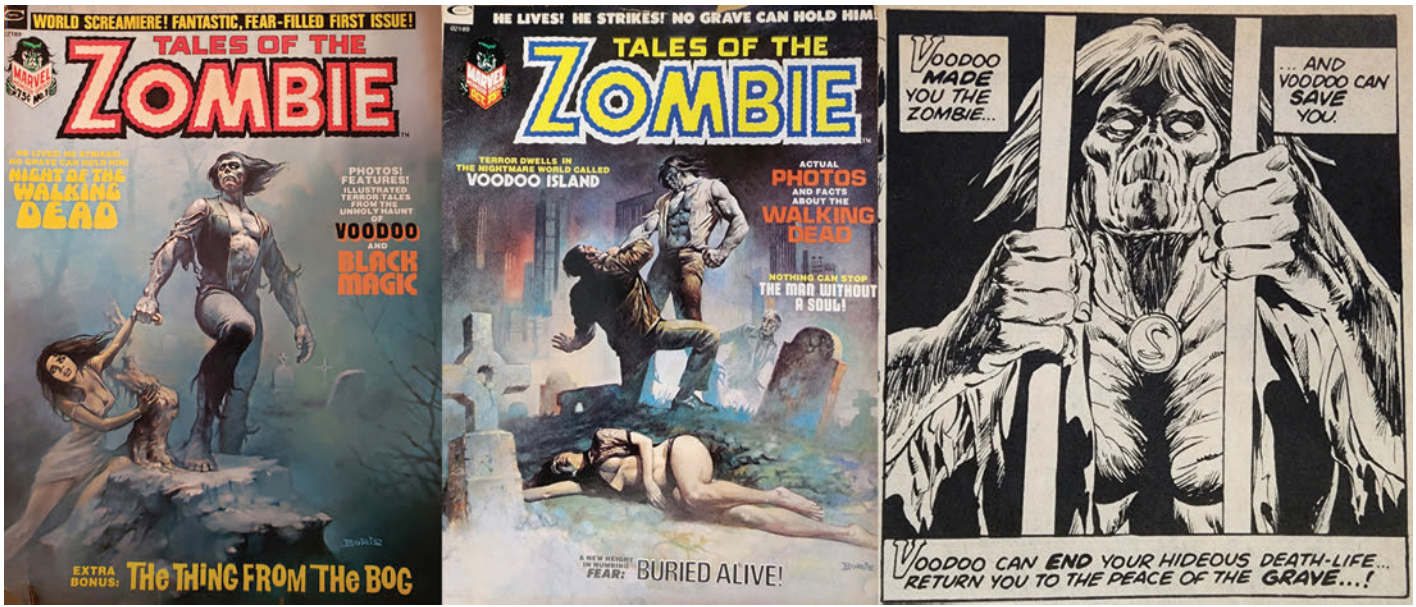

Fig. 15. Simon Garth on the covers of *Tales of the Zombie* #1 and #2 (Aug. and Oct. 1973; Boris Vallejo, artist) versus Simon Garth in the pages of *Tales of the Zombie* #2 (Steve Gerber and Pablo Marcos, "Voodoo Island," 9).

eye both to his decomposition and his muscles—and his hair is always a bit wild, which is a change from the well-coiffed hair he had when he was living.

Even if the differences between Simon on the cover versus Simon in the pages of *Tales of the Zombie* can be explained simply by the differences between covers and in-comic art, there is still a strong sense in which he is a fluid character—both protector and threat, depending on the situation. This becomes even more clear when we consider that Simon's storylines are presented in second person, tying the reader to him by continually referring to "you" and "your." This was an element of the original Bill Everett story from 1953 that was continued in the 1970s version. It is a strange choice, because while ostensibly the use of second person could bring the reader into the story, it can also seem jarring when most readers are used to first- and third-person address.

Assuming that the use of "you" in the book is an attempt to facilitate the reader's identification with Simon, it also presses the question: Just how is the reader supposed to identify with him? As antihero? As zombie? It is hard to say, given that Simon's identity is already so fluid within the series—fluctuating from troublemaker to do-gooder depending on who controls the Amulet of Damballah. Yet, in linking Simon to "you," someone we can assume is a living breathing reader and not a zombie, his zombiness becomes fluid too.

Within the pages of the comic, the paradoxical nature of Simon is further reinforced by his muscles, which stand at odds with his decomposing form. For example, the first page of the third issue of *Tales of the Zombie* is a splash page focusing on Simon, who stands from the knees up in what appears to be a cave. He is wearing a torn shirt that shows off his chest, as well as the Amulet of Damballah. The narration moves down four boxes to the title of the story. In one box, it says, "Your flesh is **sunken** and yellowed, your eyes rolled hideously **upward**, your features **devoid** of expression."[18] The next box reports, "You are, in short, a **dead man**. . . . A corpse . . . A lifeless human **husk** . . . and yet, you are **more** than that. **Far** more."[19] While on one hand, the description is accurate—Simon Garth is a decomposing corpse—on the other hand, the description seems to contradict the image on the page. Yes, his eyes may be blank. He may have tattered clothing and wrinkled skin, but he also looks powerful, with his muscles literally bursting out of his shirt. While the narration hints that Simon is "far more" than his appearance, his appearance is also far more than simply that of a decomposing corpse, and it is the incongruous layering of muscles onto the zombie frame that gives Simon his imposing stature and makes him a believable hero.

DAVID KIM, THE XOMBI

Throughout the 1980s into the 1990s, the cannibal zombie became the most prominent type of zombie in most media, including, as I detailed in chapter 2, in comics such as *Deadworld*. This meant that most zombies one would encounter in pop culture were decomposing corpses, much like Simon Garth. Yet in 1994 another odd zombie would appear in comics, this time as one of the heroes of the Milestone pantheon.

Launched under the DC umbrella in 1993, Milestone was an attempt by Black artists and writers to correct the severe underrepresentation of minorities in American comics. After introducing a slate of Black heroes that year, in 1994 Milestone added *Xombi* to their repertoire, featuring Korean American David Kim as the titular Xombi. David Kim is a scientist who is injected with nanotechnology and then discovers he can't die. As series writer John Rozum observes, "Cut off a limb, he'll grow it back. Infect him, his body will get rid of the disease. The nanomachines also keep him at an ideal age, and weight, correct his eyesight, and keep him from ever needing to brush his teeth or use a toilet."[20] David transforms from a middle-aged man with bad eyesight into a superhero with a perfect body. But this isn't without its drawbacks. The nanomachines need organic material to repair David's many wounds, and they will take from whatever happens to be nearby. Thus, David's initial regeneration comes at the cost of his best friend Kelly's life—the nanobots cannibalize her body to repair David's.

As a reanimated "xombi," David is also thrust into a weird world of strange heroes and villains, including his new friends Nun of the Above, a superhero who knows what anyone is doing within a 30-mile radius, and Catholic Girl, a superhero who uses the power of the Hail Mary, among other things, to fly and create force fields. As for the villains he now faces, there are the Artery Bandits, who can remove anyone's circulatory system, and Manuel Dexterity, an assassin whose lower half is a hand and whose touch kills you by overwhelming you with a sense of loss so acute, you die instantly from it. David hates this strange new world and his new body and wants out. Like Simon Garth, David Kim is both an odd zombie and an odd hero.

While David seems to fit the requirements for being categorized as a zombie—he is brought back from the dead to live forever—the comic goes out of its way to make a distinction between typical zombies and xombis. In the seventeenth issue, David questions why everyone calls him a zombie. His friend, and fellow superhero, Rabbi Sinnowitz, tells him, "What you are

is a Xombi. Ex-Oh-Em-Bee-Eye: someone who cannot be killed, a condition brought on by artificial means."[21] In the next issue, David meets another xombi named Dumaka who tells him, "You are the first Xombi that I have heard of who came to be against his will, and through the aid of technology."[22] Thus, even if David isn't technically a zombie, he is an odd xombi all the same.

David doesn't possess any typical zombie traits, at least not in a straightforward sense: he isn't controlled by voodoo or a zombie virus, and he isn't a decomposing corpse or cannibal. Yet David's xombi state was forced upon him without his consent (much like what happens to enslaved zombies). The nanobots also control David's body in a sense, and they cannibalize organic material to rebuild him. He realizes this early in issue #2 when he thinks about Kelly, reflecting, "I killed her. I did worse than kill her . . . I ate her. I ate her alive."[23] While this is largely David's guilt talking, as he didn't consciously kill Kelly, it represents the strange space he finds himself in where he is at the mercy of the nanobots inside him.

In becoming a xombi, David gains new abilities (he cannot be killed and seems to have newfound strength), but he is wary of becoming a hero, constantly looking for a way back to his "normal" life. So, if Simon is the antihero, David is the reluctant hero. On the surface, though, David's body seems much more straightforward as superheroic than Simon's: the nanomachines injected into his system perfect all his bodily functions. His eyesight improves; he won't age; he doesn't have to go to the bathroom. Plus, he'll never get sick. Yet, as writer Matt Wayne says, "this book is about a guy who's really uncomfortable with his body."[24] In issue #6, which takes place roughly five days after David has become a xombi, he reflects: "My body has become alien to me—separate from myself, yet, simultaneously, more intimate to me than ever before."[25] Later, when one of his allies complains about "the wet sounds of" David's "flesh moving and growing and knitting" as the nanobots put him back together, David replies, "Yeah, well, it wasn't so easy for me, either. I felt it all with extraordinary intimacy."[26] It is this forced intimacy with his body that makes David uneasy: he now feels it repairing itself; he is now acutely aware of the resources it uses to keep him in his new state of perfection. In other words, the xombification process makes David uncomfortably conscious of the impact his body has on the world and his new relationship to society as a result. David is no longer scientist but hero, no longer an ordinary, middle-aged guy, but a xombi.

Xombification has forced David into a new relationship with his body; he is hyperaware of its abilities and functions, as well as the vast gulf separating *David-as-he-was* from *David-as-he-now-is*. His situation seems a perfect metaphor for becoming either a superhero or a zombie, where one's body often bears the brunt of transformation. With contemporary cannibal zombies, this is the processes of decay on the (un)dead body; with superheroes, this can be anything from newly formed muscles to elasticity to rocky skin. Moreover, with most zombies and a great number of superheroes, there is no escape from the new body, and in *Xombi*, David is uncomfortable precisely because there is seemingly no escape from his new xombi status. While it may be perfect, he feels trapped in his new body. In the thirteenth issue, as David talks to Rabbi Sinnowitz about accepting his new life, the Rabbi remarks, "Others have been where you and I sit, hoping to find freedom. Their desperation only made them greater prisoners."[27] In this instance, it isn't David's xombi state that holds him prisoner, but his heroic one—the Rabbi, after all, implies he feels trapped too. Superheroic transformation and zombification/xombification thus read as two sides of the same coin.

David not only feels trapped in a strange, new world of superheroes, he is worried what his fiancée will think when she discovers what has happened to him. The Rabbi sympathizes, reflecting on what happened when his late wife found out about his abilities. He tells David:

> Love is a hungry beast with a voracious appetite. All you can do is feed it, at any cost, whatever it demands, in order to keep it from turning on you and devouring you. . . . You find yourself doing things you never believed yourself capable in order to keep love alive. . . . you'll feed it friends, family, anything, so long as its heart still beats in your hand, so long as you are in control of its leash.[28]

This linking of love to a sort of ravenous impulse not only reintroduces the idea of cannibalism into David's story, but it presents the darker side of the superheroic within the world of *Xombi*. The Rabbi, speaking from his own personal experience, as well as what he has witnessed of other superheroes, speaks of a sort of desperate attempt to hold on to one's non-superheroic life in the face of one's powers. There is a sense of inherent suffering at the heart of what he tells David, and it has very little to do with xombification.

SUFFERING AND VIOLENT BODIES

Jeffrey Brown observes that

> the split personality implied by the concept of a masquerade seems to be one of the most archetypal metaphors for the masculine condition in Western culture. . . . The male identity in the twentieth century is perceived in extremes: man or mouse, he-man or ninety-eight-pound weakling. At the one end is the hypermasculine ideal with muscles, sex appeal, and social competence, at the other end is the skinny and socially inept failure.[29]

This is often represented in comics as the hypermasculine superhero hiding inside the normal everyman, but with both David Kim and Simon Garth, the hypermasculine superhero body isn't hidden by the everyman alter ego; it replaces it.

If one considers Coogan's three defining traits of the superhero—mission, powers, and identity—there seems to be a push and pull inherent in both Simon's and David's heroic identities. Their muscles act as visual indicators of superhuman strength, but they also belie the suffering that accompanies their superheroic missions, which in both cases are prosocial but go against the men's own individual desires, as neither man wants to be a hero. And while one might assume it is the zombie part of both men's identities that is the root of their suffering, that is only true inasmuch as their zombie/xombi states make them immortal. Otherwise, it is the superheroic body both characters want to shed.

Both David's and Simon's powers stem, in part, from the fact that they cannot die, but David's power is much more firmly linked to the vulnerability of his body. He can be cut, shot, burnt, hurt in any way, and the nanotechnology will repair him, yet this situation—whereby David can be injured and then miraculously repaired—also spectacularizes his suffering. We can see this reflected in some of the cover imagery of the series. While the images of Simon on the covers of *Tales of the Zombie* typically suggested power and virility, the covers of the original run of *Xombi* paint David in a different way. In the first eleven covers on which David appears, he is bloodied or under threat in eight of them (see fig. 16). In the remaining ten covers, David is presented in more heroic stances. Yet the covers where David is clearly in pain, such as those shown in fig. 16, are more indicative of the

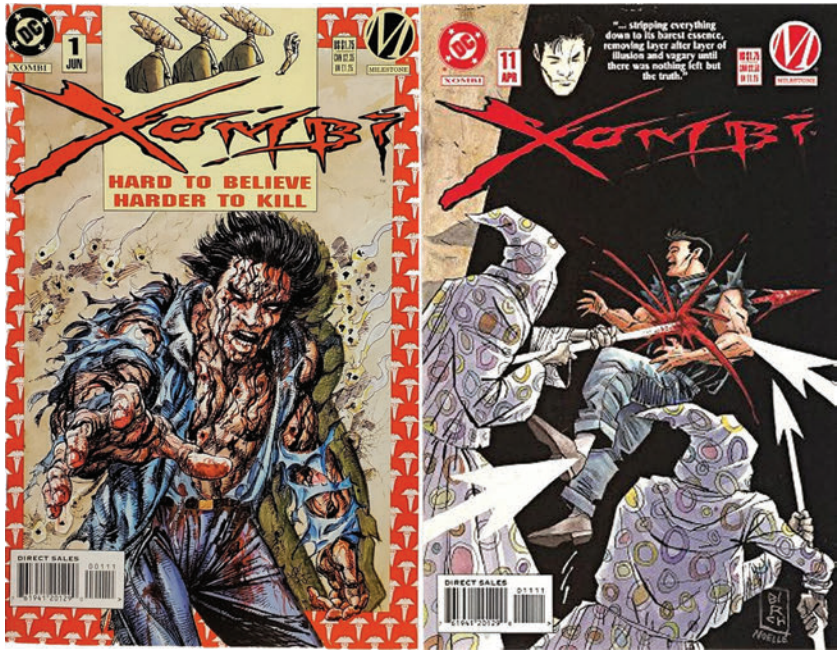

Fig. 16. The covers of issues #1 (June 1994) and #11 (April 1995) of *Xombi* (John Byrne, artist): David Kim, heavily wounded and reaching out to the reader, and David Kim in the process of being wounded.

sorts of things that happen to David's body during the series. There is thus a visual push and pull between David's body as a muscular body or a body of action and David's body as one suffering or in pain. It is almost as if his newly heroic body is an invitation for David to be hurt—so that he can heal and fight and be hurt again.

This is not without a mental and emotional effect. David feels what is happening to his body, both as it is hurt and as it is repaired. He is also acutely aware of the lives that must be sacrificed so that the nanobots have organic material with which to repair him. Ironically enough, Simon's decomposing body is the less horrific body to inhabit because it cannot feel pain—it may look horrible, but it can't harm Simon in the ways that David's body can harm him.

The spectacle of Simon's body is born of the mixture of muscles with decomposition. In David's case, though, spectacle is created through the myriad ways his body is tortured and hurt. In issue #0, which takes place two

months after the events of the series' first issue, David, as a xombi, meets two dubious characters named Twilight and Rainsaw.[30] During a fight where the three are forced to fend off a menagerie of assassins, David's arm is cut off and begins to grow back. Both processes are rendered as bloody and painful. Rainsaw, who can cut his adversaries to bits, then accidentally falls on David. The narration tells us,

> The steel particles that are Rainsaw's body swirl about at near hurricane speed. Shuriken snowflakes whip through David's flesh by the millions. Skin separates from muscle, muscle from bone, chunks of meat the size of half-dollars fly from his body. These pieces are in turn cut down to the size of quarters, then dimes and smaller, and smaller still, as the metal whirlwind makes quick change of his body.[31]

This accompanies a splash page of David screaming, his hands held up above his head, his eyes closed as his clothing rips off his body (fig. 17). Little dots of red cover the page, like a spray of blood. On the next page, the first panel shows a bloody body fall to the ground, the skin torn from its skull, as well as from one arm and one leg. Rainsaw and Twilight think David is dead, but soon, he returns, wiping the blood off his still healing body and telling them, "I can't be killed."[32]

While, in this issue, David's death and subsequent resurrection are used to introduce the character to readers, throughout the series' run, David is regularly injured in gruesome detail. This is part of the point of his character—that he can survive anything—and therefore the imagery of David being torn apart and coming back together becomes integral to the story. While we expect decomposing zombie bodies to fall apart—although Simon's never does—David's body seemingly inhabits a different space, being the perfected superheroic body. It may fall apart, but it comes back together in a perfect package. Yet, in the repetitive violence done to David's body, it ends up illustrating the masochistic elements of superherodom—the ways these heroes are expected to be hurt and heal in a seemingly endless cycle. The intimacy of body that David seems to fear, then, is an intimacy with how his body can be torn apart and then put back together again, something both superheroic and horrific.

Unlike David Kim, Simon Garth's suffering isn't tied to a cycle of his body being wounded to be repaired—although that does happen. Rather, his suffering is more psychological in nature, as one can see from the panels

Fig. 17. David Kim being torn apart by Rainsaw (John Rozum, Denys Cowan, and Jimmy Palmiotti, "Theatre of Phantoms," *Xombi* #0, Jan. 1994).

in figure 18: Simon is shown to be perpetually out of reach of the peace he seeks. While the comic repeatedly tells the reader that Simon can't feel pain and shouldn't be able to feel emotions, a running theme in the comic is Simon's search for the finality of the grave and his sense of being cursed. Moreso than any physical change he has undergone, Simon is traumatized by his inability to die.

This is where the voodoo element of the story comes in. In *Not Your Average Zombie*, I argue that the racial discourses linked to both zombiism and voodoo in early zombie tales implied a form of racial "contamination," which reimagined slavery and its attendant loss of free will through the interference of Black culture on mostly white bodies. Young white Americans would travel to foreign locales—most often those associated with brown or Black peoples—and there they would be threatened with or made into zombies. Even though the zombie masters of these tales were overwhelmingly white men, the implicit threat of Black culture (as "Black magic") remained.

This means that one way we can read Simon Garth, as a zombie created by voodoo, is that he has been implicitly "contaminated" by Black culture. After all, his body is literally taken over and controlled by voodoo.[33] As such, he no longer has full claim to his former white male identity. As if to underscore Simon's new relationship with Black culture, during the initial run of the series, he roams exclusively in the Black-associated spaces of New Orleans and Haiti. He exists in a world that is constantly coded as Black—either through its geography or the use of voodoo.

Simon is also *victimized* by voodoo. Not only does it strip him of bodily autonomy, but it deforms him: in the quick story that precedes his death and resurrection as well as in the final issues of the initial run of *Tales of the Zombie*, the reader encounters "living" Simon Garth, a conventionally attractive white man with a full head of hair and no visible blemishes. As a zombie, Simon is immediately made over as a decomposing corpse—albeit one with muscles and an even fuller head of hair—but his skin is mostly gone, he is much darker in coloring, and he no longer reads as fully human.

This is further compounded by the fact that Simon supposedly doesn't have a soul. The cover of the second issue proclaims that Simon is "The man without a soul!" Throughout the series' run, both the storylines and discussions about Simon on the letters page and in editorial columns center on the fact that he doesn't have a soul. This may account for the extraordinary amount of violence Simon does as The Zombie and how he can be explicitly violent while still following a path to salvation.

The 1970s version of Simon Garth is far more violent than his predeces-

Fig. 18. In *Tales of the Zombie*, Simon Garth suffers in issue #1 (Steve Gerber and Syd Shores, "Night of the Walking Dead!," Aug. 1973, 72); issue #2 (Steve Gerber and Pablo Marcos, "Voodoo Island," Oct. 1973, 11); and issue #7 (Doug Moench, Pablo Marcos, and Alfredo Alcala, "The Blood-Testament of Brian Collier," Sept. 1974, 7).

sors in 1940s and 1950s comics, whose violence tended to happen off the page. His violence happens on the page, sometimes in grisly detail. For instance, in the fifth issue of the comic, Simon is under the control of an evil master and slams a man into a wall, killing him. Three pages later, he kills another man by hitting him on the head with his fist, with the narration telling the reader and Simon, "Phil **dies** at your hand."[34] On the following page, Simon throws a man into a statue and in the next panel, the reader can see the man lying in a pool of blood, dead. Simon then leaves the space, allowing it to catch fire as several people try to escape. The final panel of the story notes, "Soon, no **living** being remains at the scene . . . only the flaming corpses of Phil and Papa . . . and **You**, the corpse that walks **away**, The **Zombie**."[35]

Robert Michael Cotter notes that Simon's "adventures were certainly gorier than those of the old-school zombies, although he didn't go in for flesh-eating, as it's rather hard to sell a hero who's a cannibal."[36] So, while Marvel could capitalize on the then-current trends in zombie media with Simon's look, they did so without making him a cannibal, which would have raised the ire of both the Comics Code Authority and concerned parents. Rather, zombie cannibalism becomes translated into much more explicit violence, and Simon's brutality is visualized throughout the series in a way that would've been unthinkable twenty years earlier.

Simon's strongman physique feeds into his brutality, as his muscles are the visual indicator of his strength, but as voodoo—rather than science in the Purple Zombie's case or in David Kim's—is the root of Simon's zombification and strength, the brutality becomes intertwined with religion, which in the comic is controlled by Black hands. However, because the amulet is ostensibly in charge, Simon's actions are also outside his control. He is therefore absolved, even of the most heinous crimes, because it wasn't really him. Most especially, Simon's violence isn't completely damning because he is still white—one need only look at the Black zombies in the 1940s comics to see the stark difference between the threat of violence coming from a Black male body, which is read as an outright threat, and the much more explicit violence coming from a white male body, which is forgiven by constantly reminding the reader that it isn't Simon's fault.

THE RACIALIZED LOGICS OF ZOMBIDOM

Zoro's redemption in "The Purple Zombie" stories hinged on his ability to learn to apply his violent tendencies in socially approved ways and the revela-

tion that he was never really a zombie. Simon, however, is unquestionably a zombie, and while he can think and sometimes even speak, the comic doesn't equate that consciousness with a soul—but it also doesn't blame this state on his zombification. Rather, some intrinsic part of Simon's humanity is missing, and it has been missing for some time. It can't be identified beyond the name "soul," but it is crucial to the logic of Simon's story that he doesn't have it, as in the penultimate issue of the series, the narration reminds the reader and Simon, "You are the man without a **soul**. Even before you died."[37]

The story, then, is ultimately about Simon finding his "soul." But what this means is that the white hero must learn humility and the value of family—find his "soul"—via Black culture. Black culture becomes a cure. In fact, as early as the second issue, Simon realizes, "Voodoo made you the zombie and voodoo can save you" (see fig. 15).[38] The final storyline of *Tales of the Zombie* suggests that it is only through voodoo—through Simon's zombification and the trials and tribulations he faced as a zombie—that he was able to become a hero and finally earn his "soul." As his friends bury him one last time, the narration reflects:

> They called you a zombie—a man without a soul. They were wrong. You had a soul, Simon Garth. You only had to find it, hidden as it was behind the idols of wealth and power. After two years of suffering, you have succeeded in a quest you never knew you had started. May that soul rest in peace, Simon Garth. Forever.[39]

As a living man, Simon Garth was wealthy and unyielding. He looked down on people and had no real relationship with his family. But in being reduced in status, in becoming a nearly mute zombie at the mercy of voodoo culture, he learns to value his family and earns his "soul."

