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A New Gnosis

Comic Books, Comparative Mythology, and Depth Psychology

Edited by

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Editor

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For my brother, Joey

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John Bucher, PhD, is the author of *The Storytelling Almanac* (SSMG Press), *Master of the Cinematic Universe* (MWP), *Storytelling for Virtual Reality* (Routledge), *A Best Practice Guide to Sex and Storytelling* (Routledge), and *The Emerald Tablet* (SSMG Press), a graphic adaptation of the classic esoteric text, among other books and articles. He serves as the Creative Director for the Joseph Campbell Foundation and holds a PhD in Mythological Studies with Emphasis in Depth Psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute. He teaches film, writing, and story courses in the Los Angeles area and around the world. Follow his work at: tellingabetterstory.com.

Craig Chalquist, PhD, is department chair of Consciousness and Transformative Studies at National University. He teaches and writes where psyche, story, nature, and myth intersect. His most recent book is *Terrapsychological Inquiry: Restorying Our Relationship with Nature, Place, and Planet* (Routledge, 2020). Visit his website at: worldrede.com.

Yvonne Chireau, PhD, is the Peggy Chan Professor of Black Studies at Swarthmore College, where she teaches courses on Africana religions and American religious history. She is the author of *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (2003) and the co-editor of *Black Zion: African American Religions and Judaism* (1999). Her writings on the historical intersections of magic, religion, and cultural discourses on Voodoo can be found online at the research blog The Academic Hoodoo: academichoodoo.com.

Erik Davis, PhD, is an author, award-winning journalist, and scholar based in San Francisco. His wide-ranging work focuses on the intersection of alternative religion, media, and the popular imagination. He is the author, most recently, of *High Weirdness: Drugs, Esoterica, and Visionary Experience in the Seventies,* co-published by MIT Press and Strange Attractor. He also wrote *Nomad Codes: Adventures in Modern Esoterica* (2010), *The Visionary State: A Journey through California's Spiritual Landscape* (2006), a critical volume on Led Zeppelin (2005), and the celebrated cult classic *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (1998). Erik's scholarly and popular essays on music, technoculture, drugs, and spirituality have appeared in scores of books, magazines, and journals, and his writing has been translated into a dozen languages. He received his BA from Yale University, and earned his PhD in religious studies at Rice University. www.techgnosis.com.

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Jeffrey J. Kripal, PhD, is the Associate Dean of the Faculty and Graduate Programs in the School of the Humanities and the J. Newton Rayzor Chair in Philosophy and Religious Thought at Rice University. He also helps direct the Center for Theory and Research at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, and sits on advisory boards in the U.S. and Europe involving the nature of consciousness and the sciences. Jeff is the author of numerous books, including, most recently, *The Superhumanities: Historical Precedents, Moral Objections, New Realities* (Chicago, 2022), where he intuits an emerging new order of knowledge that can engage in robust moral criticism but also affirm the superhuman or nonhuman dimensions of our histories, cultures, and futures. He is presently working on a three-volume study of paranormal currents in the sciences, modern esoteric literature, and the hidden history of science fiction for the University of Chicago Press collectively entitled *The Super Story: Science (Fiction) and Some Emergent Mythologies*. His full body of work can be seen at http://jeffreyjkripal.com. He thinks he may be Spider-Man.

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Evans Lansing Smith, PhD, has degrees from Williams College, Antioch International, and The Claremont Graduate School, and is Core Faculty in the Mythological Studies program at Pacifica Graduate Institute. He is the author of ten books and numerous articles on comparative literature and mythology, and has taught at colleges in Switzerland, Maryland, Texas, and California, and at the C.G. Jung Institute in Kusnacht. In the late 1970s, he traveled with Joseph Campbell on study tours of Northern France, Egypt, and Kenya, with a focus on the Arthurian Romances of the Middle Ages and the Mythologies of the Ancient World.

Li Sumpter, PhD, is a mythologist and multidisciplinary artist who applies strategies of worldbuilding and mythic design toward building better, more resilient communities of the future. Li's creative research and collaborative projects engage the art of survival and sustainability through diverse ecologies and immersive stories of change. Li is a cultural producer and eco-arts activist working through MythMedia Studios, the Escape Artist Initiative, and various arts and community-based organizations in Philadelphia, PA, and across the country. She holds an MA in Art and Humanities Education from NYU and an MA/PhD in Mythological Studies with an emphasis in Depth Psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute.

John Todd, PhD, is a diplomate Jungian analyst based in Evergreen, Colorado. A native of Florida, he began his career as a children and families counselor for Hospice of the Florida Suncoast for over a decade before starting private practice. In 2006 he relocated to Evergreen with his wife and two children. He is currently the Director of Training for the C.G. Jung Institute of Colorado.

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A New Gnosis: The Comic Book as Mythical Text

David M. Odorisio

Abstract Comic book authors and illustrators frequently incorporate mythical – and mystical – elements into their narratives and onto their pages, redefining the boundaries of what a comic book might convey and enhancing the medium's potential for transmitting certain revelatory or "gnostic" truths. The inclusion of such material recrafts the comic book as a gateway for readers' own possible "non-ordinary" mythical encounters. This introductory essay frames the volume as a whole from within mythological and depth psychological traditions and traces the origins and intersections of these rich comparative fields, including their potential for mining "hidden knowledge" (*gnosis*) in the graphic medium of comic books.

Keywords Mythology • Depth psychology • Comic books • Gnosis • Freud • Jung

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> *Why are we still making myths? Why do we need* new *myths? And what sort of stories attain this stature?*
>
> —Philip Ball (2021, 3)

For the past several years I have taught a graduate seminar on the topic of "Comic Books as Modern Mythology," focusing on the contemporary resurgence of mythic motifs in popular culture, with an emphasis on the comic book medium. Throughout the course, students are encouraged to think both imaginatively and critically (alongside Jeffrey Kripal [2011], whose *Mutants and Mystics* serves as the required reading), on the historical, cultural, and religious significance of this modern graphic renaissance. Following Christopher Knowles (2007), I encourage students to ask, "*Do* our gods wear spandex?" And if so, what might the (often humorous) implications of this grand enactment convey? Following Kripal (2011), are we moderns unconsciously caught in a Feuerbachian loop of self-reflexivity – projecting our own idealized selves, or even "human potential," onto caped crusaders? Or, do comic books and popular "occulture" (Partridge 2004), serve as a form of "cultural mourning," akin to Homans' (1989) portrayal of the origins of psychoanalysis, where acknowledgment of cultural or spiritual loss leads to a form of personal or social renewal. Perhaps the (old) gods are dead. But if so, comic books deftly – and defiantly – proclaim, "Long live the (new) gods!"

As Knowles (2007) boldly states, "American religion seems unable to provide a viable salvation myth in this time of crisis…. It should not surprise us, then, when *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and *The X-Men* step in to fill the void" (218). Nietzsche's claim (in the mouth of Zarathustra) that "God is dead," created (or at least articulated) a spiritual vacuum that reverberated throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, lingering perhaps even to this day. Swiss psychiatrist C.G. Jung's own response to the spiritual vacancy of post-World War I Europe was entitled, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933). For Jung, it involves a secular religiosity (or religious secularism) that is ultimately a *psychologized form of religious expression* – and experimentation. Particularly in his essays, "The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man" and "Psychotherapists or the Clergy," Jung's (1933) impassioned reply to the increasing despondency of post-War materialism and the dominance of scientific rationalism is a return to interiority – the "search for soul."

Homans (1989), in a similar-but-different key, traces the work of Freud, Jung, and the early psychoanalytic circle, and argues that the

origins of psychoanalysis can be interpreted as a response to such cultural, religious, and spiritual "loss." The resultant interiority and introspection upon which psychoanalysis establishes itself fosters the "ability to mourn" – individually and collectively – and is followed by a reconstituted or renewed sense of self-identity – "individuation" in the case of Jung; for Freud, the wider psychoanalytic project of culture-formation (see, e.g., Obeyesekere 1990).

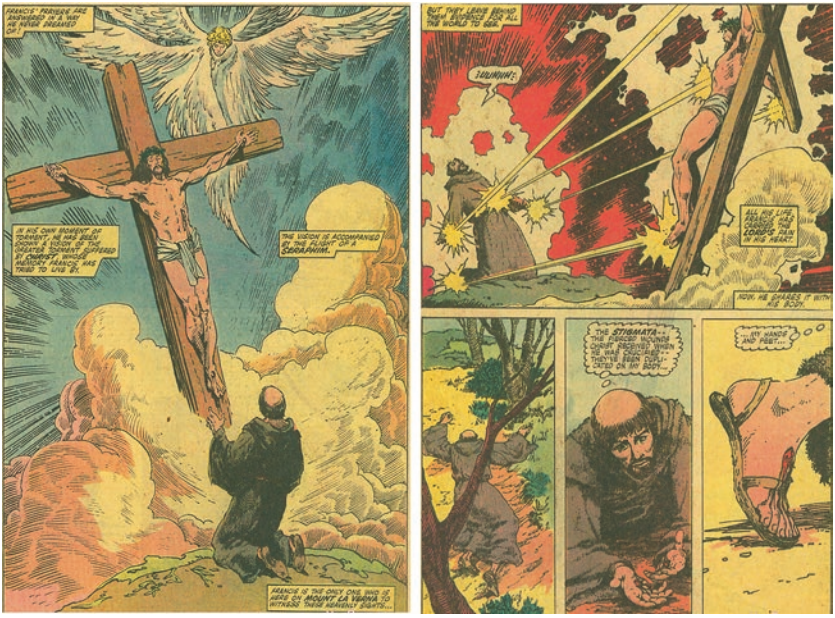
And yet – whence myth? Parallel, yet foundational, to the cultural and meaning-making projects of early depth psychology lies the work that many, especially Freud and Jung, would stake their widest (and most controversial) claims. The rapid emergence of a field of "comparative mythology," made possible by centuries of colonialist expansion and European fixation upon, and idealization of, non-Western cultures, would make possible the anthropological and early comparative work of E.B. Tylor (1832-1917), J.G. Frazer (1854-1941), and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939). Not without their modern-day critics (see, e.g., King 2017), these formative comparativists would initiate several disciplines upon which Freud and Jung would theorize their universalizing psychological claims.

As part of their cultural mourning, pioneering depth psychologists such as Freud (1899), Otto Rank (1909), Jung (1911-12/1956), and their psychoanalytic-anthropologist counterparts, Géza Róheim (1992) and Bruno Bettelheim (1976), would "return" to "primitive" (often romanticized) wells of comparative mythology as universal, trans-historical sources of theory-making – what Daniel Merkur (2005) refers to as the shift "from mythology into meta-psychology" (1; see also Downing 1975, and Segal 2020).

The contemporary (i.e., mid-late 20th and early 21st c.) situation which birthed the monumental rise of the comic book genre and superhero "mythology" in general is not that different from the early 20th c. post-War existential vacuum. If anything, the situation has only become exacerbated via the continued decline of organized "institutional" religion, and the general existential malaise of late capitalist U.S. culture as a whole. And yet this is not – and has not – been the complete (super)story. At an accelerated pace, "Spiritual But Not Religious" (see, e.g., Parsons 2018) and emerging new religious movements (Urban 2015), such as neo-paganism, have quickly – and vastly – populated American and European horizons. To me, it is no surprise that many of these emergent movements, beginning with 1960s counter-cultural ideas, have been – and continue to be – reflected in the multi-paneled pages of comic book

phenomena. Following American sci-fi futurist, Philip K. Dick, the current (and future) god(s) are found, not in an 'above-ground' mainstream, but in the "trash stratum" (Davis 2019, 369) – often composed of, and including, one's own popular "occulture" (Partridge 2004).

The notion of "gnosis" (Hanegraaff 2016) – a hidden ("occult") and revelatory form of direct, experiential knowing – is not far removed (indeed, it is akin), to Dick's (1981) "VALIS," a consciousness-zapping, gnoseologically-informed extraterrestrial satellite, capable of spiritually illuminating or mentally modifying its recipient. As Kripal (2011) amplifies, the notion of transformation by being "zapped" or radiated – whether scientifically or cosmically – is a key "mytheme" of his own reading of an American and British comic book "super-story" – as well as foundational to his own lived "mystical hermeneutics" (Kripal 2001, 3-5), and evidenced in several first-person accounts of his own gnosis-encoded "zapping" (Kripal 2001, 2011, 2017).



St. Francis – Zapped (*Francis, Brother of the Universe*. 1980. Marvel Comics. Used with permission)

To Kripal, the gnostic dimension of comic books and superhero narratives enters into his postulation of mutants *as* mystics (2007, 2011). For Kripal (2007), a living "comparative mystics" (93-6) takes into account the "Real X-Men" (146-52) that populate the literature of the anomalous and the mystical. In other words, the fields of Comics Studies and Comparative Mysticism (and Mythology) have much to offer – and learn – from one another, because to Kripal, they are in all actuality profoundly (inter)related. The "Real X-Men" that he announces, whether Teresa of Ávila and Joseph of Copertino in their mystic flights of levitation; the various (and infamous) mediums of the psychical research tradition (e.g., Leonora Piper, Eusapia Palladino, Helene Preiswerk, and their principal investigators, William James, Frederic Myers, and C.G. Jung, respectively); Freud's interest (and ultimately evidentiary belief) in telepathy (a term coined by Myers), which he theorized as "unconscious communication"; or the more contemporary Michael Murphy, founder of the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, CA (whom Kripal compares to fictional X-Man Prof. Charles Xavier, with Murphy's founding of a school for "human potential" akin to Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, i.e. mutants) – in each of these examples, "real life" mystics (or mediums) reflect back the superpowered realities that would mythically (re)emerge from the pages of esoterically-encoded contemporary comic books as forms of *gnosis* (see also DeConick 2016). In other words, the comic book as both *mythical* and *mystical* text.

The essays in this volume are certainly not the first to suggest that comic books serve as a form of "modern mythology," or even as gnostic or esoterically-encoded mythical, mystical texts. Far from it. Following in the lineage and legacy of Schechter (1980), Reynolds (1992), Knowles (2007), Kripal (2007, 2011), Morrison (2012), and Ball (2021), this volume offers an inter-disciplinary approach to comic books through the dual lens of comparative mythology and depth psychology. This often 'unholy union' is itself not without precedent as well. As highlighted above, Freud, Jung, Rank, and others, built their depth psychological enterprises upon a comparative mythology that, to them, "storied" and symbolically portrayed the otherwise inarticulate unconscious dynamics of modern persons' fragmented psyches. Freud's "Oedipus," Jung's (1911-12/1956) "mana personality," and later, his concepts of "individuation," "archetype," and the controversial notion of a "collective unconscious," all attempt a theoretical claim on the "mythic origins" of the unconscious. Perhaps most popularly influential of them all (at least in contemporary

film and cinema) is Joseph Campbell's (1949) psychoanalytically-inflected (male) "hero," who (following Jung 1911-12/1956), battles for "deliverance from the Mother," only to reach apotheosis through "the Father."

The essays offered here, while not all commenting directly on this comparative mythological and depth psychological "genealogy," are certainly indebted to it, with several authors having dedicated their scholarly vocations to undoing more than a few sins of the past (often sins of omission), in critically re-thinking from feminist, gender-queer, or Black critical perspectives, what a "modern mythology" can or should look like, and how comic books in particular might assist to "*dream the myth onwards* and give it a modern dress" (Jung 1959, para. 271).

The essays in this volume fall under two main headings. Part I focuses on the function of comic books as "modern mythologies," and includes both archaeological investigations from comics' storied past, as well as critical revisionings for (and from) the future. Part II underscores the "archetypal" nature of comic book phenomena, focusing on recurrent characters, myththemes, motifs, and the interconnectivity between Jungian depth psychological hermeneutics and the study and practice of comparative mythology.

Craig Chalquist's essay opens Part I by further articulating Jung's injunction to "*dream the myth onwards*" through a critical glance at the contemporary legacy of a "comparative mythology," particularly through a creative re-thinking of Joseph Campbell's "mythogenic zone." Chalquist notes current examples of how authors of comics draw upon mythic material from their own diverse cultural backgrounds to weave tales of fantasy and magic relevant for our time. Chalquist argues that a valid "loreway" – a network of storied performances rich with transformative ideas – has more allure today than any project to reconstitute yesterday's fragmented myths.

Yvonne Chireau's exceptional essay, "From Horror to Heroes: Mythologies of Graphic Voodoo," examines the mythos of Voodoo in comics from the early twentieth century to the present day. Unlike Vodun, an indigenous tradition of West Africa, or Vodou, an African diasporic religion in Haiti, Voodoo is a trope of imagined racial and religious otherness. Comics Voodoo, or what Chireau calls "Graphic Voodoo," comes to the fore in its envisioning of Black religion and spirituality as the loci of spectacular figurations of horror and supernaturalism, and ultimately as an origin source of the Black Superhero as Africana deity. For Chireau, Graphic Voodoo simultaneously reflects and exaggerates fears of the Black

Sacred through the use of sensational narratives and visual illustrations of Africana religions as savage, violent, and demonic.

Erik Davis' single-author study of California's Rick Griffin offers a deep dive into arguably the greatest artist to emerge from the maelstrom of psychedelic visual culture in San Francisco's late 1960s. An early and influential underground "comix" creator, Griffin was additionally known for his rock poster art and album covers. Griffin was also a genuine seeker, drawing concepts as well as images from esoteric sources and fusing these with psychedelia, humor, and dread, typified by his legendary "flying eyeballs" vision. Taking Griffin's esotericism seriously, Davis' chapter shows how Griffin's art intertwined with his concerns regarding the occult, carnality, judgment, and the soul, and how tensions visible in his work led to his conversion to Christianity in the early 1970s, at the peak of the countercultural "Jesus Movement."

Following and furthering Davis' jaunt with the Jesus Movement is Amy Slonaker's "Christian Hippie Comics of the 1970s." Slonaker examines comics aimed at the "Jesus People movement" as it emerged in southern California between the late 1960s through the late 1970s. Her focus on Christian Hippie Comics includes Al Hartley's *Spire Christian Comics*, and *True Komix*, the official comic book of The Children of God, a Christian-based cult born of the Hippie era. Following Jeffrey Kripal, Slonaker's analysis unearths a libidinal structure to Christian Hippie Comics in their conjoining of the numinous and the erotic. She posits that such "tantric" elements in Christian comics may be surprising given Christianity's traditionally repressive attitude toward forms of sexuality; however, as Slonaker suggests, these tantric motifs reflect the Asian influences of the hippie culture which these comics targeted for conversion to Christianity. The resulting comic style includes elements of a tantric revisioning of the Gospel aimed at the hippie youth of the day.

Evans Lansing Smith's "Graphic Mythologies" rounds out the first part of the book in his exploration of the mythologies of the Egyptian Books of the Dead, Navajo Sand Paintings, and C.G. Jung's *Red Book*, with a focus on the journey to the "otherworld." For Smith, such texts form the archetypal ground for the contemporary (re)emergence of graphic media, such as comic books, animated film, and video games, often with overt influence from mythic materials and traditions from past cultures.

Part II, "Archetypal Amplifications," leads with Jungian analyst Jeffrey Kiehl's rich "Archetypal Dimensions of Comic Books." Kiehl's personal opening affords an overview of the Silver Age of comics, with its more

complex and multidimensional characters, focusing on their psychological depth and nuanced nature. Writing as a psychologist, Kiehl interprets the long-standing popularity of comic books as resting upon comics' connectedness to an archetypal dimension of the unconscious. From a depth psychological perspective, these characters serve as personified forms of archetypal energies operating within Jung's "collective unconscious." Kiehl focuses his analysis on archetypal patterns and dynamics within the *Fantastic Four* stories published during the Silver Age, followed by a parallel analysis of Alan Moore's more contemporary comics series *Promethea*. He concludes by considering how each of these comic book series illustrates a "religious function" within the psyche.

Maile Kaku's compelling "All-Female Teams: In Quest of the Missing Archetype," critiques long-standing narratives of all-male heroic teams. To Kaku, such all-male teams have inspired not only comic-book characters but real-life exemplars of comradeship and adventure among "brothers-in-arms." Conversely, Kaku notes, nothing comparable has existed for the opposite sex, with no mythological female-identified archetypes in the narrative landscape. Kaku then sets out in search of the "missing archetype," asking, "If men have their celebrated Brotherhood archetype, why do women lack an analogous Sisterhood archetype?" The archetypal images that emerge of all-female teams resembles what Kaku calls "Furyhood," rather than Sisterhood. The Furies, Maenads, and Amazons of ancient mythologies resurface in the guise of male-bashing superheroine teams and female-ruled planets in the narratives of modern-day comics. Surprising as it may seem, Kaku discovers that stories of female bonding are a relatively recent innovation in the history of comics and in Western narratives as a whole.

John Bucher's "Infirm Relatives and Boy Kings" explores the Green Man archetype in Alan Moore's celebrated *Swamp Thing*. Tracking the archetype of the Green Man, Bucher draws historical connections from this mythic figure's origins to his triumphant 1984 reemergence in the popular imagination via Moore's *Swamp Thing*. Bucher reads *Swamp Thing* as one of the most expansive explorations of the Green Man archetype – even though the mythological figure is never referenced directly. While Bucher's exploration is not the first to suggest that Moore's execution of *Swamp Thing* may be an amplification of the Green Man archetype, his unique approach demonstrates connections beyond the ecological and Dionysian, and instead embraces a lens that magnifies wounding in the representation and narrative of the creature.

John Todd's "The Shadow of the Bat" explores the shamanic archetypal underpinnings of the Batman legacy. Tracing notions of the bat throughout history, Todd investigates changing attitudes of this revered-reviled and fascinating creature. Despite the bat's clear benefit to human and planetary ecology in general, Western culture has demonized it, which begs the question, "Why has so much negative shadow material has been projected onto the bat?" And further, despite such fear of the bat, why has contemporary culture so thoroughly embraced a "Bat-man"? Through interpreting Batman as "psychopomp," Todd explores the redemptive imagery of the bat and what it symbolically contains for modern Westerners.

Jennifer Tronti's "Ritual and Reclamation in *Little Bird*" examines the recent Eisner Award-winning series, *Little Bird: The Fight for Elder's Hope*. *Little Bird* presents a "postapocalyptic vision which pits an obscenely corrupt totalitarian religious regime against an indigenously-inspired rebel community." To Tronti, the comic book offers a picture of archetypal contrasts: institution and individual, other and self, death and life, real and imagined, and story and experience. Through subtle psychological and spiritual depths, and utilizing the hermeneutic landscape of Ritual Theory, Tronti underlies the graphic spectacle of blood and violence in *Little Bird*, giving voice and shape to the myriad ambiguities and ambivalences of the human condition.

Graphic mythologist Li Sumpter's Epilogue on "Worldbuilding and Soul Survival" concludes the volume. Sumpter's work as a community activist-educator as well as artist-mythmaker underscores and spotlights the future-forward direction of worldbuilding amidst fantasies (and realities) of apocalypticism in contemporary urban America. Sumpter imagines new worlds "where black and brown people, women, and all humans not only survive, but emerge more resilient and self-reliant, so they can thrive through whatever comes next."

As a whole, this volume celebrates the plurality, diversity, and richness of over a century of sustained comparative reflection. Utilizing historical-critical, mythological, and depth psychological tools, comic books come to life through a spectrum of hermeneutic horizons – vividly and boldly exemplifying the "new gnosis" that first appeared in the early American "super-story" (Kripal 2011), only to spread rapidly across the Atlantic, and around the globe. While Knowles' (2007) claim that superhero comics provide a "viable salvation myth" in times of crisis might prove difficult to demonstrate empirically, the essays in this volume certainly support, or at least point towards, the gnoseological significance of comic books in

and for contemporary culture. A "new gnosis" crash-landed in Smallville in 1938 and U.S. and British – and perhaps the world's – popular culture (and consciousness) has never been the same.

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PART I

A New Gnosis: Comic Books as Modern Mythology

Dreaming the Myth Onward: Comic Books as Contemporary Mythologies

Craig Chalquist

Abstract As Joseph Campbell noted, our mythologies are in tatters, as fragmented as the global collective consciousness we now reside in. The new "mythogenic zone" of myth-making is not a geographical location, as of old, when communities could tell stories in relative isolation, but within the creatives: the artists, filmmakers, dancers, writers….and comic book creators? This chapter argues this to be the case, noting current examples of how authors of comics draw upon mythic material from their own diverse cultural backgrounds to weave tales of fantasy and magic relevant for our time. A second point is that a valid "loreway," a network of storied performances rich with transformative ideas, has more allure today than any project to reconstitute yesterday's fragmented myths.

Keywords Mythology • Joseph Campbell • Story • Mythogenic • Loreway

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Hold an antique ceramic jar three feet above a marble floor and, when your arms get tired, let go. *Bang*. There you have the state of traditional mythology today: scattered fragments shining and alluring but impossible to reassemble into an undamaged original.

Joseph Campbell is best known as the explicator of the "Hero's Journey" (2008), a pattern George Lucas copied onto Luke Skywalker (who was not so much a Hero, archetypally, as a Mage or Wizard). Myth, declared Campbell, Jung, and a host of other scholar-storytellers, lives everywhere, in all places and times. Yet *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, one of the most influential English language books ever published according to *Time*, declares that the mythic mysteries "have lost their force," their symbols no longer of interest to the psyche (236). From Campbell's book *Creative Mythology*:

> I have employed the term "mythogenetic zone" to designate any geographical area in which such a language of mythic symbols and related rites can be shown to have sprung into being. All such codes are today in dissolution; and, given the miscellaneous composition of our present social bodies and the fact, furthermore, that in our world there exist no more closed horizons within the bounds of which an enclave of shared experience might become established, we can no longer look to communities for the generation of myth. (1991, 93)

With collective archetypes "in full dissolution," states Campbell's *Flight of the Wild Gander*, "the scientific method has released us" from the absolutes of mythological ages (2018, 154). With the dissolving of horizons of collective meaning, "the psychological hold is weakening of the mythological images" (2012, xix). In *The Way of the Animal Powers*, Campbell writes, "We live, today, in a terminal moraine of myths and mythic symbols, fragments large and small of traditions that formerly inspired and gave rise to civilizations" (1998, 8). To Bill Moyers: "What we have today is a demythologized world" (1991, 9).

How is it, then, that mythic images, themes, and motifs return to life continually: the willful Golem robot prototype in Artificial Intelligence; wild Pan, the nature god in our pandemics; Procrustes, the infamous innkeeper and his leg-lopping axe hard at work in "evidence-based" research; Trumpian zombies overrunning the U.S. Congress; Moloch the sacrificial bull god of Assyria alive and hungry on Wall Street?

Although intact mythologies live on here and there around the world, many more have either ossified into literal-minded ideologies or melted into fiction or ridicule. The same is not so, however, for their mythic ingredients. Having splashed out of the broken jar, they now run freely everywhere tales are told, performed, or enacted while grasping zealots ignorant of the flow fight over which fragment holds the most absolute truth. The creatives know better. "The mythogenetic zone today is the individual in contact with his own interior life, communicating through his art with those 'out there'" (Campbell 1991, 93). We do not need Campbell's overemphasis on individualism to see how mythic life goes on not only in our unconscious reenactments, but in film, dance, theater, TV, painting, music, sculpture, sports, scientific discoveries, and everywhere people play creatively. We are stuck with it. As C. G. Jung put it, "The most that we can do is dream the myth onward by giving it a modern dress" (1981, 160).

Including comic books.

The Mythically Tinged Origins of Comic Books

Images strung together into stories reach far back into the history of writing. Cartoons as such have flourished in America and England since the early 1800s. In 1893, William Schmedtgen, an engraver in that most mythic city Chicago, printed color comics into the columns of a newspaper. The first comic strip emerged in 1903 (Ware 2021).

Some of those strips showed a remarkable broadmindedness for their time. "Lucy and Sophie Say Goodbye" (1905), which ran for eight weeks in the *Chicago Tribune*, depicted a star-crossed lesbian couple in love. In the graphic novel *Gasoline Alley* (1918), Frank King's creations aged along with their readers. Admiring the work and beauty of nature, a boy character says, "She can paint better than I can." Thomas Nast's cartoons helped expose "Boss" Tweed's corrupt influence in New York (Kowalski 2020).

Although Rodolphe Töpffer had combined a sequential art narrative into a book back in 1837, the first to bear "comic book" on its back cover was *The Yellow Kid in McFadden's Flats*, created by Richard Outcault (who also popularized word balloons) and published in 1897 as a black-and-white reprint. The Yellow Kid wore only a hand-me-down nightshirt and lurked in slums; the slang printed on his shirt made fun of billboard advertising. Nevertheless, commercial success eventually turned the Kid into merchandise and affirmed its critique.

To consider Outcault for a moment: a cartoonist and painter of outdoor scenery, he provided illustrations for Edison's display of electric lights at the 1888 Centennial Exposition in Cincinnati and, later, set up exhibits for Edison at the World's Fair in Paris. He also made mechanical drawings. Post-Yellow Kid, he followed up with Buster Brown, whose name became a brand of shoes. He crafted the comics for children, but they grew ever more popular with adults, who liked his wit and the mordant honesty of his portrayals of the shadows of city life. He eventually retired to paint, seen walking about here and there sporting a cape and beret. In photographs he resembles Agatha Christie's detective Hercule Poirot.

Like the comics themselves, Outcault of the interesting name presented an alchemical blend of past and future, traditional and progressive. A master of technological life, he also told stories and painted rustic landscapes. He used cartoons supposedly designed for the young to offer adult perspectives on the tribulations of his time. He concerns us because he set an interesting pattern for other creators of comics: bringing together materials from the cultural past and giving them an innovative direction.

Much of this was also true of Schmedtgen, an unhappy illustrator for the *Chicago Daily News*, who sketched the flight of a wild mallard he spotted one day in Lincoln Park. His forays into nature saved his sanity from exposure to traumas like the Spanish-American War and the Haymarket Riot hangings, both of which he covered for the paper. His creativity, inspired by current events and the workings of the natural world, poured into the newspaper comics of the kind that Outcault would eventually format into books.

These progressive transformations of old themes into today's doings run rampant as motif and image in Chicago itself, named after a wild garlic or onion growing there: a Continental Divide homeland for more than a dozen American Indian tribes, then a water transit hub turned industrial metropolis and haven for immigrants. Two of the red stars on the city's flag symbolize innovation: the World Columbian Exposition and the Century of Progress World's Fair. "It is hopeless for the occasional visitor to try to keep up with Chicago," observed Mark Twain in 1883. "She outgrows his prophecies faster than he can make them. She is always a novelty; for she is never the Chicago you saw when you passed through the last time" (2018, 446). The city's first settler was Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, a free Black man who built a new farm there.

All in all, these founders and locales—we could include Cincinnati and New York City, both thematically relevant—seem fitting vehicles for the reassembly of mythic fragments into a new kind of popular literature.

The first monthly comic had appeared in 1922. By the mid-1930s, science fiction, detective stories, and Superman followed. The first Age of Superheroes was at hand, ushered forth by creatives fascinated by the mystical and esoteric (Kripal 2011). In other words, by creatives gripped by the ancient tales of myth and magical lore and willing to bring mythic heroes back to life, albeit in different guise.

The New Mythographers

According to Laurence Maslon and Michael Kantor (2013), today's comic books are our Greek myths. Not just Greek, however. The groundswell began humbly, with an author here and a raconteur there retelling their ancestral sacred stories. And not only about Heracles, Thor, or Zeus, but about Oshun, the goddess of fresh water and love; Osiris, the overseer of the Underworld; heroic Hou Yi, the archer from China; wise Spider Woman of the Navajo and Hopi; and La Llorona, the weeping woman who drowned her children rather than letting them be taken away from her. All over the world, the tellers were reclaiming their storied heritage.

Some were also transforming that heritage, fitting it to their time and place and personal struggles and insights. Dr. Lee Francis of Laguna Pueblo, New Mexico, refers to himself as an "indiginerd." He has also been called "the Stan Lee of Indian Country." With four partners he founded Red Planet Books & Comics in 2017 as the only Native comic shop in the world. It also serves as headquarters for the Indigenous Comic Con and the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. Lee also founded Native Realities Press to encourage American Indian comic writers, game designers, and artists. The press has published *Tales of the Mighty Code Talkers* by Kickapoo author Arigon Starr (author of the comic book *Super Indian*), for example, and *Tribal Force* by Yaqui and Mexican Jon Proudstar. His was the first book to present an entire team of Native superheroes (Kamerick 2017).

These comics take on hard issues. *These Savage Shores*, written by Ram V. with a team of artists, blends vampirism with East India Company greed and colonization in 1700s India. *Helm Greycastle* by Henry Barajas is a Latinx fantasy about an abducted dragon prince immersed in Aztec mythology and Mexican history. *Djeliya*, by Senegalese author Juni Ba,

starts where the world ends after a wizard pushed a button and destroyed it. You will find the very last prince in a disco, accompanied by a West African bard and musician, both planning on how to pick up the pieces that remain.

"What is the inner life of a shunned figure?" Robin Ha addresses this in *Gumiho*, named for a Korean succubus. What is life like as a first-generation immigrant in Northern California? Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese* responds, fantastically and poignantly. What does it mean to return to a homeland you have never been to? Chinese American writer Ethan Young, author of *The Dragon Path*, knows. Audiences, he notes, want to hear from people who share their lived experiences (Quaintance 2021).

Are these and other comic book creators at work on a new Big Story, Religion, or revived Mythology for our time? No. Rather than investing their energies in globalizing frameworks that will never hold everyone, they pour their vitality into collaborative fantasies that stretch between how things are and how they could be. Rather than institutionalizing their visions, they invite us all to share them.

Like myths, the comics don't stay in the comic books. The Wakanda Dream Lab (n.d.) moves Afrofuturism and Blacktivism forward by drawing on the magical world of Wakanda to "develop a vision, principles, values and framework for prefigurative organizing for a new base of activists, artists, and fans for Black Liberation. We believe Black Liberation begets liberation of all peoples" (wakandadreamlab.com/about). My term for these sorts of creative imaginings with real-world consequences is *enchantivism*: telling tales that may begin in injustice or injury but grow more spacious in the telling, inviting the listeners to imagine the kind of just, equitable, and delightful world we would enjoy living in (2007).

A Gnosis of Bright Fragments

> In the context of a traditional mythology, the symbols are presented in socially maintained rites, through which the individual is required to experience, or will pretend to have experienced, certain insights, sentiments, and commitments. In what I am calling "creative" mythology, on the other hand, this order is reversed: the individual has had an experience of his own—of order, horror, beauty, or even mere exhilaration—which he seeks to communicate through signs; and if his realization has been of a certain depth and import, his communication will have the value and force of living

> myth—for those, that is to say, who receive and respond to it of themselves, with recognition, uncoerced. (Campbell 1991, 4)

Michael Foster and Jeffrey Tolbert edited *The Folkloresque*, a volume in which they gave examples of how folklore and popular culture overlap (2015). The folkloresque occurs when folkloric elements inform commercial works, and from there return to the audience. The relationship is not linear, producer to consumer, but circular, a conversation between creator and reader (or listener, or performer) informed by mythic fragments.

In our time, ancient mythologies do not speak to world audiences (hence the paucity of myth programs in academia), but myth-embedded fantasy productions certainly do. *Spirited Away*, an animated film bursting with mythic motifs from many cultures, is the most popular film ever to air in Japan. *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, DC Comics, and Marvel have swelled into billion-dollar financial empires protected by threshold-guardian copyright attorneys. Their success depends directly on public enthusiasm.

Franchises have no monopoly on this enthusiasm. The *Kalevala*, an epic stitched together out of Finnish folktales by country doctor Elias Lönnrot in the late 1800s, galvanized Finnish independence, national pride, regional art and music, architecture, education, and language studies. *Kalevala* characters show up all over Finland as locale and business names. The Finns celebrate Kalevala Day on February 28th; it is also called Finnish Culture Day (Ennelin 2019).

According to Campbell, living myth serves four functions: 1. the religious (metaphysical-mystical) by putting us in touch with the numinous; 2. the cosmological, to picture our vast surround; 3. the social, for group norms; and 4. the psychological, for lifelong individuation. Can popular literature and art fulfil these? 1. They certainly speak to our sense of wonder, awe, and even spiritual resonance. 2. Campbell believed the cosmological function, which explains our place in the cosmos, was now met by science. We might add science fiction, magical realism, and scientifically informed comics. 3. Belief in authorities, divine or otherwise, continues to give way to finding a center of ethical meaning not only within, but between us—including in the fantasies and fables that inspire us. 4. Campbell and Jung believed that every age must bring forth its own archetypally rooted symbols, making use "not of one mythology but of all the dead and set-fast symbologies of the past," via imagination, storytelling, art, performance, and creativity, "out of which his own myth and

life-building 'Yes because' may then unfold" (1991, 677). Comic books do that, in abundance.

Incidentally, we have been at this crossroads before:

> The mythopoetic creativity of the Celtic bards and fabulators of the period of the great European awakening from 1066 to c. 1140 was in essence equivalent to that mythogenetic process: an appropriation and mastery, not of space, however, but of time, not of the raw facts of a geography, but of the novelties, possibilities, raw facts, dangers, pains, and wonders of a new age: a "mythological updating." (Campbell 1991, 521)

Which suggests an important question: if our mythically tinged creations, including comic books, possess "the value and force of living myth," what is to stop us from creating our own mythic wisdom pathways and even spiritualities out of these scattered materials?

In the online article "Do We Really Need a New Mythology?" I wrote:

> We start with a series of fascinating stories packed with folkloric symbols, plots, and other rich ingredients. Then we add drama, ritual, music, movement, personal practices, celebration feasts marking special times of the year. Emblems and artwork. Rites of passage. Ethical values and ideals, including service to each other (2020).

Then we thicken the mixture with ingredients not normally found in institutionalized religion:

> Self-correcting comedy to keep us from taking ourselves too seriously, for example. Communities not of obedience but of creative collaboration and mutual support. Games of various kinds. Health and wellness routines that don't become compulsive. Instead of tithes or indulgences (= pay us to get to heaven), transparent donations to sustain, not inflate, the work and its dreamers as well as to support urgent social justice causes. Instead of a clergy power pyramid, fantasists dreaming together and inspiring one another. Instead of a sacred manual, a flurry of living books, articles, stories, comics, films, and who knows what so long as it's imaginatively true to the spirit of…(2020)

Of what? Of the new *loreway*: an imaginative body of fictionally framed narrative, performance, entertainment, and personal practice that fills out a mythic-feeling story arc and provides a sense of play, fun, community,

and meaning to participate in. Not a legendarium, mythology, sect, or franchise. Not an antique jar glued together from its shards. Instead, art and craft, film and performance that draw on mythic symbols and motifs and characters to convey deep life truths, inspiring role models, practices to try out, and embodied realizations about who we are, where we are, and who we can be to one another.

Dream up a set of inspiring stories that fit our time, add ingredients, and cook. Can a meal prepared from our loreologizing recipe offer spiritual, philosophical, and psychological food for the hungry and thirsty soul? Judging from those among us whose creative work serves as their wisdom path as well as their main source of enthusiasm for life, it would seem possible.

Perhaps that word "gnosis" can give us a hint. The study of myth is said to confer it. The ancient Greeks used various words for different kinds of knowledge: to be skilled at something (*techne*), to theorize or conceptualize scientifically (*episteme*), to be wisely practical (Aristotle's *phronesis*). In Plato's hands, another of these words, *gnosis*, joined itself to deep reflection. By the time the walkers of the Path of Hermes Trismegistus, otherwise known as Hermeticism, got ahold of this word in first-century Alexandra, from where it moved over into the Gnostic branch of that ancient Egyptian tradition, gnosis referred to a number of interior knowings of the deep sort:

- Visionary or imaginative seeing below surfaces and appearances
- Self-identification as a spiritual seeker outside the mainstream
- A sense of liberation from the mainstream illusions and delusions
- A sense of meaningful continuity extending beyond one's lifetime
- Knowledge of ever-deepening spiritual strength
- Interpretation of everyday events as symbols (Lachman 2011).

As the Hermetics knew and the Gnostics demonstrated by going extinct as elitists, we develop gnosis not to separate from others, but to join with self, others, world, and cosmos. With authentic gnosis—what some Gnostics called *kardiognosis*, knowledge of the heart and mind, imagination and intuition—we face inward and outward simultaneously.

Gnosis used to be the prerogative of the few: Egyptian priests, followers of the Way, self-called Gnostics praying in private. We live in a different time, where maybe—who knows?—a bit of enlightenment awaits the turning of a comic book page.

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From Horror to Heroes: Mythologies of Graphic Voodoo in Comics

Yvonne Chireau

Abstract This essay examines the *mythemes* of Voodoo in comics from the early twentieth century to the present day. Unlike Vodun, an indigenous tradition of West Africa, or Vodou, an African diasporic religion in Haiti, Voodoo is a trope of imagined racial and religious otherness. Comics Voodoo – or what I call Graphic Voodoo – comes to the fore in its envisioning of black religion and spirituality as the loci of spectacular figurations of horror and supernaturalism, and ultimately as an origin source of the black Superhero as Africana deity. It is my contention that Graphic Voodoo simultaneously reflects and exaggerates fears of the black Sacred through the use of sensational narratives and visual illustrations of Africana religions as savage, violent, and demonic.

Keywords Horror • Graphic Voodoo • Black superheroes • Comics • Race

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Introduction

Throughout much of the twentieth century, religion and comics were viewed with ambivalence. Religious topics were considered too "adult" for underage readers and too sectarian for general audiences, and religion was largely ignored by the secular newspaper strips, cartoons, serials, and anthologies that made up American comics media. Moreover, after the mid-century, disparagement of religion was deemed off-limits, when comics publishers established industry guidelines in order to regulate their content. "Ridicule…of any religious or racial group is never permissible," declared the general standards adopted by the Comics Code Authority in 1954.[1] Nevertheless, a marked exception to the rules can be seen in comics' treatment of the spiritual practices of black people. Specifically, the indigenous religions of Africa, black diaspora religions such as Haitian *Vodou*, and the African American vernacular traditions known as Hoodoo-Conjure, were signified in ways that remained remarkably consistent for over a hundred years.[2] Due to their subordination in the grand hierarchy of racial representation, these Africana traditions were portrayed in ways that amounted to the visual slander of their sacred beliefs and practices.[3]

[1] "Comics Magazine Association of America Comics Code: 1954," in Amy K. Nyberg, *Seal of Approval : the History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 192. This article focuses primarily on twentieth century comics that were created and scripted by white writers and artists, and distributed by commercial, white-owned comics publishing companies.

[2] One of the earliest comics illustrations of African-derived religion is an 18th century English cartoon broadside of a Jamaican *Obeah* practitioner named *Mumbo Jumbo the Obi Man*. See "Johnny Newcome in Love in the West Indies" (London, 1808), original print at the British Museum, online at https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1877-0811-207, accessed 2-26-22. On *Vodun* in West Africa, see Dana Rush, *Vodun in Coastal Benin*: *Unfinished, Open-Ended, Global* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2013); and Timothy Landry, *Vodun: Secrecy and the Search for Divine Power* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). On Haitian *Vodou*, see Benjamin Hebblewaite, *A Transatlantic History of Haitian Vodou* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), and Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); on Hoodoo-Conjure, see Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), and Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

[3] Joseph M. Murphy, "Black Religion and 'Black Magic': Prejudice and Projection in Images of African-Derived Religions." *Religion* 20 (1990): 325.

In this article, I examine how Africana religions have been abstracted and denigrated in twentieth-century comics with reference to *Voodoo*. The propagation of *Voodoo* as a comics trope commenced with the marginalization of a cluster of black sacred traditions from Africa, Haiti, and the US, which are known by similar-sounding names: *Vodun*, a West African religion of initiation and ceremonial activities for divine beings called *Vodun; Hoodoo,* a black American system of ancestral ritual, magic, and healing; and *Vodou*, a Haitian religion of rituals and prayers of dedicated service to spirits called *loa*.[4] The promotion of *Voodoo* in popular culture began in earnest during the 1920s and would continue throughout the rest of the century with Voodoo-themed literature, theatrical performances, and Hollywood films as well as comics. As a mythic invention, Voodoo manifests what Adam McGee has called a "psychic disease" of the collective imagination, with little relationship to historical religious practices.[5] My goal is not to offer a literary appraisal of this phenomenon; rather, I wish to bring scholarly insights to bear on a hermeneutics of religion, using the term *Graphic Voodoo* to refer to the characterization of the deeply rooted beliefs and rituals of Africana faith traditions as evil or malignant.

The complicated genealogy of *Voodoo* belies its origins as a synecdoche for black religious alterity. The term entered the American lexicon more than one hundred twenty- five years after the antislavery rebellion that brought independence to Haiti in 1791. In the early nineteenth century, the shocking events that led to the downfall of the world's richest colony and the wrenching liberation of the enslaved black population reverberated across the French- and English-speaking world and the US South. Stunned by the cataclysmic fracturing of an old regime and the coming forth of the new, European and American writers established the contours of a Voodoo mythos gleaned from the literary tradition known as the Victorian Gothic. Nineteenth-century writers blurred the lines between

[4] Having family resemblances, "Africana traditions" is used here to refer to black religions with historical origins in Africa and its diaspora that share similar cultural antecedents. I use the term "black religions" as an ideological designation to describe the religious orientations of the religions of black people and their descendants in the Caribbean and the US. The "Africana Sacred" is an idea that incorporates black religious traditions into a generalized category of academic analysis. See Dianne M. Stewart, and Tracey E. Hucks. "Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field." *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 1 (2013): 28-77.

[5] Adam McGee, "Haitian Vodou and voodoo: Imagined religion and popular culture." *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 41.2 (2012): 231-256.

fiction, history, and political commentary by their "Gothicisation" of the Haitian Revolution in travel narratives, romantic novels, and broadsides that functioned as "sources of imaginative fancy and personal entertainment."[6] Caribbean Gothic texts dramatized the dangers and powers of black spirituality with forbidding stories of *Obeah* and *Vaudoux* that described mysterious conspiracies and subterranean cults of sorcery, flourishing among former slaves. By the twentieth century, the term "Voodoo" had supplanted the earlier *Vaudoux* to describe an assortment of unauthorized practices of African origin. The true essence of Haitian *Vodou*, a religious tradition of reverent interactions with sacred forces of nature, ancient deities, and ancestral spirits, would be adulterated by writers and artists in the sensational fictions of Graphic Voodoo.[7]

It was in the early twentieth century that Graphic Voodoo took on a life of its own in the comics. During the 1930s era of American pulp periodical magazines and syndicated strips, *Voodoo* would be headlined alongside popular costumed hero comics like *The Blue Beetle*, *The Angel*, and *The Sandman* as a force that perpetrated despicable criminal activity. *Voodoo* was the utility term given to the mysterious impulse that pitted crooks against grim-faced vigilantes in seedy noir dramas like *Detective Comics* and *The Spirit*. Meanwhile, entertainment industries seized upon American fascination with Voodoo, prompting a cultural turn in film, theater, and

[6] Matt Clavin notes that the rise of Gothic romance at the turn of the nineteenth century coincided with the publication of historical narratives of the Haitian Revolution, which use many of the conventions of the former ("Race, Rebellion, and the Gothic: Inventing the Haitian Revolution," *Early American Studies* 5.1 (2007): 1-29; see also Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, "Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic: The Caribbean," *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 229-257).

[7] *Vaudoux* was used to refer to a "dance" and a "serpent god" believed to be worshiped by enslaved African people in Saint Domingue. See Alasdair Pettinger, "From Vaudoux to Voodoo." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 40.4 (2004): 415-425. For a corrective history on the uses and misuses of the word *Voodoo*, see Kate Ramsey, "From' Voodooism' to 'Vodou': Changing a US Library of Congress Subject Heading," *Journal of Haitian Studies* (2012): 14-25; and Leslie Desmangles, "Replacing the Term" Voodoo" with" Vodou": A Proposal," *Journal of Haitian Studies* (2012): 26-33.

musical productions, as comics followed suit.[8] Within the nascent US animation industry of the 1930s, for instance, Voodoo themes abounded in mimetic performances of black folk worship that were restaged as comedy for the pleasure of white spectators. In syndicated newspaper comic strips like *Tarzan* and *Jungle Jim* whiteness was promoted as exceptional and blackness as subversive with stereotypes of African Voodoo priests and witch doctors (here, ironically, we find one of the first black antagonists to be featured in a recurring role, a character aptly named *The Voodoo Man,* starring in two late depression era comic book series, *The Flame* and *Weird Comics*). In the early twentieth century, animators would use caricatures and minstrelsy to represent African American folk religions with some of the most egregiously racist depictions of black culture to appear in Hollywood's technologically advanced "colored cartoons." Later, cartoon properties such as Bugs Bunny and Donald Duck were branded in comics books with titles such as *Voodoo Hoodoo.* During World War II, Graphic Voodoo was used as a dramatic foil for iconic superheroes like *Captain America, the Human Torch* and *Wonder Woman,* whose patriotic efforts involved battles with incongruously-placed Voodoo Nazis in Africa. Comic books in the postwar period also situated Voodoo plots in the remote tropical settings of Africa, the fantastic backdrop of dramatic confrontations between white jungle kings and indigenous black miscreants. And in the 1950s to the mid 1960s, when the black presence would largely disappear from American mainstream comics, Graphic Voodoo still thrived in the subterranean realms of horror fiction, with titles like *Voodoo, Tales of Voodoo, Terrors of the Jungle,* and *Phantom Witch Doctor,* which recycled the tropes of primitive supernaturalism in Africa and the Caribbean. Finally, in the last decades of the century, comics would re-appropriate Graphic Voodoo as a mythic domain of black spirituality and supernaturalism that featured Africana superhero characters. All of these diverse and

[8] Christian Garland, "Hollywood's Haiti: Allegory, Crisis, and Intervention in The Serpent and the Rainbow and White Zombie," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 19: 273-283; Melissa Cooper, *Making Gullah: A History of Sapelo Islanders, Race, and the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Michael Largey, *Vodou Nation: Haitian Art, Music, and Cultural Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 147.

varied examples disclose the continuity of Graphic Voodoo in the comics, from the demonic to the divine, and from horror to heroes.[9]

As a "medium of extremes," says Fredrik Stromberg, comics utilize caricatures to simplify their subjects, reducing physical characteristics with a shorthand of basic, recognizable symbols. The use of stereotypes to depict members of racial and ethnic groups is a means of forsaking complexity and nuance to highlight perceived group attributes or features to delineate the whole, a common practice in the comics.[10] Representations of race evince the ideological beliefs of comics creators and consumers, where the stereotyping of black subjects and white supremacy are mutually constitutive. In the history of black representation, comics have held a disreputable place, as they have been used to portray Africans and African-descended people as inferiors, whether in political cartoons, illustrated dime novels, or pulp magazines. Furthermore, we will see that comics defamed Africana sacred traditions as a matter of course.[11] Publishers of religious comics graphica, for the most part, generalized depictions of race within sequential art renderings of the Bible, Christian comics, and

[9] These sources include Graphic Voodoo comic books from a period of more than fifty years. See, "The Voodoo Sacrifice," *Blue Beetle Comics* (1939); "The Voodoo Man Cometh!" *Weird Comics* 1 (April 1940); "Voodoo in Manhattan!" *The Spirit* (June 1940); "The Voodoo Murders," *Human Torch* (All Winners Comics, May, 1941); "Black Voodoo Murders!" *Captain America* 28 (July 1943); "Voodoo Magic," "The Voodoo Sorcerer!" *Adventure Comics* 63 (June 1941); *The Sandman* (June 1941); "Tale of the Witch Doctor's Cauldron," *Wonder Woman* 19 (September, 1949); *The Human Torch* 36 (April 1954); "The Smashing Case of Voodoo in New York," *Blue Beetle Comics* 23 (July 1943), and "Vladim the Voodoo Master" (Winter 1940); "Voodoo Boo Boo," *Bugs Bunny* 78 (April 1961); "The Voodoo Doom of Superman," *Action Comics* 413 (June 1972); "The Voodoo Showboat," *Captain Marvel Adventures* 22, (March 1943); On Voodoo and cartoon animation, see Henry T. Sampson, *That's Enough, Folks: Black Images in Animated Cartoons, 1900-1960* (Scarecrow Press, 1998).