It is, at best, a punishing kind of cure, marring Simon's good looks and making him a servant of the amulet. In this sense, Simon's zombification is not so different from what one might have seen in the 1930s and 1940s, where films and short stories often used zombification as a stand-in for the "contamination" of foreign, nonwhite cultures. Yet, here, that contamination isn't seen as entirely bad. It can be restorative. It is, after all, what allows Simon to protect his family and ultimately discover his soul. Thus, for all the research the Marvel writers and artists claimed they did and the ways in which they attempted a more refined view of voodoo, they ultimately recycled stories centering the possible threat of Black culture. Only here, Simon's whiteness affords him the ability to turn his punishment into salvation.

While Simon Garth is a zombie, and his resurrection and enslavement to the Amulet of Damballah tie him to voodoo, he isn't fully a part of voodoo culture. It may control him and offer him a path to redemption, but he is a continual outsider—and this is key, because it marks Simon as different from the voodoo-inspired zombies in comics of the 1940s. He cannot be rescued from his zombification, like the white people in the 1940s comics could, but he is also not a representative of "native" culture as the zombies of color controlled by voodoo were either. Rather, like David Kim, he is stuck in-between worlds: voodoo saves him and enslaves him, but it never fully assimilates him.

The fact that it is Black culture and Black bodies that make Simon's heroism and victimization possible thus serves to do two things: it positions voodoo as something threatening—as even in the hands of "good" believers, it separates Simon from "normal," living (white) society—but it also shows how much work Black characters must undertake so that Simon can save his family. It puts Black culture in the service of white redemption as Simon's power comes at the expense of Black labor and knowledge. This is explicitly illustrated in issue #9 when the voodoo priestess Layla, who not only tried to save Simon from being killed in the first place but who has consistently cared for him, offers to risk her life in a ritual so that Simon can return to his living form for 24 hours to help his daughter. The ritual ends up killing Layla, but as her fellow practitioner Papa Doc[40] explains to Simon, the loa judged Layla worthy and she has joined them, gifting Simon what he calls "the most precious gift of **all**."[41] Not only is Simon's power not his own, but Layla was a voodoo priestess, a person with the power to bring the dead back to life, yet the storyline ends with her giving up everything for Simon. His redemption is predicated on her sacrifice. He cannibalizes her life to serve his own—a fitting metaphor for the ways in which whiteness often cannibalizes Black culture.[42]

Whereas Simon's racialization is largely implicit and comes through his connections to voodoo, David Kim is a Korean American man. Yet, while *Xombi* does not address David's racial identity head on, like *Tales of the Zombie*, race structures David Kim's zombification. Not only is David rendered visually as a Korean American man, but narratively, his pre-xombi life was led as a research scientist, and David was the embodiment of the model minority stereotype: during the comic's brief time spent with David before he is xombified, the reader learns that he is the classic overachiever, who is studying to become a doctor, and it was this overachieving spirit that led

David to develop the nanomachines that ended up saving him and making him over as a xombi. As David Scott Diffrient notes, "The model minority image is just as problematic as—or no less detrimental than—the stereotypes that preceded it, delimiting the range of expressive possibilities available to performers of color. . . . It promotes the idea of American egalitarianism while masking the institutional bases for continued discrimination."[43]

In *Xombi*, not only is David presented as the rule-following overachiever, but David's "model minority" past is played off against his "hard body" present in ways that at first might seem to complicate the stereotype, but ultimately serve to reinforce it. For instance, after his xombification, David rarely inhabits his scientific persona: he doesn't wear his lab coat or visit his lab much, nor does he talk about his work. Rather, he spends most of his time as a superhero. Thus, while David ostensibly retains some of his "model minority" characteristics after his rebirth as a xombi, his body and its attendant "powers" work to remove him from that space. It is as if the model minority and the hard body can't fully coexist.

Within the comic, David's existential crisis at becoming a xombi is also tied both to the pain and guilt associated with being continually injured and repaired and to David's fear of his fiancée finding out he is a xombi.[44] Yet his resistance to his newfound state also implies a disconnect between David's brainy past and his bodily present and future. While David hasn't lost any of his model minority characteristics in his transformation, his new physical body overshadows those characteristics, and it becomes David's key identifying feature within the superheroic world in which he finds himself. Moreover, it starts to become the primary way David identifies himself. It is as if, without his permission, David has been condensed to his body and only his body. In much the same way that racist societies may reduce racial and ethnic minorities to their bodies, David finds himself in a situation where his body becomes the sole means by which others identify him. It is a strange sort of racialization that doesn't play off David's Korean American identity so much as it illustrates the more general logics of racism.

One of the other remarkable things about *Xombi*, especially as a Milestone title, is that David is the only major character in the title who is a person of color.[45] Kelly Sanborne, David's best friend, is also Korean American, but she dies in the first issue, and while her memory may haunt David, she is not a major character in the series moving forward.[46] The only other people of color of note in *Xombi* are Dumaka, a former African warrior who is also a xombi, and the enigmatic Kemenko, a 44,000-year-old

woman who appears Asian. David meets Dumaka, the other xombi, in issue #18, but after Dumaka tells David the story of how he came to be a xombi, Dumaka chooses to die at the end of the issue. Kemenko is only in a handful of issues toward the end of the title's initial run, when the reader learns that she is waiting for David to fall in love with her in a future only she can see. In each of these cases, the people of color suffer, and besides Kelly Sanborne, the people of color are immortal and suffering: Kemenko waits for a future that may not happen, David wants his old life back; and Dumaka is waiting to die.

ZOMBIE HARD BODIES

In some ways, David's and Simon's suffering makes sense if considered through the lens of Susan Jeffords's work on action heroes. In *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, Jeffords states that in "action films of the 1980s . . . heroism, individualism, and bodily integrity" are "centered in the white body," and she suggests that in these films, if

> there is a body that has been betrayed, victimized, burdened by the society that surrounds it, it is not the body of color, the body that has been historically marked by the continuous betrayals of a social, political, and cultural system that has marginalized and abused it. It is, instead, the body of the white man who is suffering because he has been unloved.[47]

According to Jeffords, in the action films of the 1980s and 1990s, suffering was a means of showing how extraordinary the hard-body heroes were, that they could endure what the normal "soft-bodied" person could not, and in fact, part of the point of torture in these films was to set the heroes apart. As Jeffords observes, "Those who could fantasize easily about replicating Rambo's assaults on tanks, rescues of prisoners, or uses of weapons seemed now to have difficulty imagining suturing or cauterizing gaping wounds in their own bodies."[48] Thus, the wounding of characters like John Rambo not only shows how the national body can recover from its past wounds but it also serves to set the hard-bodied characters apart from the average person.

There can also be a deeper commentary on the superior morality of these muscled heroes at play. Drew Ayers observes that 1980s action films "take much pleasure" in scenes where the hero is tortured, which "have their

roots in traditional Christian iconography of passion and suffering" where "the endurance of pain indicates a triumph of spirit over body."[49] Describing the torture of Mel Gibson characters in films such as *Braveheart* (1995), Jeffrey Brown likewise notes that the "violence suffered" by them "not only proves the superiority of their manliness but also sanctifies the supposedly higher moral value of that manliness. The Gibson protagonist suffers not just for himself but for a higher purpose."[50] This sounds very close to what one might expect of a superhero—suffering for a "higher purpose"—yet for both Simon and David, while their suffering may mark them as extraordinary, unlike other heroes, theirs is a constant suffering that mars that extraordinariness.

Simon can feel no pain, but he longs to return to the grave, something he cannot do until he ostensibly gains his "soul." He isn't suffering to fight another day but to lie down and finally die. And while David Kim is essentially immortal and in a constant state of repair, his suffering seems to be an exaggerated form of hard-body suffering: the nanobots will repair his physical wounds just in time for him to endure more, and so on, for the rest of his existence. For him, there is no end to his suffering—as any healing he does simply sets him up for more suffering. He has no means of assuaging his suffering, as Simon can. Thus, Colin Milburn suggests that in texts such as *Xombi*, "otherwise 'innocent' human beings are transformed by combat technologies, restructured as automated weapons systems, without consent or awareness of the cause for which they are fighting."[51] In this way, David may be more of a conventional zombie than Simon, as he ultimately has no agency over his body.

David's body is under constant attack: both from the villains he faces and the nanobots reconstructing him. David also feels what is happening to his body, both as it is hurt and repaired. He is acutely aware of the lives that must be sacrificed so that the nanobots can have organic material to repair him.[52] He is thus trapped in his body. Simon, too, is trapped in his body, at the will of both the Amulet of Damballah and the fact that he must seemingly "earn" his death. The hard-body heroes that Jeffords examines, in contrast, aren't trapped by their bodies, but are liberated by them—able to save locals, and by extension, the U.S.A., by utilizing what is essentially another weapon in their arsenal. Superheroic logics would often imply the same about the superhero body; yet both Simon and David show the horror underlying the idea of the *body-as-weapon*.

Celine Parreñas Shimizu notes that Bruce Lee is the "patron saint of the

cult of the body: the almost mystical belief that . . . by the force of will, we can sculpt ourselves into demigods."[53] And this notion, of the body as something that can be sculpted and shaped into an ideal version, is at the heart of both hard-body heroes and many conventional superheroes. However, David's body isn't the product of an exercise regimen or years of military training; it is the product of science gone wrong. This is the hard body created via the Korean American mind, not via white male fortitude, and as such, David implicitly brings his suffering on himself. This means he cannot wear the superhero body in the straightforward way that many of his white counterparts can—rather, he must both cannibalize the world around him and feel excruciating pain to maintain the bodily ideal. Simon exists in much the same space, as it is implied that his living existence as a "soulless" millionaire was what led to his death and eventual resurrection as a zombie—he brought the suffering on himself.

In many ways, David Kim is the exaggerated version of the conventional hard-body hero or superhero, who is stuck in a continual cycle of getting knocked down and then getting back up again. David Kim's body can be wounded but always rebounds, but unlike Rambo, David Kim isn't simply shot or stabbed. He can lose arms, legs—at one point, his entire body is eviscerated—only to come back together a few minutes later. So, while Rambo's wounds might speak to the American national ability to recover from the presidency of Jimmy Carter, David Kim's wounds seem to go deeper, and his status as hard body becomes more complicated: because David isn't simply wounded, he is dismantled, and David feels the pain of his wounds—and the subsequent repairs—acutely. David's hard body is remarkably buoyant, but this also means that it is almost always either in the process of being wounded or repairing said wounds—it is a body that isn't allowed to remain "hard."

David's body before he became a xombi was a vulnerable body, to be sure, but even as a xombi, occupying a body that will never age or really change, David is still vulnerable: he is a very real illustration of the horrors of the hard body. Having a hand cut off and then rebuilt by nanobots hurts. Knowing that he is going to outlive all his friends, even his other superhero friends, is terrifying. Keeping his hard body a secret from his fiancée Dalila is maddening. David's hard body is a curse, and in showing it as a curse, it loses its masculinizing force. Yet the fact that this happens to a Korean American body seems to reify an implicit assumption that true hard bodies can only be white.

With both David and Simon, there also seems to be an implicit thrill to be had in their suffering. Yvonne Tasker suggests that in action cinema, "suffering—torture, in particular—operates as both a set of narrative hurdles to be overcome, tests that the hero must survive, and a set of aestheticized images to be lovingly dwelt on."[54] And in both *Tales of the Zombie* and *Xombi*, the characters' suffering becomes both a part of their story and part of the spectacle. In *Tales of the Zombie*, the use of the second person "you" throughout the series links Simon and the reader so that his suffering is ostensibly ours, but this is, at best, a voyeuristic relationship as Simon bears the brunt of psychological suffering while the reader remains safely on the outside. With David, the entire premise of his xombihood is that he is constantly being rebuilt and as such, narratively speaking, it makes sense that he is constantly put into situations requiring that—it is a way to show off his "superpower"—and *Xombi* sometimes seems to go to great lengths to document the process (see figs. 16 and 17).

In exploring the torture of white, male heroes in American films, Jeffrey Brown notes, "The oscillation between the hero's position as sadist and masochist, between administering violence and suffering violence, represents not a fracturing of gender-specific subjectivity but a model of masculinity that is cohesive—stronger for its weakness."[55] Yet, while Simon—perhaps because of his position as a white man—seems to exist within the push and pull of sadism and masochism, David leans far more toward the masochistic—although that is a bit of a misnomer. He isn't choosing his pain but is rather subject to it.

In discussing mutant superheroes, Scott Bukatman suggests that "their first and most dangerous enemies are their own bodies."[56] This is the case with both David and Simon, but it has less to do with their bodies, per se, than exactly who or what has control over them. Key to Jeffords's claims about the wounding of the hard body is that alongside the narrative of the hard body "is a complementary theme of anti-mechanization that reinforces the sense of the male hard body as 'natural,' not manufactured, and individual, not mass-produced."[57] Yet, with both Simon Garth and David Kim, this naturalness is gone, replaced with voodoo on one hand and nanotechnology on the other.

José Alaniz claims that "chief among [the superhero body's] corporeal features: strength, control, unboundedness—an utter disavowal of fleshly fragility."[58] The zombie might at first appear as the exact opposite, at least in its contemporary cannibal form, as it showcases a very "fleshly fragility,"

but it also typically disavows that fragility by existing within the impossible liminal space of the undead. The zombie is a body that shouldn't be able to live or move, yet it does. However, as is the case with both Simon Garth and David Kim, the fleshly fragility Alaniz sees as lost returns. David as a xombi literally cannibalizes other beings and feels the pain of reanimating. Simon Garth can't feel anything physically but is constantly under threat of losing agency over his body. Plus, in not being able to die, the true fragility of both of their situations appears—they both want to die and can't: their bodies come to dominate them instead of the other way around.

DOMINATED BY HIS BODY

In "Iron Man as Cyborg: Between Masculinities," Evdokia Stefanopoulou suggests that in the 1930s,

> the connection of the superhero figures with futurism and military technology, as well as with a eugenic hierarchy of bodies suggested a deeply authoritarian ideological core. . . . Although the context of the 21st century superhero has changed significantly, we can still trace the same hierarchy of bodies with the saliency of the white, muscular and hypermasculine superhero body as the ultimate protector of contemporary societies.[59]

With both Simon Garth and David Kim, however, the hypermasculine and well-muscled superheroic body is undermined by continual suffering. Colin Milburn argues that, with superheroes, "power must display itself on the surface of the body."[60] While he is making a point about the costumes superheroes wear, one could just as easily think of the muscles adorning many a superhero physique. Not only do the well-defined muscles of many superheroes work to connote their power, but they often also work to help sculpt their masculinity and race as well. As Brown observes, "Classical comic book depictions of masculinity are perhaps the quintessential expression of cultural beliefs about what it means to be a man. In general, masculinity is defined by what it is not, namely 'feminine,' and by all its associated traits—hard *not* soft, strong *not* weak, reserved *not* emotional, active *not* passive."[61]

Yet zombification complicates this binary with both Simon and David. In Simon's case, it is straightforward, he exists in the liminal realm in-

between life and death. He is *not* living but he is *not* dead either. He is also both free-willed *and* a slave. For David, the liminal has more to do with his body, which is both whole and fragmented, as it is his own and the nanobots'. Thus, if superheroic masculinity—which we may assume is a stand-in for idealized hegemonic masculinity—exists in an uncomplicated space with clearly demarcated borders, then the superheroic masculinity of those characters whose borders are breached or are fluid are always already suspect.[62]

The bodies of superheroes are often defiant and excessive bodies; they go beyond what should be physically possible in the natural world and are extraordinarily strong and durable. On the other end of things, there are decomposing corpse zombies, whose bodies are also defiant and excessive. Theirs are bodies that refuse to die and are impossibly durable but in an almost diametrically opposed manner to superheroes. Yet with some zombies—the unaltered enslaved zombie or the strongman zombie—this distinction seems to disappear. Zombiness becomes almost like an alter ego, hidden under the skin, and while the zombie's body is still defiant, it is no longer visibly so.

I mention this because a whole body of literature on superheroic bodies focuses on the malleability of superheroic bodies and the ways in which this malleability sets the superhero apart. Elizabeth MacFarlane, Sarah Richardson, and Wendy Haslem, for instance, discuss how the superhero body is "forever after *not quite human*. This is the gift and the burden the superhero's body must bear—to be remarkable and remarked upon: capable of amazing feats, incapable of belonging, finding community, or the comfort of anonymity."[63] They also note that while the superheroic body may be idealized, it is also a source of dread. This positioning of the superheroic body as existing at the boundaries of both the wonderful and abhorrent seems to mimic the liminality of the zombie in any of its forms. In both cases, the body exceeds the norm.

My point is not to suggest that zombie bodies and superheroic bodies are the same; rather, they both exist as indicators of a tension between the possible and the impossible. In some cases, this becomes more visible, as with superheroes like the Thing or the Hulk or with decomposing corpse zombies, and in other cases, this tension is more hidden. Yet, with both Simon Garth and David Kim, the tension changes: in both cases, we have zombified bodies that are also superheroic bodies. Bodies that are excessively excessive. What happens when comic book artists render the zombie in a superheroic body? With the Purple Zombie from chapter 1, given the

action/adventure thrust of the stories, the body seems logical: it fits the conventions in which the reader finds it. Zoro's muscles also work against his zombification, to the point that, by the end of the story, he reveals he was never a zombie at all. The tension dissipates as he sheds both his zombie identity and his superheroic one to become a regular guy.

Kamerling suggests that "by presenting us with human-like and heroic zombies, these tales ask us to consider expanding our idea of the human to incorporate beings who by look and habit do not at first appear as we do."[64] While this appears to be the case with Zoro, Simon Garth never makes the transition. Yes, zombiism helps him find "his humanity" in an abstract sense but given his distinctive physical appearance and his servitude to the Amulet of Damballah, while he may achieve a level of selflessness that he didn't have as a living man, becoming a zombie hero does not serve to humanize Simon. Rather, it doubles down on the ways in which he must forever remain on the outside.

With David, if it is possible, he almost becomes too humanized—trapped in a body that is forever reminding David of its bodily nature, whether that is his vulnerability to pain or his imperviousness to death. In both cases, the perfectibility of the human body is shown to have its limits—and neither Simon nor David are fully up to the task. Because while becoming a zombie grants them unimaginable power and reproduces them as heroes, neither man can fully assimilate into the hero role, even though both may offer up their bodies as sacrifice for the larger community. Instead, these two heroes are expected to suffer.

Tales of the Zombie ended its initial two-year run with Simon Garth saving his family, beating the bad guys, and then returning to the grave. Much like the Western gunslinger riding off into the sunset, Simon goes back to his coffin, secure in the knowledge that his family and friends are safe. But his second "death" also puts an end to any potential disruption he might cause as a zombie or as a body "controlled" by Black culture. The status quo is only truly safe once Simon removes himself from the living world. *Xombi* offers up a far less cut-and-dried ending, with the original run of the comic ending with David's fiancée coming home and David psyching himself up to tell her the truth about his new xombi identity. Yet here too we see the potential disruption of David's body being mitigated by his choice to try to maintain his "normal" life. He hasn't made peace with being a xombi so much as he has decided not to let it disturb the mundane life he clings to.

In both comics then, we have a complex form of zombie body that pres-

ents as hard body but also illustrates the excesses of the hard body. Both Simon and David do heroic things, but they can't inhabit their newly heroic bodies without complications—they simply don't have enough control over those bodies. Yet, in many ways, their loss of control and suffering work to illustrate not necessarily the horrors of zombidom—although that is a part of what these men endure—but the horrors of superherodom. The perfect body that is expected to get hurt and rebound again and again is inherently a body of suffering, whether it is a zombie body or not.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gwen Dylan Is Not the Girl She Used to Be
iZombie and Female Zombies in Comics

In Fredric Wertham's 1954 treatise against comic books, *Seduction of the Innocent*, he describes Wonder Woman as "a horror type. She is physically very powerful, tortures men, has her own female following, is the cruel 'phallic' woman. While she is a frightening figure for boys, she is an undesirable ideal for girls, being the exact opposite of what girls are supposed to want to be."[1] While Wertham's proclamation might seem hilariously out-of-touch today, it points to very real postwar fears about feminism and the role the media played in perpetuating "appropriate" gender stereotypes.

I often wonder what Wertham would have made of a character like Gwen Dylan, the titular heroine of the 2010–12 Vertigo comic *iZombie*, given just how much more "inappropriate" she would have to seem to someone who found Wonder Woman distasteful. Gwen is a zombie, forced to eat brains or lose her memories, and while most of the time she looks like a pretty, young, white woman, there is always the possibility that she will "zombie-out" and turn into something far more sinister. In the first issue of *iZombie*, Gwen tells the reader, "I'm not the girl I used to be."[2] While, in part, it's a reference to the fact that Gwen is a zombie, she isn't your typical undead either.

Becoming a zombie ostensibly means to lose one's free will, but as we have discovered, this isn't always the case, and in *iZombie*, Gwen is yet another exception to the rule: Gwen can control her urges. She can pass for living. She even catches the eye of more than one person during the series' run. In short, Gwen is a very un-zombie-like zombie. Most of the other zombies in *iZombie* conform to typical expectations of the walking dead: they are decomposing, unthinking creatures of the mass. They serve as foils to reify just how un-zombie-like Gwen truly is.

As such, Gwen's situation suggests that zombihood doesn't afflict all equally. But if we examine her in contrast to the female zombies in comics of the 1950s, we can see that there is a long history of zombification affecting

men and women differently. Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl argue that despite moves toward more diversity in comics over the past few years, often "characters operate in the context of the male, white, heterosexual realm, with women primarily portrayed as young, sexual objects in need of protection."[3] In 1950s horror comics, this was often the case, with young, white women threatened with zombification and young, white men coming to their rescue. Yet, even when women were turned into zombies in these comics, they often retained their beauty—unless of course the point of the story was to test a man's loyalty or to expose a woman's evil ways. In either case, these comics created a clear binary between beauty and ugliness that aligned beauty with goodness and evil with ugliness. Gwen Dylan is a zombie who doesn't bear the physical traces of zombification as long as she eats, but she is also constantly in danger of becoming physically zombified, so unlike the women in 1950s horror, it isn't her good character that can prevent decomposition but rather the right regimen.

Exploring the beauty culture surrounding zombidom, this chapter examines the gendered aspects of the zombie's decomposition, noting how female zombies are held to different standards than their male counterparts, standards that reinforce stereotypical notions of physical appearance determining female value. Using Gwen Dylan as my focus, I will first compare her to the female zombies of the 1940s and 1950s, suggesting that while Gwen exhibits far more agency than the Golden Age female zombies, she is still stuck in similar rhetorical positions in terms of her looks, ultimately robbing her of agency. Female zombies are rarely presented as heroic and when they are—as in the case of Gwen Dylan—their heroism is tied to self-sacrifice for the good of the community. As such, I want to interrogate how Gwen's zombiness and her femininity work in the construction of her as a hero—and the ways in which her femininity ultimately works to undermine her heroism.

PRE-CODE WOMEN

In comics of the 1940s and 1950s, women in zombie-themed stories often fell into one of three general characterizations: the victim in need of rescue; the zombie master; or the zombie itself. While my focus in this section will mostly be on women as zombies, it's worth considering the female zombie masters as well, as they tended to be represented as graphic foils to many of the female victims and zombies populating Golden Age comics. For

instance, while many of the women in jeopardy from zombie masters were conventionally attractive white blondes, female zombie masters in comics tended to be brunette: a subtle difference, but one that played on stereotypical associations of good with lightness and evil with darkness.

While there were female zombie masters in other media of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, they were relatively rare. In American feature films released between 1932's *White Zombie* and *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968, for instance, only four of the zombie masters were women.[4] In comics, however, female zombie masters might not have been the majority, but they were more common. One of the earliest of these female zombie masters appeared in 1941 when Tabu, Wizard of the Jungle, faced off against Celie, "The Zombie Witch," who used zombies to con white men into believing there was gold in "Juju Mountain." While Celie is seemingly a citizen of the jungle, she appears as a white brunette with skin tone no different than Tabu's, the white wizard of the jungle. She is wearing a turban that accentuates her dramatic widow's peak, and she is dressed in a short sleeveless red dress that flares out at the bottom in several jagged pieces and is accessorized with gold jewelry (see fig. 19).

In "Drums of the Undead," a 1949 story from *Adventures into the Unknown*, the female zombie master, Erzulie Bocor,[5] tries to repatriate a drum from an American museum back to Haiti when she clashes with a young white couple, Bill and Sheila. Like Celie, Erzulie is brunette and wears a sleeveless red dress, although this one is accessorized by a long black cape. However, while she is presented as Haitian within the narrative, her skin coloring isn't different from Bill's or Sheila's (see fig. 19). The fact that both Celie and Erzulie appear white is notable for a few reasons; first, in films of the era, most zombie masters were white men. In comics, most zombie masters were still men, but they weren't necessarily all white. Male zombie masters of color tied to foreign locales were often explicitly depicted as Black or brown, so the whitening of these two women is noticeable. Celie is, ostensibly, a jungle native and Erzulie is Haitian. Yet both are colored similarly to the white protagonists of their stories.