[10] Fredrik Strömberg, *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History* (Fantagraphics Books, 2003), 7; on blackness and caricature, see Rebecca Wanzo, *The Content of Our Caricature: African American Comic Art and Political Belonging* (New York: NYU Press, 2020).

[11] Jeffrey A. Brown, "Panthers and Vixens: Black Superheroines, Sexuality and Stereotypes in Contemporary Comic Books," in Howard & Jackson, eds. *Black Comics: The Politics of Race and Representation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 126-129; Frances Gateward & John Jennings, *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Mark Singer, "Black Skins, White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race," *African American Review* 36.1 (2002): 107–119.

illustrated tracts created for churches and parochial schools.[12] However, in order to depict Africana religious subjects, comics artists and writers often distilled specific, racialized elements, whether they reflected real characteristics or not. For example, visual clichés like the "Voodoo doctor" illustrate how the African sacred was linked to signature objects in order to create negative associations between religion and magic, fetishism, and idolatry. *Voodoo* imagery embellished outward attire with religious attributes, using raffia skirts, ceremonial masks, horns, skulls, bone necklaces, and plumed headdresses to convey the tangible presence of blackness and "Africanness" as spiritual affect, even when applied to anthropomorphized animal characters and diminutive pickaninnies, as was common with the serial cartoon comics of the so-called golden age of animation.[13]

In this essay I treat Graphic Voodoo and its racial and religious artifacts as mythic formations. The archetypes of Voodoo are deeply imprinted on the collective imagination with images of bloody sacrifices, ugly heathen gods, bizarre rituals, relics of death, and the unfathomable blackness of bodies dancing and chanting to throbbing drums around a circle of flames. What is the meaning of these cynical appraisals of the human experience? Graphic Voodoo externalizes symbols that originate from the depths of the psyche, as a demonizing category of Western consciousness. "[R]acism," as Laennec Hurbon observes, "gathers its efficacy from the unconscious level of phantasms." Since myth expresses itself through material forms, it is possible to locate those forms within a precise historical milieu through processes of ontological excavation. In what follows I

[12] Joshua Fronk, *Sequential Religion: The History of Religion in Comic Books & Graphic Novels* (PhD diss., Fashion Institute of Technology, State University of New York, 2016). An exception to the race- neutral approach taken by sectarian publishers can be seen with American Catholic comics such George Pfaum's series *Treasure Chest of Fun and Fact,* published from 1946-1972. See "Catholic American Citizenship: Prescriptions for Children from Treasure Chest of Fun and Fact, 1946-1963," in *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, ed. A. David Lewis & Christine Hoff Kraemer (New York: Continuum, 2010), 63-77; on black religions in the comics, see Yvonne Chireau, "Looking for Black Religions in 20th Century Comics, 1931–1993," *Religions* 10.6 (2019): 400.

[13] Nelson, "Studying Black Comic Strips," in *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, 94; Bruce Lenthall, "Outside the Panel – Race in America's Popular Imagination: Comic Strips Before and After World War II," *Journal of American Studies* 32.1 (1998): 39-61; Ian Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890–1945* (London: Smithsonian Institution, 1998), 62-75; Sarita McCoy Gregory, "Disney's Second Line: New Orleans, Racial Masquerade, and the Reproduction of Whiteness in The Princess and the Frog," *Journal of African American Studies,* 14.4 (2010): 441.

argue that the epistemological impact of the Haitian Revolution was sustained through psychosocial projections of the black Other. In order to uncover the patterns of Graphic Voodoo we look to the xenophobic world views that originated the categories of race and religion in modernity – not only as the material products of oppositions that emerged in the Atlantic world but as collective formations of the global unconscious.[14]

Recent studies of comics and religion have considered the phenomenological aspects of religion and mythology in comic books, graphic novels, and fictional literature. In his book *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal,* Jeffrey Kripal examines the power of myth in catalyzing paranormal experiences for comics readers and writers. The notion of "living mythology" might normally be applied to performances of fan culture such as LARP, and comics cosplay, but for Kripal, comics mythologies are composed of dynamic narratives and capacious symbolism that can also evoke extraordinary shifts in consciousness. The background scripts that play out in comics storytelling and worldmaking are what Kripal calls comics *mythemes*, which are an extension of the authorization functions of myth. The notion of comic book mythemes points us to the ways that obscured aspects of the psyche can become "real." This method of reading comics and religion provides the point of departure for the following discussion of Graphic Voodoo.[15]

Drawing upon *Mutants and Mystics'* interpretative framework, I maintain that Graphic Voodoo mythemes constitute and are constituted by a racial "Super-story" that runs like a current through the comics universe. However, if comics are presumed to project archetypes from beyond mundane reality, then the social dimensions of myth cannot be overlooked. An analysis of Graphic Voodoo brings both race and religion to the fore of

[14] Laënnec Hurbon, "American Fantasy and Haitian Vodou," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (1995): 181-197. Recent theories of geopsychoanalysis provide suggestive insights into what is called the "colonial unconscious" as a site for charting the psychic imprint of the diverse national, political, and cultural collectivities of the early modern Atlantic world. On the idea of the "global unconscious" see Warwick Anderson, Deborah Jenson, & Richard C. Keller, eds. *Unconscious Dominions: Psychoanalysis, Colonial Trauma, and Global Sovereignties* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[15] Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). In this vein I argue that the origins of the racial epistemology of Graphic Voodoo might be located in the deep structures of myth, since myth also gives form to history and religion. On comics, religion, and myth, see Christopher Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes* (Newburyport, MA: Weiser Books, 2007).

comics mythologizing. And while Graphic Voodoo texts reveal little that is real or true about historical Africana religions, they do highlight patterns that have inured in particular forms of the racial-religious imaginary. A closer look at Graphic Voodoo can shed light on the ways comics subsume racial and religious meanings in tropes and patterns that approximate Kripal's idea of mythemes.[16]

Focusing primarily on white comics creators, subjects, and readers, *Mutants and Mystics* expands on figurations of myth in superhero and science fiction comic books with an eye toward the paranormal experiences they evoke. These comics recount glorious epics of mankind's cosmic destiny, the potentialities of expanded consciousness, and vivid contacts with extraterrestrial beings of light and wisdom. Similarly, Graphic Voodoo comics underwrite a kind of speculative fiction that encompasses science fiction, fantasy and horror. In these, however, progressive and positive visions are inverted with atavistic fixations on imagined threats to whiteness, often with disturbed and unsettling presences that highlight stunted ideations of death and fear. Unlike Kripal's comics mythemes which validate transformative states of awakened spiritual cognition with elevating experiences of the divine and liberating notions of the human-as-god, Graphic Voodoo mythemes reformulate acute anxieties of the demonic that are drawn from the inner structures of the subconscious. Within Graphic Voodoo figurations of race and religion, apperception derives not from edifying mystical experiences, nor from the actualization of the spiritual Self, but from an awareness of whiteness in relation to blackness, in its racist subliminalities.[17]

[16] While not using the term *mythemes*, Anna Beatrice Scott identifies aesthetic "conflations" in what she calls "confabulations" of blackness in comics images and stories, including racialized ideas of supernatural power and embodiment ("Superpower vs Supernatural: Black Superheroes and the Quest for a Mutant Reality," *Journal of Visual Culture* 5.3 (2006): 295-314.

[17] Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*; on whiteness as religious orientation, see Stephen C. Finley & Lori Latrice Martin, "The Complexity of Color and the Religion of Whiteness," in *Color Struck: How Race and Complexion Matter in the "Color-blind" Era* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 179-196. Of course, in referring to "race," in this paper I emphasize whiteness as the dominant ontology in US culture over and against blackness. An example of the de-racializing or un-racializing of one of the most well-known Graphic Voodoo symbols can be seen with the figure of the zombie, who has been transformed into a monstrous entity and most dreaded effigy of malign sorcery, a pop culture and cinema celebrity, now deracinated and universally appropriated. See John Cussans, *Undead Uprising: Haiti, Horror, and the Zombie Complex* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017], 101-07).

What then, are the secret origins of Graphic Voodoo? As an early viral concept, *Voodoo* was formed as an aftereffect of the first successful anticolonial uprising in the western hemisphere, a devastating and violent encounter that transformed black slaves into free citizens. As an overdetermined cultural proposition that burdened Africana religions with insurgent supernaturalism, the idea of *Voodoo* channeled centuries of racial angst from Haiti, the modern harbinger of terror in the global unconscious. In the twentieth century, submerged memories of the legacies of Haiti and its discontents would shape how racial and religious encounters between Africa and its diaspora, and the West were imagined. In one vital stream, Graphic Voodoo can be traced to the inception of the Gothic aesthetic in white European literature. The Victorian Gothic incorporated descriptive elements of Africana traditions of the Caribbean in writings that referenced *Obeah* in the English-speaking West Indies and *Vaudoux* in the Francophone context.[18] Yet, in another stream, it was the historic fall of Saint-Domingue that brought deeply repressed fears of African-inspired spirituality and black empowerment into white mythic self-consciousness. In the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution – a calamitous event of epic proportions – Western powers would register the image of the new republic as a "monstrous anomaly" upon which nightmares of race and religion would thereafter be imprinted. Followed by a nineteen-year military occupation of Haiti in the early twentieth century, the *Voodoo* mythos culminated in the ongoing revilement of Africana spirituality in Western culture. These mythologies of religious and racial alterity would transform images of the esteemed traditions of the Africana Sacred into debased icons.[19]

[18] *Obeah,* an African-originating practice of spiritual healing, harming, and self-defense originated among enslaved black people in the English Caribbean, including the islands of Jamaica and Barbados. Much like Vodou in Haiti, obeah was associated with slave resistance through magical means and was persecuted as a kind of sorcery and witchcraft by authorities in various periods. See J. Brent Crosson, *Experiments with Power: Obeah and the Remaking of Religion in Trinidad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), and Kate Ramsey, "Powers of Imagination and Legal Regimes against 'Obeah' in the Late Eighteenth-and Early Nineteenth-Century British Caribbean," *Osiris* 36.1 (2021): 46-63.

[19] On Haiti's forgotten histories in myth and memory, see especially Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015); Cussans, *Undead Uprising: Haiti, Horror and the Zombie Complex*, 29; Nick Nesbitt, "Haiti, the Monstrous Anomaly," in *The Idea of Haiti: Rethinking Crisis and Development* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 3-26.

Graphic Voodoo in the Jungle

Prior to Haiti becoming the "magic island" of religious horror, American comics looked to the "dark continent" of Africa for racial fantasies and adventure. Jungle adventure comics were the distant offshoots of travel accounts and ethnographies of Empire in the nineteenth century, which referenced Africa as a timeless and abstract geographical Other. By the mid twentieth century, jungle-themed adventures had become some of the most profitable and widely-read comics publications. With titles like *Jungle Comics*, *Jungle Action*, and *Jungle Adventures*, comics gave voice to mythemes that treated race and religion at the margins while mapping the adventures of white protagonists and black villains in exotic locales. Graphic Voodoo comic books adopted action hero conventions with portrayals of white jungle queens and kings and their black nemeses, who were most often depicted as malevolent Voodoo priests and witch doctors. Jungle fantasies positioned African characters as savages while also minimizing their roles so as to magnify white heroic figures whose presence as savior symbols obscured or ignored the real history of black subjugation by Europeans, and the special horrors of colonialism in Africa.[20] Characterizing the subordination of black figures in World War II era comics in contrast with strong, morally superior white male and female heroines, comics historian William Savage remarks that:

> Like Tarzan…jungle lords and ladies…were white people who "ruled" or at the very least held considerable influence over various "inferior" species, including lions, panthers, snakes, elephants and black people. The status of blacks as items of fauna underscored the imperialist, colonialist, paternalistic,

[20] The most popular characters of the jungle adventure genre included leading white protagonists in the tradition of Edgar Rice Burroughs' celebrated Tarzan novels, published some 25 years earlier, such as *The Phantom* (1936), *Sheena: Queen of the Jungle* (1938), and *Mandrake the Magician* (1934). Brian Street describes the consensus imaginary of the "primitive" that shaped views in fiction and non-fiction writings on African religions in the twentieth century. He notes, "'Primitive' man…spent his whole life in fear of spirits and mystical beings; his gullibility was exploited by self-seeking priests and kings, who manipulated religion to gain a hold on the minds of their simple subjects; he worshiped animals and trees, tried to control the mystical forces of nature by ceremony, ritual, taboos, and sacrifices, and explained the wonders of the universe in imaginative but unscientific myths" (*The Savage in Literature* [New York: Routledge, 1975], 7; see also Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990]).

> and racist thrust of the jungle comics – a thrust otherwise indicated by specific descriptions of black behavior.[21]

African religious authorities played secondary roles in the comics as devious Voodoo masters, conniving witch doctors, and sinister sorcerers with powers and abilities that emanated evil intent. Jungle adventures were hugely popular during the World War II era, as they capitalized on male readers' desires for escapist literature with exciting fantasies in faraway places. In real terms, however, Graphic Voodoo jungle adventures reimagined encounters between Africans and the West within the asymmetries of empire, white male subjectivity, and other discursive configurations of race and power. Protagonists with ideophonic names like *Toka*, *Jo-Jo*, *Ka-Zar* and *Ka'Anga*, acted as purveyors of justice in the essential struggle between good and evil, externalizing formations of scientific racism, and affirming the display of embodied male whiteness as the visual ideal of comics heroism.[22] Consider the cover of *Jungle Comics #77*, a series from the World War II era. The gaze is drawn to the striking conflagration of racialized terror and erotic supernaturalism. The stylistic realism contrived a wild untamed African backdrop, although it is not clear, geographically, where the action takes place. Featuring a black-skinned masked villain, posed as a mad scientist, to experiment on a supine, scantily-clad white female captive. With ominous ritual accoutrements, a Kota sculpture, and embattled half-naked bodies, the *Voodoo-Master* is called out on the cover blurb as a murderous villain. An incipient spear fight and a titillating bondage scenario round out the tableau of the physical enactment of deadly force on the bodies of the white and black figures. Graphic Voodoo jungle comics such as these normally depicted conventional crime and mystery stories set in an otherworldly African wilderness where whites encountered primitive blacks in need of the guidance and influence of western civilization. As a combination of the "crash landed alien" concept from *Mutants and Mystics* and the "super hero with a secret identity" trope, Tarzan-type protagonists engaged foreign Otherness as an extension of the nineteenth century US frontier doctrine. Kripal's mythemes of "orientation" and "alienation" also figure prominently in jungle comics' allegorizing of white fantasies of prehistoric tribal worlds, with Africa

[21] William Savage, *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 76.

[22] Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997), 161-163.

pictured as a timeless geography of tropical ecologies, lost cities, and backward black tribes existing in thrall to the tyranny of Voodoo sorcery.[23] Black religions were exemplified by charlatan characters, corrupt leaders, and venal criminals of varying persuasions. As mythical accounts of white supremacy, jungle adventure comics enacted African immorality and spiritual derangement in imagined geographies that were formed in the context of black subjection in America.

Comics' jungle adventures may be contrasted with Graphic Voodoo productions that introduced younger audiences to Africana traditions by framing race and religion as more of a laughing matter. Deploring the insidiousness of black stereotypes, Fredric Wertham, a psychologist and harsh critic of comics' negative social impacts on children in the 1950's, highlighted the racist implications of jungle comics. "The [comic] book depicts colored natives as stereotyped caricatures, violent, cowardly, cannibalistic and so superstitious," he claimed, "that they get scared by seltzer tablets and popping corn and lie down in abject surrender before the white boys."[24] While situating Africana religions as savage, the older Graphic Voodoo tropes trafficked in humor as racial and religious ridicule with cartoons and animation that provided a kind of comic relief with reassurances of white superiority to American youth.

Graphic Voodoo in Cartoon Comics

In his book *The Colored Cartoon: Black Presentation in American Animated Short Films, 1907-1954*, Christopher Lehman argues that the success of depression-era cartoon animation owed much to the resonance of caricatures of blackness. Blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville entertainment styles inspired the creation of many noteworthy cartoons and comics in the decades prior to the Second World War. Graphic Voodoo cartoons synthesized versions of the African sacred, exaggerating clownishness with an egregious use of "Negro" dialect, along with frantic dancing and shouting. Religion-themed cartoons during this period included the biblical

[23] Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 32, 41. Jungle adventure comics were specifically directed at male readers, as they tapped into social attitudes of the day and served as a mirror for gender, race, and cultural anxieties after the mid-century (see Savage, *Comic Books and America*).

[24] Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 25, 309. On Wertham's role as a critic of racism, see Daniel Yezbick, "'No Sweat!': EC Comics, Cold War Censorship, and the Troublesome Colors Of 'Judgment Day!'" in *The Blacker the Ink*, 19-44.

satire *Goin' to Heaven on a Mule* (1934), the Merrie Melodies animated parody *Clean Pastures* (1937), the supernatural ghost comedy *A Haunting we Will Go* (1939), the jazz-inflected live-action short *Voodoo in Harlem* (1938) and Hanna-Barbera's *Swing Social* (1940), a musical with talking fish inhabiting a cartoon setting of black church performances. Animated films were populated by racialized characters, what theorist Sarita McCoy Gregory has termed *subpersons*, non-human caricatures of blackness that held a status somewhere between animals and living objects.[25] By appropriating the coded speech and manners of minstrelsy, animators fused Africanized tropes with illustrations of black American religious degeneracy. *Swing Social*, for instance, was a short cartoon film that juxtaposed Africana spirituality with community worship in the fantastical setting of an underwater didactic morality play. Using parody as racial hyperbole, *Swing Social* mimicked black vernacular ritual practices and folk traditions like Hoodoo-Conjure, contrasting the churchly African American devotional performance with *Voodoo* in technicolor venues that featured anthropomorphized blackfish and other sea creatures. "*It's 'dat ole devil*," whispers a kingfish preacher in one scene, launching into a sermon on the tempting lure of the evil "Voodoo," as a grizzled catfish beats on tomtom drums, intoning: "If it ain't got that old Voodoo, it ain't got a beat, all the same with a different name, that's *Voodoo!*" Like other animated cartoon productions, *Swing Social* reproduced a variety of Graphic Voodoo memes that distilled Africana religious performances into lucrative entertainment commodities in the 1930s and 40s.[26]

[25] On the idea of "subpersons" as racial caricatures in animated films, see Sarita McCoy Gregory, "Disney's Second Line: New Orleans, Racial Masquerade, and the Reproduction of Whiteness in The Princess and the Frog," *Journal of African American Studies* 14.4 (2010): 441.

[26] Christopher P. Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon: Black Presentation in American Animated Short Films, 1907-1954* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007). See also Daniel Ira Goldmark, *Tunes for 'Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). While an analysis of film animation is beyond the scope of this article, one observation is worth considering in light of the persistence of racialized motifs in Graphic Voodoo animation. In many of these cartoons an elision of the symbols related to indigenous African religions and black American sacred cultures is a common device. The presence of the drums, for example, a prominent ritual instrument for spiritual evocation throughout the African diaspora, is typically coded as *Voodoo* and erased from its religious context.

Graphic Voodoo extended to printed 'funny animal' stories and colorful comic books based on animated films.[27] These comics showcased popular cartoon properties such as Mickey Mouse, Tom and Jerry, and Bugs Bunny, while recreating the visual logics of racial and religious alterity with depictions of black people's obsessions with the supernatural world. Here, in print, as with animated cartoons, Africana spirituality was presented as an object of comedy and contempt. Comic book cartoons resignified black folk traditions with reference to Graphic Voodoo stereotypes with insipid characters and their exaggerated fears of ghosts, haunted places, and witchcraft. In representations that reflected on the authentic religious condition of black people, traditional practices of Hoodoo-Conjure, as exemplified by the immediacy of ancestors and other invisible inhabitants of the spirit realm, were lampooned as spooky superstitions and ghost tales. Cartoon comics also belittled African American religious practitioners for their propensity for unrestrained worship, exuberant devotional practices, and joyful, rhythmic music. In this manner the sacred theater of the black American church was abstracted into an irreverent entertainment and comedic spectacle. Cartoon comic books based on animated characters such as *Lil Eight Ball* (from *Woody Woodpecker* creator Walter Lanz) and *Donald Duck*, utilized Africanizing caricatures and black folk religion stereotypes that linked African American spirituality with retrograde superstition. As with their motion picture counterparts, cartoon comics were replete with minstrel figures whose terrified antics provided colorful sight gags for readers.[28]

A closer look at the 1949 comic book *Donald Duck Voodoo Hoodoo*, from the series *Donald Duck Adventures* (Dell Comics Four Color #238) reveals a typical Graphic Voodoo comedy populated with characters from the beloved Walt Disney franchise. *Voodoo Hoodoo* is the story of Donald

[27] Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). The blackface figure is one of the most recognizable visual representations of blackness in the culture industries of music, performance, print and graphic media. Beginning in America in the 1800s and persisting into the twentieth century, blackface minstrelsy became the conventional style for representing blackness by way of the racialized abject in popular forms of entertainment and literature. Blackface minstrelsy denied black personhood with ridicule, whether on screen, stage, or in graphics. See also Rebecca Wanzo, *The Content of our Caricature: African American Comic Art and Political Belonging* (New York: NYU Press, 2020).

[28] Walter Lantz, *New Funnies* 65 (July 1942). See Michael Barrier, *Funnybooks: The Improbable Glories of the Best American Comic Books* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 236-237.

Duck and his three mischievous nephews, famous as intrepid and well-meaning tourists on the hunt for lively adventures in faraway places. In *Voodoo Hoodoo*, Donald Duck is cursed by a "living Voodoo doll" named *Bombie the Zombie* and must travel to Africa to seek a cure from a witch doctor named *Foola Zoola*. On his journey Donald Duck encounters a tribe of blackface characters who embody the classic stereotypes of tropical savagery, illustrated with the credulous African native, with oversized lips, sharpened teeth, nose rings, and bulging-eye racist physiognomy. Although the story is ostensibly set in a South African village, the comic uses black American dialect in captions, as characters exclaim "Nossuh!" and "Oh Lawsy, Lawsy!" when encountering the Duckburg stars. Considered by fans to be an important and outstanding work by creator Carl Barks, *Voodoo Hoodoo* was just one of many episodes in the Donald Duck comics series that incorporated Graphic Voodoo characters and place names like *Darkest Africa*, *Bongo on the Congo* and *Jungle Bungle*.[29]

Cartoon comic books imposed racial meanings on their subjects by connecting Africana cultural and religious practices with the silly antics of well-known animated characters. Another cartoon franchise that successfully transitioned into print was that of Bugs Bunny, with the longstanding crossover series *Dell Four Color Comics*. Several issues of this comic book were singled out by none other than Fredric Wertham, the crusading psychiatrist whose book *Seduction of the Innocent* helped to set off a national backlash against excessive gore, sex, drug use and criminal activity in comic books and comics advertisements in the 1950s. Wertham, a vocal critic of derisive portrayals of minorities, argued that reading comic books contributed to rising rates of juvenile delinquency and caused psychological harm to American youth. Referencing an episode in which Bugs Bunny is chased by a retinue of subperson figures with spears and shields, Wertham's book pointed out that the "superstitious natives'' and African

[29] Carl Barks, "Donald Duck in Voodoo Hoodoo," Four Color #238 (1949). Tom Andrae, *Carl Barks and the Disney Comic Book: Unmasking the Myth of Modernity* (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2006); Joonas Viljakainen, *Representations of Nationality in Carl Barks' Lost in the Andes and Voodoo hoodoo* (BA Thesis, University on Jyväskylä, 2013); Katja Kontturi, "Not Brains, Just Voodoo: A Zombie in Disney's Donald Duck Comics," in *RePresenting Magic, UnDoing Evil: Of Human Inner Light and Darkness* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 31-38; and Daniel Immerwahr, "Ten-Cent Ideology: Donald Duck Comic Books and the US Challenge to Modernization," *Modern American History* 3.1 (2020): 1-26. "Darkest Africa" was a 22-page Disney comics short story written, drawn, and lettered by Carl Barks, first published in *March of Comics* #20 (1948).

tribesmen that were depicted as blackface characters were especially deplorable. And while publishers did address issues of religious and racial representation in the development of a Hollywood Hays-style comics code, industry-wide participation was voluntary, and Graphic Voodoo themes continued to reaffirm whiteness and white superiority within a popular culture medium that promoted the vilification of Africana religiosity as a matter of comedy and farce.[30]

Graphic Voodoo in Horror Comics

To conclude this discussion of religion and race in the comics we turn finally to horror publications. Contrasted with the African jungle adventures from an earlier period, Graphic Voodoo horror reveled in a terrifying blackness that was based much closer to home. Haiti, the mythical land *par excellence* of evil Africana religion, provided the primary source material for Voodoo horror texts and images for much of the twentieth century. Like their Gothic literature counterparts in the 1800s, Voodoo horror comics promoted lurid fantasies of *Vodou* by corrupting a history that had been suppressed and denied, for it was in Haiti that racial horror was first apotheosized in western consciousness. As the "obsessively-retold master tale of the Carribean's colonial terror," the mythos of the Haitian Revolution conjured the dual specters of white terror and the ominous prospect of black rule. Repurposing the jungle adventure comic, Voodoo-horror reenacted the plight of Haiti in mythologies of memory that linked to concomitant anxieties that circulated in American culture during the 1950s and 60s, particularly around threats to white male heterosexual subjectivity.[31] For example, Voodoo horror comics projected collective fears of white annihilation by members of the US military in Haiti, from 1915 to 1934. Even as nineteenth century literatures referenced race and religion within a colonial backdrop of bloodly massacres and white genocide, twentieth century wartime accounts similarly condemned *Vodou* as a threatening force in Haiti, where Africana supernaturalism was believed to be a crucial pillar of resistance by anti-occupation forces and local rebels. Counter-histories written by Marines and other denizens of the

[30] Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 32; Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*,163.

[31] Michael Goodrum and Philip Smith, *Printing Terror: American Horror Comics as Cold War Commentary and Critique* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

occupation focused on the dangers of Africana spirituality in Haiti, allegorizing the past by recapitulating their demise in the present. Through the reassertion of colonial-style policies of forced labor and brutal measures of discipline against the indigenous population, US occupiers transformed Haiti into a landscape of terror. Nevertheless in the hands of these outsiders, *Voodoo* in was created as the quintessence of religious and racial menace; but it was never the authentic religion of *Vodou,* only its simulacrum, conveyed with "true-to-life" accounts of zombies, cannibalism, and human sacrifice.[32] White American ethnographers, journalists, and military officers thus implicated the twentieth century geopolitical order by providing a subjective experience of racial and religious Otherness by reframing propaganda in fictionalized accounts set in occupation-era Haiti.[33]

Reports of wartime Voodoo-horror embellished Haitian *Vodou* rituals that were seemingly perpetrated by the enemies of the Occupation, centered around themes of sorcery, violence, and conspiratorial secrecy. William Seabrook, an American journalist who went to Haiti as a military observer in 1915, wrote what became a prototype for later popular zombie fictions, a controversial autobiographical memoir called *The Magic Island*. Similarly, former Marines John Huston Craige and Arthur J. Burks published horror writings purportedly from personal eyewitness reports. Burks would describe *Voodoo* as a "most terrible religion" in a collection of magazine short stories on the "rites of Voodooism" from the mid-1920s that depicted a grotesque vista of blackness and sexual excess, depravity, and ecstatic violence.[34] And so we see with the Voodoo horror imaginary an indirect acknowledgement of the American occupiers as the true agents of barbarism, as those who projected their fears of spiritual contagion onto

[32] Laënnec Hurbon, "American Fantasy and Haitian Vodou," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles: University of California Museum of Art, 1995), 181-197; Cussans, *Undead Uprising*, 40-41.

[33] See, for example, the comic book story "Famous Marine Crowned King of the Voodoos," *Picture News Comics* 4 (March 1946). Jeffrey Kripal describes comics authors of the paranormal who imagined themselves as subjects who wrote themselves into their own texts (*Mutants and Mystics*); on white Vodou writers as spiritual explorers see John Cussans, *Undead Uprising*, 22-41.

[34] See George Romero's introduction to the reissued version of *Seabrook's Magic Island* in 2016. See also Cussans, *Undead Uprising*; Michael Goodrum, "The Past That Will Not Die: Trauma, Race, and Zombie Empire in Horror Comics of the 1950s," in *Documenting Trauma in Comics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 69-84; Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti*, 165, 178.

the very populations who were subjected to the brutality of the invading forces. In a recent history of horror comics, Michael Goodrum observes that in addition to creating an archive of wartime trauma, Voodoo horror allowed white male comics writers and readers to "stage fears of their extinction in and through modernity."[35] He notes that racial themes in horror comics in the 1950's period often fixated on cautionary narratives of the threat posed by Voodoo in relation to whiteness in stories of mystery, murder, and crime. Graphic Voodoo source texts from Haiti also functioned as amateur spiritual ethnographies for explorations by white males that were taken as authentic recountings of their experiences of psychic discovery.[36] Voodoo fiction writers documented the surrealism of *Vodou* rituals, positioning themselves as metaphysical seekers while simultaneously acting as unwitting apologists for the militaristic campaigns and neo-colonial exploits of the occupiers. Like Kripal's comics' writers of the uncanny and the impossible, white male ethnographers in Haiti participated in desacralized rituals of radical alterity with hallucinogens and explored their own "subjective obliteration" in transgressive acts of ego-extinction and self-dissolution that exploited the community-based traditions of worship and initiatory service in Haitian *Vodou*.[37]

In the years following World War II, Voodoo horror was a staple in American comics and other fields of popular culture. Nevertheless, by the mid-1950s the perceived unwholesomeness of the genre sparked a moral panic among an array of religious organizations, parents' groups, and public officials in the US. Senate hearings were called to address the impact of comic books on juvenile delinquency and mental health, with the testimony of psychiatrist Fredric Wertham garnering particular interest. Wertham's 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent*, as noted previously, challenged racist representations in the comics, including Africana religion

[35] Michael Goodrum, *Printing Terror: American Horror Comics as Cold War Commentary and Critique* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 109-146.

[36] Susan Zieger, "The Case of William Seabrook: Documents, Haiti, and the Working Dead," *Modernism/modernity* 19.4 (2012): 737-754; Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 217; Steven Gregory, "Voodoo, Ethnography, and the American Occupation of Haiti: William B. Seabrook's *The Magic Island*," in The Politics of Culture and Creativity: A Critique of Civilization Vol. 2, University Press of Florida, 1992: 169-207.

[37] Cussans, *Undead Uprising*, p. 135. Kripal notes that horror, "with all its depictions of the dead and the monstrous, is a profoundly religious genre, even when it is not explicitly religious, since terror, a close cousin of trauma, can also catalyze transcendence" (*Mutants and Mystics*, 296).

caricatures. With the formation of the Comics Code Authority in the same year, grisly violence, monstrous creatures, and terms like "weird" and "horror" were stricken from mainstream comics so as to contain the excesses of the trade.[38] Subsequently, many prominent horror comic books agreed to excise the images of vampires, ghouls, and demons on comics cover art, and the word *zombie* was replaced in the comics lexicon. And so, the paradigmatic figure of the monstrous undead would be eventually freed from its racial origins, as an obscure character of Haitian folk tradition that had transcended its roots in African culture.[39]

Black representation in mainstream comics reached its lowest point after 1950, as if race had ceased to exist and Africana characters were irrelevant.[40] From the 1960s on through to the 1970s, Graphic Voodoo in the comics played out as horror, with the uncertainty of a shifting cultural milieu and an era that included increased American engagement with international geopolitical conflicts, foreign anti-colonial independence movements, the Cold War, Vietnam, and nuclear proliferation. Then, in 1973 a character by the name of *Brother Voodoo* debuted in the Marvel Comics anthology *Strange Tales*. Brother Voodoo comics, which melded *Vodou* and *Voodoo*, featured a protagonist whose secret identity was that of a repatriated Haitian psychologist, instead of an African or black American character. With his unusual pedigree, Brother Voodoo was likened to the popular comics character *Dr. Strange*, who had been introduced in *Strange Tales* ten years earlier with a similar origin story, that of a brilliant neurosurgeon turned exotic Orientalist master. Adilifu Nama asserts that the practice of "cloning" new black characters from established white

[38] Markman Ellis, *The History of Gothic Fiction*, 205; Elizabeth McAlister, "Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies," *Anthropological Quarterly* 85 (2012): 457-486; Raphael Hoermann, "Figures of Terror: The "Zombie" and the Haitian Revolution," *Atlantic Studies* 14 (2017): 152-173; Emiel Martens, "The 1930s Horror Adventure Film on Location in Jamaica: 'Jungle Gods', 'Voodoo Drums' and 'Mumbo Jumbo' in the 'Secret Places of Paradise Island,' *Humanities* 10 (2021): 62.

[39] Although a defining symbol in the corpus of Graphic Voodoo mythemes, the zombie will not be discussed here. Zombification plays a somewhat insignificant role in the religion of Vodou in Haiti and should be considered to be an amplification of the peculiar fears of white westerners in expressions of dread and paranoia. The zombie first appeared in American film in the 1920s and was an immediate hit (Hoermann, *Figures of Terror*). A recent discussion can be found in Michael Goodrum, "The Past That Will Not Die: Trauma, Race, and Zombie Empire in Horror Comics of the 1950s" (in *Documenting Trauma in Comics*, 2020).

[40] Lenthall, "Outside the Panel."

characters resulted in a remixed class of superheroes that were often more compelling and provocative than the original source material:

> …racially remixed superheroes offer audiences familiar points of reference that, as black superheroes, suggest a range of ideas, cultural points of interests, compelling themes, and multiple meanings that were not previously present. Frequently, the black versions are more chic, politically provocative, and ideologically dynamic than the established white superheroes they were modeled after.[41]

However, in representing Africana religion as horror, *Brother Voodoo* comics attempted to balance older, racist Graphic Voodoo distortions with the character's putative embrace of his sacred heritage as an *Houngan* and magical adept with mythemes of redemptive heroism. Despite its reimagining of Haitian *Vodou* as an inspiring source of black identity, the comic trafficked in clichéd racial stereotypes, appropriating blaxploitation film tropes and overdetermined visuals of male physical brawn and hypermasculine affect.[42] Brother Voodoo's initial appearances in two episodes of *Strange Tales,* for instance, demonstrate the tension between the comic's productive use of horror-fantasy styles and black superhero conventions. The cover of issue #1 featured an urban battle zone and a quasi-psychedelic backdrop with black antagonists, blazing guns and bullets, as the superhero strides into the foreground. Superimposed with his signature "mystical smoke" and pulsating with electrical energy, Brother Voodoo is shown inhabited by his *Vodou marassa,* or spirit twin, in a fantastical illustration of subtle bodies and altered states that literalizes Kripal's "radiation" mytheme. In contrast, issue number two presents Brother Voodoo in full brawling mode against an Africana super villain named *Damballah,* and a writhing serpent demon, a style that recalls the extreme kinetics of men's naturalist pulp magazines of the 1950s. Here, the superhero presents as a

[41] Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011). Brother Voodoo was introduced in the horror series *Strange Tales* in 1973, with additional appearances in *Tales of the Zombie*, *Tomb of Dracula, Werewolf by Night,* and *The Avengers*, before undergoing a 21st century revamp as the new Sorcerer Supreme in *Doctor Voodoo, Avenger of the Supernatural.*

[42] Rob Lendrum, "The Super Black Macho, One Baaad Mutha: Black Superhero Masculinity in 1970s Mainstream Comic Books," *Extrapolation* 46.3 (2005): 360. On black superhero masculinity, see also Jeffrey A. Brown, "Comic Book Masculinity and the New Black Superhero," *African American Review* 33.1 (1999): 25-42, and Nama, *Super Black.*

muscular action figure, fighting for his life in the jungle, subduing feral beasts and treacherous enemies.

Although it was imagined as a vehicle for a new kind of comics character, *Brother Voodoo* re-inscribed older Graphic Voodoo horror tropes by bastardizing Africana religiosity. In the comic, Haitian *Vodou* was transformed into a black superhero's weapon of enhanced powers by caricaturing the venerable deities known as *loa* as vengeful demons, misrepresenting the holy artifacts of spiritual protection and healing as fetishism, and casting the sacramental practices of ritual spirit possession as necromancy. Heedless to the religion of Haitian *Vodou* as a deeply rooted spiritual tradition, the comics reduced a vibrant faith to a magical arsenal of warfare against witch doctors, criminal sorcerers and, of course, zombies. As a comic book that ostensibly challenged conventional racial and religious identities, *Brother Voodoo* carried forth the misrepresentation of *Vodou* as a primitive system of violent occultism.

Near the end of the twentieth century, Voodoo horror comics only occasionally tackled racial issues, which included topics such as prejudice and inner-city violence. Stories were just as often set in black majority cities like New Orleans or other racialized urban spaces as they were located in unnamed torrid zones in the South Pacific or Africa. Horror comics also explored black subjectivities in the context of the distinctive regional cultures of the southern United States, referencing the past and its legacies of slavery with fantasy-inflected Graphic Voodoo mythemes. A story arc in the Vertigo series *Swamp Thing* #42, for example, about a human-plant-monster superhero, used images lifted directly from William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* to illustrate what Quina Whitted describes as a "post-modern slave narrative." A gratuitous gothic fantasy set on a contemporary Louisiana plantation, the comic condensed Haitian *Vodou* practices and images of malformed black bodies, rotting corpses, and haunted landscapes. The creator of this particular story was Alan Moore, a ceremonial magician and one of Kripal's "writers of the impossible," utilized dream and flashback sequences to create a paranormal fantasy of race, subjection, and ancestral revenge. Likewise, other Voodoo-horror comics of the late twentieth century recycled Graphic Voodoo stereotypes and violent supernaturalism with conventional fantasy and science-fiction mythemes in comics superhero formats, adding a slew of original characters such as the Jamaican Voodoo priest *Papa Midnite*, biracial New Orleans jazz

player *Shadowman*, the trickster-rapper *Jim Crow*, and the exotic dancer Priscilla Kitaen as *Voodoo*.[43]

Conclusion

Although I have used the idea of Graphic Voodoo to describe the Africana sacred and its mythic associations with race, religion, and Otherness in the comics, it is important to recognize that *Voodoo* is neither a historical tradition nor a genuine spiritual practice. It is, rather, a discursive formation. By way of sociological analogizing, Graphic Voodoo might even be interpreted as a "religion of whiteness," as Stephen Finley posits, since it emerged as the material embodiment of racist ontologies of violence and subjugation.[44] The implications of Graphic Voodoo discourses, however, are very real. The narration of jungle adventures and neo-colonial incursions in the comics parallel the ways that whiteness and black subordination were inscribed into racial social hierarchies between Africa and the West in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Graphic Voodoo, we have seen, played a role in the material practices of US cartoons and animation films by perpetuating the gross devaluation of black American vernacular traditions and folk religions such as Hoodoo-Conjure, and their vital connections to ancestral spiritism and the enchanted world, with degrading stereotypes and imagery. And finally, the imagined horrors of blackness and its spiritual atrocities were incorporated into the sordid fictions of *Vodou* that rationalized the US role in Haiti, with its institutions of military repression and foreign control during the Occupation, from1915 to 1935, and again at the end of the twentieth century. The totalizing effect of Graphic Voodoo has been to create a kind of historical revisionism that aestheticizes race and religion and validates postulations of white supremacy in the comics and elsewhere in popular culture.

[43] Qiana J. Whitted, "Of Slaves and Other Swamp Things," in *Comics and the U.S. South* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 187; Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 11, 28. See also Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[44] Post-colonial analysis explores the ways that consciousness was fashioned within particular regimes of historical knowledge. See Steven Finley and Lori Latrice Martin, "The Complexity of Color and the Religion of Whiteness," in L.L. Martin, et al (eds.), *Color Struck. Teaching Race and Ethnicity* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2017). See also Stephen C. Finley, et al (eds.), *The Religion of White Rage: Religious Fervor, White Workers and the Myth of Black Racial Progress* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

Moving into the twenty-first century, we find that Graphic Voodoo has been appropriated by a new generation of comics creators, artists, and writers of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, cultural sensibilities, and religious commitments. In contrast with the contested representations of Voodoo in twentieth century comics, the ongoing presence of Africana religions is "open-ended and unfinished," with comics mythemes that offer greater respect for the enduring traditions of Africa and its diaspora. Graphic Voodoo has also given way to creative interlocutions between comics and the contemporary arts movement such as Afro Futurism, as well as the neo-horror aesthetic known as the ethno-Gothic.[45] Afro Futurism, in particular, explores the intersections between science, blackness, and spirituality, much like the speculative genres of *Mutants and Mystics*, as it reimagines Africana heroes, racialized divinities, and black transhumans that are based in authentic histories that draw upon animistic, supernatural, and technocultural traditions. African, African diasporic, and black American religions exemplify a global blackness in which humanity is interconnected as the past is drawn into the present, and the future into the now, grounding quantum theories of time and space with indigenous cosmologies in spectacular convergences. Afro Futurist mythemes in twenty-first century comics texts and narratives look beyond temporality to the ancestral spiritual realm to create mythic futures from displaced African and African American pasts.[46]

The invention of Voodoo issued from a world that had witnessed the demise of whiteness and its brutally extractive regimes of slavery in the West, which marked a turning point in modernity. Graphic Voodoo in the comics consolidated the racial and religious apprehensions of the Other

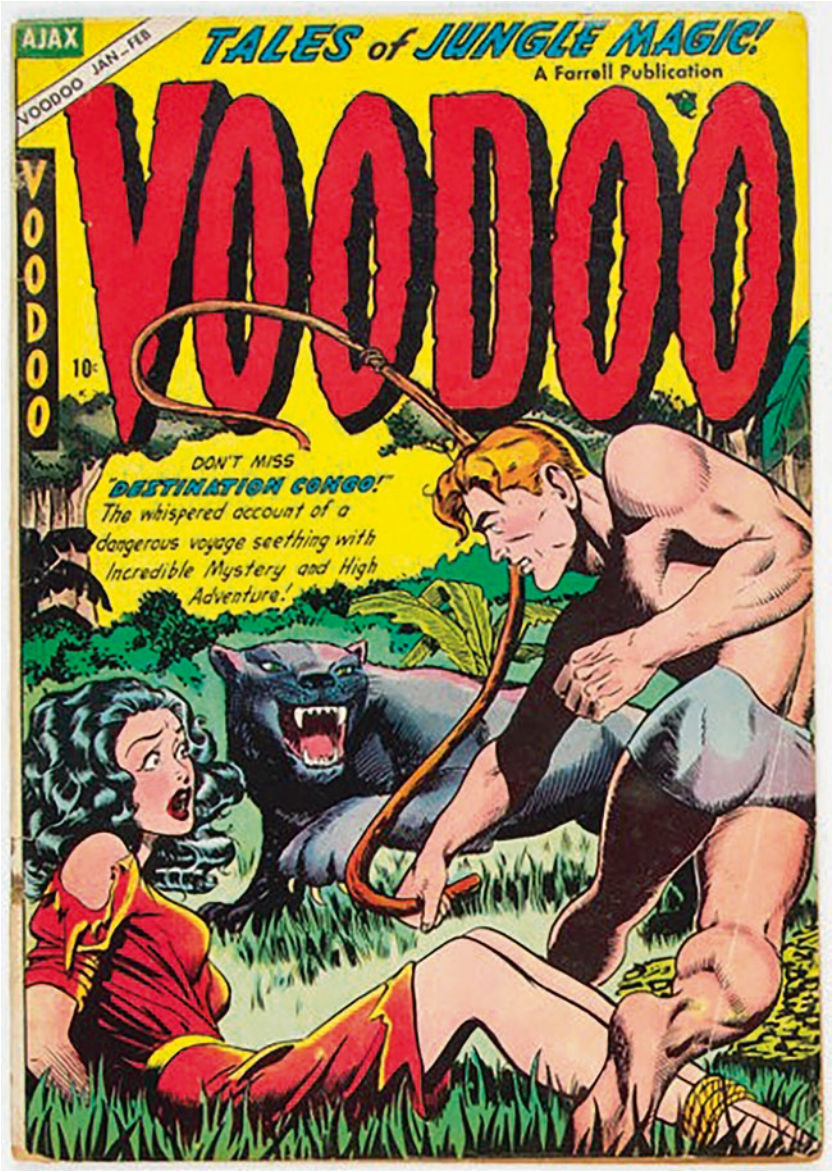
[45] See Dana Rush, *Vodun in Coastal Benin: Unfinished, Open-ended, Global* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2013). "Ethnogothic" uses Graphic Voodoo styles to transgress comics depictions of race and religion by resignifying black abjection. These include stories of black retribution that are often presented as nightmares or ghost stories that manifest in the return of the repressed, i.e., black monsters and ghosts as racial subjects that linger at the metaphysical margins, mired in traumatic histories and memories. See Whitted, *Comics and the U.S. South*, 189; Donna-Lyn Washington, ed. *John Jennings: Conversations* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 2.

[46] See Reynaldo Anderson, "Critical Afrofuturism: A Case Study In Visual Rhetoric, Sequential Art, And Postapocalyptic Black Identity," in *The Blacker the Ink*, 171-192; Yvonne Chireau, "Looking for Black Religions in 20th Century Comics, 1931–1993," *Religions* 10.6 (2019): 400.

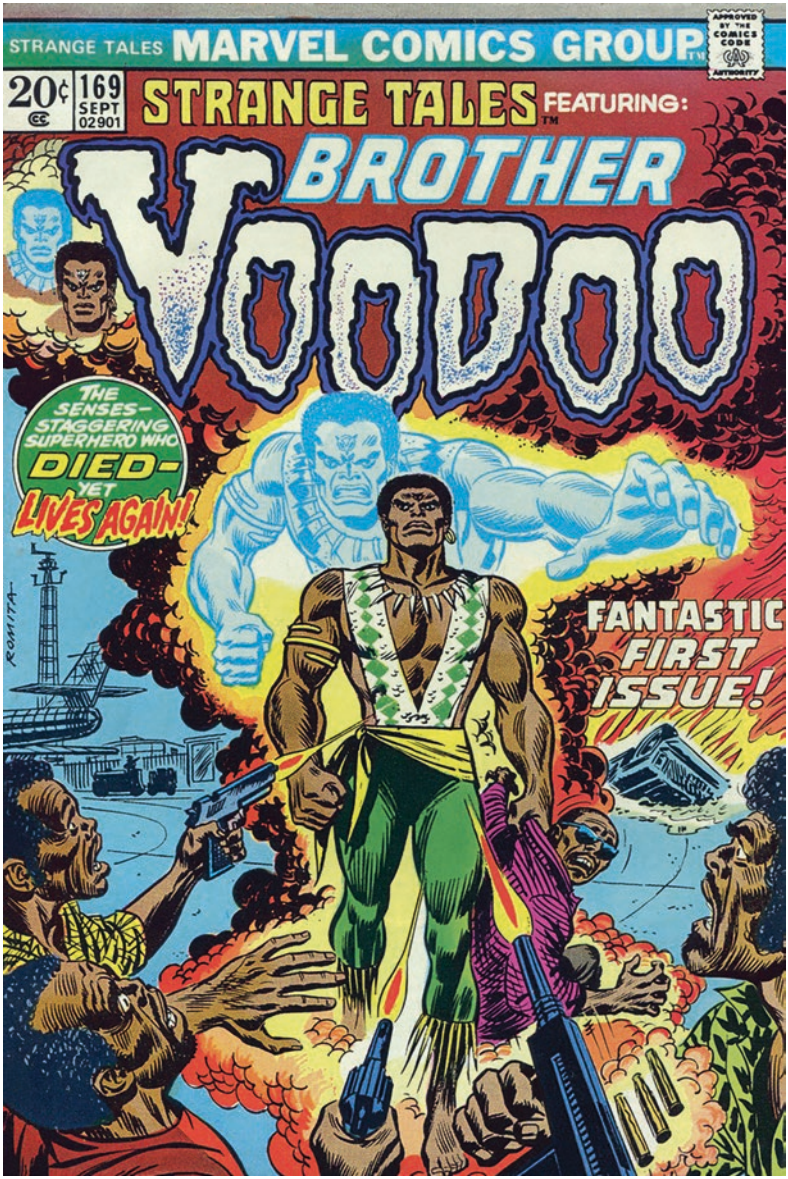
after the nineteenth century Gothic 'literature of nightmare.' In the earlier period, the violent anticolonial uprising that led to the ensuing triumph of black sovereignty in Haiti initiated a transhistorical, world-shifting crisis that impacted the collective imaginary in its reactionary formations. The Voodoo mythos that haunted the West for over a century was marked by a fascination with the morbid, the abject, and the uncanny. The same might be said of the neurotic fantasies of whiteness that were formed out of the cataclysmic rupture of intelligibility that ensued from the emergence of the first western nation to claim universal emancipation of its enslaved citizens. Did the relentless focus on Africana supernaturalism in Graphic Voodoo comics come about as a result of psychosocial projections of white trauma in light of the Haitian uprising? Graphic Voodoo produced a subjectivity in whiteness that envisioned itself in relation to the African sacred, apprehending that which it feared but could not perceive as part of itself. "It is…the other part of the self," says Laennec Hurbon with reference to American fantasies of *Vodou*, "which, because inadmissible, is devalued and returned to the self in the grimacing form of the cannibal and the sorcerer." This conflation of the demonic-divine flows out a primal experience of the "absence of difference" between the sacred and the monstrous, an encounter with an unHoly Other, a critical turn that takes the comics reader, as Kripal reflects, "back to terror and bedazzlement."[47] Conceived as a most archaic form of sublime fear, as Rudolf Otto describes the human experience of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* – it is the utter horror caused by the Self's confrontation with its own negation or annihilation.[48] Regardless of its appeal for consumers and creators, Graphic Voodoo reflects the actual terrors of history and memory, the xenophobic anxieties, racist distortions, and white supremacist misrepresentations of the black and Africana Sacred. And with these mythemes of race and religion in the comics, the horror *is* the hero.