While it is possible that both could be white women, that isn't an assumption a reader could make with male zombie masters in similar positions. Thus, it seems as if these female zombie masters of color were removed from their "native" backgrounds a bit by lightening their skin and presenting them as white, removing the presence of women of color entirely from these two stories. With the exception of the film *Ouanga* (1935), Black women in zom-

Fig. 19. (*From left to right*) the Golden Age female zombie masters Celie (Ted Brodie-Mack, "Tabu Wizard of the Jungle and the Zombie Witch," *Jungle Comics* 2, #24, Dec. 1941, 19), Erzulie Bocor ("Drums of the Undead," *Adventures into the Unknown* #7, Oct.–Nov. 1949), and Emma Vurpillot ("Step into My Grave," *Baffling Mysteries* #11, Nov. 1952).

bie films of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s were typically servants. Thus, while they might have had access to mystical powers via voodoo, they were still trapped in a stereotypically subservient position. In comics of the same era, it seems, women of color were removed, replaced by lighter-skinned women who posed less of a racialized threat.

One can see this same thing happening in "Step into My Grave," a 1952 tale from *Baffling Mysteries*, where the female zombie master is Emma Vurpillot, who lives in Louisiana and bewitches Tyson Blagdon, who has just inherited his late brother's plantation. Tyson marries Emma and quickly discovers she is a zombie master who wants to take over his plantation. Like both Celie and Erzulie, Emma is a white brunette (see fig. 19). And while the location of New Orleans doesn't automatically associate Emma with Black or brown cultures, during a monologue while she is taunting Tyson's zombified brother, Neil, Emma states that she is using "the voodoo power that has been handed down to me from my mother, my grandmother, my great-grandmother and beyond!," suggesting a line of voodoo priestess going back several generations.[6] In *Not Your Average Zombie*, I note how in many otherwise racially problematic films, one potential positive is the fact that voodoo was often treated as a means for women of color to access power. Here, implicitly, one can see a similar thing happening. Emma's ability to command zombies comes from a multigenerational matriarchal legacy that seems to be directed at turning men into slaves, as none of her zombies appear to be female. However, Emma's power is, of course, coded as evil, so any agency it might offer her is counteracted by her associations with sorcery and villainy. Moreover, while she seemingly comes from a long line of Vodou priestesses, suggesting she might not be completely white, her coloring within the comic is the same as Tyson's, once again suggesting that any hint of a woman of color has been covered over by whiteness.

The female zombie master of the 1952 story "It Won't Come Back until Midnight," like Emma, gets her powers from her mother, who was a "Voodoo witch doctor," and she too is trying to gain the protagonist's home. However, in this tale, it turns out the home belonged to her family until his family stole it and sent her parents to their deaths.[7] Thus, while Emma might read as entirely evil within the context of her story, the female zombie master in "It Won't Come Back until Midnight" is given some narrative justification in using zombies to take over the protagonist's home. Yet, like Emma, she will be defeated in the end.

Like Celie and Erzulie, Emma wears a sleeveless red dress for her voo-

doo ceremony. She is a brunette, and like Celie, she accessorizes with gold bangles.[8] However, the female zombie master of the 1952 story "It Won't Come Back until Midnight" is a bit different from these other women. She is also a brunette, but when she is discovered to be a zombie master, she transforms into a skeletal "hag" with drawn, pale features and unkept hair, suggesting that when her "evil" nature is revealed so is her "evil" (aka ugly) form.

Also straying from the young, beautiful, and brunette mold are the female zombie masters of "Where the Undead Roam" and "I Am a Zombie," both from 1953, and "From the Graves They Crept," from 1954. All of these women are older, and in the case of both "I Am a Zombie," and "From the Graves They Crept," the women in question are zombies themselves, enacting revenge on the men who mistreated them when they were living. In either case, whether young and brunette or old and hag-like, the female zombie masters in comics of the 1940s and 1950s could easily be contrasted with the women who were victims of zombie masters or who were zombies themselves, as these women were overwhelmingly young, pretty, and blonde.

WOMEN AS VICTIMS

One of the earliest, if not the earliest, zombified women in comics was Nita Crane from a series of Dr. Occult stories in *More Fun Comics* in 1937. Dr. Occult, a detective focusing on the mystical and magical, is walking home one night when a woman runs up to him. He is shocked: it's Nita Crane, a woman he thought was dead. She warns Occult, "You're in terrible danger. . . . Not only of body but of soul!"[9] She is trying to warn him about her zombie master, but it's of no use because in the very next issue, Dr. Occult is seemingly killed and turned into a zombie. The zombie master is creating zombies for a crime spree, but eventually Dr. Occult and Nita outsmart him and free his zombies. As was common at the time, in the story there is nothing physical to mark any of the zombies *as zombies*. They look just like the living. As such, Nita looks like any other white woman in the comic, with short hair and pale skin, and a penchant for flowy, form-fitting dresses.

This idea that living women and zombie women were visually interchangeable was a strong convention throughout the 1940s and 1950s. For instance, in "The Voodoo Man," a 1940 tale in *Weird Comics*, plantation owner Stanley Hibbert has run afoul of the local natives, who are targeting his daughter, Gloria, to get at him. The leader of the natives, Boanga, uses

mind control to force Gloria to obey his will. He's just about to kill her, remarking, "You be beautiful zombie," when the plantation physician Bob Warren comes to her rescue.[10] The notion of a beautiful young woman being hypnotized and under the control of a zombie master was nothing new by 1940—that is essentially the plot of the 1932 film *White Zombie*, after all, and it hints at the underlying sexual threat that zombification posed for women—but Boanga's comment that Gloria would make a beautiful zombie nods to both the bodily changes that many female zombies *didn't* undergo alongside the sexual undercurrent of having enslaved female zombies.

As I discussed in chapter 1, zombification in this era didn't necessarily mean decomposition. A zombie might retain their physical appearance if zombification were more focused on mind control, and in many zombie-themed comics, the implication was that, as such, zombification could preserve a woman's beauty forever. In "Ibis the Invincible and 'The Zombie Master'," a story from 1951, for instance, Prince Ibis, "Master of White Magic," is battling a group of zombies who end up kidnapping his partner, Taia. The zombie master tells her, "You are to [*sic*] beautiful to suffer an ordinary death! Drink this and you shall know immortality as **my slave**!"[11] The implication here is that as a zombie, she will be under his (sexual) control and that zombification will preserve her beauty forever. Similarly, in "The Heap," a 1952 story in *Airboy Comics*, Anton Lautrec, a reanimated zombie, comes back to his family home and tells his niece, "Fair Charlotte . . . child of good and beauty . . . come into the moonlight of the garden . . . taste of the moonflower . . . and be locked in the eternal beauty that never dies."[12]

While none of these stories explicitly remark on growing older, they contain an implicit bias against women aging. The women being threatened by zombie masters are all young, white, and conventionally beautiful, and one of the justifications used by these zombie masters seems to be that they will be able to "preserve" the women, to keep them from growing older, and one might assume, uglier. The preservation, however, is linked to the loss of bodily and mental autonomy, suggesting that—at least for the zombie masters—the ideal woman is young, white, beautiful, and completely under a man's control. And while the preservation aspect of this scenario may be "evil," the underlying assumptions that youth is preferable to aging and that the ideal woman is passive are still reified. Yet, here, the danger is less that a woman will be made pliable and more that the zombified woman will be passive and under the control of the *wrong sort* of man—zombification thus holds both a threat to her sexual purity and to national interests, assuming,

of course, the zombie master is foreign, which many zombie masters of the era were.

But, of course, just as some women's beauty could be preserved by zombification, others lived a strange in-between existence hovering between youthful beauty and decomposition. In "The Haunts of Devil's Lake" from 1952, for instance, a man sees a beautiful girl swimming under the surface of the lake where he's fishing, but when she surfaces, she is a corpse.[13] He yells, "Get away from me, you—you ghastly rotting creature! Go back to the muck and slime of the lake bottom!"[14] But when he falls under water, the corpse is replaced with "a gorgeous Indian girl."[15] She calls herself Princess Ne-Way-Tay and begs for the man's help. Taking him to the caves beneath the lake, which are filled with other corpse-like Indians, the princess soon turns on the man, revealing that the whole group are zombies, and they have lured him to the caves to be a ritual sacrifice. Only with his death can the zombies maintain their present state and not pass on into the "punishing beyond."[16]

While awaiting his fate, the man tells the princess, "I can't believe anyone so beautiful could work for those inhuman, undead zombies! You aren't even like them!"[17] But, it turns out, she is. During her lifetime, the princess was a murderess, and during her execution—drowning in the lake—the evil spirits of the lake kept her alive. The other lake zombies are also criminals, and they all fear real death because they will go to hell. The man eventually turns the tables on the princess and kills her, effectively killing the other zombies as well.

This story—and others like it—is a variation on the adage "don't judge a book by its cover," ostensibly warning readers not to believe that beautiful people are always beautiful on the inside. Yet, just as with the female zombie master of "It Won't Come Back until Midnight," this hinges on a literal reversal of the woman's beauty—her transforming into an uglier form—which muddles the moral somewhat. It suggests that while you can't assume that beautiful people are beautiful on the inside, you *can* assume that ugly people have ugly motivations. Evil shows itself on the skin. This is necessarily amplified by the fact that "The Haunts of Devil's Lake" focuses on a white man and a woman of color. Settler colonization and the horrors that were visited on Native Americans are thus transposed into a story about evil natives who are crimes against nature and who must be stopped by white men. The threat of the "uncivilized" world can thus be transposed into a visually monstrous threat that the white man must overcome.

Comics are a visual medium that rely on the reader's ability to parse a

lot of information from a limited number of images, and a visual shorthand is a necessary component of this—hence, comics borrow visual conventions and iconography from other media, such as associations of the color black with evil and the color white with peace and purity. As I noted in chapter 1, in my discussions of the associations of men of color with apelike features, this visual iconography may be couched in stereotypes, which is what we see in the use of ugliness as an indicator of evilness. In using the "evil is ugly" trope for threats and villains, comics can quickly communicate a character's morality to readers without having to rely on heavy exposition. As I have noted elsewhere, the effects of this trope are so strong that even when decomposing zombies are a force for the moral good, they often still read as the bad guys.

But if we take this practice a step further and consider it in relation to zombies and zombiness, the transition of zombies from figures that look just like the living to decomposing corpses was accompanied by a transition in the agency of zombies and their increased threat to the living (even if said threat was often directed at evildoers). The EC brand of horror, which often relied on twisting narrative conventions, could also play with standard visual conventions in ways that were picked up by other comics publishers. Hence, the convention of evil being ugly was flipped for revenge-from-the-grave stories so that the "ugly" beings were forces for the moral good. Yet decomposing corpse zombies also trouble our understanding of what the human body is supposed to look like—merging life with death into a strange liminal undeath or living death. Visually, this is communicated by having that which shouldn't be able to move and act—the corpse—move around and do things. So, in the case of zombies, while their actions may suggest that zombies are forces for good, in the very fact that they are reanimated corpses, there is an added extra layer of "wrongness" inscribed on top of the *evil is ugly* trope.

Beautiful women being exposed as decomposing zombies thus not only troubles conventional understandings of what normal humans are supposed to look like, but what "normal" human women are supposed to look like too. As Alexa Wright points out in *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture*, the etymological roots for words like "monster" or "monstrosity" is the Latin "*monstrare*, meaning both to show and also to warn or advise."[18] As she notes, "This original meaning is particularly important . . . because it shows that monstrosity is by definition a visual phenomenon."[19] Noting the long history of equating human deformity with monstrosity, Wright

observes that even as conventional belief shifted away from this equation, it has been difficult to completely divorce ideas of monstrosity from their supposed visual indicators: "Historically, human monsters offer a sense of security by embodying and making visible the threatening and unspeakable monstrousness that is encountered in the world, in society and within the self."[20] Thus, in a medium often centered on the (white) male experience, the "unmasking" of female zombies serves to make visible the underlying threat of powerful women by visually exaggerating their monstrous interiors.

Beyond the ways that beauty plays a significant role in either justifying the zombification of women or in being able to discern their true nature, there is also a sexual undercurrent when women are zombified by male zombie masters. In the advertising for the 1932 film *White Zombie*, for instance, one of the tag lines noted that the female zombie of the film would perform the zombie master's "every wish."[21] Similarly, in "King of the Living Dead" a 1951 tale from *Eerie* #1, the zombie master tells Maria, whom he has kidnapped and zombified, "You are *mine* now . . . mine to do with as I please!"[22] While this could simply mean he will force her to work in his household, the implication is that she may also be a sexual plaything. In "Reincarnation," a story from 1952, the innuendo is a bit more subtle: as the zombie master hooks Special Agent Ann Bourdeau into his zombie-making machine, he delightedly says, "How the blue tongue of electricity makes your body tense with the strain and power of unleashed energy! Scream . . . Scream . . . ! There is no one to hear you!"[23] In each of these instances the subtext is that in becoming zombified, these women are made into sexual objects used at the whim of their zombie masters, which accounts, at least partially, for the focus on female zombies retaining their beauty—the assumption being, of course, that no one would want an "ugly" sexual toy.

Yet, in thinking about the beautiful women later exposed as ugly zombies, there is also an undercurrent of sexual warning. In both "The Haunts of Devils Lake" and "It Won't Come Back until Midnight," the story is initiated, at least in part, because a white man is attracted to a beautiful woman who will then become a threat to his life. Here, the warning is subtle but clear: be careful with instant attraction and get to know a woman's inner self before committing to a pretty face. Beauty may be more desirable on a woman than ugliness, but it can't always be trusted.

Of course, the sexual undercurrent of zombifying a woman could also take on racist overtones when the master in question was a man of color and the potential zombie victim was white, adding the threat of miscegenation

to the mix. Strangely enough, as I point out in *Not Your Average Zombie*, in films of the era, zombie masters were overwhelmingly white men, so the question of potential miscegenation could be sidestepped by having white zombie masters threaten white women. In comics, while the female zombie masters of color were seemingly whitened, their male counterparts weren't. Thus, underlying the horror of turning someone into a zombie were racist fears of Black or brown male sexual violence toward white women, which we can see in stories from "The Voodoo Man" (1940) up through "Zombie Vengeance" (1953), where "native" zombie masters attempt to zombify beautiful young white American women.[24]

Even in tales where there might be a white zombie master, there were often visual cues that miscegenation was possible and to be feared. For instance, in "The Soul Stealer," a 1953 tale from *Ghost Comics*, the zombie master is a white American man, yet within the tale the woman who is threatened with zombification is tied to a tree and surrounded by shirtless Haitian male zombies (fig. 20). She is in a short, sleeveless dress and her skin color contrasts with the dark tones of the zombies—so dark that they mesh with the tree and the surrounding night sky. While, within the confines of the story, they aren't the true threat to this woman—the zombie master is—visually, they are the only threat.[25] Moreover, this threat is somewhat sexualized, given the state of undress of the zombies—none are wearing shirts—and the woman's sleeveless short dress, which exposes most of her arms and legs.

It is particularly telling that it isn't women of color being threatened by a zombie master's unnatural desires in these stories, and that is a convention that comics share with films and other zombie media of the time where a threat to white womanhood continued throughout the 1940s and 1950s, and women of color were either relegated to supporting roles or eliminated altogether. In the 1940s and 1950s, threats to women of color in mainstream media wouldn't have played upon the same social fears that threats to white womanhood could: historically, Black male threats to white womanhood were used to justify all kinds of racist violence against Black peoples, and Black men in particular. Those doing the violence could justify it as protecting the sanctity of white female virginity, which could stand in for white racial purity, through both the enaction of laws and the use of extralegal violence, such as lynching. These sorts of images—which showed white women under the threat of Black and brown men—were part of a much longer tradition of fashioning Black men as a threat that needed to be eliminated.

While the sexual threat to white womanhood seems to have been a con-

Fig. 20. A white woman surrounded by Black zombies in "The Soul Stealer" (*Ghost Comics* #8, 1953).

stant across zombie media of the time, there were also comics that focused on how a white man's love could free a woman from zombification. In "Master of the Undead" from 1953, writer Peter Brandon is researching a book on zombies. He meets Mr. Decasta, who shows him his plantation full of zombies and wants to help him write his book, but Peter soon realizes that his benefactor is an actual zombie master and has already zombified his niece, Nina, with plans to do the same to Peter. Peter wants to run away with Nina before her uncle can zombify him, and he begs Nina, "I'm in love with you! You've **got** to break this horrible spell. You're not quite 'undead' like the others."[26] Decasta moves to kill Peter and orders the zombified Nina to do it. However, as she is about kill Peter, she freezes and begins to cry. Decasta is enraged, yelling, "She refuses to stab him! I have not yet fully smothered the instinctive urgings of love!"[27] This follows the plot from the 1932 film *White Zombie*, which sees its zombified wife Madeleine faltering when ordered to kill her husband, Neil. But it also points to the overwhelming heteronormativity of these comics, which often focused on heterosexual couples and used threats to the woman to motivate the man to act. The idea is that a woman who has perhaps stumbled (sexually speaking) can redeem herself through love, if it's to the right man.[28] And in these comics, that is communicated through the woman's zombification and then un-zombification through love.

Yet male love is also tested by female zombies. In "Zombie Bride," a 1952 story, Joe and Lily are honeymooning in Haiti when she is zombified. Joe eventually tracks her down to find that she now only obeys her zombie master. Joe attacks the zombie master, but zombie Lily then attacks Joe. The zombie master stops her from killing her husband and offers Joe a deal: become a zombie to regain his wife. Joe agrees and is killed and reanimated. As the zombie master sends the two off into the jungle, Lily says, "Our love is safe now! We are dead!"[29] In "Zombie Vengeance," a 1953 story in *Strange Mysteries*, Tom Penton, a famous aviator, crashes in the jungles of Haiti where he finds a beautiful woman named Lily inside a strange building. She tells him she's in danger, that the other people in the building are zombies, "and they want to make me one of them!"[30] Tom and Lily escape but are recaptured by the zombie master. She is zombified, but soon after, Tom manages another escape, taking her with him—only to realize she can't exist in the normal world as a zombie. Even though rescue is immanent, Tom decides not to return to civilization and instead becomes a zombie to remain with Lily.

In both cases, men are so strongly in love that they are willing to die and come back as zombies to be with the women they love. One factor in the men's devotion may be that the women are largely unaltered by their zombification. They appear much as they did when they were living. So, while technically being zombified, these couples are undead in much the same way vampires are in Western culture: undead who remain frozen in time, locked into youth and beauty forever—and the zombies have the added bonus of being able to go out during the day. But also, the women in these stories exist for white, male character development; they are the prize that men win for "doing the right thing."

However, not all zombies were frozen in place during the Golden Age. Some decomposed, and often, when female zombies were afflicted, the decomposition was a test of a man's devotion. In "Forever Dead," from 1954, for instance, Geoffrey Fisher is inconsolable after the death of his wife, Dolores, and eventually he makes a deal with Dr. Judas to raise her from the dead. But he wasn't counting on her being a decomposing corpse, so when she returns as a rotting body, he laments, "I want the real Dolores, my beautiful wife!"[31] He has Dr. Judas send her back to the grave, but later, he feels guilty, so he lets Dr. Judas kill him so he can come back as a zombie to be with his zombie wife. In this story, it is clear that the "real" Dolores is the beautiful woman, not the decomposing body, yet Geoffrey's love is so strong,

he eventually overcomes his distaste at her appearance and decides to join her, the idea being that it is up to the man to conquer his repulsion at the physical ugliness of his wife to save the relationship.

Whereas, in "Forever Dead," Geoffrey decides to join his wife as a zombie, in "Corpses on Cue," a *Web of Mystery* story from 1953, a zombified man decides to zombify his lady love so she can be with him. In the story, the evil Professor Skane is a vaudevillian who has a zombie under his control named Ti Jon. Newly arrived in New York, Skane is a sensation with his act, "The man who can't be killed," where he does all sorts of things to Ti Jon on stage, including shooting him, without Ti Jon reacting.[32] However, one day while walking back from the theater, Ti Jon spots a familiar face, his boyhood sweetheart, Dolores. Unfortunately, just as he spots her, she is struck by a car and killed. Ti Jon finds her at a funeral parlor and performs the zombie rites over her, saying, "Soon she will be the same as I! I—I had to do this . . . Had to have her with me!"[33] Zombification, here, isn't about preserving Dolores as she was, but about having control over her body—even after death.

Dolores doesn't give her consent to become a zombie, so in many ways Ti Jon is doing to her exactly what his zombie master has done to him: removing agency. Yet, in this narrative universe, it isn't quite so simple, because when Dolores wakes up, she isn't happy with being a zombie, and she makes a decision: she is going to free Ti Jon from Professor Skane's control. Ti Jon is under the power of his master, but Dolores seems free to act as she sees fit, so she goes to the cemetery and meets the rulers of the undead to learn how to free Ti Jon. Later, she confronts Professor Skane during a show, saying, "STOP! You must no longer exploit the undead! By doing this, you violate all the ancient and mystic laws of voodooism. . . . I didn't want to become a zombie, but Ti Jon's voodoo rites over my dying body made me one! Now I must free both our souls into real death—where we'll have eternal peace together!"[34] Killing the professor and cursing him to spend eternity as the undead, Dolores then takes Ti Jon away, intent on going back to the Indies to find their final release.

Dolores explicitly notes that zombification isn't natural, that it is exploitation and not something someone should want, and the end of the comic leads one to believe she will find a way to "save" herself and Ti Jon from this fate by leading them to a permanent death. Thus, the idea of zombifying oneself to remain in a romantic relationship is tested here, as Delores points out how unnatural it is (and hints at how it stems from a nonconsensual act). Yet the comic also ends by noting that Ti Jon and Dolores will "have

eternal peace together," so it is having things both ways—calling out zombification as an unnatural act while also promoting the idea that men can be absolved of their crimes against nature if they're "doing it for love."[35]

"Corpses on Cue" is unique in having Delores point out how Ti Jon's act of zombifying her was nonconsensual, and it reverses the typical pattern in zombie tales about everlasting love. Usually, the woman is zombified first (and almost always against her will) and then the man chooses to be zombified to remain with her. The man is afforded a choice where the woman has none, and while these stories are ostensibly about the power of love, they illustrate how unbalanced the power relations in these relationships are.

This notion of the power of love was satirized in "'Till Death," a *Vault of Horror* classic by EC artist Johnny Craig. In it, Steve has spent two years in Haiti building up his plantation "so that it would be fit for a woman to live on!"[36] When his bride, Donna, arrives, "The next few months are pure bliss!"[37] Donna is a doting wife, waking Steve with kisses, making his meals, and otherwise turning "the brooding voodoo island of Haiti into a beautiful isle of romance and love."[38] But then Donna gets sick and dies. Steve is despondent because "the enchanted isle of romance has returned to its former evil self!"[39] Desperate to help his master, Steve's loyal servant, Jebco, takes Donna from her grave and revives her with a voodoo ritual. Donna is back, and for the next few days, Steve is happy again.

But then Steve starts to realize that Donna stinks. Baths don't help—in fact, nothing does—and that's when Steve realizes that "she's starting to decay!"[40] Things go from bad to worse in the jungle heat: "Her skin begins to rot and drop from her bones!"[41] Steve tries to escape her, but she remains steadfast at his side. Those characteristics Steve once loved about Donna—her undying devotion, her constant need to be with him—he now hates. Eventually, Steve has had enough. He shoots Donna. But it does nothing. He strangles her, stabs her, drowns her, even pushes her out of a helicopter. It does nothing; she always comes back. At the end of his tether, Steve decides to end it all and drinks poison, only to open his eyes during a voodoo ceremony. His native workers have brought him back as a zombie, and he'll spend the rest of his life with Donna.

The twist in this story is "be careful what you wish for," but underneath this is the sense in which Steve is punished by the existence of his ugly, stinking wife. On one hand, this could be a comment on how Steve's love is only skin deep and can't stand up to any true tests, but on the other hand, it reinforces what a "proper" woman should be: namely, young, beautiful, and

nice smelling. Intriguingly, though, this story takes away the male agency at the heart of so many other "romantic" zombification stories. Just as Donna didn't ask to be turned into a zombie, neither does Steve—yet ultimately his powerlessness serves to reinforce his "punishment" at being stuck with a stinky wife.