[47] Laennec Hurbon, "American Fantasy and Haitian Vodou," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, 195; Jeffrey Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 9; on blackness as the terrifying and attractive supernatural other, see Stephen Finley, "The Supernatural in the African American Experience," in Jeffrey Kripal, *Religion: Super Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 2017), 233.

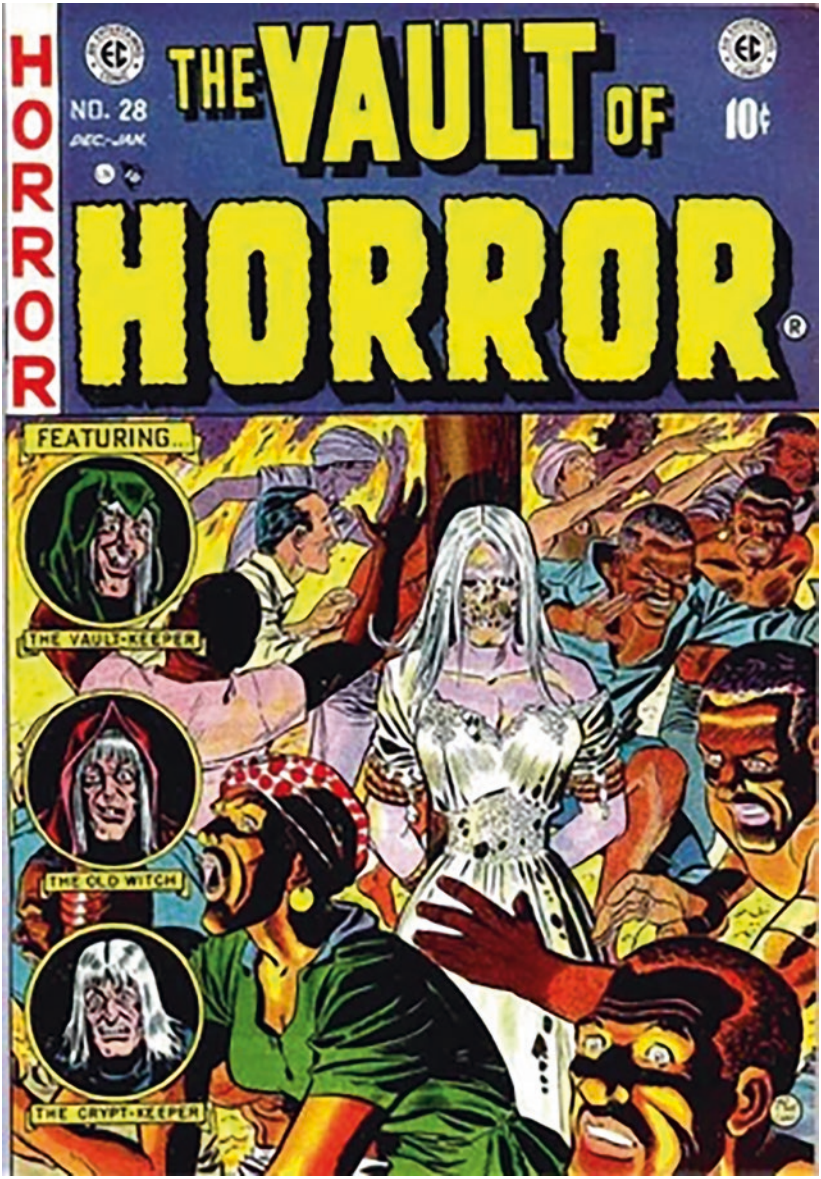
[48] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).



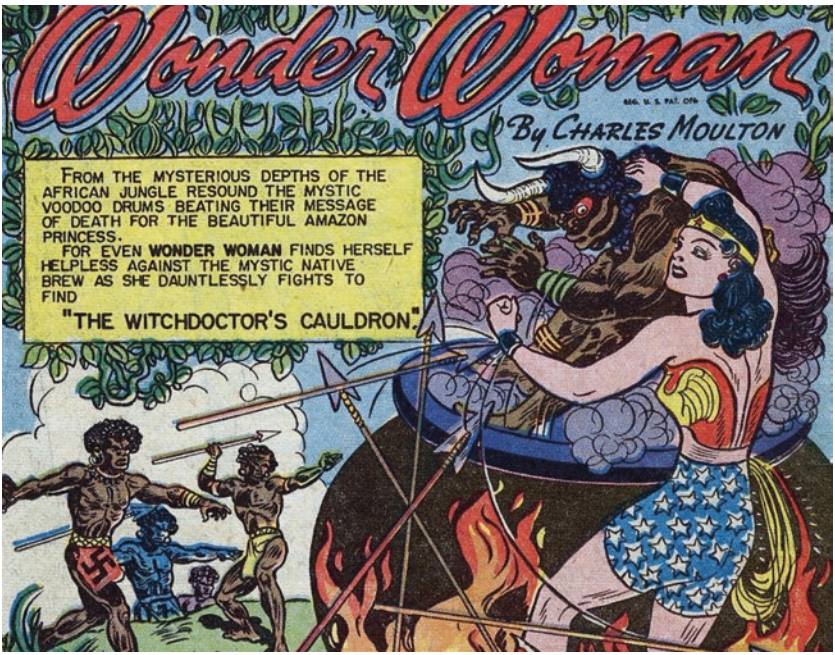
Voodoo Comics #19, "Tales of Jungle Magic," January 1955



Strange Tales #169, featuring Brother Voodoo, September 1973

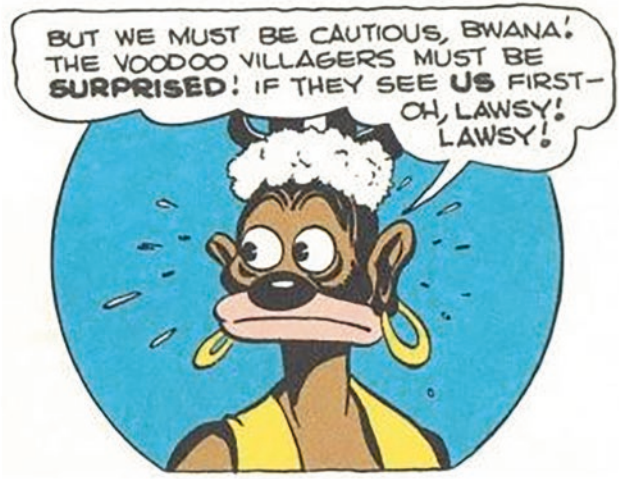


Vault of Horror #28, December 1952



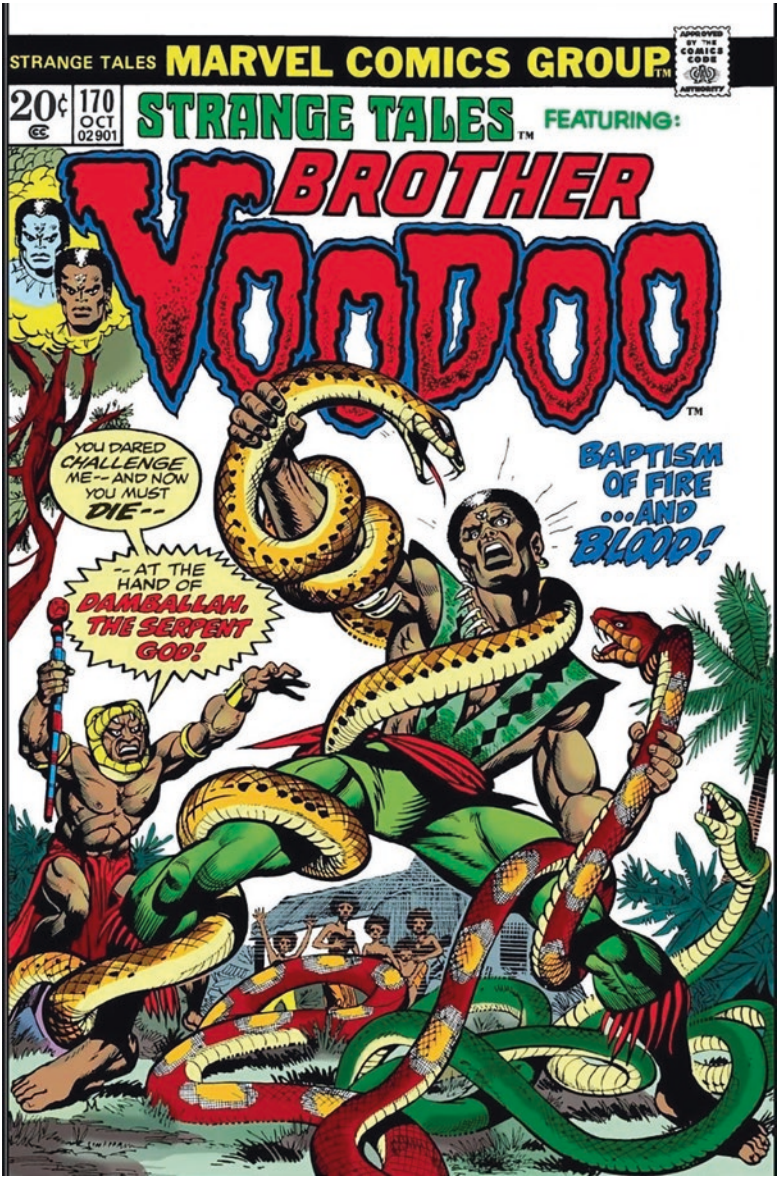
Wonder Woman #19, "Tale of the Witch Doctor's Cauldron," July 1946

Action Comics #413, "The Voodoo Doom of Superman," June 1972



"Voodoo Hoodoo," *Walt Disney's Donald Duck Adventures*, Four Color Comics #238, June 1949

Jungle Comics #77, May 1946



Strange Tales, Featuring: Brother Voodoo #170, July 1973

Mystico-Erotics of the "Next Age Superhero": Christian Hippie Comics of the 1970s

Amy Slonaker

Abstract This essay examines comics aimed at the "Jesus People movement" as it emerged in southern California between the late 1960s through the late 1970s. The focus on Christian Hippie Comics includes Al Hartley's *Spire Christian Comics*, and *True Komix*, the official comic book of The Children of God, a Christian-based cult born of the Hippie era. Following Jeffrey Kripal, my analysis unearths a libidinal structure to Christian Hippie Comics in their conjoining of the numinous and the erotic. The essay posits that such "tantric" elements in Christian comics may be surprising given Christianity's traditionally repressive attitude toward forms of sexuality; however, as I suggest, these tantric motifs reflect the Asian influences of the hippie culture which these comics targeted for conversion to Christianity. The resulting comic style includes elements of a tantric revisioning of the Gospel aimed at the hippie youth of the day.

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Keywords Jesus People • Christian Hippie Comics • The Children of God • Jeffrey Kripal • Mystico-Erotics

Introduction

Growing up in an evangelical church in California in the 1970s, I came in contact with a variety of Christian comic books that conveyed the stories of the Bible and the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Many of these comics are now part of my personal comic book collection. When I look back on them as an adult, I am struck by the way these Christian texts reach outside of their own tradition to incorporate themes of the broader youth counterculture and its messages of peace and "Free Love." Through their incorporation of "hippie" themes, Christian comic books can be viewed as part of the movement that Christian and secular observers called "The Jesus People," a segment of Christian youth that also embraced the hippie ethos and its philosophy of love as an antidote to society's woes (Eskridge 2013, 2).

The Jesus People Movement, with its roots in the hippie culture of San Francisco and Los Angeles, developed from a cultural milieu steeped in Asian philosophies. As noted by religious studies scholar Jeffrey Kripal, "Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist systems of yoga were central features of the American counterculture [of the 1960s and 1970s]…. [W]hat was probably the most historically influential version of these in the West [was] the Hindu Tantric system" (Kripal 2011, 170). Tantric philosophy is noted for conjoining ideas of the sacred and the sexual in a "mystico-erotic" system of spiritual enlightenment (308). This joining-as-one is indicative of a larger concept of non-dualism that is found across a variety of Asian traditions that perceive the nature of reality to be illusory in its separation of subject from object, of individual from God. These ideas came to be reflected in the broader popular culture of the hippie era and also, I suggest, in the culture of the Jesus People Movement, including in its comic books.

In this chapter, I will use the term "Christian Hippie Comics" to describe those comic books that are targeted toward the Jesus People Movement as it emerged from California in the late 1960s into the late

1970s, or that draw upon its symbols. The two Christian Hippie Comic texts focused on here are: (1) *Archie's Sonshine,* written and drawn by the conservative Christian Al Hartley, and published under the Spire Christian Comics imprint in 1974; and (2) *The Flirty Little Fishy*, ([1974] 1982) published under the *True Komix* imprint of The Children of God, a religious group widely considered to be a cult that flourished during the hippie era (Eskridge 2013, 192). I suggest that both of these Christian-based comic texts employ themes of their contemporary counterculture to make their message appealing to a youthful audience. More specifically, they draw upon the Eastern philosophies that permeated California hippie culture, including tantric ideas about latent spiritual powers related to human sexuality.

Such tantric themes in comic books are examined by Kripal in his book *Mutants & Mystics* (2011), in which he looks specifically at superhero comics and examines their mystico-erotic themes in support of his idea of the "Super-Story." The Super-Story, according to Kripal, is a sort of "metamyth" (5) that underlies and shapes most of contemporary popular culture. Through its central tropes, or "mythemes" (26), as Kripal calls them, the Super-Story conveys a positive message of the evolution of humankind. According to Kripal, the Super-Story's mythemes emanate from "the ancient history and universal structures of the human religious imagination" (5), so that over the centuries these separable or independent mythemes can be found in a "mind-boggling array of combinations" (26) within narratives that range from Biblical accounts of Jesus in the New Testament up to contemporary superhero films of the latest Marvel Renaissance.

I use the framework of Kripal's Super-Story and its mythemes to examine mystico-erotic elements in the two examples of Christian Hippie Comics named above in order to assess how they do – and do not – participate in the Super-Story's positive message of human evolution. I argue that *Archie's Sonshine* participates in the Super-Story through its use of mystico-erotic elements that encourage spiritual growth, but that, in *The Flirty Little Fishy*, these same elements subvert the positive message of Kripal's Super-Story, or perhaps present a "Bizarro" Super-Story that is just one more twist on the Super-Story itself. By examining how each of these texts relate to the Super-Story, we can observe how popular culture works to form a modern, living mythology –one that leaves room for readers to write their own future and create their own reality (Kripal 2011, 330).

Kripal's Super-Story and Its Mythemes

In order to use the Super-Story as a lens through which to analyze the Christian Hippie Comics in question, it is useful to say more about the nature of the Super-Story as an emergent metamyth (Kripal 2017, 271), highlighting those aspects of the Super-Story which are of particular interest in the analysis to follow.

The Super-Story's own "origin story" can help unpack its connection to a form of "cosmic consciousness" (Bucke 1901), and not just superhero powers. Kripal found inspiration for his Super-Story in the writings of Michael Murphy, co-founder of The Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California (Kripal 2011, 29). Murphy's tome of human potential, *The Future of the Body* (1992), notes that "superordinary" powers in literature, "cartoons," and movies, "might express intuitions of capacities that are available to us …[and] might prefigure luminous knowings and powers that can be realized by the human race" (Murphy 1992, 211, 213). Building on Murphy's idea, Kripal points out the commonalities among narratives about "superordinary powers" (Kripal 2011, 29) and how they all seem related to one, over-arching story. Kripal explains that the Super-Story takes many forms and has operated historically to shape many of our culture's narratives. It may, Kripal writes, have existed for millennia without, "any single plot, cast of characters or definite ending" (26), but ultimately the same underlying narrative persists through all the manifestations of the Super-Story; that is, a narrative about the evolution of the human being (1) and our capacity for developing what Kripal calls "extraordinary" and "paranormal capacities" (6). These superhuman capabilities, such as telepathy, teleportation, or the manipulation of subtle bodies of energy, are treated in superhero comics as fantasy, but, according to Kripal, such powers may be better thought of as "foreshadowings or intuitions" (182) of humanity's unfolding evolutionary path. Ultimately, this evolutionary path promises more than superhero powers. It also suggests a path toward the realization of one's own divinity, of which superhuman powers may be an outgrowth (279). In this way, Kripal's Super-Story describes a "new evolutionary or cosmic humanism" (430) that shares the hope in human potential with the founders of Esalen.

According to Kripal, this overarching Super-Story can be divided into seven tropes, or "mythemes," each of which operate to support the overall narrative while acting as separate categories for the varieties of tropes and symbols that make up the Super-Story. For example, the mytheme Kripal

calls "Mutation" (2011, 173) provides a framework for thinking about narratives that present humans as evolving and mutating beings. This Mutation mytheme can be seen, for example, in the pages of Stan Lee's *The X-Men,* first published in 1963. In the first issue the leader of the X-Men, Dr. Xavier, explains that he has created a school for evolutionarily mutated superhumans whom he has deemed "X-Men." The X-Men are so-called, he explains, because they "possess an extra power ... one which ordinary humans do not!! ... X-Men, for EX-tra power!" (Lee 1963, 8). The X-Men's extra capabilities are explained as being a matter of evolutionary mutation occurring at the same time these teenage characters are physically developing into sexual maturity. The mutating and developing bodies of its main characters reflect the mutation mytheme, which, in turn, supports the Super-Story's focus on the evolving nature of human capabilities.

The mytheme of central interest to this analysis is what Kripal calls the mytheme of "Orientation" (2011, 31). For Kripal, the Orientation mytheme works as an "imaginative construct" (27) within Western civilization to locate ideas of sacred power and wisdom "'far away,' 'long, long ago,' and more often than not, 'in the East'" (27). Locating such ideas of the supernatural in an Eastern hinterland, for example, creates an alternate reality wherein the possibility of their existence can be entertained. Through the veil of foreign lands and customs, readers can suspend their disbelief and engage ideas about the supernatural.

To illustrate his point, Kripal examines the mytheme of Orientation in the Marvel comic book *Doctor Strange* (Lee 2016), which features a plot steeped in eastern esotericism. Originally created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko in 1963, the character of Doctor Strange starts out as a rational man of science—Dr. Stephen Strange, M.D.—one of the greatest neurosurgeons in the world. But despite a successful career saving lives, Stephen Strange cares only for money and prestige. When a violent car crash injures his hands, every possible medical intervention fails to help him, leaving his hands with a tremor that prohibits him from ever performing surgery again. In desperation, Stephen searches the globe for a way to heal his hands. This leads him to the palace of "The Ancient One," high in the Himalayan Mountains. From this Eastern sage, Doctor Strange learns how to heal himself and gains the wisdom to unlock superhuman powers such as astral projection, levitation, and clairvoyance. Ultimately, the figure of Doctor Strange becomes the successor of the Ancient One and

takes on his title of Sorcerer Supreme, a master of the mystic and martial arts (Lee 2016).

In Doctor Strange's evolution from man of material science to master of mystic arts, we can perceive the outline of the Super-Story with its message of humanity's supernatural potential. In the case of Doctor Strange, it is through the mytheme of Orientation that this message is conveyed, as evidenced in the numerous far eastern tropes and symbols employed throughout the Doctor Strange saga. For instance, the type of superpowers that Doctor Strange develops are, according to Kripal, similar to the "siddhis" or superpowers from "Indian Yogic lore" (2011, 172). These powers, like astral projection and the ability to manipulate subtle energies, are specifically associated with the tantric practice of Kundalini yoga (172). In this practice, meditative techniques can tap human sexual energy through the chakra system of the subtle body to achieve spiritual enlightenment and the accompanying capacity for superhuman powers. The rooting of Doctor Strange's superpowers in an esoteric yogic tradition is one way the mytheme of Orientation uses the West's own mystical impressions of the East to create a setting to ponder ideas about the outer limits of human potential.

The mystico-erotic themes present in the Orientation mytheme are likewise present in the other mythemes of Kripal's Super-Story. As noted, in the context of the Mutation mytheme, the mystico-erotic motif in the X-men is seen in the pubescent mutants whose superpowers come to fruition at the same time as their sexual maturation process. For Doctor Strange, it is the sexually-charged secrets of tantra that imbue him with his superpowers. Kripal's location of mystico-erotic themes throughout the various mythemes of the Super-Story supports his idea that "on some profound metaphsyical level…sexual expression and superpowers" manifest together (170). To support this suggestion, Kripal traces the historical connection in comic books between themes of the erotic and mystical superpowers. Using the historically relied upon model of descending orders of metals (Gold, Silver, and Bronze) to describe the descending "Ages" of comic books (24), Kripal shows how, in each age, the superhero embodies a different mystico-erotic relationship that manifests, in what he calls, that superhero's unique "libidinal organization" (165).

For instance, in the Golden Era of Comics (1938–1956), erotic energy and sexuality were separated from superpowers as exemplified by Superman's "implicit vow of chastity" (Kripal 2011, 168) that is key to his stoic, unfuckwithable demeanor. In contrast, the libidinal organization of

Silver Age comics (1956–1970) "sublimates sex into the superpower" by repressing overt sexuality which later manifests mystically in the cosmic, atomic, and psychedelic powers of the era's superheroes, something which is demonstrated by Stan Lee's X-Men (1963). Most important for this argument is the unique libidinal organization of what Kripal calls "the next age superhero" of our contemporary era of comics (169). In this period, the erotic energy previously denied or repressed is now the basis for the superpowers of the comic book heroes. Kripal points to the recent characterization of Dark Phoenix in the Morrison/Quitely "New X-Men" series (2002), where she is depicted in poses of "explicit eroticism" as "a cosmic goddess figure akin to those found throughout Hindu and Buddhist Asia" (Kripal 2011, 211, 214). It is the conjoining of sexual and superpowers that Kripal says heralds the "new erotics" of the Next Age superhero (170). Like the Next Age superhero, the Christian Hippie Comics examined below exhibit a union of mystical and erotic powers. By tracing this mystico-erotic theme in an analysis of Christian Hippie Comics, one can better understand how they function as part of the Super-Story.

The final mytheme of particular interest to this paper's analysis is what Kripal calls the mytheme of "Authorization" (254), a concept suggesting that "our cultural and religious worlds are authored by us" (Kripal 2014, 389) such that through them one comes to understand the boundaries of reality and what is humanly possible – or (im)possible. Kripal explains this concept using the phrase "*decrire-construire*," or "to describe is to construct," which he borrows from French philosopher Bertrand Méheust (Kripal 2010, 222). As Kripal explains the phrase, *decrire-construire* refers to how, "human intellectual and social practices, particularly in their naming and institution-creating functions, somehow circumscribe reality, somehow create the real for a particular place and time" (222). The result is that to a "very large extent," our realities are "culturally loaded, constructed or even determined" (202) such that our lives—and those realities—are a reaction to that authored culture. As Méheust himself describes it, *decrire-construire* has the ability to "function as the actualization and/or the inhibition of potentialities" (in Kripal 2010, 223) because, as Kripal now explains, "to acknowledge openly and to describe authoritatively some aspect of the real is to make possible a psychological experience of the same" (223). It is through this "Authorization" process that Kripal's Super-Story can impact the real. In the case of the superhero comics Kripal studies in *Mutants & Mystics*, this means that narratives of superhero

powers provide audiences with a psychological experience of these capabilities which, in turn, provides a step toward expanding our human potential and cosmic consciousness. But Authorization also has the potential to describe realities that do not promote the evolution of human potential in a positive manner. As Méheust notes, the power to author culture also holds the power to inhibit potentialities (223). In the comic texts examined below, there is evidence of both positive and negative uses of Authorization. While *Archie's Sonshine* supports the Super-Story's idea of human spiritual growth and enlightenment, the Children of God's *The Little Flirty Fishy* promotes sexual abuse and deception. Despite the opposing realities each comic presents, they both rely heavily on the same mystico-erotic themes that will be traced below as part of Kripal's Super-Story.

The World of Christian Hippie Comics

The Christian Hippie Comics examined in this paper can be viewed as one aspect of a broader youth outreach by evangelical Christians that came in response to the flourishing number of counterculture youth or "hippies" that were finding Jesus and converting to Christianity toward the end of the 1960s. As this cultural phenomenon continued to grow into the 1970s, the term "Jesus People" was often adopted to describe the thriving subculture (Eskridge 2013, 3). The Jesus People phenomenon received increasing amounts of media exposure, appearing on the cover of *Time* magazine in June of 1971 with a front-page story heralding "The Jesus Revolution" and featuring a psychedelic image of Jesus looking like a hippie, but more than usual (*Time* 1971, 3). The accompanying article described how counterculture youth were returning to the fold of Christianity, stating "The search for a 'yes' led thousands to the Oriental and the mystical, the occult and even Satanism before they drew once again on familiar roots" (3).