Phillip Smith and Michael Goodrum suggest that many comics in the 1950s were dealing with the traumas of World War II and that "horror comics offered a space in which the violence of war could be acted out on the bodies of women."[42] I would suggest that, in zombie-themed comics, it wasn't the violence of war that was acted out on the bodies of women so much as it was fears of miscegenation, aging, and women's agency. Crafting sexualized threats to women's bodies could create a scenario where a Black or brown man could be "put into his place" by a white man, who would then secure the woman in a romantic heterosexual relationship. Playing with ideas of preserving a woman's beauty through zombification or having zombification ravage a once beautiful woman's body suggested the importance of youth and beauty as evaluators of a woman's worth, and crafting situations where a woman's free will was taken over by a man suggests a fear of woman's agency in postwar America.

Many women existed in these zombie stories to be threatened so that the hero would be moved to act, and they often then served as the "reward" a man might receive for defeating a zombie master. Even when men weren't successful at beating a zombie master, they still might be "rewarded" with a woman's love, if they were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice of their free will to be with her, and one can't help but wonder if this was a snarky comment on marriage being made by comics artists of the 1940s and 1950s. Yet underlying almost all these stories were notions that the true function of a woman was to be available for a man's sexual interest—whether this was the interest of the zombie master or the hero. To underline this, the woman's youth and beauty were of paramount importance to the point where women who were made into decomposing corpses by zombification became tests of a man's endurance and faithfulness—and this was a test many male characters failed.

A ZOMBIE IN SEARCH OF HERSELF

One might expect, in the decades between the 1950s and the early years of the twenty-first century, that the role of women in zombie-themed com-

ics would have changed, but many female characters remained the narrative justification for a hero's journey rather than fully fleshed characters in and of themselves. Even in *Xombi*, where Kelly Sanborne is given a significant backstory, the reader only engages with her through the lens of David Kim's guilt and grief over her passing. There were also far fewer female zombies in the decades after the Comics Code was enacted. Even when restrictions on the undead were eased, female zombies were something of an oddity. Yet, in 2010, a female zombie hero appeared in comics who on the surface seemed quite different from her Golden Age counterparts.

While some readers may be more familiar with the television adaptation, the comic book *iZombie* ran for twenty-eight issues from 2010 to 2012. Its titular heroine is Gwen Dylan, a young woman who tells the reader in the first issue, "I'm not the girl I used to be."[43] This is certainly true. Gwen is a zombie with large gaps in her memories of her "living" life—she doesn't remember how she died, or why, and the longer she exists as a zombie, the harder it is for her to remember basic things about her life before death, like her birthday. Gwen's identity is fragmented. But this fragmentation also sets up the narrative thrust of the series as Gwen tries to figure out who she is: both who she was before she died, but more importantly, what kind of being she wants to be now.

Complicating things, of course, is Gwen's status as a zombie and the trouble that entails. If Gwen eats brains, her memory loss is abated, and as a result she has taken a job as a grave digger. As she tells readers at the end of the first issue, "I have to eat a brain once a month or I go all mindless and shambling. Total Night of the Living Dead. Not that the alternative's so freakin' great. You are what you eat, after all, and when you eat brains—well, you get the idea."[44] Not only does Gwen find the brains repulsive, they hit her with the memories of their former owners, memories that often drive Gwen to try to settle the affairs of the dead. So, it is this tension between Gwen-the-seemingly-normal-human and Gwen-the-zombie as well as Gwen-with-faulty-memories and Gwen-with-memories-that-aren't-hers that fuels the narrative trajectory of *iZombie*: Should Gwen tell her monster-hunting boyfriend she's a zombie? Should she try to contact her friends and family from her previous life? Should she start murdering people to keep her memories? Should she try to ignore the memories she sees when she eats brains? How is Gwen supposed to balance all the disparate parts of her life into something coherent?

Discussing the television adaptation, Stacey Abbott notes that the show

is representative of "first person zombie narrative[s]" that focus on "an individual who functions as the focalization of the story and through whose eyes the apocalypse unfolds."[45] The zombie as individual is nothing new.[46] And while *iZombie* the comic and the television show largely rely on the zombie's point of view, as both narratives are largely told from the zombie's perspective, this isn't necessarily new, either—as one can see with both *Tales of the Zombie* and *Xombi*. Yet, while both of those comics also focus on a character making sense of their newly found zombie identity, in Gwen's case, zombiism manifests a bit differently.

Julia Round notes how the focus on identity is not only clear in the title "iZombie" with its centering of the "I," but that "both the vampire and the zombie invoke the theme of fragmented identity in being both self and Other."[47] Josef Benson and Doug Singsen observe that while superheroes may be presented as characters with fragmented identities, especially when they have alternate personas for their superheroic and mundane lives, they typically aren't "presented that way."[48] Rather, these superheroes are often held up as "paragons of heteronormative and hypermasculine monolithic whiteness."[49] Traditional superheroes are fantasies of a coherent, able body. Under this logic, then, zombie superheroes already exist in an impossible position as figures who are explicitly fragmented (zombies) and as figures who are trying to cover over any fragmentation (superheroes).

But Gwen Dylan exists in an altogether different space than other zombie heroes as her zombie fragmentation isn't only about the split between being living and (un)dead, but between being one type of zombie or another. In essence, some zombies are far more fragmented than others, and Gwen can make a choice about what kind of zombie to be. If she continues to eat brains regularly, she can retain her looks and her mind, but if she stops, she will revert into a more "zombie-ish" state. This is something Gwen grapples with—in particular the question of whether she is willing to kill people to keep her connection to her past alive. It is, in essence, Gwen's contending with remaining beauty or becoming the beast—both in appearance and in character—that drives her to find out more about the zombie condition.

Thus, on one hand, Gwen's fragmented identity seems to offer up a counterpoint to the female zombies of Golden Age comics, providing a depth of character rarely seen in those stories. Yet, even with a deeper characterization, Gwen still becomes enmeshed in a very similar dichotomy between beauty and ugliness.[50] In *Becoming Women: The Embodied Self in Image Culture*, Carla Rice argues that "beauty ideals are shadowed by other

Fig. 21. An example of Gwen Dylan "zombiing out" from *iZombie* (Chris Roberson, Michael Allred, Laura Allred, and Todd Klein, *iZombie: Dead to the World* [omnibus], 2011).

images, phantoms of the abject body that also haunt these women's bodily selves."[51] Within the pages of *iZombie*, Gwen becomes the literal embodiment of this haunting, especially as much of Gwen's life is dictated by her need to continually follow a sort of beauty regimen to keep her zombiness at bay. Gwen must police her body, and while this is, on the surface, so that she can maintain her memories and keep her zombification from taking over completely, it is rendered visually as a battle between maintaining a conventionally attractive form or not (fig. 21).

This visual dichotomy is reinforced whenever Gwen gets a memory inspired by the brains she is eating. In the comic, this is often represented by showing a literal split on Gwen's face, with one side remaining conventionally beautiful and the other becoming more traditionally zombified. It is also worth noting that these moments of "split" are almost always drawn in close-up or medium close-up, with Gwen's body further fractured by the frame—in these moments of "zombiing out," the formal focus is almost always on Gwen's face and head, seeming to subtly reinforce the sense that this is supposed to be about Gwen's mind and not her looks. Gwen's brief zombified moments never last long; she is usually back to "normal" in the next panel, so while Gwen's zombiness can burst out, it is never permanently scarring. Still, the threat remains, much as how Wendy Chapkis observes that women's "bodies [are] continually threatening to betray our differ-

ence."[52] Gwen is thus trapped by a body that may erupt into zombiness at any moment.

Unlike the evil female zombies of the Golden Age, this isn't some inner monstrosity making itself apparent on the body—at least not in the same way. Within the pages of the comic, Gwen's fear of zombiing out isn't explicitly tied to beauty or ugliness, but rather fears of loss of control. Zombification thus comes to stand for a sort of unruliness that Gwen is trying to keep at bay. As the character John Amon says, Gwen is eating brains because she doesn't want "to become a mindless creature of pure appetite."[53] But even here, there are undertones of beauty rhetoric at play. Becoming a mindless creature is one thing, but by adding the clause "of pure appetite," the mindlessness becomes associated with unrestricted eating.

As Susan Bordo notes in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, in Western culture the social "rules" of femininity often focus on teaching women to "feed" others, both figuratively and literally, so that women learn that "any desires for self-nurturance and self feeding" are "greedy and excessive."[54] In this way, "female hunger—for public power, for independence, for sexual gratification"—is supposed to "be contained."[55] Gwen's maintenance of her body is dependent on her eating, which in and of itself is a departure from conventions that usually encourage women to starve themselves to achieve or maintain a bodily ideal, yet Gwen must eat brains, an act she finds disgusting and morally troubling. The reader learns in the very first issue that Gwen doesn't enjoy eating brains. And she spends a great deal of the series trying to figure out ways around her need to do so—thus, she may *need* to eat brains to remain beautiful, but she doesn't *enjoy* eating them. She only does it to keep from becoming an eating machine. Thus, while eating is central to Gwen's ability to curb her zombiism, it isn't pleasurable and is done so that she can avoid excessive eating as a full-blown zombie.

At the end of the series, Gwen defeats Xitalu, an entity threatening to destroy the Earth. Xitalu eats souls, and Gwen is only able to defeat it because, as she notes, she doesn't "get **possessed** by the souls [she] take[s] in," she "digest[s] them."[56] She is thus able to consume Xitalu's soul, and as she does this, she grows larger and larger. She tells the reader: "As I digested more of Xitalu's memories, I understood things. I understood **everything**. And knew I would have to go."[57] Gwen ascends to another dimension and ends her account by telling the reader, "My name was Gwen Dylan, but I'm no longer the girl I used to be . . ."[58] In the end, Gwen sacrifices her relationships, her life, her very existence as a human, to save the world. She does so

by consuming the monster threatening the earth, but she then grows too large to remain here. It thus seems to be a win and a loss—she is free of her zombified state and everyone is saved, but Gwen must, essentially, eradicate herself. The fact that she literally becomes *too big* seems to play on conventional animosities toward large bodies, yet this is rendered visually through Gwen getting larger and larger while maintaining the same relative proportions. Thus, she doesn't get "fat," she simply expands beyond our reality—managing to maintain her beautiful visage.

With Simon Garth or David Kim, zombiness is written on the body, but it is a much more fixed state than it is with Gwen—neither of them can "cure" it or make it go away. Moreover, zombification grants both men powers—both gain strength and are indestructible. Solomon Grundy and King Zombie also both wear their zombiness permanently, and with Grundy, zombification works in much the same way as it does with Garth and Kim, as something that grants powers—at least inasmuch as he cannot die. His zombiness also serves to mark him as physically different from the heroes he faces using the *evil is ugly* trope. King Zombie's decomposition also serves to mark him as different from living humans of *Deadworld*.[59] Gwen's zombification, then, is less fixed than that of her male counterparts, but it is also tied to her ability to maintain a specific diet in a way none of the rest need to. In fact, none of the male zombies need to maintain a specific diet as zombies, and eating is rarely a part of their narrative arcs. Thus, Gwen's regimen serves to mark her as different from the other zombies we have examined in this book, but it also separates her from the other zombies of *iZombie*.

YOU SUCCEED OR FAIL AS A (ZOMBIE) INDIVIDUAL

In thinking of the differences between Gwen and the other zombies of *iZombie*, it may be pertinent to consider zombification as a state that is sometimes fixed, sometimes fluid, but also as a visual code for the failure of individual determination and will. In much the same way that evil is visually communicated via ugliness or deformity, in narratives where some zombies are able to retain their living looks and others cannot, there is a strong hint that individual success or failure is at work. As such, I want to start with the zombie's long symbolic relationship with capitalism as a means of explaining why some zombies can remain physically untouched and others become gruesome corpses.

One of the most popular ways to read zombie media is through the lens of interrelated critiques of colonialism and capitalism. Many critics see zombies as an ideal representation of bodies undergoing economic exploitation, as either slaves or workers. When the zombie first entered U.S. culture it did so as a slave born of Haitian folklore, and it spoke to fears of colonial and neocolonial exploitation. As the zombie was adapted into U.S. popular culture, the links to slavery were maintained in the earliest zombie narratives, and many commentators saw enslaved zombies as an ideal means of examining the relationships between colonial slaves and their masters. This could easily be translated—in a Depression-era world—into the relationships between workers and their bosses.

When zombies transitioned into hungry cannibals in the late 1960s, however, the links to real-world economic conditions remained. Consumption of the zombie slave's labor by a zombie master was transferred into the zombie's consumption of living human flesh. Now, capitalism, wage slavery, and rampant consumerism, rather than colonialism, were the focus. For many, the literal consumption of human flesh in cannibal zombie films becomes a not-so-subtle metaphor.[60] As Philip Horne describes, "The 'consumer society' is literalised in the zombies' process of ingestion; they devour human beings as they couldn't a TV or a sofa."[61] Steven Shaviro adds to this, saying, "The zombies mark the dead end or zero degree of capitalism's logic of endless consumption and ever-expanding accumulation, precisely because they embody this logic so literally and to such excess."[62] If vampires are the aristocratic undead—metaphors for an aristocracy that sucks the life out of workers—then zombies are their lower-class brothers: either as slaves, workers, or people following the unthinking drive to consume. Therefore, to become a zombie is to be metaphorically reduced in social status. One is either forced to do the bidding of another or one is imagined as unthinkingly reacting to external stimuli.

Yet, when we consider how women were zombified in American media of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, we should recognize that when it came to zombifying women, the economic exploitation at the heart of the zombie myth was almost always transferred into potential sexual exploitation. This was especially true in comics where these women faced implicit sexual transgressions rather than straightforward labor. Gwen Dylan's zombification reads a bit differently, namely because there isn't a zombie master controlling her. She also doesn't fit the stereotype of the "mindless consumer" zombie either, even though she is actively trying not to become mindless, and she is

consuming brains. Gwen's scenario doesn't suggest she is consuming for the sake of consumption, as some mindless drive. Rather, she consumes brains reluctantly and only because otherwise, she would, in fact, become more mindless. Brains are a means of staving off true zombification.

In the fifth issue of *iZombie*, the mysterious John Amon suggests that to retain her personality and memories, Gwen may have to start killing people to feed her need for brains. He suggests killing bad people, but the idea doesn't sit well with Gwen:

> If I stopped eating brains, I'd be nothing but appetites and urges too. Would I lose **everything** that I am? Everything that I have? I've already lost **one** life, and I'm not in any hurry to lose another. Lost all my old friends, and don't want to lose the new ones, too. But does that mean I'm willing to do what Amon asks? Either way, I could end up a **monster**.[63]

While Gwen's concern with becoming monstrous is one ostensibly located in her loss of free will, we can't overlook the concurrent loss of physical health and beauty that would accompany her descent into true zombihood. Throughout the series, this is one of Gwen's main preoccupations—how she can remain as she is without resorting to acts that she feels are repugnant.

And this gets to the most pressing point: Gwen can actively intervene in her zombification—at least in how it physically and mentally manifests. This makes her the exception to zombihood; unlike almost every other unthinking, lumbering zombie in *iZombie*, she can control her urges and she can pass for living—and not just as the living dead but as a beautiful, young woman. As long as she eats regularly, she is good. She maintains her unmarked body and her intelligence. Gwen-as-zombie is humanized by lessening the degree to which zombihood is marked on her body and in allowing her to be articulate and intelligent.

But this creates a clear binary in *iZombie*. Gwen is juxtaposed against what we might call "regular zombies," the sort of stereotypical undead frequently depicted in media. In the comic, this happens both in terms of the narrative and in terms of how Gwen is visually juxtaposed with the other zombies. While most of the regular zombies are typically depicted in the background as part of a group, Gwen exists in the fore-, middle, and backgrounds and is usually the visual center of attention. The other zombies are also clearly marked as decomposing in a way that Gwen is not. For example, in figure 22, zombies are attacking two men. The zombies not only have

Fig. 22. Cowering from (real) zombies in *iZombie* #16 (Chris Roberson, Mike Allred, and Laura Allred, "Rising," Oct. 2011).

skin in various shades of green, while Gwen maintains her pale skin tone even when zombified, their features are far more gaunt and bony than hers, and their clothing is torn and disheveled while hers is not. They also grunt and groan, rather than speak, and they are physically threatening, seemingly about to try to eat these men's brains. Thus, we get a clear binary between Gwen's zombiness and theirs—one that marks regular zombies as mindless decomposing monsters that it is okay to kill (as so many characters do throughout the series) while marking Gwen as the kind of zombie that should be saved.

Within the narrative, Gwen's difference from other zombies is explained by the character John Amon, who tells her that people typically have an oversoul and an undersoul. The oversoul is housed in the brain; it's composed of one's thoughts, memories, and personality. The undersoul is one's appetites, emotions, and fears. Normally when someone dies, both souls depart, but in some cases that doesn't happen. For zombies, the undersoul remains in the body. But as John reveals to Gwen, "You are not some mere 'zombie,' but something rarer and more wonderful still."[64] She is a *revenant* because her memories and emotions are still intact. She has both the over- and undersoul, but she must eat brains regularly or risk losing her oversoul and becoming a regular zombie.

While this creates a narrative explanation for why some zombies are decomposing shamblers and others can pass for living, it still manages to

set up regular zombiness as a failure. Unlike the other zombies of *iZombie*, Gwen can keep herself from "zombiing out" as long as she maintains a steady diet of brains; otherwise, Gwen will become "a mindless creature of pure appetite."[65] This creates a situation in which decomposing zombiism seems to be a failure of individual will. A corpse zombie is simply someone who didn't keep up their regimen of eating brains. It is as if stories of individual betterment—often used to sell diet supplements or exercise equipment—have been turned toward zombidom.

The idea is that through individual hard work, one does not have to accept one's zombie status. A sort of escape is readily available to those willing to do the hard work of maintaining appearances through eating brains. Thus, unlike those narrative worlds in which zombiism is a virus hitting people indiscriminately, here, to some degree, individual failure is to blame if one becomes a zombie. Gwen thus ends up reifying a myth that if you are a zombie, you have no one but yourself to blame—because hard work can rescue you from true zombidom. It is the Horatio Alger myth reconfigured for zombies.

In "The Well-Born Superhero," Chris Gavaler explores the history of the dual-identity hero of superhero comics. Going back to the longer literary tradition of "individual transformation employed for social good," Gavaler focuses on *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and sees in that character and many similar heroes the need to follow a desire on the part of higher classes to rescue themselves by

> metaphorically blending their identities with the objects of their fear. Refiguring gothic tragedies of interbreeding into narratives of triumph, the dual-identity hero—part well-born person, part criminal commoner—absorbs the threat of the unfit, while simultaneously improving the well born by purging the upper class of its degenerative parasitism.[66]

But whereas with dual-identity heroes such as the Scarlet Pimpernel, there is some separation between identities—Sir Percy can take off his mask and just be Sir Percy instead of the Scarlet Pimpernel, for instance—Gwen can't revert to a non-zombie self. She is permanently both.

This idea that the dual-identity hero can manifest the social anxieties of class fits with the depiction of zombidom in *iZombie*, especially if we think about stereotypical notions of worth connected to gender. The fear of losing one's social status in becoming a zombie is balanced by tempering that zom-

bidom and making it something that can be overcome through intelligence and hard work. Yet this is also communicated through a very clear visual juxtaposition between the ugliness of true zombies and Gwen's beauty.

Within the world of *iZombie*, Gwen is positioned as attractive. Not only does the were-terrier Scott have a crush on her, but monster-hunter Horatio falls for her as well. In a short preview of issue #19, reader Andy Khouri calls Gwen a "sexy zombie girl."[67] He then explains that she "has to eat brains to keep from becoming a full-on unsexy zombie."[68] Again, the focus here seems less on Gwen's mental acuity than on her physical appearance. Whereas David Kim's bodily vulnerability is undermined by the fact that his body always reverts to its ideal, Gwen's bodily vulnerability is very much tied to the opposite, playing into the same sorts of tropes present in the 1950s comics—the idea of the female body losing its youth and beauty and becoming something gruesome. For Gwen at least, this is compounded by the loss of her mental acuity as well—but the two are never fully separated. The loss of one is invariably tied up in the loss of the other.

In discussing disability in American culture, Rosemarie Garland Thomson observes how visible disabilities can likewise work to reify the notion of individual will as all that stands between an ideal self and becoming the Other:

> Freighted with anxieties about loss of control and autonomy that the American ideal repudiates, "the disabled" become a threatening presence, seemingly compromised by the particularities and limitations of their own bodies. . . . Cast as one of society's ultimate "not me" figures, the disabled other absorbs disavowed elements of this cultural self, becoming an icon of all human vulnerability and enabling the "American Ideal" to appear as master of both destiny and self. At once familiarly human but definitively other, the disabled figure in cultural discourse assures the rest of the citizenry of who they are while arousing their suspicions about who they could become.[69]

If we imagine zombihood as inhabiting a space similar to what Thomson describes, then Gwen exists in the borders between the two extremes of the imagined American body: on one hand, a beautiful young woman with agency, on the other, a body made threatening both by its loss of control and its loss of conventional beauty. Gwen's struggle, then, is to retain her purchase on the ideal space and disavow her zombihood, and even at the end of the series, when she sacrifices herself for the greater good, she is able

to retain her beautiful young body, suggesting that in her sacrifice, she has "won" the battle against her Otherness.

But Gwen's need to eat brains does, at least, turn the ideal of female passivity on its head. Whereas the women threatened with zombification in the 1950s comics were also implicitly threatened with turning over their free will to the wrong man, Gwen's potential loss of agency isn't tied to a supposed sexual threat. Yet it still fits with what Nickie Phillips and Staci Strobl identify as the "emphasized femininity" expected of female crime fighters in comics.[70] Female heroes are often expected to both "fight for justice" while complying "with more traditional gender expectations."[71] Thus, Gwen can remain the active heroine as long as she maintains her good looks too. Unlike Zoro, Simon Garth, or even David Kim—who is often mangled and disfigured only to be put back together again—part of Gwen's very mission seems to be maintaining her non-zombie form.

GWEN DYLAN ISN'T THE GIRL SHE USED TO BE

The term "monster" is quite slippery within *iZombie*. Gwen often equates the possibility of turning into a full-fledged zombie with monstrousness. In the fifth issue, for instance, she contemplates that she has "read about people who lose all inhibitions after a head injury, and turn into . . . well monsters."[72] She fears this will happen to her, and in issue #13, Gwen equates killing people in order to eat their brains with monstrosity.[73] The characters Horatio and Diogenes are monster hunters, ostensibly good guys, yet the government-sponsored "Dead Presidents," who are technically monsters in the conventional sense, work to keep people safe. Gwen's best friends are a ghost, Ellie, and a were-terrier, Scott, and over the course of the series, she will encounter vampires, mummies, were-jaguars, and a Frankenstein-like creature, none of whom are fully "monstrous" in the sense of being irredeemably evil. Moreover, while some of these "monsters" may have clear physical markings of their monstrosity on their bodies, none are wholly unattractive. There is even an entire storyline focusing on how attractive Francisco, the Frankenstein-like man, is.

The conventional equation of ugliness and evil is challenged in *iZombie* because, within the series, monstrosity can be connected to malicious actions but also to a monstrous façade, yet none of the "monsters" of the story are fully monstrous in either sense. Thus, Gwen's fears of becoming a

monster seem, at once, unfounded, but also get to the deeper connections I've discussed between physical appearance, agency, and the zombie state. Gwen fears doing monstrous things but connected to this is a concurrent loss of her looks. I'm not arguing that Gwen's primary interest is in saving her beauty, but rather noting how, even in a comic over fifty years removed from the Golden Age, the physical appearance of a female character can't be wholly removed from the narrative thrust of her story.

In the series' penultimate issue, Gwen and the other "monsters" are facing off against Xitalu, the interdimensional creature threatening to destroy the Earth. As the creature deals in souls, and since Gwen has an overabundance of soul, she realizes what needs to happen. She says, "This was the moment my whole life—and my afterlife—had been leading up to."[74] Gwen decides to sacrifice herself to save the Earth. She absorbs Xitalu's soul, digesting it, and becoming a being of a higher dimension, no longer of Earth. The reader learns that she has reappeared in our dimension long enough to tell her story—ostensibly the comic the reader is reading—before disappearing from our realm forever. The comic ends as it began, with Gwen noting, "My name was Gwen Dylan, but I'm no longer the girl I used to be . . ."[75] In a sense, Gwen must embrace her monstrosity—her need to "feed" on souls—and literally become the monster she is fighting: devouring and digesting it in order to save the world. Yet what the reader sees on the page tells a different story: Gwen's naked form grows larger and floats into another dimension. She looks human and beautiful, and her mind is intact, so Gwen doesn't have to face her fears of becoming a monster, not really.

Rather, in defeating Xitalu, Gwen has chosen to sacrifice herself for the sake of everyone else, effectively ending her human existence so that everyone else may live. It is a noble action, but it also brings to mind the threat that Gwen poses as a woman with the potential to go unruly at any moment, a woman whose physical beauty and free will could slip away if she "got lazy" or "stopped trying." In this sense, Gwen effectively contains her own threat while containing the threat of Xitalu, equating the two.

It is telling that Gwen's act is one of self-sacrifice on behalf of others. While this isn't out of the ordinary for superheroes, it is also not out of the ordinary for female caregiving characters: the mom who sacrifices for her kids; the wife who sacrifices for her husband. That this is done through consumption rather than violent action points to a rethinking of superheroic powers, but it also suggests that female superheroes may have a more gender-specific list of actions available to them in fighting evil. If women are

often associated with child-rearing and caregiving—both acts of protection that may demand some sort of self-sacrifice—then, as superheroes, their "power" may simply amplify that association into something that encompasses the entire community.

In chapter 2, I argued that the zombie's physical appearance could obscure its position as a vehicle for justice. Revenge-from-the-grave zombies, after all, may look hideous but are performing a social service. Yet these revenge-seeking zombies return to their graves at the end of the story. The possible disruption they represent is curbed once they've accomplished their task. Gwen's trajectory is very similar. She finds a way to defeat the bad guy, saving the world, but then, she must disappear.

The end of *iZombie* suggests that Gwen has finally figured out her identity. But this new identity is tied to sacrifice. She must cease to exist in this dimension. And even before that, Gwen's retention of her personality depended on eating brains—brains that would give her *other people's* memories and thoughts. Gwen was, thus, a sort of blank slate for other people's ideas, emotions, and wishes. In a sense, she was already being erased before she willingly chose to erase herself. Therefore, whereas *Xombi* is about continual suffering, *iZombie* is about inevitable invisibility. Gwen may be the hero of the story, but her heroism is tied both to her physical appearance and her willingness to sacrifice herself for everyone else. As with Simon Garth and David Kim, Gwen is positioned as something of a reluctant hero, but whereas, for both men, zombiism gives them new abilities with which to face evil, Gwen's ultimate superpower is her willingness to sacrifice for others.

Gail Simone coined the term "Women in Refrigerators" in 1999 to describe the process whereby violence against women becomes the motivating factor for male protagonists to act. Mel Gibson notes that female characters in superhero comics "have historically been far more likely than men to be murdered, raped and tortured . . . Further, while male characters who are killed or otherwise harmed are usually at some point restored to their original power and position, this is argued to be much less the case with regard to female characters."[76] In Gwen Dylan's case, this is certainly true. While the character was revived in a television show (as Oliva "Liv" Moore), the comic *iZombie* ended with Gwen's ascension to another plane in 2012.[77] Moreover, the series ends with Gwen showing the aftermath of her sacrifice—the ways in which her friends and family have been able to thrive in a post-Xitalu (and post-Gwen) world. Gwen is not being "fridged" in the traditional sense here, but rather, she illustrates how female sacrifice is made

over as good for the entire community. It is the other side of the "Women in Refrigerators" coin.

The female zombies of the 1940s and '50s were often used to spur a man into action or to test his romantic resolve, and most of the time they ended up reifying the notion of female worth as tied to youth and beauty. In *iZombie*, the female zombie has more agency, but she is still caught in the binary between beauty and decay—albeit this time those concepts are connected to free will and mindlessness. Yet, Gwen's "victory," her retention of her free will and beauty, is linked to her willingly taking herself from this realm. Her heroism is sacrifice. John Amon, Scott the were-terrier, and all the other "monsters" can remain as long as Gwen gives up her presence.

At the beginning of this chapter, I suggested that Gwen's femininity ultimately works to undermine her heroism. I would amend that to suggest that Gwen's femininity constrains what she, as a hero, is able to do. She is given the option to kill people—both to retain her beauty and mind and to rob Xitalu of what it needs to eat to survive—or she can give herself up. She can become the monster or she can become the sacrifice. In many ways, her position is similar to David Kim's, but whereas he is doomed to exist forever, Gwen is doomed to cease existing, eaten up by her need to protect those around her. Phillips and Strobl argue that "to fight crime, male heroes are expected to *look* heroic, to maintain a hypermasculine physique, and to 'do crime fighting' in a gendered way that privileges heterosexuality."[78] Yet, they add, "Female crime fighters must negotiate their crime fighting in a way that embraces 'emphasized femininity' while simultaneously demonstrating competence in a role traditionally thought of as the domain of male protectors."[79] To do this, female heroes typically must marry their crime fighting with good looks as well as more gendered behavior, such as "domesticity, child care nurturance, and empathy" as they fight.[80] In this way, a female superhero's femininity ultimately works to undermine her heroism—at least as long as superheroism is couched in white, male heteronormativity. Gwen's zombiness almost becomes secondary to her identity as a woman in how her heroism is ultimately communicated.

I argued earlier that, in many comic books, the zombie's physical appearance obscures the discursive work that happens when the zombie body becomes a vehicle for heroic justice. In this way, for instance, revenge-from-the-grave zombies could be powerful, but they were also only temporary. As forces for the moral good who acted to stabilize the status quo, they ended up reasserting the supremacy of whiteness, masculinity, and normal-

ity before returning to the grave. Gwen's unruly zombie identity operates in much the same way. Instead of acting as a site of rebellion against those messages that would teach her that feminine worth is located in feminine beauty, or even ideas of "proper" feminine behavior, Gwen strives to conform, to hide the zombie away. Ultimately, she reins in the threat her zombiism poses—even if she's managed to keep it under control for the run of the series—by sacrificing both the "proper" body and the zombie one. The zombie's inherent disruption is shut down.

Thus, while Gwen Dylan operates under a widely different context than the female zombies of the 1940s and 1950s, her femininity is still what comes to define both her zombification and her heroism.[81] While male zombies of the Golden Age might have been made over as rotting corpses, they weren't typically used as a test of a woman's loyalty and love, nor were they threatened with implicit sexual slavery by female zombie masters looking to preserve their youth and looks forever. And while Gwen Dylan is given a way to stave off full zombification, it is shown to be an untenable long-term process. In short, zombficiation afflicts women differently—not in any real sense; it doesn't affect their minds or bodies differently. But socially, the female experience of zombification is radically different from the male experience. On the surface, one might think of zombification as something that comes at all in exactly the same way, but as Gwen Dylan and the female zombies of the Golden Age show, even with zombies, patriarchy is the real monster lying in wait.

PART 3

Powers

CONCLUSION

Blackest Night *and* Marvel Zombies

The Hero as Zombie

In the years between David Kim's appearance in the first run of *Xombi* in the early 1990s and the 2020s, the zombie underwent a renaissance across media. Spurred in part by the success of 2002's *28 Days Later* and Zach Snyder's 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead*, as well as the popularity of the video game series *Resident Evil* (1996–present), the zombie quickly became the "it" monster of the early twenty-first century. In comics, this renaissance manifested in several new zombie characters and zombie-themed series. In *The Goon* (1999–present), the titular character fights a host of supernatural baddies, including the Priest who controls an army of the undead. The Warren Ellis miniseries *Blackgas* (2006–7) is about a gas turning people into aggressive zombie-like cannibals. In *The New Deadwardians* (2012), an eight-issue limited series, zombies are the lower class to the vampires' upper class. Then, of course, there is the juggernaut that is *The Walking Dead* (2003–19), the popular comic book that spawned a multimedia franchise encompassing video games, books, and TV shows, and which follows the fates of humans in a postapocalyptic zombie world, presenting what we might call "stereotypical" cannibal zombies: reanimated corpses driven by their hunger for human flesh.

In fact, throughout most of these titles, zombies conform, at least partially, to "expected" cannibal zombie characteristics: they are reanimated decomposing bodies, often with cannibalistic urges, who may or may not be mindless. Gwen Dylan, of course, the titular zombie of *iZombie*, can stave off full transformation into a more traditional cannibal zombie as long as she eats brains, but the threat that she could turn into a mindless zombie still looms large. In *Star-Spangled War Stories Featuring G.I. Zombie* (2014–15), the zombie in question, Jared Kabe, is much like Zoro, the Purple Zombie, from chapter 1: he is a soldier exploited for the abilities his zombie state gives

him (such as reanimation). Like Zoro, Jared is intelligent, but unlike Zoro, Jared craves human flesh. Cannibal zombies face off against inedible robots in the 2006 series *Zombies vs. Robots*, and cannibal zombies were at the heart of the comic book extension of *Night of the Living Dead* in 2010. During the early twenty-first century, comics writers and artists took up the cannibal zombie blueprint made popular in films and other media and experimented with it, although most of them stayed close enough to the basic tenets of the cannibal zombie genre to make their zombies legible as zombies.

Thus, while throughout the zombie's tenure in comics from the 1930s up through the 1970s and 1980s, the zombie figure could mean anything from a mindless being created via voodoo to a well-muscled hero, by the turn of the twenty-first century the zombie's characterizations in other media—which had moved decisively toward cannibal zombies—were now strongly influencing the character's representation in comics as well. Besides the growing number of new cannibal zombie hordes in comics, this meant that some publishers were keen to incorporate cannibal zombies into preexisting content as well. The Scooby gang faced off with zombies and other creatures in *The Scooby Apocalypse* in 2016, and zombies threatened the Star Trek universe in *Star Trek: Infestation* in 2011. Both Marvel and DC also began to experiment with zombifying some of their most popular superheroes in the early 2000s, and this is the focus of this final chapter—the transformation of heroes into zombies.

In "Only Transform: The Monstrous Bodies of Superheroes," Michael Kobre notes that while superhero bodies are "power fantasies" and "dreams of strength and mastery" they are also highly malleable bodies and that "for all its obvious fetishism of power, the superhero body is even more an emblem of transformation."[1] Echoing Henry Kamerling's assertions about the similarities between zombie bodies and the bodies of superheroes, Kobre argues that "the exaggerated, unstable bodies of virtually all superheroes can also be understood as monstrous."[2] While this may not have been explicit in the Golden Ages, by the Silver Age American comics featured superheroes who felt monstrous in their superheroic forms, such as the Thing or the Hulk, and as the Silver Age transitioned into the Bronze, more and more superheroes expressed frustrations with the plasticity of their superheroic bodies, such that the superheroic body could often be seen as just as much of a curse as a gift. Yet, in the comics that are the focus of this chapter, superheroic bodies are rendered literally monstrous as zombies, so that the shared meta-

phors of transformation and alterity present in both zombies and superheroes are jettisoned for the literal change from superhero into zombie.

Part of the point of these transformations is to allow superheroic bodies the ability to move beyond the generic constraints of the superhero genre to do things that otherwise wouldn't be permittable. In turning conventional superheroes and their villainous counterparts into zombies, not only can writers and artists explore the "darker side" of any particular character, but they can have them do things that they would never do in the canon. It is a carnivalesque inversion of the superhero universe in the oldest sense of the term—a temporary reversal that has no real consequence after the fact.

Aaron Taylor argues that, with comics, "to a certain extent, the medium itself is conducive to unstable corporeal identities."[3] He then describes how "a comic's sequentiality is metonymical, consisting of interrelated panels depicting isolated, *static* moments that must stand in for an entire series of actions. Bodies are always-already literally objectified by these conditions, represented as dynamic statues that are only 'activated' virtually by the imaginative eye of the reader."[4] This idea that the superheroic body is thus always already *reanimated* suggests an even deeper connection to the zombified body than their similar plasticities, but there is also a power dynamic at play here that casts the reader as the controller and the superheroic body as controlled.[5] Yet, ultimately, what Taylor's claims point to is the ways in which the superheroic body—much like the zombified body—is always a bit out of control. It is a body that the person inhabiting it is at least partially alienated from; they exist within the body but are also at its mercy (and to a lesser extent, at the mercy of the reader).

In *The Comic-Stripped American: What Dick Tracy, Blondie, Daddy Warbucks, and Charlie Brown Tell Us about Ourselves*, Arthur Berger suggests, "Americans are split like Superman, alienated from their selves and bitter about the disparity between their dreams and their achievements, between the theory that they are in control of their own lives and the reality of their powerlessness and weakness."[6] What we see in comics series where superheroes are zombified is this sort of alienation explicitly put back onto the bodies of superheroes. While a zombified Thor might retain his powers, in the first series of *Marvel Zombies* he is also a victim of "The Hunger," which drives him to try to find living flesh to eat. As such, Thor and his zombified colleagues are faced with a situation in which they must confront head on what it means to be powerless in one's own body.

In describing the superheroic body's chief features, José Alaniz lists "an utter disavowal of fleshly fragility."[7] Typically, superhero bodies are death-defying not only because of their strength and imperviousness but also because, as comics readers know, death in comics universes is rarely permanent. Zombies, too, act as death-defying bodies, yet in a much less idealized way—they are bodies that personify "fleshly fragility" and embrace it but still don't die. Both kinds of bodies exist to defy death; yet for both zombies and superheroes, this often means invoking and embracing death again and again. Think of how many times Superman has "died" or how many zombies get up and keep on going after losing a limb, and you can see the fun house mirror reflection that each shows to the other.

But for all the ways that superheroes and zombies inhabit similar kinds of bodies, and for the long history of heroic zombies in comics, when preexisting superhero characters are zombified, the zombification reads differently. In chapter 2, I discussed how zombification became part of the sinister powers used by both Solomon Grundy and King Zombie; likewise, part of what makes Zoro, the Purple Zombie, remarkable is that he is unable to die. Yet, for Simon Garth, Gwen Dylan, and David Kim, zombification—while it might grant them some special abilities—is also a curse. It traps these characters into cycles each of them is trying to break, and while zombifying preexisting superheroes might seem similar to what happens to Simon, Gwen, and David, it differs in a key way: these superheroes aren't in danger of their zombification being permanent in any real sense. Their stories of zombification exist in alternate universes or outside of canon, or both. The zombie isn't who they are; it is a costume they try on.

There is a long history of zombification acting as a costume in comics, often used for horrific or comedic effect. In "The Corpse That Came to Dinner" from the July 1953 issue of *Out of the Shadows*, for instance, Dan Parker and his new wife Joyce return from their honeymoon to discover that their friend Henry has died by suicide. Upon hearing the news, Joyce confesses to her new husband that Henry wanted to date her, but she rejected him for Dan.[8] The couple visits Henry's grave and are shocked when his decomposing corpse starts digging its way out of the ground. Dan and Joyce run away, but the zombie Henry follows them home, insisting that they bring him in as a guest (fig. 23).

Playing on typical revenge-from-the-grave conventions, this initially seems to be the story of a man coming back from the dead to punish those who wronged him. But Henry is a terrible houseguest and makes the cou-

Fig. 23. Zombie Henry guilt-trips his living friends into letting him stay with them a while in "The Corpse That Came to Dinner" (Reed Crandall and Mike Peppe, *Out of the Shadows* #9, July 1953).

ple's lives miserable: cracking horrible jokes about eating human flesh and playing drums at all hours of the night. Dan and Joyce become so desperate they turn to a "Voodoo Doctor" who has "a rare voodoo poison that can paralyze a ghost!"[9] The couple buy the poison and put it in Henry's wine. Once he is paralyzed, they take him back to the graveyard to bury him.

But there is a twist! While he looks like a rotting corpse, Henry isn't a revenge-from-the-grave zombie at all. He isn't even a zombie! Rather, this has all been an elaborate practical joke. Henry didn't really die; he simply cooked up a scheme to get back at the girl who dumped him. As the couple fill in his grave with dirt, Henry is paralyzed, but he still tries to plead, "That obituary was a fake! I used make-up . . . Foul clothing . . . But I was really alive all the time . . . Alive!"[10] Henry gets his comeuppance as his "joke" backfires spectacularly.

Henry's story wasn't an isolated incident. Fake zombies popped up occasionally in comics of the pre-Code era: whether it was Japanese soldiers pretending to be zombies during World War II or nefarious land developers trying to frighten locals to get their land cheap, the zombies of the Golden

Age weren't always zombies.[11] The zombie sometimes acted as a convenient costume. In Henry's case, the costume ended up costing him his life, but often these Golden Age zombie costumes resulted in a *Scooby-Doo* type of unmasking, proving that the supernatural was silly and that there was always a rational explanation behind strange happenings. More than this, the unmasking of fake zombies often illustrated that other humans were far more monstrous than anything ever dreamed up in Hollywood.

With enslaved zombies, readers can wrestle with questions of free will and agency; with revenge-from-the-grave zombies, there is a sense in which the sins done against one are worn on the skin. Even with the more heroic zombies I've discussed in this book, there is a sense of real consequences stemming from zombification. Gwen Dylan must sacrifice herself for the good of humanity; David Kim is forced to live forever; Simon Garth is at the will of the Amulet of Damballah. Even Zoro, the Purple Zombie, must contend with being put on the front lines of World War II because he is inherently expendable as a zombie. But the questions that zombies evoke—of death, identity, power, and violence—don't hit quite the same when the zombie in question isn't really a zombie or when the zombification itself is only temporary.

Jeffrey Brown suggests that "beyond the fundamental technical skills required to read a comic book in the literal sense, comics are perhaps best understood as read by fans in the metaphorical sense as a unique genre of fiction closely tied to its medium of presentation."[12] He continues, noting, "The audience negotiates a reading of a specific genre text premised on the preordained, value-laden narrative system utilized across the entire genre."[13] In the case of superhero comics, this means that seasoned readers of comics are familiar with conventions such as alternate universes or stories existing outside of the canon; they can accept that at any given time there may be multiple versions of the Batman story happening, with some being marked as canonical and others not. The concept of "Batman" thus exists as something that is, at once, stable—there is a root, canonical core to Batman that doesn't change—but also highly fluid.

In zombifiying existing characters, zombiism can be tried on in ways that won't affect the character in question in any real sense, while allowing for a bit of experimentation: *What would so-and-so be like if he were a zombie?* Considering the ramifications of this, I will briefly explore two limited series that appeared in the 2000s, DC's *Blackest Night* (2009–10) and the first series of Marvel's *Marvel Zombies* (2005–6). In doing so, I suggest that

what seems to be a playful reimagining of characters as zombies offers up an opportunity to examine the ways in which the zombie state—despite a long history of zombies as heroes and forces for the moral good in comics—changes dramatically when it is superimposed onto the traditional superheroic body.

By zombifying popular characters, creators can reimagine those characters without disrupting the canon; they can let good characters act "bad" or introduce gore and violence to otherwise restrained storylines. Yet, while zombification in these instances becomes a vehicle for counterfactuals and exploration, it is nearly meaningless in other ways; it acts as just another costume the hero can try on and discard at will. What is compelling about this is the ways in which the *zombie-as-costume* thus ends up reflecting on the ways in which superherodom itself also often operates as costume, as something that fits some bodies much more smoothly than others.

HEROES AS ZOMBIES: *BLACKEST NIGHT* (2009–2010)

While it appeared a few years after the first series of *Marvel Zombies*, I want to start with the DC miniseries *Blackest Night*, an eight-issue story revolving around the Green Lantern Corps and their counterparts in the various other corps who are called to fight the Black Hand, who raises the Black Lantern Corps, dead heroes and villains revived to try to destroy all light in the universe. Unlike most of the other zombie comics discussed in this book, *Blackest Night* does not imagine its zombies as heroes; rather, some heroes have become zombified, but, as such, they have been turned into villains. The zombie state itself is associated with evil.[14]

Black Hand is resurrecting the dead to serve his interests, much like a traditional zombie master, yet the zombies are decomposing corpses who look like their cannibal zombie cousins. The zombies of *Blackest Night* can also talk and think, which leads to much of the drama of the series, as the dead confront the living about any number of past events and seem fixated on every bad feeling their living selves ever had. In this way, it is as if zombification itself—or at least this particular form of resurrection at Black Hand's behest—leads to only the most negative of behaviors.

But while, on one hand, *Blackest Night* pits the living against the undead like any number of other contemporary zombie tales, thematically the series also focuses on loss, grief, and guilt in the face of death; it considers why

some superheroes are able to come back from the dead and others aren't. Centering on the emotional ties created between various characters—as only the dead who have strong emotional ties to the living come back—the miniseries allows characters to air their grievances and seek out emotional closure by having those who have died come back to life to hash things out with the living, all without interfering with the canon. As such, readers can experience a bit of closure too, as the emotional baggage tied to character deaths is addressed head-on.

The dead who are revived by the Black Hand are especially adept at stoking the guilt of the living. In the series' first issue, Hawkman is dealing with the guilt and anger he feels after the death of Sue Dibny—who was killed by his best friend Ray's wife, Jean Loring. A reanimated Sue, alongside her husband, Ralph (the Elongated Man), then show up and kill Hawkgirl, taunting Hawkman by insisting that Hawkgirl never loved him, before killing him as well. Later, the reanimated Jean Loring will torment her husband Ray by having him relive Sue Dibny's death. Aqualad and Mera will face an angry reanimated Aquaman, and Ronnie Raymond, who was once Firestorm, reanimates and attacks Jason Rusch, the current Firestorm. In the series, then, past storylines and retired characters must be confronted, and there is an assumption that power does not pass gracefully from one hand to the next. The reanimated heroes and villains are jealous and angry about their fates and the fates of the living. The series thus offers a self-reflexive meditation on the use of multiple reincarnations, recasting, and alternate universes, all common tropes in superhero comics.

By the time *Blackest Night* was released, zombies in comics were long separated from their 1950s revenge-from-the-grave cousins. Yet, in *Blackest Night*, echoes of those zombies remain. The dead are returning to deal with the living—albeit this time, this isn't about victims finding their killers, but about the dead returning to confront their family and friends. Here, the zombies exist not only as reminders of what sacrifices superheroes must make and the ways grief and loss can stir up guilt and self-destructive tendencies, but they also exist to expose the strange rules that seem to govern who lives, who dies, and who is regenerated in superhero comics. At the climactic moment in the series' fifth issue, for instance, Black Hand resurrects a dead Batman in order to create a strong emotional link with several living heroes, taunting them by explaining that all of the times they seemed to defy death, they didn't "escape" it: rather, he allowed their "numerous resurrections" and now they will assist him by dying permanently to feed his power (see fig. 24).[15] As such, the questions of who gets to live and who dies

Fig. 24. Black Hand unleashes the zombified Batman on several living heroes in *Blackest Night* (Geoff Johns, Ivan Reis, Oclair Albert, and Joe Prado, 2010).

permanently seem couched in the relative utility of any given superhero: Black Hand could just as easily be the writer, artist, or editor who makes the final decision on which comics continue and which don't.

Throughout the series, those characters who have died and been reanimated to serve the Black Lantern Corps question why they died permanently while others didn't, wondering at one of the oldest conundrums in superhero comics. These comics are in a peculiar position where death is concerned, given that so many characters are revived and killed numerous times during their careers, so on one hand, *Blackest Night* is examining what finality really means in a sequential medium where many characters are seemingly stuck in the never-ending middle of their stories.[16] Yet, this discussion is undercut by the fact that at the end of the series, all of the characters who were killed in the previous seven issues come back to life. For them, death isn't permanent, and the questions of how comics handle death as a permanent state are once again sidestepped.[17]

The series presented DC with a chance to undo some character deaths—at least temporarily—while testing the potential staying power of some of its "retired" pantheon. Marc DiPaolo observes that *Blackest Night*

> completed Geoff Johns' multi-year project to resurrect from the dead (not as zombies but as "real" people) many of the kind, whimsical superheroes who had been written out of continuity for decades because they were too "cute" or idealistic to be an integral part of the post-*Watchman* DC Universe. Thanks to [*Blackest Night* writer Geoff] Johns, DC Vice President Dan DiDio, Grant Morrison, and several others, many nostalgic faces have returned in the DC Universe roll call of heroes.[18]

At the heart of this storyline, then, is not only an attempt to grapple with notions of comic-book death, but an opportunity to reintroduce underused or forgotten characters, those who may not have fit with the tone of DC's comics in the past, but who might prove lucrative in the future.

The *Blackest Night* storyline could also signal a tonal change for existing characters. As Donald De Line notes in his introduction to the first volume of the *Blackest Night* omnibus, Green Lantern is a character who "has been in existence for some 70 years" and *Blackest Night* "has taken Green Lantern to unprecedented places, breathing new life and energy into the storied mythology."[19] Thus, the series could also experiment with existing characters and storylines while not endangering the canon. Ultimately, it offered several avenues of creative experimentation with very little risk.

Fig. 25. Spider-Man feels guilty while Hank Pym tries to figure out the superheroes' next move in *Marvel Zombies* (Robert Kirkman, Sean Phillips, and Arthur Suydam, 2006).