Six months later, this *Time* magazine cover was cited by Billy Graham in the preface of his new book, *The Jesus Generation* (1971), which explained how the counterculture youth of the day were turning away from drugs, gurus, and protests, and turning instead toward Jesus Christ. As Graham put it, "tens of thousands of American youth are caught up in it. They are being turned on to Jesus" (Graham 1971, 9). Graham concluded, "I have become convinced that the Jesus revolution is making a profound impact on the youth of America and shows all signs of spreading to other countries" (11–12). To capitalize on the increase in the

counterculture's interest in Jesus, Billy Graham and other Christian evangelicals began to imbue their youth ministries with countercultural symbols from a variety of sources including music, politics, and spirituality. In the area of music, for example, evangelicals staged their own version of Woodstock in Dallas, Texas, from June 12 through June 17, 1972, in order to appeal to youthful Jesus seekers. The organizers, Campus Crusade for Christ, called the event EXPLO '72 (Eskridge 2013, 173). *Christianity Today* referred to it as "Godstock" due to its crowd of approximately 180,000 young attendees who assembled in front of a massive stage with a 35-foot high, psychedelic backdrop of Jesus People symbols (169, 173). The stage was flanked on either side by towering stacks of speakers cranking out 3000 watts of Jesus jams (173). After the newly born-again Johnny Cash completed his Bible-soaked set, Billy Graham took the stage to close out the event by leading the crowd in song, repeating the refrain, "They will know we are Christians by our love" (174).

Another way evangelical Christians coopted youth culture in order to present its message of salvation was through an appeal to the younger generation's penchant for political activism and protest. In 1969, an off shoot of the evangelical Campus Crusade for Christ sought to establish a Jesus People outreach in Berkeley, California, amidst the waves of student unrest on the UC Berkeley campus. To this end, they established the Christian Word Liberation Front (CWLF), whose name dubiously mimicked that of the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), an already active student coalition on the Berkeley campus that used protest and police conflict to push for greater rights of non-white students (Christian World Liberation Front Collection, GTU 94-9-03 n.d.). By playing off the name of the radical TWLF, the CWLF hoped to take advantage of the TWLF's cultural cache amongst Berkeley's counterculture youth. The CWLF delved head long into adopting the symbols and aesthetics of the radical student protests at UC Berkeley, adopting the language and style of Berkeley's "New Left" (95). One CWLF placard announced, "Pig State No, Anarchy, No, Jesus Yes!" (95). Like any legitimate student protest group, the CWLF produced its own broadside called *Right On*, starting in 1969 (96). The format and design of *Right On* made it nearly indistinguishable from the radical student publications of the day, but only within the pages of *Right On* were the words of Jesus laid directly alongside matters of student politics.

While *Right On*'s content provides evidence of evangelicals' cooptation of left-wing political culture, it also provides evidence of the

evangelicals' willingness to wade into topics of Buddhism, Zen, and other Eastern philosophies. One article from *Right On*'s September 6 issue in 1969, entitled "Meditational Brain Bust," analyzes Eastern meditational practices and their claim to help practitioners locate the god inside themselves (Christian World Liberation Front Collection; *Right On* 1969). Another *Right On* article from September 1971 critiques an Alan Watts lecture on Zen, finding his philosophy to be an inferior alternative to Christianity and characterizing Watts' choice to practice Zen as a failure to "cope with the guilt" of our inevitably sinful nature (Christian World Liberation Front Collection; *Right On* 1971). Despite ultimately rejecting Eastern ideas, the evangelical *Right On* knew that swaying the radical left to the side of Christianity meant engaging with their favorite Eastern philosophies.

Evangelical engagement with Asian philosophies also took place on the Hollywood hippie scene, which had its own evangelical newspaper designed to attract wayward youth to Jesus. The *Hollywood Free Paper*, printed from 1969 to 1978 by the evangelical Duane Pederson, while less strident than *Right On*'s political tone, similarly engaged tropes of Eastern philosophy to attract its hippie audience (Hollywood Free Paper and Jesus People Magazine Collection n.d.). For instance, the front page of a special edition from 1971 boasts the headline "JESUS IS BETTER THAN HASH," and features a cartoon parody of a charlatan guru that appears similar to the Maharishi made famous by the Beatles' travels to India (Fig. 1; *Hollywood Free Paper* and *Jesus People Magazine* Collection 1971). The unfolding comic scene depicts a disappointed hippie seeker who has ascended a mountainous precipice only to discover that his long-haired guru charges flat rates for meditation lessons while living in Western-style luxury.

In the examples from Christian newspapers above, Eastern philosophies are depicted as inferior to Christian ideas. But despite their ultimate criticism of these ideas, it is clear that evangelical Christians felt the need to engage Eastern thought in order to create a meaningful dialogue with young converts. These same elements of Eastern philosophy are also engaged in the Christian Hippie Comics analyzed below. However, these Christian Hippie Comics approvingly incorporate non-Western concepts of the mystico-erotic into their depictions of a Christian lifestyle. Like those evangelical outreaches that coopted secular musical and political culture to attract young seekers, these Christian Hippie Comics coopt the tantric themes embraced by the counterculture.

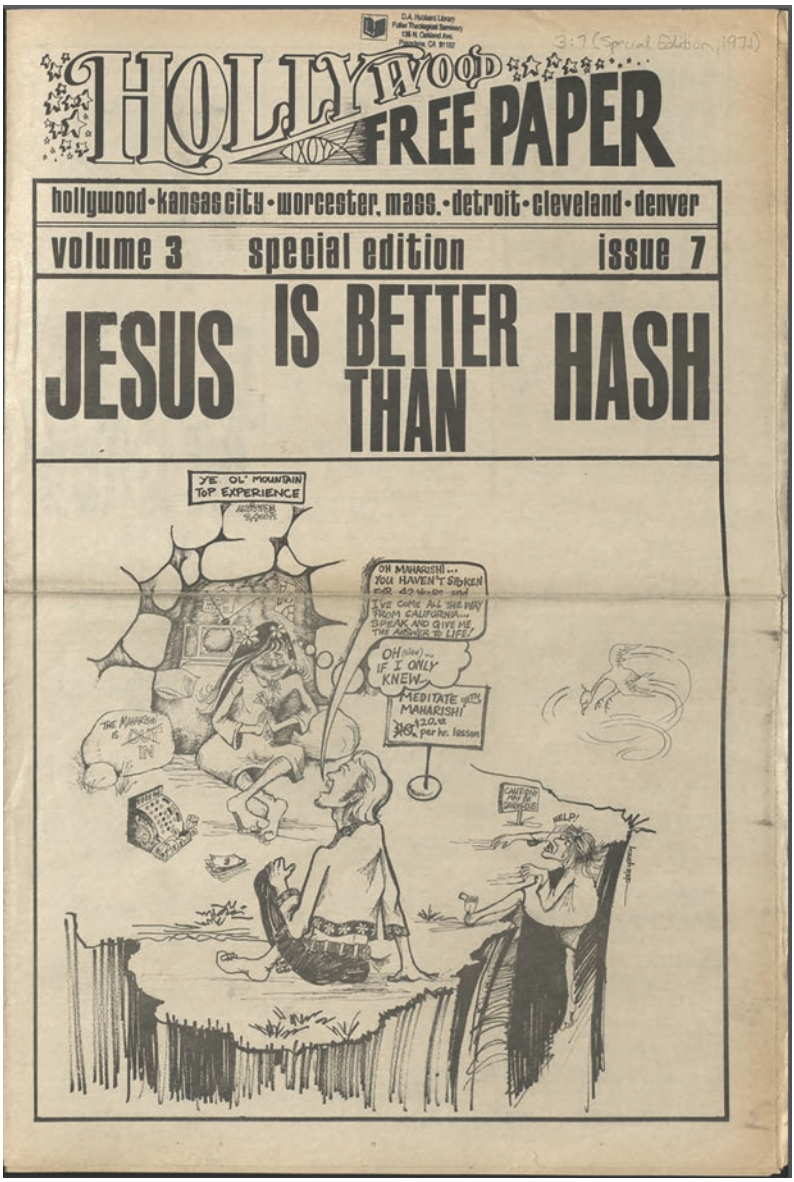

Fig. 1 "Jesus Is Better Than Hash" (1971), *Hollywood Free Paper*. (D.A. Hubbard Library. Fuller Theological Seminary. Used with permission)

A Brief History of *Archie's Sonshine* (1974)

In 1972, the same summer that Billy Graham took the stage at "Godstock" to promote a hip version of his Christian message to young people, veteran Atlas Comics artist and born-again Christian Al Hartley completed his first Christian comic book for the Spire Christian Comics imprint. It was a well-received adaptation of *The Cross and the Switchblade,* which, like Billy Graham's outreach, sought to target youthful converts through its format and subject matter related to saving teen souls. From this successful beginning, Hartley went on to a prolific career with Spire Christian Comics, due in part to a deal he struck with the co-founder of Archie Comics, John L. Goldwater, which allowed Hartley to draw all the characters of the Archie gang, but with plot lines that emphasized a message of Christian salvation. As Hartley described it, "all the laughs and excitement and bloopers would just be hooks to get the reader's attention and lead him to Christ. The books looked exactly like comics, but they were really supertracts" (Hartley 1977, 38). Hartley attributes his unlikely licensing arrangement with Archie Comics to divine intervention and the fact that the traditionally Jewish John L. Goldwater was a God-fearing man, just like Hartley (39). Goldwater felt a connection to Hartley's strong faith and agreed to the deal as being in keeping with the "wholesome family values" (Blumenthal 1999) of the Archie brand.

Archie's Sonshine (Hartley 1974), was one product of this deal, and, like the other comic books in this series, featured on its back page a greeting from Hartley himself. Pictured at his drawing desk, smiling and wearing a LaCoste V-neck sweater, Hartley warmly greets his readers and encourages them to give their lives to Jesus Christ. His greeting also includes a message that is often emphasized by Hartley, his desire to show how God operates in every aspect of our daily existence. As Hartley puts it, "our great motivation is to take a slice of life that the reader can identify with, and then show precisely how God wants to be involved in that life experience … day in and day out in the very nitty gritty of our lives" (Hartley 1998, iv). As we will see below, Hartley achieves this goal in *Archie's Sonshine* by showing how God's love is present in the "nitty gritty" of the amorous liaisons of the Archie gang. In this combination of love for God and romantic, teenage lust, I identify a combination of the mystical and the erotic, and trace its development as a theme that links *Archie's Sonshine* to Kripal's Super-Story.

Mystico-Erotic Themes in *Archie's Sonshine*

The plot of *Archie's Sonshine* incudes the whole Archie gang, but focuses primarily on the character of Big Ethel, whose quest for romantic love blends seamlessly with her new-found experience of Christian zeal. As the story opens on a teen-packed beach, Big Ethel complains to Betty about her lack of luck finding a boyfriend. In response, Betty raises a "One-Way Jesus" finger toward the sky and tells Ethel, "You can look up!!!" Just at this moment, a custom van careens onto the sand. The side of the van boasts a mural that says "LOVE" in a groovy font, along with an emblem of a white cross superimposed over a pink heart. From out of the van steps a hunky, bare-chested preacher who looks a bit like Warren Beatty from Shampoo and a lot like Jesus Christ. The unnamed preacher starts to share a message about love to the gathered teens. He tells them, "It's never enough until its shared!!!" Under the preacher's sway, Big Ethel has been turned on for Jesus and rushes throughout the beachgoers to share the message of God's love. The first person she approaches turns out to be a cute, single Christian boy who shares Ethel's spiritual fervor. As he speaks to Ethel about his faith, she is overcome in a paroxysm of amorous feelings as indicated by a tornado of floating hearts around her bulging and crossed eyes. Finally, unable to endure the romantic spark between them, Ethel gasps and falls unconscious into a pose that begs comparison to the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* as sculpted by Bernini in the seventeenth century (Fig. 2). Holding the spent Big Ethel in his arms, the cute Christian boy says, "I think the sun got her!!!" Archie responds, "It was the SON all right!" The final scene of the comic book shows Ethel holding hands with the cute Christian boy as they walk on the beach at sunset. Above the pair is emblazoned a New Testament quote from 1 John that says, "If you walk in the light of God's son you'll have true fellowship with each other"; heavily suggesting that due to Ethel's belief in Jesus she was able to find a romantic partner.

As presented, the story of Big Ethel in *Archie's Sonshine* tends to unite romantic love and the love of God. It conflates the eros associated with human sexuality and the mystical, or spiritual, path of salvation through Jesus. In this way, Big Ethel is like Kripal's Next Age superhero, who reflects a "Tantric yoga model of sexual energy" (2011, 170) with its direct relationship between erotic powers and superpowers. We can see this in the direct relation between Ethel's romantic success and her growing awareness of God's love. Once Ethel meets her boyfriend she has a St.

Fig. 2 Al Hartley, Archie's Sonshine (1974). (New York: Archie Enterprises, Inc. Used with permission)

Teresa-style experience of God's love and, by the last page of the comic book, finally achieves "true fellowship" with God.

The gawky figure of Big Ethel may seem an unlikely embodiment of a tantric super-mystic, but the suggestion is supported by Hartley's own emphasis within Christianity on a non-dual aspect of the Christian God who, Hartley asserts, can be found in the minute details of our day to day lives. Such an attitude was visible in the broader Jesus People Movement that presented Christianity as a lived daily practice involving Jesus at every moment and not just as a weekly Sunday activity. This blending of God with the quotidian as part of a Christian worldview can arguably be seen as incorporating ideas of non-duality from those Asian religions that find no separation between God and the individual. If we see Hartley's theory of God as incorporating aspects of Eastern philosophies, we can understand why his tantric-tinged gospel message might appeal to its young audience already steeped in the Eastern philosophies of contemporary hippie culture.

While this combination of sex and Jesus may seem unlikely in an evangelical comic book, Hartley was not alone among Christian Hippie Comic artists who appealed to youth by suggesting a connection between Jesus' love and the eros based in romantic sexual desires. For instance, comic artist and evangelical Christian, Jackson Wilcox, drew many illustrations for the hippie-targeted *Hollywood Free Paper*, including the cover of the 1976 February edition which features a cartoon image of a smiling man with a pocketknife who has carved a heart into the trunk of a tree. Inside the heart is carved "Jesus+_____" (Fig. 3). The cartoon man asks the reader, "Is your name being carved in this heart?" (*Hollywood Free Paper* and *Jesus People Magazine* Collection 1976).

In Christian Hippie Comics like those of Wilcox and Hartley, mystico-erotic tropes create a tantric-tinged gospel message we can link to the Super-Story and its positive message of human development. However, as examined below, in the case of *The Little Flirty Fishy* these same tropes have been used by other Christian Hippie Comics to subvert the Super-Story's message and to weave a narrative that inhibits potentialities and individual growth.

A Brief History of *The Little Flirty Fishy*

Like *Archie's Sonshine*, *The Little Flirty Fishy* combines romantic love and spiritual enlightenment in a religious tract that appears in comic book form. *The Little Flirty Fishy* (hereafter, *Flirty Fishy*) was a publication of the

Fig. 3 "Is Your Name Being Carved in this Heart?" (1976), *Hollywood Free Paper*. (D.A. Hubbard Library. Fuller Theological Seminary. Used with permission)

Children of God (COG), a religious group with roots in the Christian Hippie scene of Huntington Beach, California, where, in 1968, COG operated an evangelical teen outreach center ministering to the beach town's wayward hippie youth (Eskridge 2013, 64). From there, they grew into an international network of communal homes that supported the larger organization through proselytizing activities such as the publication and distribution of its own literature, which was sold to the public through street sales. However, certain publications were reserved for group insiders only and communicated official COG doctrine which emanated from the prophetic revelations of the group's leader, David Berg. Within a few years of the group's founding, Berg changed his name to Moses David and disappeared from public view, thereafter directing the movement in *absentia* (Jones 2021, 15). He accomplished this almost solely through the use of published newsletters called "Mo Letters" (Zandt and David 1991, 20). Mo Letters transmitted Moses David's prophecies as being received via direct communication with God. Certain Mo Letters were chosen to be converted into comic book form and were published under the group's comic imprint, *True Komix* (54). *True Komix* were all illustrated by trusted members of COG, who used pseudonyms such as "Ethan Artist" and "Phillip LaPlume" through which to identify their artwork (197).[1]

COG's use of newsletters and comic books to lead its organization was a method adopted in response to the growing general consensus that the Children of God were a cult (Jones 2021, 15). By operating in an underground manner (16), and with no visible leader, COG could more easily avoid the mounting scrutiny of outsiders. By 1971, an organization of aggrieved parents had formed, which claimed that their children inside COG were victims of kidnapping, drugging, and brainwashing while being forced to live in a "slave-like atmosphere" (Zandt and David 1991, 37; Eskridge 2013, 191). Through such outcry, stories of sexual promiscuity surfaced which were later confirmed as evidenced by official COG policies that encouraged free and open sexual activity, including a form of religious

[1] It is difficult to precisely date the issues of *True Komix* given their underground production style. Some *True Komix* have been gathered and dated by scholar David E. VanZandt, who dates *True Komix* issues from 1976 and 1977 and lists dozens of Mo Letters dating from 1969 to 1989 (Zandt and David 1991, 221, 197). In addition, a large archive of *True Komix* has been collected on a website maintained by ex-members of the Children of God. This archive notes that in 1982 a compendium of *True Komix* was created, collecting the illustrated versions of Mo Letters that had been written throughout the 1970s (https://www.xfamily.org/index.php/True_Komix_-_The_Love_of_God).

prostitution called "Flirty Fishing" (Zandt and David 1991, 46). COG pioneered this proselytization technique whereby female-only COG members approached potential male converts "on the pretense of sexual or romantic attraction," and, if it became necessary for a successful witnessing interaction, "the family member may engage in sexual relations with the prospect" (Zandt and David 1991, 46; Eskridge 2013, 208). The goal was to attract new male members who would ultimately be introduced to David Moses and encouraged to join COG and donate money to the group.

Flirty Fishing was just one aspect of the overall emphasis within COG on the sexual act of love as an avenue to finding God. Through this emphasis, COG capitalized on the hippie message of "free love" in order to attract the young dropouts whom the group targeted (Eskridge 2013, 65; Zandt and David 1991, 29). The hippie youth of the day, already acclimated to ideas of blending sex and spirituality as espoused, for example, by tantrism, were targeted by COG with a similar Christian message that blended traditional Christian doctrine with ideas about the power of sexual union. In this way, COG's sex-soaked version of Christianity attracted youthful converts, and, in the process, presented a tantricized version of the gospel.

Mystico-Erotic Themes in *The Little Flirty Fishy*

Of the numerous *True Komix* publications, the example of *The Little Flirty Fishy* is useful for its discussion of the theological basis of Flirty Fishing, which reveals a conception of Christianity tinged in tantric ideas due the connections it draws between sexual union and closeness to God (Family 2007). According to the comprehensive internet archive maintained by ex-COG members, *Flirty Fishy* is based on a Mo Letter originally drafted in 1974 by Moses David and then reprinted as an illustrated *True Komix* issue in a 1982 compendium titled *True Komix* (Family 2019). It is also typical in its graphic illustrations of male and female nudity and sexual intercourse that are set alongside the New Testament words of Jesus and the prophecies of Moses David. As Moses David explains in *Flirty Fishy*, it is through the act of sexual union with potential converts that the woman (the bait), and the male convert (the fish) become one with God, or, as he says, "The bait is upon the hook and the hook and the bait and the fish, lo, these three become one and inseparable, one body pierced with My love! The bait and the fish become one flesh, both on the hook of My Spirit! See?" (Fig. 4) (*The Flirty Little Fishy*, 5). Accompanying these

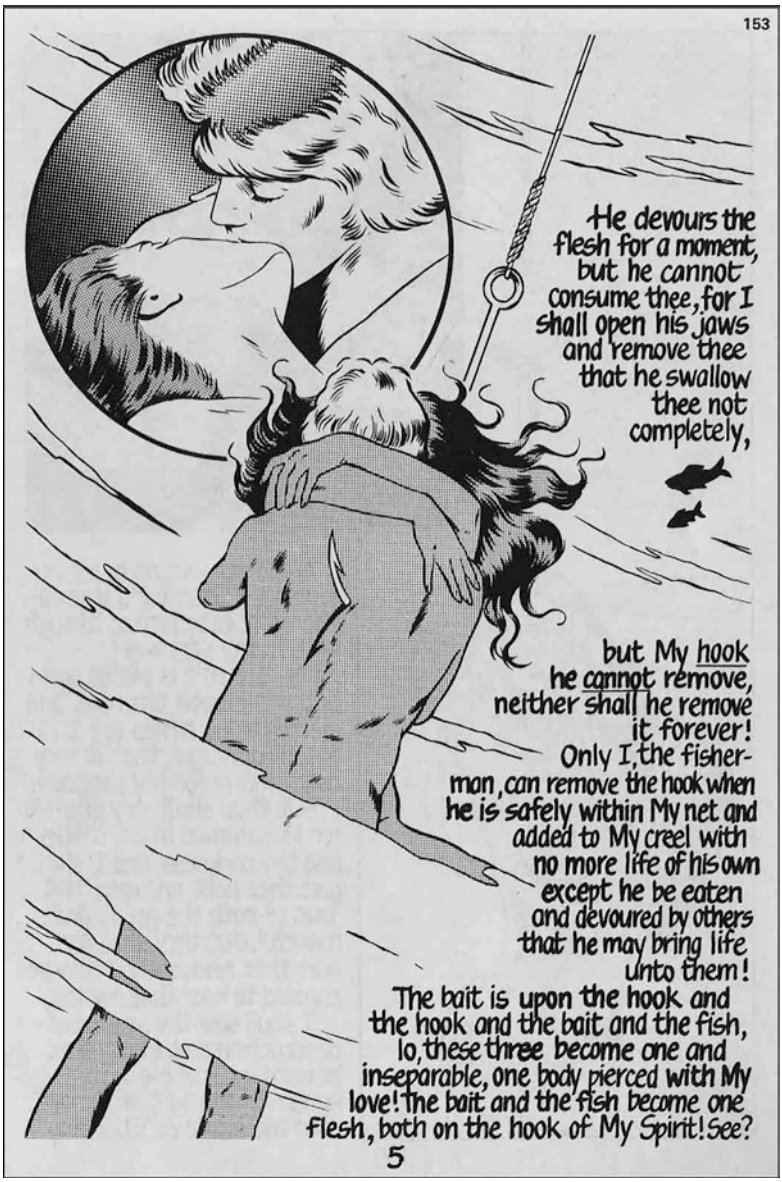

Fig. 4 "The Little Flirty Fishy" (1982). (True Komix. Used with permission)

words are illustrations of a naked couple engaged in sex with a massive fishhook plunged through their torsos, uniting them as one. Moses David adapts his fishing metaphor from Jesus' words to his disciples, when He promises them they will win souls for Jesus like "fishers of men," citing this passage at Matthew 4:19 and Luke 5:10. The comic illustrations used to accompany these words of Christ include a libidinous, slack-jawed fish and a woman in a beckoning pose wearing a see-through negligee.

The sexualized and degraded status of women is depicted throughout *Flirty Fishy*, which employs a manipulative and coaxing tone to urge its female members into sex. For example, next to a cartoon image of a woman disco dancing in a revealing dress, female COG members are informed "you must not let self and pride enter it" (2). In later pages of *Flirty Fishy*, a crying woman is assured by the voice of God that "David [Moses] is My master fisherman who useth thee for My bait to catch many fish for Me!" (7). Thus, through personal revelations from God, and through appeals to warped interpretations of the Bible, *Flirty Fishy* is typical of how *True Komix* presents COG's mystico-erotic themes in comic book format.

Conclusion

Both *Archie's Sonshine* and *Flirty Fishy* participate in Kripal's Super-Story by using mystico-erotic themes to present a Christian-based message that blends spiritual seeking and sexual energy. Both comic books employ these themes within the imaginative construct of Kripal's Orientation mytheme, with its frequent references to Asian locales or ideas to explain the anomalous to Western audiences. In the case of *Archie's Sonshine*, the Orientation mytheme is visible in its tantric blend of sex and mysticism as embodied in Ethel's teenage lust and her simultaneously escalating spiritual epiphany. In *Flirty Fishy*, the Orientation mytheme is present in COG's assurance to female members that through tantric-style sexual relations they may experience "God's spirit." In both cases, these themes present a tantric-tinged gospel message.

However, despite both comics' use of these elements of the Super-Story, it is only *Archie's Sonshine* that maintains the Super-Story's plot on its trajectory to cosmic consciousness. This seems fitting since the artist and author, Al Hartley, describes his own comics as "supertracts" due to their message of salvation promising to free humanity from its earthly bonds. In Hartley's supertract *Archie's Sonshine*, the character of Big Ethel

can be compared to Kripal's Next Age superhero who masters tantric practices to achieve the extraordinary powers of the Super-Story. In Ethel's case, her superpower is her spiritual growth toward communion with God, a pathway of human development that aligns her course with that of the Super-Story. When Ethel becomes turned on for Jesus, both spiritually and physically, she changes from a depressed loner to a sexually and spiritually fulfilled Christian.