HEROES AS ZOMBIES: *MARVEL ZOMBIES* (2005–2006)

The first *Marvel Zombie* limited series was released four years prior to *Blackest Night*, and since its release, the metaseries has spawned a number of comic book sequels and tie-ins, as well as television and video game crossovers. The original series was written by *The Walking Dead* creator Robert Kirkman and explored an alternate universe where Marvel's superheroes were infected with a zombie virus.[20] These heroes suffered "The Hunger," making them ravenous for living human flesh. Like *Blackest Night*, *Marvel Zombies* used (and continues to use) zombies to experiment with characters without damaging the canon, yet while *Blackest Night* used its zombie storyline as a means of interrogating the emotional bonds between characters and the permanence (or impermanence) of death in comic books, *Marvel Zombies*—at least in its first iteration—was much more focused on exploring what happens when good guys do bad things.[21]

The initial limited series opens in the aftermath of a viral zombie apocalypse. Most of Marvel's superheroes have been turned into zombies and have done horrible things thanks to "The Hunger" (see fig. 25). They can only think clearly right after they've fed, and their food supply is dwindling. As Iron Man notes, "When this started, there was enough to go around—billions, actually. We swarmed like locusts and picked the globe clean."[22] Now the zombies must try to make a plan to survive, with what little clear-

thinking time they have left. Into all of this comes the character Galactus, who wants to convert the Earth into elemental energy and consume it.

The story is mostly told from the zombies' points of view, something Kirkman addresses in his preface to the omnibus, noting that it was series editor Ralph Macchio's idea: "It had never even occurred to me that we could do that. . . . I thought we'd need someone for the reader to relate to . . . someone to see the world through their eyes . . . it couldn't all just be zombies . . . but actually . . . it could."[23] Of course, this presupposes that zombies aren't sympathetic characters and that readers can't relate to them, but as we've seen throughout this book, there have been a number of relatable zombie comic book characters over the years. Even the revenge-from-the-grave zombies, with their horrible visages, are much more conventionally relatable that the living evildoers they are pursuing. There is thus an assumption at the heart of Kirkman's conception of *Marvel Zombies*, much like the assumption that structures *Blackest Night*, that zombification is an inherently negative thing.

Kirkman also notes that even the parts of the comic that he thought might be too gross for editors were allowed into the series: "Every disgusting thing the zombies did was kept in."[24] For instance, Giant-Man keeps an uninfected Black Panther alive so that he can both study him and slowly dismember and eat him. While Giant-Man may express some guilt over what he does to T'Challa, he continues to do it and guards his "food" carefully, even decapitating his infected wife, Wasp, when she discovers him keeping T'Challa. This gets to the heart of the *Marvel Zombies* franchise: it is a space that allows writers and artists to imagine the very worst possible behavior and allow Marvel's superheroes to do it.

Both *Blackest Night* and *Marvel Zombies* create space for their superheroic characters to explore feelings of powerlessness, both as zombies and as living characters in the face of zombies. Is the living Mera supposed to kill her already dead husband in *Blackest Night*? How will zombified Peter Parker reckon with what "The Hunger" virus made him do (see fig. 25)? In these instances, all the superpowers in the universe can't fix what is wrong. The characters must face their limitations, either those imposed by their emotions or, in the case of the zombies affected by "The Hunger," the limitations of what the virus will allow them to do. Both series thus imagine universes where superpowers become, if not inconsequential to the problems these characters face, then at the very least less helpful than they typically are. And for those who are zombified, they must deal with a loss of control over their bodies that in many ways reads as the inverse of the same sort of loss of

control a character might experience when first faced with new superpowers: confronting friends and family who don't understand what has happened to you while trying to figure out what you are and aren't capable of now.

However, alongside this bodily disenfranchisement, there is a concurrent sense in both series that zombification is less about the loss of free will and more about allowing heroic characters to kill and maim with impunity. In much the same way that critics have noted that *Tales of the Zombie*, while ostensibly a horror comic when it was initially released in the 1970s, was strongly influenced by the Marvel brand's superheroic logics, nearly the reverse could be said to be happening here: *Marvel Zombies* crafts a space where horror logics can be overlaid onto superheroes without damaging the characters permanently. In both *Blackest Night* and *Marvel Zombies*, zombification seems to be a convenient excuse to let some characters behave badly. While there is a subtext that explores how superpowered characters grapple with the loss of control over their own bodies, zombification essentially becomes a costume instead of a fully realized state in both series.

Reinforcing this is the zeal with which both Marvel and DC have promoted their zombfied superheroes. *Marvel Zombies* appeared at the height of the mid-2000s zombie renaissance and took advantage of Kirkman's previous association with zombies via *The Walking Dead*, and it opened lucrative new revenue streams with its subsequent merchandising. Both *Marvel Zombies* and *Blackest Night*, as well as DC's 2019 limited series *DCeased*, have splash pages full of their most popular characters as gruesome zombies, and this imagery has been translated into a number of different forms. Over twenty zombified Marvel superheroes appear as Funko Pop figures; they likewise appear on shirts, posters, and even as video game controller holders. DC has its own zombie-themed Funko Pops characters, as well as key chains and other apparel too. The experimentation offered by these noncanonical limited series and their offshoots, then, is only one part of the formula. Being able to turn established characters into zombies also generates new revenue streams and has the potential to bring in new audiences, who may not be tempted by the superheroic but who are drawn in by zombies.

ILL-FITTING COSTUMES

Throughout this book, I have focused primarily on those zombie comic book characters that are in some way heroic. I did this, first, to illustrate that

zombiism, as it has been imagined throughout its history in American pop culture, isn't antithetical to heroism—at least not in practice. In fact, writing this book has only strengthened my belief that there is a profound disconnect between what most audiences believe zombies are and how zombies often get reproduced across media. In my first book, I wrestled with what, exactly, a zombie is because I kept finding portrayal after portrayal of zombies in American media that didn't fit popular assumptions of the zombie as a being who has lost its free will.[25]

Across media, I found zombies who could talk, reason, fall in love, even lead revolutions. Likewise, there were beautiful zombies and zombies who could escape their fate. It occurred to me that while there may be a popular notion of the zombie as some nightmare form of self without individual identity or control, American writers, filmmakers, and other artists have often tempered this by reintroducing individual identity and desires into the mix.

I began this book claiming that most of the time when the average person thinks of zombies, they think of something abject, something they wouldn't want to become, yet what I have shown in the previous chapters is how this both has and has not been the case with zombie characters in comics. While there have been abject zombies roaming the pages of American comics, there have also been zombie heroes, zombies with goals, and even beautiful zombies. It seems we can accept the unthinking undead masses of *The Walking Dead* or *Night of the Living Dead* because we have zombies like Zoro, the Purple Zombie, and Gwen Dylan, too.

I also focused primarily on heroic zombies in this book because, in examining characters like David Kim and Gwen Dylan, it became clear to me that for many of the zombie heroes populating American comic books, it is their race or gender (or both) that serve to make their heroism ill-fitting, not their zombie identity. There is almost always a price to be paid in becoming a zombie, but if we think about it, the same is true of becoming a superhero—and for these characters, what I found was that their zombification wasn't what troubled their heroism, their race or gender was.

When I set out to write about comic book zombies, I wasn't intending to make some larger claim about superheroes, but time and again what I found was that the parallels between zombies and superheroes were striking. As I mention in the introduction, both superheroes and zombies entered American popular culture within a decade of each other, under very similar circumstances. Both figures are born out of racialized ideas of perfect bodies—

the perfect bodies meant to save others (which are white and male) and the perfect bodies meant to serve others (Black and brown bodies). There was wide experimentation with both concepts in those early years, and nothing was really settled throughout the late 1930s into the 1940s for either the zombie or the superhero. In many ways, with both figures, nothing has ever really been settled.

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison observes, "Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself not as enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny."[26] Morrison's suggestion that Blackness is the defining Other of (American) whiteness offers us a lens through which to consider textual and visual deployments of Blackness that work to reinforce whiteness as the implicit norm. While I do not believe that Blackness and zombiness are deployed in the exact same way in American popular culture, given the zombie's racialized roots, the zombie is one of many figures that has contributed to maintaining whiteness as the American national norm. In its earliest incarnations in film and other media, after all, the zombie was part of cautionary tales about what happened when young, white Americans traveled into Black and brown spaces and were subsequently "contaminated" or threated with contamination via voodoo.

The zombie began its tenure in American pop culture as an Other to American whiteness, and this is crucial for how it has been subsequently deployed in comics, especially when zombies have been made over into heroes. Simply put, the zombie cannot fit cleanly into the superheroic guise because it is inherently *not* what the superhero is. If the superhero, at least in its earliest form in American comic books, is the idealized white male American body, the zombie in its earliest form is, in many ways, the superhero's defining Other: the body that has failed because it is under someone else's control (often a foreign or Black someone, or both). It is the body corrupted; it may even be the body that is dead.

No matter how heroic the zombie may be, these roots haunt it. Zoro, the Purple Zombie, must admit that he was never really a zombie to integrate fully into American culture. The strongman zombies of color were threats, not heroes. The revenge-from-the-grave zombies needed to return to the grave after their vengeance had been claimed. Even Simon Garth, a white man, needed to return to the grave once his family was safe—with

his zombification via voodoo rendering his whiteness corrupt. David Kim and Gwen Dylan already existed outside of the normative heroic. David is Korean American, Gwen is a woman, and for all the good things they do, neither one can inhabit the heroic space fully. Gwen must sacrifice herself, and David is trapped in a never-ending cycle of death, suffering, and reanimation.

In each of these cases, the zombie's heroism starts to break down, and while this certainly points to the ways in which zombification and superherodom are inherently incongruous, it also points to the ways that anyone other than a white, cis male doesn't fit cleanly within the conventional heroic mold. These people may be heroes, but their identities clash with what it means to be superheroic in the traditional sense—and that traditional sense lingers in the superheroic, even today. If anything, what zombie heroes end up showing us is that comics creators can fashion all sorts of superheroes in any shape or form—even zombified heroes—but if these heroes exist outside of a very narrow sense of what a hero is (namely white and male), they become *X*-superheroes. They are *Black* superheroes, *Latinx* superheroes, *female* superheroes, or *zombie* superheroes. There is an implicit norm against which these characters must be judged.

This is what Josef Benson and Doug Singsen note in *Bandits, Misfits, and Superheroes: Whiteness and Its Borderlands in American Comics and Graphic Novels*, when they observe that while there has been progress made in producing superheroes of color of late, "The danger in a superficial reskinning is that the heroes operate on a substratum beneath the real superheroes, which does nothing to decenter or deconstruct the original and in many cases reaffirms white supremacy rather than undermines it."[27] While their focus is on those heroes who have been "reskinned" as different races, what they are getting at—that there must be a significant challenge to the underlying logics of the identity a figure inhabits for it to be anything more than a simple costume worn—is worth noting.

As Benson and Singsen observe, very few comics actually challenge the logics that have defined superherodom for nearly a century, although there are some that do. Nodding to the uncomfortable space in which the character Kamala Khan initially exists, Benson and Singsen say, "Much of the plot of *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* revolves around Khan struggling with her own internalized white racial frame, which invariably associates power with whiteness."[28] While initially Khan takes on the "white version of Ms. Marvel with blonde hair and a tight-fitting suit," she eventually "embraces

her cultural roots and fuses them with her newfound powers," producing a superherodom that is decidedly different from what superherodom traditionally is.[29]

What the zombie characters that I've explored throughout this book have shown is that without engaging the histories and logics that produced "the zombie" in American pop culture, we are left with a free-floating signifier that can mean everything and nothing. As we've seen, zombies can be good; they can be evil. They can be heroes, and more rarely, they can be out-and-out villains, but what many zombie figures show is that no matter how heroic any particular character may be, superherodom is inherently presumed to be white and male unless a great amount of work is done to render it in some other way.

What both *Blackest Night* and *Marvel Zombies* further illustrate is that if we think of zombiism as a costume that can be placed onto different bodies to imagine *what if* or to play with questions of loyalty and love, we take away some of its discursive power. If zombies exist in-between and can challenge the status quo, then adapting them as a mask takes that disruption away: it was all a game or a dream or something that happened in an alternate universe. The zombie ceases to be about colonial racism or fears of wage slavery or even assumptions of ugliness as evil, and it becomes a convenient excuse to do bad things for a limited time.

Yet zombiism isn't alone in this. Superherodom could also be considered a costume; given its roots in eugenics and American frontier mythologies and the fact that the first bodies to wear the superhero "costume" were cis, white, heterosexual American men; however, the fit of this particular costume may not be one size fits all. The superhero costume must be adjusted to fit some bodies—and in moving the "costume" to nonwhite or nonmale bodies, the costume produces different results. These particular characters may become heroes, but they are still, at the end of the day, something else besides—because there is an implicit assumption about what a "hero" really is, just as there is an implicit assumption about zombiness that underlies all its manifestations no matter how far they stray from that assumption.

Thinking of superherodom as a "costume," we see how creators can easily slip bodies of color, women, and others into the superheroic frame—but unless there are significant adjustments made to the underlying logics of superherodom, this remains, at most, an aesthetic change. To make a truly meaningful zombie character, one must grapple with the issues of disenfranchisement and Othering at the zombie's roots. Similarly, to

make a truly meaningful female or person of color superhero, a creator must wrestle with the superhero's roots and confront them: What are the assumptions of bodily perfection, justice, and goodness that underlie the superhero and how are these caught up in racialized and gendered assumptions of national identity?

All of this is to say that by zombifying popular characters, creators can reimagine them without disrupting the canon; they can let good characters act "bad" or introduce gore and violence to storylines, and it doesn't really change anything. Characters can even briefly wrestle with disenfranchisement, but then go back to their canonical positions where they don't have to worry about being the Other—because they exist in spaces where the disenfranchisement is nothing more than a bad dream or something that happens to somebody else. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks notes how easy it is for white people to inhabit Black culture temporarily before moving back into their position as white people, and what we see when certain characters are zombified—or superheroified—is much the same thing. They may temporarily inhabit that space, but it doesn't change their original positionality.[30]

Zombification-as-costume ends up reifying a very limited notion of what the zombie is and can do. As I have shown in *Not Your Average Zombie*, the zombie figure can be quite radical. It can challenge assumptions of power and give voice to otherwise marginalized figures. But when the zombie is reduced to a costume one can wear and take off, it shows us how easily radical potential can be reduced to a reversable aesthetic transformation. Whether you are turning an existing character into a zombie or reimagining a superhero as a woman or person of color, unless you are explicitly dealing with the previous assumptions of what a superhero (or a zombie) is, is anything really changing?

In the introduction, I suggested that the zombie and the superhero were born of similar impulses, most likely spurred on by the need to create fictional responses to real-world fears of a changing American society during the Depression. With both the zombie and the superhero, a figure was created that could help audiences grapple with anxieties over the drastic changes the U.S. had undergone as urbanization, globalization, and immigration, among other things, challenged the values some held dear. If people felt they were being left unprotected in the face of new dangers, then the zombie, with whom they could identify, and the superhero, whom they could hope would provide rescue, might be comforting fictions in times of upheaval.

Both of these figures represent something that shouldn't be—the perfect human body with extraordinary powers or the dead body returned to life—and even if one version of this can be read as ideal, it is still strange. But it is in this strangeness—this abject liminality—that either of these figures, the zombie or the superhero, might be progressive, might be able to push back against assumptions of what is properly "human" or "heroic," or even "American." Yet, in sending revenge-from-the-grave zombies back to their graves, in revealing Zoro, the Purple Zombie, to be no zombie at all, or in having Gwen Dylan choose her own eradication, that rebellious potential is shut down.

In much the same way, in having zombification be a temporary costume consigned to an alternate universe, the zombie identity's ability to challenge the status quo likewise fades. However, it does show us that to challenge the underlying assumptions of whiteness and masculinity written into the superhero's roots, something like zombification is necessary. Embracing the in-between and that which troubles borders and makes things strange is the best way to confront the assumptions built into figures like the superhero.

Gwen Dylan begins and ends *iZombie* by telling the reader that she isn't the girl she used to be, and while I may balk at the gendered implications of her sacrifice at the end of the series, her mantra sticks with me because it has the potential to mean so much more than that she has become a zombie. It can also mean that Gwen realizes she has been given an opportunity to challenge who she was in order to become something new, and while part of that something new is her zombie identity, part of it is her new heroic identity as well.

Perhaps for zombies or for superheroes, the best way forward is not to be who you used to be, but to embrace the in-between spaces where you are both/and *and* neither/nor. For characters like Gwen, it is pointless to quibble about the ways in which her new identity is informed by her zombiism or her heroism, as they both have the ability to transform a person into something similar and entirely new. Gwen Dylan is a hero *and* a zombie, or maybe she is a hero *because* she is a zombie. Either way, she certainly isn't the girl she used to be.

Notes

Introduction

1. "I am a Zombie!" *Adventures into the Unknown* #50 (Best Syndicated Features, Dec. 1953).

2. "I am a Zombie!"

3. Michael Goodrum and Philip Smith also note that experimentation in comics could have been because comics of the era "also faced fewer risks than film because the financial stakes were lower" (Michael Goodrum and Philip Smith, *Printing Terror: American Horror Comics as Cold War Commentary and Critique* [Manchester University Press, 2021], 15).

4. Julian C. Chambliss and William L. Svitavsky, "The Origin of the Superhero: Culture, Race, and Identity in US Popular Culture, 1890–1940," in *Ages of Heroes, Eras of Men: Superheroes and the American Experience*, ed. Julian C. Chambliss, William L. Svitavsky, and Thomas Donaldson (Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 7.

5. Rob Goulart, *Cheap Thrills: An Informal History of the Pulp Magazines* (Arlington House, 1972), 21.

6. Goulart, *Cheap Thrills*, 11–13.

7. M. Thomas Inge, "Origins of Early Comics and Proto-Comics," in *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, ed. Frank Bramlett, Roy T. Cook, and Aaron Meskin (Routledge, 2017), 13.

8. Jess Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger: The 4,000-Year History of the Superhero* (ABC-CLIO, 2017), 211. There was also crossover between the pulps and radio (and later comics and radio), as well as film, meaning that many of these early pulp heroes and comics superheroes existed from the very beginning as multimedia figures.

9. Chambliss and Svitavsky, "Origin of the Superhero," 14.

10. Gary Hoppenstand, "Pulp Vigilante Heroes, the Moral Majority, and the Apocalypse," in *The Hero in Transition*, ed. Ray B. Browne and Marshall W. Fishwick (Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), 144.

11. Scott Jeffery, *The Posthuman Body in Superhero Comics: Human, Superhuman, Transhuman, Post/Human* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 73.

12. Jeffrey, *Posthuman Body in Superhero Comics*, 74.

13. Gerard Jones, "Men of Tomorrow," in *The Superhero Reader*, ed. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester (University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 18.

14. Jones, "Men of Tomorrow," 21.

15. Chambliss and Svitavsky, "Origin of the Superhero," 15.

16. Chambliss and Svitavsky, "Origin of the Superhero," 16.

17. Chambliss and Svitavsky, "Origin of the Superhero," 16.

18. Ian Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture 1890–1945* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 133.

19. See, for instance, Nevins, *Evolution of the Costumed Avenger*, who details several different definitions of the superhero, including Coogan's, before providing a "cluster of elements" to define the superhero (4–9).

20. As Coogan and others are quick to note, there are, naturally, superheroes who don't display all three of these elements and heroes from other genres who do, but as a baseline working definition, many scholars follow the mission-powers-identity formula. See Peter Coogan, "The Definition of the Superhero," in *Superheroes: From Hercules to Superman*, ed. Wendy Haslem, Angela Ndallanis, and C. G. Mackie (New Academia Publishing, 2007), 28.

21. Coogan, "Definition of the Superhero," 24.

22. Coogan, "Definition of the Superhero," 25.

23. Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl, *Comic Book Crime: Truth, Justice, and The American Way* (NYU Press, 2013), 3.

24. Phillips and Strobl, *Comic Book Crime*, 8. See also Julian C. Chambliss, William L. Svitavsky, and Thomas Donaldson, introduction, in *Ages of Heroes, Eras of Men: Superheroes and the American Experience*, ed. Julian C. Chambliss, William L. Svitavsky, and Thomas Donaldson (Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 3.

25. There are many variations on the spelling of "zombie." While *zombie* might be the most familiar to American audiences, in scholarly literature about Haitian Vodou, one can see it spelled many ways, including *zombi*. Additionally, while in the U.S., "voodoo" has been the popular spelling of the religion, there are also several different variations on it. Throughout this book, I will use *Vodou* when speaking directly about the religion and will use *voodoo* when speaking about the pop culture version of it. I will also defer to the spellings used in other sources when necessary.

26. Seabrook's book also contained illustrations drawn by Alexander King, which may have influenced other visual depictions of the zombie as well. In ". . . Croyance, Leading the Nine Dead Men and Women," King drew nine Black zombies, who are indistinguishable from each other, dressed all in black with blank eyes, following a Black woman, ostensibly Croyance. Death—in the form of a skeletal figure with a wide-brimmed hat, follows in the distance (*The Magic Island* by William Seabrook [Harcourt Brace and Co., 1929], facing p. 82). In "No One Dared to Stop Them, for They Were Corpses Walking in the Sunlight," King drew five zombies, which look similar to the zombies from the other illustration; however, these zombies are

a bit more individualized as they walk across the image escorted by the same death figure riding a goat (*The Magic Island* by William Seabrook [Harcourt Brace and Co., 1929], facing p. 98). In all of King's illustrations, Black bodies have exaggerated, nearly caricatured, features, and the zombies are no exception. The only difference between them and the living people are that the zombies do not have pupils in their eyes or clear facial expressions.

27. I have previously called these zombies *slave-style* zombies to draw a clear connection to their colonial roots, but I will use the term *enslaved* throughout this book.

28. Chera Kee, *Not Your Average Zombie: Rehumanizing the Undead from Voodoo to Zombie Walks* (University of Texas Press, 2017), 8.

29. See Kee, *Not Your Average Zombie*, for a much longer discussion of the ways the zombie carries its Haitian roots with it.

30. Roger Luckhurst, *Zombies: A Cultural History* (Reaktion Books, 2015), 64.

31. Lawrence Watt-Evans, "The Other Guys: A Gargoyle's-Eye View of the Non-EC Horror Comics of the 1950s," *Alter Ego* 3, no. 97 (Oct. 2010), 5.

32. Goulart, *Cheap Thrills*, 180.

33. David Annwn Jones, "Horror Comics," in *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, ed. Frank Bramlett, Roy T. Cook, and Aaron Meskin (Routledge, 2017), 176. Jones notes that "Dick Briefer's *New Adventures of Frankenstein* (1940) appearing in issue 7 of Prize Comics (1940) and, running for 45 issues, is often cited as the earliest fully-fledged horror comics series and Gilberton Publications' *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1943) as the first story that occupied the whole of a comic book" (176). Yet Watt-Evans notes that when the Frankenstein's Creature character was reintroduced in 1945's *Frankenstein Comics*, "The monster was turned into a good guy, and became a virtual super-hero, fighting the Nazis" (5). Thus, much like the zombie, the Frankenstein character wasn't necessarily generically fixed in comics during the 1940s.

34. N. Labarre, *Understanding Genres in Comics*, Palgrave Studies in Comics and Graphic Novels (Palgrave, 2020), 48–50.

35. Labarre, *Understanding Genres in Comics*, 46.

36. Watt-Evans, "The Other Guys," 5–7.

37. Horror stories from 1950–54 tended to be more visceral and gorier than anything that preceded them in the 1940s. Horror of this time tended to be cynical, and it eschewed common ideas of who could be evil by including authority figures in the mix. Entertaining Comics (EC), which is probably the best known of the comics publishers of the early 1950s, was known for dark humor and twist endings—and several other publishers tried to copy their style (to varying degrees of success). All of this is to say that horror of the 1950s and the horror elements found in 1940s comics were different tonally as well as being transmitted differently (in action/adventure titles in the 1940s versus in horror titles in the 1950s).

38. The Golden Age of comic books is roughly the era up until the implementa-

tion of the Comics Code Authority's Code in 1955. This is an era marked by a lack of institutional censorship and a proliferation of different comic book publishers. This was followed by the Silver Age in the 1960s, where we see the introduction of a number of popular superheroes and superhero groups, including the X-Men, and the Bronze Age in the 1970s, an era that happens in the wake of revisions to the Comics Code during which comics move from newsstands to dedicated comic book stores.

39. Avon published *Eerie Comics* #1 in 1947, which many identify as the first true horror comic, and *Adventures into the Unknown* was first published in fall 1948.

40. Labarre, *Understanding Genres in Comics*, 48.

41. Alex Boon, "Captain Nelson Cole of the Solar Force," *Planet Comics* #1 (Love Romances Publishing Co., Jan. 1940).

42. Labarre, *Understanding Genres in Comics*, 47.

43. Zombie masters were almost always male (see Kee, *Not Your Average Zombie*).

44. Chera Kee, "Beware the Zuvembies: Comics, Censorship, and the Ubiquity of *Not-Quite* Zombies," in *Theorizing the Contemporary Zombie: Contextual Pasts, Presents, and Futures*, ed. Scott Hamilton and Conor Heffernan (University of Wales Press, 2022), 179–96.