In contrast, *Flirty Fishy*, despite using the same mystico-erotic themes, doesn't tell a Super-Story but instead creates—as Méheust describes it—"the inhibition of potential" by authorizing a world view based on deception and human degradation through false love. The female characters in *Flirty Fishy*, who blend sex and proselytizing, have been duped by a disingenuous leader into deceiving male converts for money. This does not conform to Kripal's idea of the Next Age superhero whose empowerment comes from mastering their own sexual powers, and not being enslaved by them. In addition, the *Flirty Fishy* comic does not comport with the overall outline of Kripal's Super-Story, despite the fact that, as Kripal says, there "isn't any single plot, cast of characters, or definite ending" to the Super-Story (2011, 6). Still, the foundation of the Super-Story is about human potential and the possibility of personally evolving into cosmic consciousness. The deceptive practices depicted in *Flirty Fishy* can't be described as promoting individual growth when individuals are manipulated like bait on a hook. Unless we consider *Flirty Fishy* as a Bizarro version of the Super-Story, its narrative doesn't hold hope for the superpower of spiritual enlightenment.

This analysis demonstrates that elements of the Super-Story are not always used for good. If one pays attention to how these tropes are manipulated, it is possible to critically deconstruct narratives that have been written without the reader's best interests in mind. This can be important when such themes begin to appear not just in comic books or literature, but in daily, lived socially constructed realities as well. As Kripal writes, "[I]f one can realize that visionary landscapes and paranormal realities [are] authored by oneself and one's culture, then one can also realize that things like 'society,' 'religion,' 'self,' and 'other,' even physical reality itself, are equally authored, and so also illusory" (38). Within this framework, it is possible to reject artificial barriers that inhibit one's trajectory towards the fulfillment of human potential.

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The Flying Eyeball: The Mythopoetics of Rick Griffin

Erik Davis

Abstract Rick Griffin was arguably the greatest artist to emerge from the maelstrom of psychedelic visual culture in California in the late 1960s. An early and influential underground comix creator, contributing to R. Crumb's legendary *Zap*, Griffin was also known for his rock poster art and album covers, including the Grateful Dead's *Aoxomoxoa* album. Griffin was also a genuine seeker, drawing concepts as well as images from esoteric sources like Manly P. Hall's *Secret Teachings of All Ages*, and fusing these with psychedelic metaphysics and an ambiance of humor and dread typified by his legendary "flying eyeballs" vision. Taking Griffin's esotericism seriously, this chapter will show how Griffin's art intertwined with his

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concerns with the occult, carnality, judgment, and the soul, and how tensions visible in his work led to his conversion to Christianity in the early 1970s, at the peak of the counter-cultural Jesus Movement.

Keywords Rick Griffin • Mythopoetics • Comix • Jesus Movement

The peak years of California's bohemian counterculture were suffused with sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll, but they were also saturated with the spirit. Turbo-driven by the widespread use of psychedelics, the Beat mysticism of the 1950s had bloomed, by the late 1960s, into a vibrant peacock tail of gods, symbol systems, and supernatural encounters that drew from all manner of times and places and religions without quite fixing on any of them. The iconic cover for The Jimi Hendrix Experience's *Axis: Bold as Love*—which superimposed Roger Law's painting of the band over a mass-produced offset Hindu god poster picturing the theophany of Krishna from the *Bhagavad Gita*—captures this lysergic cosmic effulgence as well as anything. But for a more bracing and diverse iconographic stroll through the mystic carnival of California consciousness, one cannot do better than to look—closely, and then again—at the work of Rick Griffin.

Soul surfer, psychedelic poster illustrator, and underground comix weirdo, Griffin channeled the visual smorgasbord of freak esoterica while lending it a uniquely visionary, fluid, and symbolic depth. And when Griffin accepted Jesus Christ as his personal savior in 1970—a conversion that inflected but did not squelch his ongoing engagement with waves, visionary art, and popular cultural forms—Griffin gave visual voice to the Jesus Movement, one of the oddest and most misunderstood currents of California freak religiosity: the rebellion against the rebellion, the One Way of Christ that cut through all the hazy labyrinths of mystical hedonism.

Griffin's career can be loosely divided into three overlapping and interpenetrating social identities: surfer, psychedelic visionary, and born-again Christian. Griffin's relationship to these passionate in-groups is key to understanding and appreciating the mythic charge of his art. As Los Angeles art critic Doug Harvey has explained in an excellent overview of Griffin's work, "The various subcultural contexts of Griffin's life and career can be read as a sequence of tribal situations—Surf Culture, Psychedelic Culture, Jesus Freak Culture—that sought to create utopian splinter microcosms of human society to which various consciousness-transforming sacraments were central. In each case, Griffin's role was to act as an intermediary between the experiential and the symbolic realms,

translating and codifying the transcendent weightlessness and timeless immediacy of the Green Room, the ego-shredding electricity of LSD, and the redemptive living waters of Christ's presence into pictorial equivalents—as roadmaps for the novice and reminders for the initiated."[1]

Griffin grew up on the knob of Ranchos Palos Verdes, which lies on the coast between Los Angeles and Long Beach. Outside of school, the young man spent his time surfing and drawing. Griffin's father, who worked as an engineer, was also an artist and a serious amateur archaeologist, and the family regularly visited Indian reservations and ghost towns throughout the Southwest. Kachina forms and other Amerindian iconography would come to infuse Rick's work, as did the Mexican styles he absorbed from the restaurants, churches, and taquerias of Southern California and, later, on surfing expeditions south of the border. Though Griffin was raised without religion, he was also fascinated with Catholic iconography and the rococo density of Churrigueresque Mexican church architecture, which inflected many Spanish revival churches in Southern California. While these samplings raise the vexed issue of appropriation, we should at minimum recognize Griffin's graphic innocence and symbolic hunger, feelings that were shared by many artists of his generation, who sought for inspiration outside the boundaries of mainstream American society. Griffin also loved *Mad* magazine; Don Martin's goofy illustrative line infused Griffin's early semi-autobiographical surf bum character Murphy, who was quickly adopted as a friendly icon of the early 1960s SoCal surfer scene, which navigated its own path between clean-cut kookery and Beat antinomianism.

Murphy—and Griffin's style—would change considerably as Griffin himself changed, first by attending Chouinard Art Institute, the ancestor of CalArts, and then by diving deeper into bohemia as a member of the southland jug-band tribe the Jook Savages. Another significant mark was left—literally—by a terrible auto accident in October 1963, which dislocated Griffin's left eye, put him in a hospital for weeks, and, following Griffin's refusal of plastic surgery, left his handsome face scarred for life, with an air of piratical suspicion etched into his countenance. Griffin had caught a ride hitchhiking, and in some accounts, awoke to find the driver laughing demonically while weaving across the road—a creepy echo of the maniac Kustom Kulture hot rod art of Von Dutch and Ed "Big Daddy"

[1] Doug Harvey, *Heart and Torch: Rick Griffin's Transcendence.* (Laguna Beach, Ca.: Laguna Art Museum, 2007), 10.

Roth, who, along with Stanley Mouse's early monster parade, also influenced Griffin's style with their greasy kidstuff. Whatever the truth of that tale, Griffin did hear a nurse reciting the 23rd Psalm in the hospital once he regained consciousness. A seed—or a holy eyeball—had been planted.

As Harvey notes, Griffin's work darkened and thickened after the accident, as he turned to the dense cross-hatching and deeper textures that anticipated the psychedelic *horror vacui* to come. In 1965, Griffin and the Jook Savages headed north, and by the following year, Griffin was installed in the Haight-Ashbury. Inspired by a legendary poster for the Charlatans (an undersung San Francisco group who popularized the Wild West look among budding hippies), Griffin created a poster for a Jook show, a home-run effort that rather quickly led to Griffin becoming one of the most significant poster artists of the era.

Drawing from Old West and Native American iconography, hallucinatory typography, biomorphic arcana, and his own mightily expanded and mystically inclined nervous system, Griffin concocted scores of striking rock posters for both Bill Graham and the Family Dog. Griffin's penmanship was already unmistakable, but now his images featured intense plays of color that were magnified by Griffin's painstaking use of hand color separation. While some of these images were ferocious, others were intentionally homely. Much of his early poster work was inspired by the engravings found on antiquated product labels, especially from items associated with food and the kitchen. In a late interview, Griffin described the "subconscious endearing quality" of these labels, which reflected both the "tender loving care" of the original artists and the fact that these old-timey styles were being jettisoned as postwar advertising embraced modernism.[2] As the critic Walter Medeiros writes, for Griffin, "the trademark images of these domestic staples were broadly symbolic of care, beginning with care about one's work and extending to family love and human brotherhood."[3]

A sense of love and spiritual brotherhood also infused the images Griffin made for the Human Be-In, an important festival in Golden Gate Park, and *The Oracle*, the Haight's colorful hippie newspaper. These images directly tapped the spiritual zeitgeist, but Griffin was also using his art to develop a more personal and idiosyncratic symbolism. Lightning bolts,

[2] Patrick Rosenkranz, ed., "The Rick Griffin Interviews," *The Comics Journal*, 257 (December 2003): 82.

[3] Ted Owen, *High Art: A History of the Psychedelic Poster* (London: Sanctuary Publishing, 1999), 76.

scarabs, eggs, hearts, flames, eyes—these seemed to emerge from some fractal dimension between the flat plane of design and the copulating archetypal underworld of primal archetypes, as if Griffin's own visions, unleashed through his devoted consumption of psychedelics, were invading the page. As his friend Gordon T. McClelland explained, "Rick was a serious seeker. He was convinced that spiritual power and truth existed, but wasn't sure how to tap into it. His main way to access something he thought was on track was to take massive doses of LSD and combine it with lots of pot smoking. When he was in he was all the way in, and the regular use of psychedelic drugs provided a resemblance of something spiritual."[4] The art that resulted from Griffin's psychedelic journeys was often deeply esoteric, but it had an exoteric effect. As Harvey points out, the explosion of global media in the 1960s allowed such highly local and personal visual codes to literally spread across the world, enabling a "tiny LSD-saturated bohemian subculture" to influence planetary signs and meanings, producing what Harvey rightly calls "an unprecedented semiotic convulsion in the history of human culture."[5]

Griffin's masterful cover for the Grateful Dead's 1969 album *Aoxomoxoa*, which was titled by Griffin and designed with Dead lyricist Robert Hunter, is a beautiful example of the artist's dark and carnal biophilia. With its solar spermatozoa, avocado wombs, phallic skulls, sprouting mushrooms, and curling streams of incense smoke, the image—originally a poster—presents an eerie mandala of pagan recurrence and psychedelic sex-and-deathery. The image also demonstrates Griffin's remarkable deployment of lettering, which squeezed the humble Roman alphabet into Gothic hieroglyphs at once fecund, cosmic, and sinister. The symmetrical letters that thread through the palindromic album title—A, O, M, X—also appear in many of Griffin's comix panels, where they sometimes take on various esoteric overtones—Alpha and Omega, AUM—and sometimes escape into pure formal play. On the album cover, hovering beneath the winged solar disc of ancient Egypt, the meaty Old West typography for "Grateful Dead" verges on incoherence—indeed, Griffin was disfiguring band names with spidery script twenty-five years before black metal artists hit the scene. Griffith knew that such formal ambiguity only seduces you into trying to decipher the enigma—like the drugs, like the scene itself, it *draws you in*. That's why the gaze is rewarded as well,

[4] Harvey, *Heart and Torch*, 126.
[5] Ibid, 33.

since the Dead's name is also an ambigram that conceals the phrase "We ate the acid"—which is of course precisely the sort of semantic excess one might notice when you *have* eaten the acid.

Griffin's most celebrated psychedelic image—and arguably the most iconic San Francisco rock poster of all time—is BG-105, the famous "flying eyeball" design he used to announce a 1968 Jimi Hendrix performance. The first thing that must be said about this extraordinary image is that it is not fucking around. Through a transcendental hole ripped in reality, and outlined with hot-rod flames, a bloodshot eyeball hustles toward us clutching a *memento mori*. The eyeball's appendages—angel wings that suggest the outline of a (sacred) heart and the talons and tail of some fell dragon—strike a swastika pose more Vedic than Nazi but still creepy as hell. Though reminiscent of an 1882 Odilon Redon drawing (*L'Œil, comme un ballon bizarre se dirige vers l'infini*), Griffin probably lifted the flying eyeball from the pinstriper Von Dutch, who used one as a signature icon, an image that Dutch also linked to ancient Egyptian and Macedonian culture. But as Eric King notes in the poster collector's intriguing essay on BG-105, Von Dutch's eyeballs were friendly, while Griffin has given us an image of implacable judgment—not the mulchy merry-go-round of *Aoxomoxoa* but the horror of final days. "It is Rick's vision of the all-seeing eye of God the father, the Old Testament 'jealous and angry God' before whom Rick felt we were all wanting, all guilty, all unworthy sinners doomed to burn forever in the lake of fire."[6] There may be some backwards projection here, since the Griffin of 1968 was still a few years away from his Christian conversion, and much more immersed in occult esoterica than the gospels. For all we know, the artist originally saw this eyeball thing hurtling at him from the rafters at an Avalon Ballroom show. Whatever its origins, the icon has all the disturbing ambivalence of the in-your-face sacred, famously limned by Rudolph Otto as *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—a mystery at once enchanting and terrifying.

King argues that the tension between the love of the spirit and the love of the flesh defined hippie culture, and that Griffin—who by most accounts was a sometimes-intense lover of life—wrestled with this polarity more intensely than most, an agon that eventually led him to Christ. But when did the struggle begin in earnest? After all, Christian imagery was not uncommon among psychedelic freaks—having a "Christ trip," crucified

[6] Eric King, "Some words on BG-105, Rick Griffin's 'Eyeball,'" 1996, http://www.therose7.com/eyeball.htm.

for all, was almost run-of-the-mill in some corners. In "Pieta," a 1967 art photograph taken by the photographer Bob Seidemann, Griffin gender-bends Michelangelo's famous image while incarnating the physical ideal of the hippie Jesus. In the photograph, Griffin holds a bloody palm towards the camera, his identification with Jesus seemingly complete. At the same time, Griffin's wife Ida, his girlfriend at the time, insists the photograph was wholly Seidemann's creation.

More explicitly religious resonances characterize some of the panels Griffin created for R. Crumb's revolutionary *Zap Comix* the following year, when Griffin shifted away from the poster scene and started to explore the emerging genre of underground comix. In *Zap Comix* #2, Griffin gives us some more eyeballs of judgment, now set against a dizzying abstract astral plane that draws equally from Krazy Kat and Salvador Dali. The eyes are ambivalently split between angelic and demonic forms, but they announce their possible apocalyptic union as "Alpha and Omega" (A, O). The following issue, which appeared in the fall of 1969, also includes a remarkable example of Griffin's sincere (if still playful) interest in esoteric symbolism: a single-panel piece called "Ain-Soph-Aur" that reflects the influence of Manly P. Hall's *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* (1928), a popular and heavily illustrated occult compendium that Griffin adored.

The panel is an original if eccentric remix of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, a cosmogram that traditionally depicts an emanationist view of reality, in which sacred forces are "stepped down" through ten spheres or dimensions known as the sephirot. Above and beyond the first sphere of the Tree lie three layers of the Unmanifest—here accurately tagged as Ain, Ain Soph, and Ain Soph Aur—a space that announces itself as "the vacuum of pure spirit." This cosmic plenum in turn give birth to Kether, the supernal Godhead, or "highest crown." Griffin illustrates this supreme sephirot with a heavily abstracted Kachina mask that riffs on a particular Hopi figure known as Tawa, or "Sun Face."[7] The Kachina Godhead then "speaks" a primal pair of sephirot: Binah and Chokhmah, dark and light, here rendered as O and X, code letters that recur throughout Griffin's

[7] Again, you can think of this usage as appropriation or appreciation or both; like many Haight Street heads, Griffin had great respect for Native American cosmology as well as the peyote religion. For more on the complex and sometimes mutually beneficial relationship between hippies and Indians, see Sherry L. Smith, *Hippies, Indians and the Fight for Red Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

work. The yin-yang tension between these two in turn creates the material, elemental world. Here light spills down from the sun but can also, like the holy dove we see, travel upstream, back to the Source, in a fashion highly reminiscent of the Renaissance alchemical emblems that also packed Hall's encyclopedia. The lower dimensions of Griffin's Tree are more "pagan." Here the carnal procreative power of an Egyptian royal couple manifests further elemental connections—a patriarchal lightning bolt and a maternal stream of milk, which feeds a baby wailing away like Max Fleischer's Swee'Pea, alone on the darkling plane of Malkuth, the lowest sephirot.

As with the Dead cover, "Ain-Soph-Aur" suggests an organic and psychedelic ecology of erotic energies, fluid dynamics, and sacred transformations. But despite their mandala-like symmetry, there is something tense and unsettled about both these diagrams, as if, for all their humor, they are seething beyond themselves. A lot of Griffin's psychedelic work is marked by this feeling of anxious polarity, of vessels breaking, of a *coincidentia oppositorum* that cannot quite hold. To use therapeutic language, it seems like Griffin is trying to "work something out" with his language of symbols, something to do with sex and death and the long cosmic view on our mortal condition occasioned by profound psychedelic mysticism. That such sacred alchemy is taking place on the cover of rock LPs and in the sometimes-lewd pages of underground comix only intensifies a tension that, as King suggests, was also intensely personal for Griffin. In *Zap* #3, for example, Griffin's "Ain-Soph-Aur" is followed across the gutter by an R. Crumb strip called "Hairy." A sour depiction of urban hippie decadence, the strip features two hirsute Haight street crusties who at one point plunge a syringe full of speed into the pert ass-cheeks of a wide-eyed 13-year-old girl. It's classic Crumb, but many of the blowjobs and spurting demon cocks in the pages of *Zap* lack the buffer of Crumb's neurotic social satire, and read more like the pornographic id gone raw and ugly. If Griffin was seeking or staging something sacred in his art, he did so in a cultural zone faintly smelling of sulfur.

But perhaps there was a way out of the bind. For the cover *Zap* #3, Griffin created an uncanny full-color image that suggests a more explicitly religious turn than the merely esoteric. This picture features the same sort of circular portal as the Jimi Hendrix poster, only this time a solar swastika, with a rainbow ouroboros halo, is escaping away from us, *out* of the womb-tomb of carnality and into the clear blue sky. A pilgrim scarab, surrounded by the wreckage of violence and gluttony, looks up towards the glowing

swastika, and utters a word in Hebrew. The letters spell out the tetragrammaton, the four-lettered name of YHVH, with the odd addition of the letter *shin* wedged in the middle, making the word *Yahshuah*—in other words, Jesus. As Griffin almost certainly learned from Manly P. Hall, who discusses the matter in *Secret Teachings,* this so-called pentagrammaton—which does not reflect the correct spelling of "Jesus" in early Hebrew sources—was first used by Christian occultists during the Renaissance, when the great stream of Kabbalistic mysticism entered into non-Jewish esoteric circles. The *shin* also appears in "Ain-Soph-Aur" in the place of Tipharet, the sephirot associated with Christ in Christian Kabbala.

Like other artists of his era, Griffin raided the archetypal archive of the religious imagination for the same reasons he raided the history of advertising: to achieve resonant psychedelic and illustrative effects in a pop hermetic game of surface and depth. But this deeply esoteric reference to Jesus—guaranteed to be missed by the overwhelming majority of *Zap* consumers, not to mention his fellow underground comix artists—suggests that Griffin was doing more than minting pop arcana for the freaks. He was opening up to something inward through his art, something as personal as it was collective, a possibility of salvation he wanted to announce to the world and simultaneously conceal.

Consider another color image that Griffin crafted around the time of his turn to Jesus in late 1970: the cover for a collection of underground comix artists called *All Stars.* Here a peculiar hooded figure enters a room, holding a scourge and what appears to be a combination of the Shroud of Turin and the Veil of Veronica—an image of the suffering Jesus that medieval Catholic lore held was miraculously transferred to the cloth that Veronica used to wipe the sweat from Christ's face as he climbed to Calvary. Note that both the Shroud and the Veil are artifacts of sacred representation, of the power associated with *pictures* of Jesus, but that the presumed god-man himself—who the hot-red devil in the lower right corner recognizes as "Emanuel"—is hooded.

In the center of the image we see a highly disturbed young man, whose desperate prayer may reflect some of Griffin's own internal turbulence. "I'm sick of it…dope, crime, smut…it don't gimme no peace of mind—dear Lord…I…I really need help…please God…" This fellow, red like the devil, is surrounded by the paraphernalia of drugs and street thuggery, but it's the porn magazine that catches our eye, a crude and curvy pussy shot that in some sense exposes one of the formal primitives that underlies Griffin's organic biomorphs. This poor soul, with his pimples and greaser

hair-do, looks like a Basil Wolverton character from *Mad*, and though the magazine he seems to be praying to (and beyond) is clearly smut, it is also—literally—a comix panel. As such, this visionary *mise-en-scene* of sin and redemption is also a stand-off of sorts between genres of profane and sacred illustration.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James argued that the people most likely to undergo conversion already possess an extensive psychological domain, a "field of consciousness," in which "mental work can go on subliminally, and from which invasive experiences, abruptly upsetting the equilibrium of the primary consciousness, may come."[8] Many people who become "born again" unconsciously incubate their transformations beforehand—intensifying the personal conflicts in their lives, experiencing heavy and heavenly dreams, noticing suggestive coincidences, staging symbolic encounters. Strong psychedelic experience, of course, also uncorks the subliminal dynamics of the unconscious, with its awesome archetypes, polarities, and archaic and even beastly urges. Perhaps every powerful trip is a conversion of sorts. What makes Griffin's work so extraordinary from a religious studies perspective is that we can see traces of this subliminal process on the page. In a sense, we can see Griffin set himself up for conversion, incubated partly through his own work.

James speaks of "invasive experiences," and it is no accident that Griffin's famous Fillmore flying eyeball represents an otherworldly or divine *invasion*: an all-seeing vector of vision that climbs through a portal into our world—a portal that, it pays to notice, recurs in many Griffin images, both before and after his turn towards Jesus. But even after Griffin stepped over the Christian threshold, he continued to evolve the idiosyncratic and powerful psycho-spiritual language that already informed his comix and illustrations. Though there was a change, there was not a clean break, which means that those of us who resonate with his earlier work can also follow him into his Christianity, a faith that becomes, for Griffin, a stage on a longer psychedelic journey rather than an utter rejection of that path.

Griffin had already left the Haight by the time he found Jesus. In 1969, he abandoned San Francisco with his girlfriend Ida and their two children for travels in Texas and Mexico. Longing for the mellower surfer lifestyle of the southland, Griffin then returned to southern California, settling in San

[8]William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 237.

Clemente. In 1970, Griffin was filmed surfing at the remote and legendary Hollister Ranch for John Severson's classic surf film *Pacific Vibrations*, which also features footage of Griffin and some pals tripping-out a hippie bus with spray-paint. Griffin's notorious intensity seemed evident—though friends describe a man of great innocence and enthusiasm, one account of the period describes Griffin's ability to "scare the living shit out of anybody not ready to deal with his quietly mysterious persona."[9] After painting his first major acrylic for the *Pacific Vibrations* poster, Griffin drove up the coast and visited Paul Johnson and Monique Timberlake at a commune in Mendocino, friends who, in the freaky way peculiar to the era, had become Christian. They "witnessed" about Jesus to Griffin. During his return trip, one story goes, his car broke down, and somehow he walked away from the experience with Jesus as his lord and savior.

Ida played a role in his conversion as well. While Rick was up north, Ida was witnessed to by some friends in San Clemente, including the born-again brother of John Severson. She bought a little pocketbook New Testament, illustrated with Renaissance paintings, and one afternoon she took LSD and "it all came alive for me." The letters of scripture glowed like gold, and she heard a voice from the blue skies saying "Do you want to live or do you want to die?" Ida wrote Rick about her experience about the same time that Paul Johnson was talking about Jesus with him. When Rick returned, he and Ida began to attend a local Baptist church and started to collect Christian art. Rick soon tied the knot with Ida, dedicating his life and art to Christ, though Ida points out that he didn't quit smoking pot.

Needless to say, these were not exactly Bible-belt Christians. Griffin and Ida were born again during the heyday of the Jesus People, or the Jesus Movement, a distinctly countercultural expression of American Christianity that would come to mainstream prominence by 1971, when a host of books and major magazine articles drew attention to the hordes of hirsute youth who combined hippie mores with rock-solid biblical faith and a conviction that the Second Coming was just around the corner. For many of the Jesus People, sometimes somewhat disparagingly called "Jesus Freaks," the Lord was a kind of guerrilla guru, an intimate and

[9] Brad Barrett, "Motorskill Tripping with Brad Barrett: 'Griffin Gave us an Evil-eye Fleegle, and it Scared the Shit Out of Me," Encyclopedia of Surfing, July 15 2018, https://eos.surf/2018/07/15/motorskill-tripping-with-brad-barrett-griffin-gave-us-an-evil-eye-fleegle-and-it-scared-the-shit-out-of-me/.

revolutionary spiritual pal who offered, in the face of countercultural confusions around sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll, "One Way" to go. In a famous Wild West-styled wanted poster that first appeared in the UC Berkeley Christian street paper *Right On!*, Jesus is described as a "notorious leader of an underground liberation movement," a man who possessed the "extremely dangerous" potential to set people—especially young people—free.