45. Nicky Wright, *The Classic Era of American Comics* (Contemporary Books, 2000), 144.

46. Kee, "Beware the Zuvembies."

47. William Schoell, *The Horror Comics: Fiends, Freaks and Fantastic Creatures, 1940s-1980s* (McFarland, 2014), loc. 59.

48. Philip Smith and Michael Goodrum, "'Corpses . . . Coast to Coast!' Trauma, Gender, and Race in 1950s Horror Comics," *Literature Compass* 14, no. 9 (2017): 1.

49. Smith and Goodrum, "'Corpses . . . Coast to Coast!,'" 1.

50. Phillips and Strobl, *Comic Book Crime*, 24.

51. Smith and Goodrum, "'Corpses . . . Coast to Coast!,'" 11.

52. For a longer discussion of this, please see Kee, "Beware the Zuvembies."

53. For more on the important role distributors and sellers played in the changes to comic books in the 1950s, see Shawna Kidman, *Comic Books Incorporated: How the Business of Comics Became the Business of Hollywood* (University of California Press, 2019).

54. The Code only applied to standard-sized four-color comics rather than black-and-white magazine-sized titles, which were ostensibly for a more mature audience.

55. Underground horror titles included *Insect Fear* in 1970; *Slow Death*, which was ran intermittently from 1970 to 1992; and *Skull*, which was published over six issues from 1970 to 1972. *Zap Comix* artist Robert Williams also published a collection of his art under the title *Zombie Mystery Paintings* in 1986, and while some of the paintings do include decomposing corpses, many do not. In a 1972 edition of

The Monster Times, Steve Jenkins wrote "Zombies in the Comix!," which is more of an overview of pre-Code and reprinted comics of the 1960s than it is a discussion of the undead in comix (see Steve Jenkins, "Zombies in the Comix!," *The Monster Times* 1, #6 [April 12, 1972], 6–9).

56. Robert Michael (Bobb) Cotter, *The Great Monster Magazines: A Critical Study of the Black and White Publications of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s* (McFarland, 2008), 32–33.

57. Kee, "Beware the Zuvembies." Marvel applied for a trademark for "zombie" in comic book titles when this book first appeared, but by the time the trademark was approved in 1975, the series was nearly over. However, Marvel technically held the trademark until 1996. They later applied for (and were granted) the trademark for "Marvel Zombies" in 2006. See Brian Cronin, "Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed #132," *CBR.com* (Dec. 2007): https://www.cbr.com/comic-book-urban-legends-revealed-132/

58. Chera Kee, "No Grave Can Hold Them: *Night of the Living Dead* and the Rise and Rebirth of Zombies in Comics," in *Beyond the Living Dead: Essays on the Romero Legacy*, ed. Bruce Peabody and Gloria Pastorino, Contributions to Zombie Studies series (McFarland, 2021), 32–53.

59. It was originally published by Arrow Comics, then Caliber Comics, and then Image Comics/IDW. Its initial run lasted until 1992, and it has since been released sporadically as a limited series or one-offs.

60. Kee, *Not Your Average Zombie*.

61. Peter Dendle, "The Zombie as Barometer of Cultural Anxiety," in *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, ed. Niall Scott (Rodopi, 2007), 45–57.

62. Jeffrey K. Johnson, *Super-History: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society, 1938 to the Present* (McFarland, 2012), 2.

63. Granted, the zombi existed in Haitian belief systems well before 1929, but as a pop culture creature, the "zombie" really didn't exist until 1929 and was a thoroughly American creation.

64. Johnson, *Super-History*, 13.

65. Chambliss and Svitavsky, "Origin of the Superhero," 7.

66. Dendle, "Zombie as Barometer of Cultural Anxiety," 46.

67. The zombie myth could work both on those who might believe that there was some truth to the tales of the undead wandering the Haitian countryside and those who didn't. For believers, those who would zombify their own people certainly couldn't be as civilized as the rest of the world, and for nonbelievers, those who believed in zombification were clearly superstitious fools.

68. Henry Kamerling, "Are Zombies Superheroes?," in *Superhero Bodies: Identity, Materiality, Transformation*, ed. Wendy Haslem, Elizabeth MacFarlane, and Sarah Richardson (Routledge, 2018), 117. Kamerling's focus is on post-1970 zombies—

those shaped by George A. Romero's 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*—as opposed to earlier zombies directly shaped by folktales and stories about Haitian Vodou.

69. Kamerling, "Are Zombies Superheroes?," 117–18.

70. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1993).

71. Creed, *Monstrous Feminine*, 11.

72. Chera Kee, "Good Girls Don't Date Dead Boys: Toying with Miscegenation in Zombie Films," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 42, no. 4: 176–85.

73. Kee, *Not Your Average Zombie*, 15.

74. Kee, *Not Your Average Zombie*, 15.

75. June Tarpé Mills, who went by the pen name Tarpé Mills, was a trailblazing female comics creator in the 1940s and 1950s.

76. Code refers to the Comics Code, which was a censoring tool that went into effect in 1955. While pre-Code could, technically, refer to any comics published before 1955, it is generally used to talk about comics published between 1950 and 1954.

Chapter 1

1. When comics artists moved zombies into urban settings in Golden Age comics, they sometimes replaced the "native" zombies of color from foreign settings with homeless men. For instance, see Joe Simon, "The Fantastic Thriller of the Walking Corpses," *Daring Mystery Comics* #1 (Timely Publications, Jan. 1940) or "Recruits for the Legion of the Undead," *The Beyond* #11 (Unity Publishing Corp., May 1952). The use of homeless men as zombies speaks to the ways in which zombification in fiction has often been linked to those bodies most likely to be dehumanized in real life.

2. Exceptions to this include the zombies in *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) and *I Eat Your Skin* (1964), which are both variations on bug-eyed zombies (zombies with eyes that look like ping-pong balls).

3. This may speak to the ways in which comics artists enjoyed a great deal of freedom in crafting their zombie characters. Without the physical limitations of makeup and special effects, not to mention working with real human bodies in film, comic book artists could imagine zombie bodies in any number of ways.

4. In several comics from the 1940s and 1950s, the very definition of "zombie" seemed up for debate, with zombies that sometimes acted or looked more like ghosts, Frankenstein's creature, or even mummies. Yet, in each of these cases, zombiism was still connected to monstrosity or inhumanity.

5. Leo Bachle, "The Scarlet Zombie," *Active Comics* #8 (Bell Features and Publishing Company, Nov. 1942).

6. "The Undead," *Uncle Sam Quarterly* #7 (Comic Magazines, Inc., Summer 1943), 19–31.

7. Jerry Siegel (w.) and Joe Shuster (a.) (credited as Leger and Reuths), "Dr. Occult, the Ghost Detective," *More Fun Comics* 2, #18 (Nicholson Publishing Co., Feb. 1937).

8. "Green and Mean," *TV Tropes*, https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/GreenAndMean

9. Kee, "Beware the Zuvembies," 186.

10. Michael Kobre, "Only Transform: The Monstrous Bodies of Superheroes," in *Superhero Bodies: Identity, Materiality, Transformation*, ed. Wendy Haslem, Elizabeth MacFarlane, and Sarah Richardson (Routledge, 2018), 149.

11. Jeffery, *Posthuman Body in Superhero Comics*, 74.

12. Jeffrey, *Posthuman Body in Superhero Comics*, 75.

13. The exception to this was that most zombie masters were white men. However, they were white men who were often coded as foreign through their accents or allegiances (see Kee, *Not Your Average Zombie*).

14. Siegel and Shuster, "Dr. Occult, the Ghost Detective," #20.

15. Siegel and Shuster, "Dr. Occult, the Ghost Detective," #20.

16. Siegel and Shuster, "Dr. Occult, the Ghost Detective," #20.

17. S. Cooper and Joe Blair, "Mr. Justice," *Jackpot Comics* #1 (M.L.J. Magazines, Inc., Sept. 1941).

18. For instance, the Black zombies of *Ouanga* (1935) or the lone Black zombie of *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943).

19. Kee, "Beware the Zuvembies."

20. A name most likely borrowed from William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* (1929) where Seabrook discusses his interactions with a Vodou priestess named Celie.

21. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th ed. (Continuum, 2001), 13.

22. In his book-length condemnation of comic books that in part propelled comics publishers to implement the Comics Code, Fredric Wertham calls out the racism in comics as one of the reasons he's opposed to them. He particularly notes that "in many comic books dark-skinned people are depicted in rapelike situations with white girls," later adding that this "is probably one of the most sinister methods of suggesting that races are fundamentally different with regard to moral values" (Fredric Wertham, M.D., *Seduction of the Innocent* [Rinehart & Company, 1954], 104–5).

23. While the visuals of this story work to dehumanize the Black zombie, the story itself concerns Buck and Corny working with a voodoo priest to return a stolen relic, seemingly offering up a token nod of respect to Black culture while simultaneously trading in racist tropes (see "Buck Farrel," *Crown Comics* #6 [Golfing, Inc., Summer 1946]).

24. Jeffrey Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 170.

25. Brown, *Black Superheroes*, 178.

26. Allison Rudnick, "Humor and Horror: Printed Propaganda during World War I," *Now at the Met* blog (Dec. 28, 2017), https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2017/printed-propaganda-world-war-i. The use of monkey and ape imagery was popular in propaganda posters during both the First World War and the Second World War. There was the famous "Destroy This Mad Brute" poster by Harry R. Hopps from 1917 that shows a large ape, representing Germany, holding a white woman and carrying a bloodied club. There was also a practice during the Second World War of calling Japanese soldiers apes, and the dehumanization of enemy combatants through comparisons to animals more generally isn't uncommon during wartime.

27. In a 1940 Nelson Cole of the Solar Force story in *Planet Comics*, a character calls zombies "monkeys." However, the zombies in question are green-clad humanoid aliens that behave like mindless robots, so this doesn't seem to be a comment on their physical appearance (Alex Boon, "Captain Nelson Cole of the Solar Force," *Planet Comics* #1 [Love Romances Publishing Co., Jan. 1940]).

28. James Snead, *White Screens/Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*, ed. Colin MacCabe and Cornel West (Routledge, 1994), 20.

29. Ed Guerrero, "The Black Man on Our Screens and the Empty Space in Representation," *Callaloo* 18, no. 2 (1995): 395.

30. Kee, "Good Girls Don't Date Dead Boys."

31. Rudy Palais, "The Deacon and Mickey," *Catman Comics* #29 (Continental Magazines, Aug. 1945).

32. Harry Douglas (credited as Harry/Douglas), "The Blue Blaze," *Mystic Comics* #1 (Timely Publications, March 1940).

33. Keeping in mind that most zombies in films of the 1930s through the 1950s were not reanimated dead bodies but were people who had been made to *appear* dead so they could later be revived and rescued, his links to zombiism are actually quite strong.

34. Simon, "Fantastic Thriller of the Walking Corpses."

35. The origin of Fiery Mask also speaks to the ways in which artists and writers were stretching zombie-making in the 1930s and 1940s to fit the generic conventions of superhero and action/adventure stories. Not only were they moving zombies into urban environments as criminal henchmen, but the same sorts of apparatuses used to create zombies could also be the means of superhero creation. This makes clear the similar underlying premises of both superhero and zombie creation at the time: an outside force takes over a person's body—to turn them into a superhero in some instances and a zombie in others (see Simon, "Fantastic Thriller of the Walking Corpses").

36. The Purple Zombie is remarkably similar to June Tarpé Mills's other creation, the Blue Zombie, who appears in "Tarpé Mills Presents Fantastic Feature Films," in *Target Comics* #6 in 1940. The premise of that story was that it was the recreation of a film starring Orson Black, *The Man of a Thousand Faces*, in a storyline pitting the Bolshemanians against the Corelians and featuring "brilliant scientist" Igor Zamoisky, who figures out a way to bring his friend Nicholas Samovski back from the dead. The procedure turns Samovski's skin blue, but more worrying to Zamoisky is that his friend has woken up calling him *master*. As Zamoisky reflects, "Great Heavens! What have I done? He is without a memory . . . without a will of his own . . . without an imagination! I have created a . . . Zombie!!" Zamoisky rallies, realizing that he can now create an army to face the evil Boleshemanians, but he promises to let the zombies go back to their rest once Corelia wins its war. The story ends with Zamoisky's vow that he will keep Samovski alive until he can find a way to restore his friend to his former free-willed self. Beyond the basic premise—a scientist creating a means for bringing back the dead and a strongman zombie with strange skin pigmentation—the storylines of the Purple Zombie and the Blue Zombie differ significantly. The Blue Zombie story appeared in July 1940 and the Purple Zombie began its run in August of that same year (see Tarpé Mills, "Tarpé Mills Presents Fantastic Feature Films," *Target Comics* #6 [Novelty Press, Inc., July 1940]).

37. Mills deliberately picked what she felt was an ambiguous pen name (Tarpé Mills) when she entered comics and was once quoted as saying, "'It would have been a major letdown to the kids if they found out that the author of such virile and awesome characters was a gal" (Trina Robbins, *The Great Women Cartoonists* [Watson-Guptill Publications, 2001], 62).

38. Tarpé Mills, "The Purple Zombie," *Reg'lar Fellers Heroic Comics* #1 (Eastern Color Printing Company, Aug. 1940).

39. While the purple hue is remarked upon, Zoro's color looks almost exactly as it has throughout the first and second issues—it is momentarily darkened in two panels before resuming its original hue (which is puce).

40. Tarpé Mills, "The Purple Zombie," *Reg'lar Fellers Heroic Comics* #2 (Eastern Color Printing Company, Oct. 1940).

41. Mills, "The Purple Zombie," #2.

42. Mills, "The Purple Zombie," #1.

43. Mills, "The Purple Zombie," #1.

44. Mills, "The Purple Zombie," #2.

45. Mills, "The Purple Zombie," #2.

46. Mills, "The Purple Zombie," #2.

47. Mills, "The Purple Zombie," #2.

48. Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 29.

49. Robert G. Weiner, Robert Moses Peaslee, and Duncan Prettyman, "Introduction: It's All about the Villain!," in *The Supervillain Reader*, ed. Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner (University Press of Mississippi, 2020), xxv.

50. While it is outside the purview of this chapter, if we consider Zoro in light of how he represents masculinity, we might also be able to read some of the frustrations and feelings of powerlessness of the previous decade (the Great Depression and the years leading up to World War II) in Zoro—he is angry and doesn't have a proper outlet to channel his frustrations, so he goes overboard in killing Malinsky and his backers. He is the brawn, but he needs Kim Hale, the brains, to rein him back in. But Hale isn't really the masculine ideal either—he's all brain and no bawn, and as the story continues, he hesitates where Zoro doesn't, and in fact becomes the "damsel in distress" in need of rescuing during their time travel escapades. Zoro's trajectory could thus also be read as one toward an ideal masculinity that blends both brain and brawn.

51. Tarpé Mills, "The Purple Zombie," *Reg'lar Fellers Heroic Comics* #5 (Eastern Color Printing Company, March 1941). Chico's narrative trajectory is very similar to Zoro's. At first, he seems to be a villain—and in fact is ready to destroy Dr. Hale—until Hale saves his life. Zoro was ready to kill Chico for attempting to harm Hale, but Hale stops him. It is right after this that Chico and Zoro will team up to go fight in the war, which is the first step in redemption for them both.

52. Allan W. Austin and Patrick L. Hamilton, *All New, All Different? A History of Race and the American Superhero* (University of Texas Press, 2019), 20.

53. Mills, "The Purple Zombie," #1.

54. Tarpé Mills, "The Purple Zombie," *Reg'lar Fellers Heroic Comics* #7 (Eastern Color Printing Company, July 1941).

55. Mills, "The Purple Zombie," #7.

56. Or in the case of the French Revolution, Hale is mistaken for an aristocrat and Zoro's ability to blend in with the revolutionaries gives him the means to rescue his friend from execution.

57. Tarpé Mills, "The Purple Zombie," *Reg'lar Fellers Heroic Comics* #12 (Eastern Color Printing Company, May 1942).

58. Austin and Hamilton, *All New, All Different?*, 20.

59. Austin and Hamilton, *All New, All Different?*, 25.

60. The servant in question is faithful to their white master to a fault, with their service sometimes going to the extreme of self-sacrifice to keep the white master safe.

61. Kamerling, "Are Zombies Superheroes?," 117.

62. Kamerling, "Are Zombies Superheroes?," 117.

63. Elizabeth MacFarlane, Sarah Richardson, and Wendy Haslem, "Introducing the Superhero Body," in *Superhero Bodies: Identity, Materiality, Transformation*, ed. Wendy Haslem, Elizabeth MacFarlane, and Sarah Richardson (Routledge, 2018), 1.

64. Kamerling, "Are Zombies Superheroes?," 121.

65. Darieck Scott, *Keeping It Unreal: Black Queer Fantasy and Superhero Comics* (NYU Press, 2022), 45.

Chapter 2

1. Stephen Banes, "A Word of Warning about Zombies," in *The Chilling Archives of Horror Comics! Zombies*, ed. Craig Yoe and Steven Banes (IDW, 2012), 7, 9.

2. "Dial Z for Zombie!" *Marvel Tales* #114 (Marvel Comics, May 1953). A houngan, or oungan, is a Vodou priest.

3. Gregory Page, *Phantom Lady* #15 (Fox Feature Syndicate, Dec. 1947), 6–7.

4. "Corpses . . . Coast to Coast," *Voodoo* #14 (Four Star Publications, March–April 1954).

5. Of course, cannibal zombies intrinsically pose more of a threat to non-zombies, and they can also be weaponized much like enslaved zombies were. In Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* (Image, 2003–19), for instance, the character Michonne Hawthorne is initially introduced leading two armless zombies with her, using them as protection and as a way to hide herself from other walkers. Up until relatively recently in *The Goon* (1999–present), the Goon's chief nemesis, the Priest, controlled an army of intelligent undead zombies that acted as his muscle. Thus, even with cannibal zombies, forms of the zombie master still exist.

6. Page, *Phantom Lady* #15, 7.

7. Kee, "Beware the Zuvembies," 183.

8. "Beasts of the Bog," *Voodoo* #4 (Four Star Publications, Nov. 1952).

9. Qiana Whitted, *EC Comics: Race Shock & Social Protest* (Rutgers University Press, 2019), 83.

10. Bill Gaines, interview by Dwight Decker and Gary Groth (May 1983), in *The Comics Journal Library: The EC Artists: Part 2*, ed. Michael Dean (Fantagraphics Books, 2016), 19.

11. Jack Fennell, "Comics as Legal Ideologies: The Aesthetics of Supervillainy," *Law Text Culture* 16 (2012): 311–12.

12. Mikhail Lyubanksy, "Seven Roads to Justice for Superheroes and Humans," in *Our Superheroes Ourselves*, ed. Robin S. Rosenberg (Oxford University Press, 2013), 178.

13. Lyubanksy, "Seven Roads to Justice for Superheroes and Humans," 179–80.

14. David A. Pizarro and Roy Baumeister, "Superhero Comics as Moral Pornography," in *Our Superheroes Ourselves*, ed. Robin S. Rosenberg (Oxford University Press, 2013), 26.

15. "I Was a Zombie," *The Thing* #4 (Outstanding Comics, Inc., Aug. 1952), 8.

16. Comics Magazine Association of America, "The Comics Code of 1954," *Comic Book Legal Defense Fund*, http://cbldf.org/the-comics-code-of-1954/

17. Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origins of a Genre* (Monkey Brain Books, 2005), 110.

18. Fennell, "Comics as Legal Ideologies," 308.

19. José Alaniz, "Disability and the Silver-Age Supervillain," in *The Supervillain Reader*, ed. Robert Moses-Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner (University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 251.

20. Fennell, "Comics as Legal Ideologies," 306.

21. Fennell, "Comics as Legal Ideologies," 307.

22. Kee, "No Grave Can Hold Them," 36.

23. While outside of the purview of my work here, one could also make the case that the increasing number of physically disfigured zombies was logical in a post–World War II world as those comics creators who served during the war most likely encountered dead, dying, and disfigured bodies. Coverage of the liberation of Nazi concentration camps would also provide images of skeletal bodies that comics creators could use in imagining their zombies.

24. Kathrin Bower, "Holocaust Avengers: From 'The Master Race' to Magneto," *International Journal of Comic Art* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 182.

25. Kee, "Beware the Zuvembies," 183.

26. Bower, "Holocaust Avengers," 184.

27. Pizarro and Baumeister, "Superhero Comics as Moral Pornography," 19–20.

28. "Canyon of the Living Dead," *The Hand of Fate* #8 (Humor Publications, Inc., Dec. 1951).

29. "Beware the Undead!" *Diary of Horror* #1 (Avon Periodicals, 1952).

30. "The Slithering Horror of Skontong Swamp," *This Magazine Is Haunted* #5 (Fawcett Publications, Inc., June 1952).

31. Grundy is revived in Alfred Bester (w.), Paul Reinman (p.), and Marty Nodell (i.), "And Then There Was One," *Comic Cavalcade* #13 (Gainlee Publishing Co., Dec. 1945); readers would eventually learn that the reason the Green Lantern couldn't best Grundy while wearing the ring is that it was originally Grundy's ring, and he is thus immune to it.

32. Alfred Bester (w.) and Paul Reinman (a.), "Fighters Never Quit," *All-American Comics* #61 (J.R. Publishing Co., Oct. 1944).

33. Bester and Reinman, "Fighters Never Quit."

34. Rick Veitch (w. and a.), "Two-Fisted Zombies," *All New Underground Comix* #5 (Veitch Bros. Enterprises, 1973).

35. There is also a zombie's question at the very end of the story, which starts with the statement "The night has come." This seems to be a reference to the 1968 film.

36. Kee, *Not Your Average Zombie*, 86.

37. Kee, *Not Your Average Zombie*, 86.

Chapter 3

1. *Revolt of the Zombies*, directed by Victor Halperin (Victor and Edward Halperin Productions, 1936).

2. Simon Garth has subsequently made appearances across a number of Marvel titles, and *Xombi* was revived in 2011 for six issues.

3. Jeffery, *Posthuman Body in Superhero Comics*, 72–74; 77.

4. Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (NYU Press, 2016), 7.

5. Fawaz, *New Mutants*, 8.

6. Kamerling, "Are Zombies Superheroes?," 117.

7. Kobre, "Only Transform," 156.

8. Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (Rutgers University Press, 2000), loc. 340.

9. Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, loc. 332.

10. Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, loc. 342.

11. Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, loc. 362.

12. Rob Lendrum, "The Super Black Macho, One Baaad Mutha: Black Superhero Masculinity in 1970s Mainstream Comic Books," *Extrapolation* 46, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 365.

13. Kee, "No Grave Can Hold Them," 32–53.

14. Magazine-sized titles were ostensibly for adults and were therefore not under the purview of the Code.

15. Damballah references a real-world Vodou loa (spirit intermediary).

16. Kee, "Beware the Zuvembies," 190.

17. Mike Howlett, *The Weird World of Eerie Publications: Comic Gore That Warped Millions of Young Minds!* (Feral House, 2010), 95.

18. Steve Gerber (w.) and Pablo Marcos (a.), "When the Gods Crave Flesh," *Tales of the Zombie* #3 (Marvel, Jan. 1974), 5.

19. Gerber and Marcos, "When the Gods," 5.

20. Qtd. in Charlie Jane Anders, "One of the Best Comic Books of the 1990s Is Coming Back at Last," *Gizmodo* (Oct. 15, 2010). https://gizmodo.com/one-of-the-best-comic-books-of-the-1990s-is-coming-back-5664484

21. John Rozum (w.) and J. J. Birch (a.), "Hidden Cities Chapter 1: Prophecies," *Xombi* #17 (Milestone, Oct. 1995).

22. John Rozum (w.) and J. J. Birch (a.), "Hidden Cities Chapter 2: The Serpent's Tale," *Xombi* #18 (Milestone, Nov. 1995).

23. John Rozum (w.) and J. J. Birch (a.), "Silent Cathedrals Part Two: Feats of Clay!," *Xombi* #2 (Milestone, July 1994).

24. Matt Wayne, reply to fan letters, "Post-Mortem," *Xombi* #1 (Milestone, June 1994), 32.

25. John Rozum (w.) and J. J. Birch (a.), "Silent Cathedrals: Epilogue," *Xombi* #6 (Milestone, Nov. 1994).

26. John Rozum (w.) and J. J. Birch (a.), "Schools of Anguish Part Two: Burning Sensation" *Xombi* #8 (Milestone, Jan. 1995).

27. John Rozum (w.) and J. J. Birch (a.), "The Nature of the Beast: A Prologue," *Xombi* #13 (Milestone, June 1995).

28. Rozum and Birch, "Nature of the Beast."

29. Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*, 167.

30. While #0 issues can be used for a variety of reasons, they are often promotional issues that introduce a storyline or character or are issues that provide backstory for new readers. In this case, *Xombi* #0 was released about six months ahead of the regular run of *Xombi* and introduced the character to potential readers. Interestingly, the events of issue #0 take place after David's xombification (which happens in issue #1) so that readers could see him already xombified.

31. John Rozum (w.), Denys Cowan (p.), and Jimmy Palmiotti (i.), "Theatre of Phantoms," *Xombi* #0 (Milestone, Jan. 1994).

32. Rozum, Cowan, and Palmiotti, "Theatre of Phantoms."

33. The focus on voodoo, however, isn't just in terms of Garth's re-creation as a zombie, rather the entire comic is infused with it. In the second issue of *Tales of The Zombie*, Tony Isabella penned a short article that opens by telling readers, "Voodoo. It's the current rage, don't you know. Paperbacks on the subject litter newsstands throughout the world. Voodoo cults are reportedly springing up in major cities throughout the United States" (Tony Isabella, "Introducing Brother Voodoo," *Tales of the Zombie* #2 [Marvel, Oct. 1973], 35). Throughout the run of the series, there were articles about voodoo practice and beliefs, depictions of voodoo in American media, and repeated assertions of the amount of research on voodoo the writers and artists of *Tales of the Zombie* did when crafting their stories. Still, the comic seems to be trying to have voodoo both ways. On one hand, there are explicit attempts to maintain some distance from past depictions of voodoo through articles about the religion and accurate naming of Vodou figures in its storylines. In the first issue of the series, the Haitian Junior Chamber of Commerce is listed as a technical advisor, and in the second issue, writer Chris Claremont spends an entire article both utilizing familiar voodoo tropes and trying to dispel them. Claremont explains the Fon roots of Vodou and how, when the slaves in the French colony of Saint Domingue (which would later become Haiti) were required to be baptized as Catholics, they incorporated that religion into Vodou practices. In later issues of *Tales of the Zombie*, writers would even criticize more sensationalist displays of voodoo, such as those found in the 1973 James Bond film *Live and Let Die* (see Chris Claremont, "Voodoo: What's It All About, Alfred?," *Tales of the Zombie* #2 [Marvel, Oct. 1973], 56–60, and Don McGregor, "Live and Let Die," *Tales of the Zombie* #4 [Marvel, March 1974], 17–23). Yet the pages of *Tales of the Zombie* were also filled with naked bod-

ies writhing before bonfires, tom-toms, snakes, voodoo dolls, and, of course, zombies. So, like zombie media of the 1930s and 1940s voodoo could be sensational, exotic, and threatening to white, American culture—as when it threatens Garth's daughter—but it also has the potential to redeem. This marks a departure from most earlier depictions of voodoo in zombie comics, yet it also works to present voodoo as something that can never quite assimilate into mainstream American culture.

34. Steve Gerber (w.) and Pablo Marcos (a.), "Palace of Black Magic!," *Tales of the Zombie* #5 (Marvel, May 1974), 25.

35. Gerber and Marcos, "Palace of Black Magic!," 26.

36. Cotter, *Great Monster Magazines*, 74.

37. Tony Isabella (w.), Virgilio Rendondo (a.), and Alfredo Alcala (a.), "Simon Garth Lives Again," *Tales of the Zombie* #9 (Marvel, Jan. 1975), 11.

38. Steve Gerber (w.) and Pablo Marcos (a.), "Voodoo Island!," *Tales of the Zombie* #2 (Marvel, Oct. 1973), 9.

39. Tony Isabella (w.), Ron Wilson (a.), and Pablo Marcos (a.), "The 2nd Death Around," *Tales of the Zombie* #9 (Marvel, Jan. 1975), 46.

40. The name seems to be used unironically, but one can't help but make a connection to François "Papa Doc" Duvalier, president of Haiti from 1957 to 1971, whose brutal regime lasted until his death and was followed by the rule of his son Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier.

41. Isabella, Rendondo, and Alcala, "Simon Garth Lives Again," 14.

42. See bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (South End Press, 1992).

43. David Scott Diffrient, "Beyond Tokenism and Tricksterism: Bobby Lee, *MADtv*, and the De(con)structive Impulse of Korean American Comedy," *Velvet Light Trap* 67 (2011): 41.

44. In the twelfth issue, David realizes, "When Dalila mentioned her unease with the transvestites, I realized that I can't just show her, like I wanted to. . . . She liked to be prepared. No surprises. Clearly I couldn't just show her": John Rozum (w.) and J.J. Birch (a.), "Consultations," *Xombi* #12 (Milestone, May 1995).

45. There is an irony at work in *Xombi*: its initial cancellation may have had to do with people assuming it was a "Black" title because it was published by Milestone, and yet, besides David's identity as a Korean American, the title does not tackle race in any straightforward way. David's life is not foregrounded by race in the way so many characters of color in comics have been. One simply has to think of the characters who have racialized superhero names: Black Panther or Brother Voodoo, for instance, to see that David is something different. He is not set up from the outset as a representative of all things Asian American. Therefore, David's racial identity isn't what defines him, and this approaches exactly what the Milestone creators were hoping to do with titles like *Xombi*: feature characters of color who weren't definitive of an entire race or ethnicity, who were more than their racial category.

46. Religion, rather than race, seems to be the key identifier for most of the original run of the series with David teaming up with superheroes Rabbi Sinnowitz, Catholic Girl, and Nun of the Above.

47. Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, loc. 1816.

48. Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, loc. 655.

49. Drew Ayers, "Bodies, Bullets, and Bad Guys: Elements of the Hardbody Film," *Film Criticism* 32, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 44.

50. Jeffrey A. Brown, "The Tortures of Mel Gibson: Masochism and the Sexy Male Body," *Men and Masculinities* 5, no. 2 (Oct. 2002): 137.

51. Colin Milburn, "Nanowarriors: Military Nanotechnology and Comic Books," *Intertexts* 9, no. 1 (2005): 96.

52. David's experience isn't wholly due to his xombi nature either, as is evidenced by the other xombi David meets, Dumaka. Dumaka is made into a xombi by helpful spirits and is given an out: when he is ready to die, he can. So, even after meeting with Dumaka, we can't get an insight into a collective xombi experience because all Dumaka proves is that David is unique and alone.

53. Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *Straightjacket Sexualities: Unbinding Asian American Manhoods in the Movies* (Stanford University Press, 2012), 41.

54. Yvonne Tasker, "Dumb Movies for Dumb People: Masculinity, the Body, and the Voice in Contemporary Action Cinema," in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (Routledge, 1993), 230.

55. Brown, "Tortures," 124.

56. Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Duke University Press, 2003), 66.

57. Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, loc. 1318.

58. José Alaniz, *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond* (University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 6.

59. Evdokia Stefanopoulou, "Iron Man as Cyborg: Between Masculinities," *Gender Forum* 62 (2017): 21–38.

60. Milburn, "Nanowarriors," 82.

61. Brown, *Black Superheroes*, 168.

62. This necessarily doesn't take into account alternative forms of masculinity, which critique or intentionally subvert the hegemonic ideal, but throughout most of their history in U.S. pop culture, superheroes have upheld the hegemonic ideal rather than questioned it.

63. MacFarlane, Richardson, and Haslem, "Introducing the Superhero Body," 1.

64. Kamerling, "Are Zombies Superheroes?," 121.

Chapter 4

1. Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 34.

2. Roberson, Allred, and Allred, "Dead to the World."

3. Phillips and Strobl, *Comic Book Crime*, 141.

4. Kee, *Not Your Average Zombie*.

5. Erzulie is a family of loa, or spirit intermediaries, in the Vodou religion, associated with femininity. Bocor may be an alternate spelling of bokor, a Vodou priest who may work for good or evil.

6. "Step into My Grave," *Baffling Mysteries* #11 (Periodical House, Nov. 1952).

7. "It Won't Come Back until Midnight," *Web of Mystery* #16 (A.A. Wyn, Inc., Dec. 1952).

8. This look is also repeated in 1952's "Blood of the Zombie" where the beautiful zombie woman Sutha must sacrifice her zombie husband to appease the rules of zombidom. Sutha is a bit darker skinned than the other women—as she is ostensibly from Haiti—but she wears a sleeveless red dress with gold bangles and sports black hair ("Blood of the Zombie," *Strange Mysteries* #5 [Superior Publishers Limited, May 1952], 1–6).

9. Siegel and Shuster, "Dr. Occult, the Ghost Detective."

10. Allen Spectre, "The Voodoo Man," *Weird Comics* #5 (Fox Publications, August 1940), 51.

11. "Ibis the Invincible . . . and . . . 'The Zombie Master,'" *Whiz Comics* # 140 (Fawcett Publications, Inc., Dec. 1951).

12. "The Heap," *Airboy Comics* 9, #5 (Hillman Periodicals Inc., June 1952).

13. Another version of this story appears in "Lure of the Sea Hag" from 1952. In it, Dick Collins tries to help a beautiful young woman who ends up being a sea hag who was forced to become a figurehead on her husband's boat. After Collins helps her free herself from her husband's spell, the "sea hag" is once again beautiful but in their escape, she disappears with only her bones remaining, leaving the man a blithering mess ("Lure of the Sea Hag," *The Beyond* #13 [Unity Publishing Corp., July 1952], 1–7). A similar scenario plays out in "The Living Dead" from 1954 where a beautiful young woman changes into a cadaver in front of a man's eyes before taking revenge on him as a victim of his father's wartime experiments (John D'Agostino, "The Living Dead," *Dark Mysteries* #20 [Master Comics, Inc., Oct. 1954]).

14. "The Haunts of Devil's Lake," *Web of Mystery* #8 (Ace Books, Inc., April 1952), 1.

15. "Haunts of Devil's Lake," 2.

16. "Haunts of Devil's Lake," 3.

17. "Haunts of Devil's Lake," 4.

18. Alexa Wright, *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture* (I.B. Tauris, 2013), 3.

19. Wright, *Monstrosity*, 3.

20. Wright, *Monstrosity*, 6.

21. Kee, *Not Your Average Zombie*, 77.

22. "King of the Living Dead," *Eerie* #1 (Avon Periodicals, May–June 1951).

23. "Reincarnation," *Witches Tales* #12 (Witches Tales, Inc., July 1952).

24. "Zombie Vengeance," *Strange Mysteries* #9 (Superior Publishers Limited, Jan. 1953). See also Palais, "The Deacon and Mickey"; "Land of the Zombies," *Adventures into the Unknown* #14 (B & I Publishing Co., Dec.–Jan. 1951); "Zombie Bride," *Voodoo* #2 (Four Star Publications, July 1952); "The Black Candle of Life," *Beware! Terror Tales* #4 (Fawcett Publications, Inc., Nov. 1952); and "Recruits for the Legion of the Undead," *The Beyond* #11 (Unity Publishing Corp., May 1952).

25. "The Soul Stealer," *Ghost Comics* #8 (Fiction House, 1953). In a reversal of this called "Two for the Money" from 1954, gigolo Harvey Craig is looking for a wealthy woman to keep him. He ends up meeting two potential women, both immigrants to the U.S. and both very rich. There is Carlotta Bartok, an ex-Romanian countess, and Ilka Habor from Hungary. Craig decides to have the best of both worlds, marrying both women and living a double life. But things are just a bit too good, and after six months of marriage, Craig has packed on the pounds, so he decides to diet. This upsets Ilka when he tells her, and later that night, she attacks him, revealing that she is really a vampire. He gets away from her and goes to see Carlotta, but he can't reveal why he is upset, so he makes up a story about reading about Hungarian vampires. Carlotta says, "How HORRIBLE! Those Hungarians are RIDICULOUS!" But later, when he tells her about the diet, she is also upset, and she attacks him. He fears she is also a vampire, to which Carlotta says, "I am NOT a vampire . . . They're DISGUSTING! THOROUGHLY DISGUSTING! . . . We Roumanians hate vampires! I'm proud to say I'm a zombie!" ("Two for the Money," *Mysterious Adventures* #22 [Story Comics, Inc., Oct. 1954]).

26. "Master of the Undead," *Baffling Mysteries* #17 (Periodical House, Inc., Sept. 1953).

27. "Master of the Undead."

28. A twist on this happens in "Who Walks with a Zombie," from 1954, where Ken travels to a remote West Indian island to meet his friend Jane, where she has been researching her latest book, but when he meets her, he discovers she has changed. She is pale, listless, and unresponsive. Eventually, she stirs, and Ken follows her to "a native cemetery" where Jane digs up a manuscript—her manuscript—which details what has happened to her. She has been zombified by a local doctor who is creating zombies on the island. Ken meets the doctor, who remarks, "Her love for you must have been strong . . . to act on her own as she did without my command!" And just as the doctor tries to kill Ken, his zombies grab him and kill him, before returning to their graves. Ken leaves, knowing "that her love for me had fought on even through death!" ("Who Walks with a Zombie," *Mystic* #27 [Official Magazine Corp., Feb. 1954]).

29. "Zombie Bride."
30. "Zombie Vengeance."
31. "Forever Dead," *Voodoo* #17 (Four Star Publications, Sept.–Oct. 1954).
32. "Corpses on Cue," *Web of Mystery* #18 (A.A. Wyn, Inc., May 1953).
33. "Corpses on Cue."
34. "Corpses on Cue."
35. "Corpses on Cue."
36. Johnny Craig, "Till Death," *Vault of Horror* #28 (EC, Dec 1952–Jan 1953).
37. Craig, "Till Death."
38. Craig, "Till Death."
39. Craig, "Till Death."
40. Craig, "Till Death."
41. Craig, "Till Death."
42. Smith and Goodrum, "'Corpses . . . Coast to Coast!,'" 8.
43. Roberson, Allred, and Allred, "Dead to the World." Technically, her name is Gwendolyn Rose Price, but a character mistakes Gwendolyn for Gwen Dylan and that name sticks.
44. Roberson, Allred, and Allred, "Dead to the World."
45. Stacey Abbott, "iZombie: The New Voice of the Zombie Apocalypse" *16:9 filmtidsskrift* (2016). http://www.16-9.dk/2016/05/izombie/
46. See Kee, *Not Your Average Zombie*.
47. Julia Round, *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels: A Critical Approach* (McFarland & Company, 2014), locs. 2168, 3273.
48. Josef Benson and Doug Singsen, *Bandits, Misfits, and Superheroes: Whiteness and Its Borderlands in American Comics and Graphic Novels* (University Press of Mississippi, 2022), 6.
49. Benson and Singsen, *Bandits, Misfits, and Superheroes*, 6.
50. This is mirrored to a degree by the situation faced by Gwen's friend Scott, who is a were-terrier trying to hide his condition from his friends. Yet Scott doesn't face a personality change when he becomes the terrier; he only needs to contend with looking different—moreover, his monstrous "look" is far less threatening than Gwen's, as he essentially looks like a humanoid dog.
51. Carla Rice, *Becoming Women: The Embodied Self in Image Culture* (University of Toronto Press, 2014), 6.
52. Wendy Chapkis, *Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance* (South End Press, 1986), 5.
53. Chris Roberson (w.), Mike Allred (a.), and Laura Allred (c.), "The Remains," *iZombie* #5 (Vertigo, Nov. 2010).
54. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (University of California Press, 1993), 171.
55. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 171.

56. Chris Roberson (w.), Mike Allred (a.), and Laura Allred (c.), "The End, Conclusion," *iZombie* #28 (Vertigo, Oct. 2012).

57. Roberson, Allred, and Allred, "The End, Conclusion."

58. Roberson, Allred, and Allred, "The End, Conclusion."

59. It doesn't serve to mark him as different from the other "geek" zombies—his ability to speak and reason do—yet there is no clear indication of why some zombies in that narrative universe can think and speak and others can't.

60. For a sampling of the essays that deal with how this manifests in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) in particular, see Kyle William Bishop, "The Idle Proletariat: *Dawn of the Dead*, Consumer Ideology, and the Loss of Productive Labor," *Journal of Popular Culture* 43, no. 2 (2010): 234–48; A. Loudermilk, "Eating 'Dawn' in the Dark: Zombie Desire and Commodified Identity in George A. Romero's 'Dawn of the Dead'," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 3, no. 1 (2003): 83–108; and Stephen Harper, "Zombies, Malls, and the Consumerism Debate: George Romero's Dawn of the Dead," *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2002), http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/fall_2002/harper.htm. For an essay that explores *Dawn* as consumerist critique while reviewing literature on the film, see Shannon Mader, "Reviving the Dead in Southwestern PA: Zombie Capitalism, the Non-Class, and the Decline of the US Steel Industry," *Spectator* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 69–77.

61. Philip Horne, "I Shopped with a Zombie," *Critical Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (Dec. 1992): 97.

62. Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 106–7.

63. Roberson, Allred, and Allred, "The Remains."

64. Chris Roberson (w.), Mike Allred (a.), and Laura Allred (c.), "The Magical Memory Tour," *iZombie* #4 (Vertigo, Oct. 2010).

65. Roberson, Allred, and Allred, "The Remains."

66. Chris Gavaler, "The Well-Born Superhero," *Journal of American Culture* 37, no. 2 (June 2014): 182.

67. Andy Khouri, "Witness a Were-Terrier's Sexual Awakening in 'iZombie' #19 [Preview]," *Comics Alliance* (Nov. 16, 2011). https://comicsalliance.com/izombie-19-preview-roberson-allred/

68. Khouri, "Witness a Were-Terrier's Sexual Awakening."

69. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1997), 41.

70. Phillips and Strobl, *Comic Book Crime*, 157.

71. Phillips and Strobl, *Comic Book Crime*, 157.

72. Roberson, Allred, and Allred, "The Remains."

73. Chris Roberson (w.), Mike Allred (a.), and Laura Allred (c.), "Six Feet Under and Rising, Part One: Arrivals and Exits," *iZombie* #13 (Vertigo, July 2011).

74. Chris Roberson (w.), Mike Allred (a.), and Laura Allred (c.), "The End, Part Three," *iZombie* #27 (Vertigo, Sept. 2012).

75. Roberson, Allred, and Allred, "The End, Conclusion."

76. Mel Gibson, "Comics and Gender," in *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, ed. Frank Bramlett, Roy T. Cook, and Aaron Meskin (Routledge, 2017), 287.

77. The TV series departed significantly from the comic in almost every way, but its ending—with Liv and her husband, Major, living together as zombies with their children, suggests that heteronormative family-building is the ultimate happy ending. Moreover, Liv and Major may be zombies, but they remain conventionally attractive zombies in full control of themselves.

78. Phillips and Strobl, *Comic Book Crime*, 152.

79. Phillips and Strobl, *Comic Book Crime*, 157.

80. Phillips and Strobl, *Comic Book Crime*, 157.

81. Of course, one element that may contribute to the ways zombiism affects female characters differently that I haven't discussed is the fact that most of the comics I've examined were written by men. For instance, *iZombie*'s entire run was penned by Chris Roberson.

Conclusion

1. Kobre, "Only Transform," 150.

2. Kobre, "Only Transform," 155.

3. Aaron Taylor, "'He's Gotta Be Strong, and He's Gotta Be Fast, and He's Gotta Be Larger Than Life': Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body," *Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 2 (2007): 348.

4. Taylor, "'He's Gotta Be Strong, and He's Gotta Be Fast,'" 348.

5. It's strange to think of the relationship between superheroes and their readers as similar to that of the zombie and their zombie master, but there is a correlation, especially if the reader is conceived of as the person who "reanimates" the characters in the comic. Still, the analogy falters a bit when we consider that the reader is beholden to the preconstituted panels and storylines that make up any given comic—the reader may control the objectified superhero character, but only within the confines of what the creators give to them.

6. Arthur A. Berger, *The Comic-Stripped American: What Dick Tracy, Blondie, Daddy Warbucks, and Charlie Brown Tell Us about Ourselves* (Walker, 1973), 157.

7. Alaniz, *Death, Disability, and the Superhero*, 6.

8. Reed Crandall (p.) and Mike Peppe (i.) (credited as C&P), "The Corpse That Came to Dinner," *Out of the Shadows* #9 (Visual Editions, Inc., July 1953).

9. Crandall and Peppe, "The Corpse That Came to Dinner."

10. Crandall and Peppe, "The Corpse That Came to Dinner."

11. See George Tuska, "Zanzibar the Magician," *Mystery Men Comics* #12 (Fox

Publications, July 1940), 61–64, and "The Undead," *Uncle Sam Quarterly* #7 (Comic Magazines, Inc., Summer 1943), 19–31.

12. Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*, 144.

13. Brown, *Black Superheroes*, 144.

14. Also, while the series evokes a lot of zombie iconography, with decomposing corpses rising from the grave, the undead are never officially called "zombies" in *Blackest Night*. Yet, in the wake of *The Walking Dead* and *Marvel Zombies*, that may not have been necessary—as long as the premise of the dead returning to life was employed alongside standard zombie iconography, one can assume readers understood this to be a zombie narrative whether the resurrected heroes and villains were called zombies or not.

15. Geoff Johns, Ivan Reis, Oclair Albert, and Joe Prado, *Blackest Night* (omnibus) (DC, 2010).

16. Most comics have clear beginnings—a first issue, an origin story—and then exist in a seemingly never-ending middle space, where each issue continues the story, but there isn't a clear ending in sight. The story of Superman, for instance, has been ongoing, in one way or another, since 1938, and one thing that sets the modern comics medium apart from many other mediums is that most of the stories told in the medium are told sequentially with this sort of elongated middle. TV shows can act in the same fashion, with episode after episode adding to the story, and while individual story arcs may come to a close, the overall story itself keeps on stretching forward indefinitely. However, most of the comics I interact with in this book have very clear endings. The Purple Zombie lasted for twelve issues; Simon Garth's original run in *Tales of the Zombie* was nine issues. *iZombie* lasted for twenty-eight issues, and *Xombi*'s original run lasted for twenty-two issues. *Deadworld* seems to be the outlier in this regard, as it has been published off and on since 1987, but it has been published in limited series and one-offs for the last two decades. It is telling that zombie protagonists don't seem as long-lasting as their mindless shambling cousins, the zombies that exist to be killed off or to create atmosphere while living humans take center stage.

17. Whereas in anthology comics of the 1940s and 1950s, death was most likely a permanent state, superheroes have been regularly defying death throughout most of their tenure in comics, and it is compelling that *Blackest Night* tries to deal with the notion of death through characters that, generically, have a hard time dying. Yet this stands in contrast to most of the zombie protagonists in comics too: Simon Garth wants to die, and it is his reward for protecting his family. Gwen sacrifices herself for humanity, so she sort of dies, but sort of doesn't. David Kim can't die, but that haunts him. Whereas with the superheroic zombies risen from the dead in *Blackest Night*, death is a bad thing—or at the very least, not optimal—for the zombie heroes, death is the end goal, whether it is attainable or not. Of course, for Gwen, death—or ceasing to exist in this plane—is a prosocial move; it saves the

community. For Simon Garth, it is a reward, and for David Kim, it is a part of his now-lost former life. Death isn't cessation for the zombies, so much as it is the way things need to be. It is a natural part of life, which hints at how "unnatural" David Kim's (or Simon Garth's, or any zombie's) state really is.

18. Marc DiPaolo, *War, Politics, and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film* (McFarland, 2011), 288.

19. Donald De Line, introduction, in Geoff Johns, Ivan Reis, Oclair Albert, and Joe Prado, *Blackest Night* (omnibus) (DC, 2010).

20. Mark Millar introduced an alternate universe Earth overcome with zombies in *Ultimate Fantastic Four*, issues #21–23 in 2005, and Marvel decided to do a spin-off, which became *Marvel Zombies*. I might also note that there have been instances in the past where individual Marvel characters have been briefly zombified—for instance, Brother Voodoo was temporarily turned into a zombie in the first volume of *Marc Spector: Moon Knight*, issues #6 and #7, in 1989.

21. In this way, DC's later limited series *DCeased* (2019) is very similar: it also takes place on an alternate universe Earth where a techno-organic virus has turned many into the "Anti-living," including Aquaman, Batman, the Green Lantern, and the Joker. It has also spawned several spin-offs and sequels.

22. Robert Kirkman, Sean Phillips, and Arthur Suydam, *Marvel Zombies* (omnibus) (Marvel, 2006).

23. Robert Kirkman, "Marvelous Zombies," in Robert Kirkman, Sean Phillips, and Arthur Suydam, *Marvel Zombies* (omnibus) (Marvel, 2006).

24. Kirkman, "Marvelous Zombies."

25. Kee, *Not Your Average Zombie*.

26. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Vintage Books, 1993), 52.

27. Benson and Singsen, *Bandits, Misfits, and Superheroes*, 265.

28. Benson and Singsen, *Bandits, Misfits, and Superheroes*, 262–63.

29. Benson and Singsen, *Bandits, Misfits, and Superheroes*, 263.

30. bell hooks, *Black Looks*, 23.

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