The origins of the Jesus Movement can be traced to the Bay Area, and especially to a Haight Street coffee shop called the Living Room, which was set up by Ted Wise and some fresh freak converts in 1967. A small commune in Novato called the House of Acts developed from the cafe, one of whose members—whose friendly charisma was matched by his remarkable name of Lonnie Frisbee—subsequently moved to Orange County. There Frisbee sparked the most important Jesus Freak cross-over revival when he started preaching at Chuck Smith's Calvary Chapel, an otherwise middle-of-the-road evangelical church. He drew mostly young people—including, for one sermon, the future Mrs. Ida Griffin, who, having been raised Episcopalian, noted some important differences in these new converts. "They played acoustic guitars," she explained in conversation, "and they referred to the Lord as 'Jesus' without the 'Christ.'" This deeply intimate relationship with Jesus came before the ideological commitment to dogma; as such, it fed the countercultural predilection towards powerful personal experience, even if the call itself subsequently demanded the rejection of most countercultural values. Many Jesus People, like Frisbee and Ida Griffin, first glimpsed the One Way on LSD; even when drugs were set aside, forms of worship and communion often retained the ecstatic and exuberant character found in religious competitors like ISKCON, better known as the Hare Krishnas.

Whatever offshoot of whatever ministry Griffin came in contact with, it is clear that his conversion was a profound and singular experience, one that Ida compared to "a bolt of lightning." As such, the moment is outside our view. At the same time, as noted above, conversion is not a single punctured and ineffable event, but precipitates out of a long-bubbling vat of emotional tensions, symbolic obsessions, sacred longings, and metaphysical dislocations that exert pressure over time. As a psychedelic, or "psyche-manifesting," illustrator, Griffin had the rare gift of being able to incorporate some of this "metanoia stew" in his art. In other words, the bolt from the blue that Griffin experienced in late 1970 was not totally separate from the white lightning that literally shot through his art.

This is, in any case, how I think we should approach *Man from Utopia*, a remarkable and deeply weird 28-page publication that Griffin completed just months before his conversion. On the thick, card-stock cover that parodies classic EC Comics covers, Jesus appears as one of the featured superheroes of the issue, along with a vaguely malevolent duck-billed creature with a Roman brush helmet identified as "The Moniter" (Griffin was never a great speller). Despite its throwback cover—whose unfortunate Gumbo image, inspired by old-school racist advertising labels, I make no apologies for—*Utopia* is not really a comic. Instead it presents a portfolio of more-or-less thematically related images, which, rumor has it, may have suffered the additional confusion of getting mixed up by a tripping Griffin before getting handed off to the printer. The themes reflect Griffin's core obsessions: surf, sex, death, Christ, flesh, liquid, and lysergic gnosis. Yet the work as a whole refuses summary as it refuses overall coherence, even as its recurrent images and narrative fragments resonate with a remarkable intensity, its heavy, sometimes demonic imagery balancing the daffy bounce and fluid power of Griffin's masterful line. *Man from Utopia* is an opus of psychedelic and mythopoetic consciousness, one that Griffin felt strongly enough about to print on high-quality paper rather than the usual pulp.

While hints of prophetic Christianity had appeared in Griffin's work before, *Utopia* reflects a more tangled opening to the man on the cross, a visionary struggle that would shortly condense into a new identity, which Griffin himself would self-describe as a "disciple of Jesus Christ."[10] But there is no dogma here, none of the preachiness that would show up in some of Griffin's subsequent work. Instead of born-again resolution, *Utopia* expresses the agonizing and often absurd turbulence of *metanoia in motion*—the kind of ferocious and foreboding almost-revelation known by serious acidheads, and by all those poets facing Rilke's stony Apollo, with its demand that "you must change your life."

Here I would like to look more closely at a single two-page *Utopia* spread that may or may not be part of a larger "story" called "Silver Beetles or Mystery Monitor." These two images feature no explicit Christianity, but present two enigmatically related panels that grapple with the mythopoetic vectors of light, revelation, and mediation. As noted earlier, some of Griffin's comix panels reference the letters Alpha and Omega, which are identified with Christ in Revelation 22:13. On the left panel of the *Utopia*

[10] Rosenkranz, "The Rick Griffin Interviews," 65.

spread we see an A=A scroll that unfurls above a bizarre revelatory icon, one that, in a distant echo of medieval Doom paintings, scares off frightened souls to the left and exudes stars and galaxies to the right. Against a cross of light, this meta-icon presents a palimpsest of pop archetypes: lightbulb; soap bubble; a *2001: A Space Odyssey* star child emerging from a cosmic yoni; even an untimely echo of the alien Greys. Whatever we think about these component parts, which are not so much integrated here as laminated together, we know we are facing a glyph of *illumination*. But for all the mystic resonances of that term, illumination here is also a material fact: a lightbulb, an industrial commodity, its twisted base ominously reminiscent of a serpent coil or the rattlesnake tail that appears in BG-105. This conjunction of the sacred and the mundane recalls a photo that André Breton wove into his marvelous 1928 Surrealist text *Nadja*: the shot of an advertising poster, "l'affiche lumineuse," decorated with a blazing lightbulb and the word "Mazda"—at once the name of a trademarked half-watt Edison lightbulb and, as Ahura Mazda, the ancient Zoroastrian lord of light.

Griffin's A=A lightbulb fuses the intense polarity found throughout his work, not just between sacred and profane, or sex and death, but between metaphysical being and the quotidian commodities of the profane modern world. As such, his glyph of illumination invokes a crucial question asked by the scholar of religion Alexander van der Haven, a question with powerful implications for contemporary sacred art: "How do revelations work in a religious cosmos that is not transcendental?"[11] Van der Haven poses this query in a discussion of the mad writer Daniel Paul Schreber, whose late-nineteenth-century religious visions included a God who communicates through a "light-telegraphy" of rays and vibrating nerves. Der Haven suggests that, in the non-transcendental cosmos of technological modernity, you are faced with the problem that, even if you hold out the possibility of divine revelation, that revelation is still subject to the entropy and distortion that haunts any physical communications channel, whether lasers or light-telegraphs or Edison lightbulbs. Illumination is gnosis, but it is also a technological (or pharmacological) event, a material process that further refracts, degrades, and ironizes the divine message. Griffin's lightbulb, then, recalls the famous hippie appropriation of the DuPont

[11] See Alexander van der Haven, "God as Hypothesis: Daniel Paul Schreber and the Study of Religion," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion: Working Papers from Hanover,* ed. Steffen Führding (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2017), 176-198.

company slogan "Better living through chemistry"—ironic, but only in part.

The mystical irony of the profaned sacred, and the sacralized profane, is a key feature of acid mysticism, and it can come off as both funny and dreadful. Both qualities are apparent in *Man from Utopia*, especially in the weirder and more complex image that faces the A=A lightbulb on the right side of the spread. The cherubic character clutching the pen would be familiar to many a resident of the Southland: he is the mascot for Bob's Big Boy, a once popular burger franchise that Bob Wian started in Glendale in 1936. Large fiberglass statues of this figure appeared in front of many Bob's Big Boy restaurants. Holding aloft the double-decker burger the chain originated, this young fellow in red checkered overalls charmed little kids with his cheery, friendly vibe, which nonetheless belied certain enigmas. Who *was* this seemingly very big kid? "Bob" we know is Bob Wian, and "Big Boy" the name of his famous burger. So, is this a Big Boy serving a Big Boy? Does the possessive indicate that he *belongs* to Bob, or does this big-eyed mascot stand as Bob's (or the burger's) emanation, a sort of carnivore theophany? Either way, Griffin recognized the Big Boy as an unparalleled SoCal icon of the sort of sacred absurdity that the Church of the Subgenius describes as "bulldada." (Praise Bob!)

To further unpack this strange picture, we need to consider an important subcategory of visionary or psychedelic art: *the diagrammatic image*. In a diagrammatic image, the picture plane is composed of multiple dimensions, scenes, or realms that are linked together through various frames, portals, borderlines, arrows, vibrations, and connecting lines. Griffin's good pal and fellow comix artist Robert L. Williams provides many examples of such hallucinogenic diagrams in his extraordinarily dense and reverberant "Low Brow" canvases. As Williams's work makes clear, the diagrammatic image is deeply linked to comic book art, with its plurality of panels and variable deployment of borders, overlapping frames, and suturing elements like lightning bolts, arrows, speech balloons, exclamation marks, and other abstract symbols that often represent sounds and emotions that cross between and across individual frames.

The diagrammatic image from comics also invokes older traditions of illustration. In the early modern period especially, a variety of allegorical, esoteric, and alchemical images used similar diagrams to illustrate both spiritual and natural relationships (and often a combination of the two). Take, for example, the frontispiece to *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae* (1646) by the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher, who pioneered the camera

obscura and other optical marvels in an era when light was both a sacred radiance and an increasingly manipulable feature of the material world. Again, Griffin was familiar with these kinds of pictures through Hall's *Secret Teachings* (itself born, like Griffin and Bob's Big Boy, in Southern California). We have already discussed "Ain-Soph-Aur," Griffin's kabbalistic diagrammatic image, aspects of which resonate with the Big Boy panel. Here too we see the "stepping down" of illuminating power from an abstract supernal plane—pictured by the same Kachina Sun Face figure, now partly obscured—to the profane world. But unlike the *Zap* panel, the *Utopia* image is not a mandala, that familiar symmetrical template used by so many visionary and psychedelic artists, not infrequently to the point of cliché. Here, instead, this cosmic flow is askew: the holy light emerges from the upper corner, where the Sun Face Godhead is mostly cut off by the frame. From there the light passes through a creepy, fleshy, long-haired intercessor out of *Tales from the Crypt*, and from there through the Big Boy's eyes to the object he is drawing into existence with his Rapidograph pen (needless to say, one of Griffin's own tools of art). This object, which strongly resembles the "A=A" figure on the left of the spread—and which the Big Boy appears to be looking at across the gutter—echoes the intercessor's strangely shaped head, even as that same morphology recurs as a lightbulb that pops up in a thought bubble on the upper right.

This lightbulb is an important key to the meaning of the diagram, which is as much about artistic inspiration as mystical revelation. Again, as in Breton's Mazda photograph, the lightbulb is both a modern industrial feature of the electrical grid *and* an avatar of sacred illumination. But the device of the "idea bulb" is also old-school cartoonese for the eureka moment of inspiration, a trope that one obsessive on the Internet traces back to *Felix the Cat* cartoons from the 1920s.[12] The lightbulb, then, is at once symbol, sign, and icon, a blazing self-mediating condensation of the looping, concatenating vertigo that characterizes psychedelic revelation. Yet here at least, the elusive circuits of illumination birth the aesthetic object that the Big Boy artist manifests on the page before us: a strange embryo that, reminding us of the *animism* in *animation*, manages to rise off the page, echoing the shapes of higher planes with heft and dimension.

[12] Nicholas Graham Platt, "How did the lightbulb become associated with a new idea?", Medium.com, February 13, 2016, https://medium.com/navigo/how-did-the-lightbulb-become-associated-with-a-new-idea-1dce1b6d648.

The human artist at the center of the frame—goofy, oblivious, clothed in the commercial—is hardly in control of this process. He may wield the Rapidograph, but his personal idea bulb is embedded in a deeper circuit driven by strange forces working behind the scenes, forces that barely appear on the page before us. In other words, the human artist is a hollow fiberglass mascot of secret influences. That's why the checkered pattern on his worker's overalls merges into the pattern on the table before him, which unfolds exactly like the mosaic pavement of Masonic temples. In the First Degree lecture, these black-and-white tiles are described as "emblematic of human life, checkered with good and evil," and they represent the place where the aspirant undergoes initiation—an initiation that, here at least, is indistinguishable from inspiration, and illumination, and invasion, perhaps even something like a cosmic game between black and white.[13]

Notice as well that the bulb shape drawn by the Big Boy artist is expanding in three dimensions, seeming to rise off the page. These shapes, these phonemes of the visionary revelation, are alive—enlivened by Griffin's inimitable penmanship, whose carves and grooves cause the picture plane to fruit into full dimensionality. This alien-lightbulb form recurs throughout the pages in *Man from Utopia*, a process of morphological resonance and transmutation that Griffin raises to a daemonic and deeply psychedelic pitch – "cant quite putcher finger onit," goes one later caption, "some kinda warp." A sense of terrible spiritual *enantiodromia* runs throughout *Utopia*, as if the *Zap*-worthy demon armies pictured in one panel are the vanguard of a holy superhero who might in turn keep the dark at bay, or as if the labial mantle that cloaks a rose-crowned Grateful Dead skeleton announces the sacred secret of sex, a secret that remains nevertheless obscene.

But it is the Jesus portraits in *Utopia* that seem, through their very out-of-placeness, the most disturbing images of this weird stew. In one panel, the Moniter—looking not unlike Marvin the Martian—is shown clutching a Veil of Veronica as he maneuvers a Roman chariot led by scarabs. Elsewhere, the Moniter's lightbulb head appears on the crucified Christ, also crowned by the antlers seen on the *All Stars* cover. These are personal images beyond our ken, perhaps unknown to Griffin himself, who, contemporary photographs show, hung a similar pair of antlers on the wall of

[13] The Euphrates, "The Checkered Flooring," Freemason Information, March 7, 2009, https://freemasoninformation.com/banks-of-the-euphrates/the-checkered-flooring/.

his San Clemente studio, alongside a soft charcoal image of Jesus photographed and included in *Man from Utopia* under the title "Our Darling." The lines that Griffin unleashes here do not easily converge.

Perhaps the most shocking Christian image is also, again paradoxically, the goofiest. Holding out hands punctured with eyeball stigmata, a Murphyish surfer with egg-shaped Aoxomoxoa eyes nose-rides towards us on a burst of foam that emerges from a juicy and explicitly vaginal sacred heart. (Recall the split beaver in the *All-Stars* cover.) Lest we speculate on the audacious profanity of such a conjunction, it should be recalled that the influential eighteenth-century German Pietist Count Zinzendorf encouraged his followers to meditate on Christ's side wound *as* a vulva, an organ of spiritual rebirth. And indeed, that is what Griffin has given us, and given himself as well: the ultimate carnal-cosmic Jesus Freak icon of getting born again.

Though the graphic intensity of *Man from Utopia* would reappear in other Griffin pieces from the early 1970s ("Tales from the Tube," "OMO Bob Rides South"), Griffin did shift the focus and ultimately the style of his work following his conversion. He began doing work with Southland churches, creating tracts and illustrating the cover for a directory produced by his local Baptist Church. He even did an evangelical billboard that echoed his Human Be-In poster from the previous decade. He consciously stepped away from some of his earlier concerns, reducing and even mocking his former attraction to occult iconography. When he revised and republished a famous psychedelic Murphy strip called "Mystic Eyes," he replaced the translation for an esoteric magic square he had furnished on the earlier version with the phrase "Primitive Pre-Salvage Mumbo Jumbo!" In one 1974 interview, he explained this shift: "Before I knew Christ I was really into symbols, because I tried to use symbols to explain to myself what it was I was trying to find. I don't think I would use any Christian symbols now."[14]

Despite his conversion, however, Griffin did continue to use symbolism, and to work as well for secular outfits like *Surfer* magazine, *Zap*, and the Grateful Dead. While no doubt influenced by economic pressures—Griffin had a wife and family to support—these gigs also gave Griffin the opportunity to evangelize in his own way. He laced Christian images and prayers into recognizably Griffinesque scenarios, like claustrophobically illustrated Mexican adventure comics or surf tales starring his old character

[14] Rosenkranz, "The Rick Griffin Interviews," 70.

Murphy. Though some of his underground comix pals were unhappy with his new life—a few reportedly tried to bring him back to the fold by bursting into his home with a bottle of tequila, only to wind up drunk themselves—R. Crumb continued to support his work with no questions asked. *Zap* #7, from 1974, included a beautiful and minimalist four pages from Griffin called "And God So Loved the World," which appeared alongside the usual bestial romps.

Stylistically, however, Griffin did start to turn away from the dense symbolism and psychedelic intensity of his earlier work towards more accessible designs influenced by classic children's book illustrations and what Doug Harvey calls "orange crate art." A marvelous example of this is Griffin's cover for the 1973 Grateful Dead album *Wake of the Flood*. Though the verse from the Book of Revelation he had originally pegged to the image got cut, the cover plays with familiar Griffin devices, including the round portal, the sea, and the scythe. But there is no fear of the reaper here. As Griffin explained at the time, "I didn't want to have a real grimacing Grim Reaper image. I didn't want the usual death image because I'm concerned with life. The Bible is the giver of life, and it continually talks of Eternal Life, whatever that is. I don't know. So I wanted it to be more of a loving thing – a loving harvest."[15]

Despite his apocalyptic sense of urgency about the coming harvest, Griffin felt no need to cut himself off from his earlier sources of income and creative opportunity. The continuity between Griffin's secular and Christian work reminds us of his ability to integrate sources as diverse as commercial labels and archetypal symbolism. In other words, before and after Jesus, Griffin was a master of literally drawing the sacred and profane into a *coincidentia oppositorum*. This sense of dynamic continuity can also be seen by lining up *Wake of the Flood* with another album cover he did two years later for the California soft-rock Christian band Mustard Seed Faith. Once again, the sea and the circular portal appear, suggesting mortal transition, though here that passage is no longer gently somber but illuminated with an amazing splash of fairy-tale light reminiscent of Howard Pyle or Maxfield Parrish. The Mustard Seed Faith cover became a popular image in the Southland's vibrant Christian scene, and subsequently inspired the cover for the 1977 album *Point of No Return* by the group Kansas, whose primary songwriter Kenny Livgren in turn converted to Christianity in 1979.

[15] Rosenkranz, "The Rick Griffin Interviews," 63.

Mustard Seed Faith was on the Maranatha! Music label, which subsequently hired Griffin as art director, giving him and his family a badly-needed steady paycheck and a new home in Santa Ana. Maranatha! was associated with Chuck Smith's aforementioned Calvary Chapel, whose ministry, since Lonnie Frisbee had come and gone, had successfully wedded the earnest and emotional informality of the Jesus People to more mainstream currents of American evangelism. Along with John Wimber's splinter Vineyard movement, Calvary Chapel's revival would also go on to significantly influence the language, look, and feel of modern American evangelism. The oppositional cultural expressions by the early Jesus People (casual clothing, rock music, long hair) would—paralleling the counter-culture's transformation into a dominant commercial culture—become absorbed by more mainline evangelical currents through the 1970s and early 1980s. The blue jeans and acoustic guitars of today's megachurches have freak origins, as does, in part, contemporary Christianity's oppositional "counter-cultural" stance. But a more important spiritual legacy was the sense of intensity and intimacy that many Jesus People brought to their relationship with Jesus, which helped shape the personal and even magical sense of communication with God that characterizes much contemporary evangelism.[16]

Towards the end of the 1970s, Chuck Smith asked Griffin to provide the illustrations for a paraphrased version of the Gospel of John, perhaps the most important book of the New Testament for American evangelicals. *The Gospel of John* appeared in 1980, and was reissued in 2008 in a handsome hardbound volume with extra images not featured in the original 8"x11" magazine format. Though Griffin made wonderful art until the end of his life, *The Gospel of John* stands as his last great work. The images encompass both acrylics and black-and-white line drawings, including punchy and sometimes playful cartoons for each of the chapter numbers—chapter nine, in which Jesus heals a blind man, is accompanied by two flying eyeballs. Though Griffin brought a palpable reverence to the task of illustrating scripture, he did not hesitate to continue the spunky reflection on pop culture and commercial art that marked his entire career. One illustration shows Bob Dylan—recently in the news for his own Christian conversion, brought about in part through Orange County's Calvary-inspired Vineyard Movement—stepping though the porthole of death; while one of the paintings pictures Christ entering Jerusalem, and includes, alongside portraits of

[16] For more on this, see Tanya Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage, 2012).

Griffin and his wife, a skateboarder wearing a Lynyrd Skynyrd t-shirt. Though humorous, these figures also incarnate what the scholar Robert Ellwood described as the evangelist's desire "to collapse into nothing all time between himself and the New Testament."[17]

Stylistically, Griffin continued to reflect on the illustrations of N.C. Wyeth and Dean Cornwell, though in his acrylics he often preferred to replace the crisp lines of classic illustration with more impressionistic air-brushed gestures. These strokes lent great but informal power to two of the most powerful acrylics in *The Gospel of John*, both of which foreground water. For his illustration of Jesus's encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well—one of the most beautiful stories in the gospels—Griffin presents an erotically charged encounter overlaid with a visionary but realistic rendering of liquid: three round splashing "crowns" representing the everlasting water that Christ offers the female outsider. Meditating on these, we realize these shapely drops are still the biomorphic love-spurts of his earlier work.

The other marvelous water painting in *The Gospel of John* is a green, moonlit scene of the boat-bound apostles cowering before Jesus as he walks towards them on the surface of a churning sea. Here Griffin captures the uncanniness of the miraculous, but also embeds the prophetic in the personal. For though there is no surfboard here, those with ears to hear can pick up the California Christian koan that Thomas Pynchon asks in *Inherent Vice*: "What was 'walking on water' if it wasn't Bible talk for surfing?"[18] Indeed, ghosting the painting from *The Gospel of John* is a Griffin drawing from a 1977 calendar, which shows Jesus surfing the edge of a tube, his arms upraised in benediction and athletic grace. Beneath him a typically demotic Griffin blob-being rides the wave, pronouncing "just a closer walk with thee." The image is at once so audacious and so economical that it both harmonizes the clash of contexts and celebrates the sweet absurdity of it all.

This marvel of sassy naïveté also serves as documentary evidence for the cult of born-again surfers that, as Pynchon recognized, was and to some muted degree remains a vital strand of Southern California beach culture. It also reminds us that for true soul surfers, the waves are a *mysterium* in motion, a sentiment Griffin expressed in a 1974 exegesis on tube riding, which he considered the apotheosis of surfing:

[17] Robert S. Ellwood, *One Way: The Jesus Movement and Its Meaning* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 31-32.

[18] Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 99.

> Water is water, energy is energy and a wave is the combination of the two. It has inertia and momentum, and the object is to blend with it as much as you can and still retain your identity, because the tube is constantly collapsing and if you get too far back in there, it collapses and you collapse with it. You get wiped out. If you get too far out in front of it, you're out on the shoulder of the wave, and it's slower out there. You don't get that real excitement. So the tube, like I said, is always a mystery spot.[19]

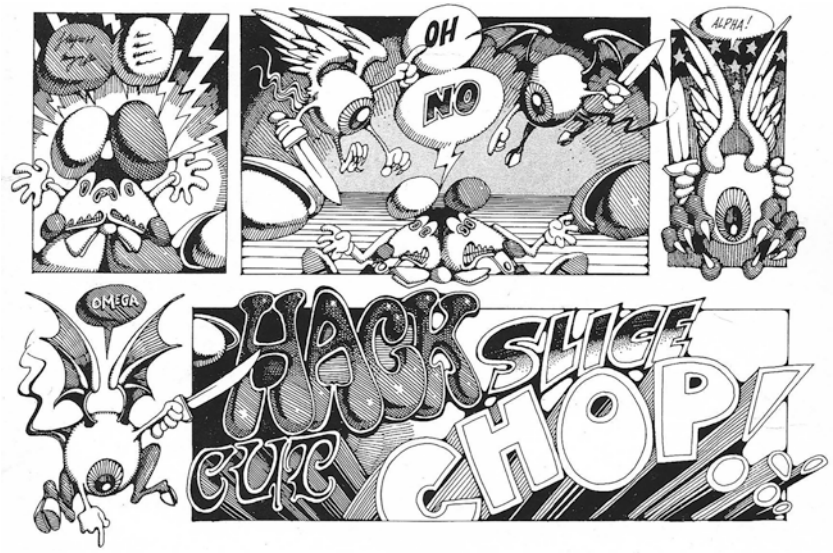
Like an unrolling revelatory scroll, waves symbolically mark the passage between our dust-to-dust world and the deep ocean of death. As such they form the foaming face of creation, a face that for Rick Griffin belonged, at least in the 1970s, to Jesus. By the early 1980s, friends report, Griffin began to "backslide" from the faith to some degree, though he remained a deeply spiritual person. He eventually separated from Ida and started partying robustly again; a hit of acid appears on the clown's palm in his 1990 cover painting for the Grateful Dead's *Without a Net*. In an interview a year later, Griffin no longer sounds like a born-again evangelist, and he makes references to "Pre-Salvage Mumbo Jumbo" like karma, Shiva, and the Acid Tests. But none of these shifts of belief and practice effected his core communion, which was surfing, and art, ever nourishing, ever teaching.

Griffin was killed on his Harley Davidson motorcycle in 1991 at the age of forty-seven. He may have been driving recklessly, with some of the hard innocence that people who knew him well describe. Some of his ashes were taken up to Mysto's, a favorite surf spot near Fort Ross in Sonoma County, now sometimes called El Griffo's. For the cover of the *Zap* issue that followed the accident, his old poster pal Victor Moscoso crafted a sunset surfer image featuring classic Griffiana—a flying eyeball, a stigmata hand, globular spume. But the greater homage came within, greater for being more crusty. On a single page, all of Griffin's old underground pals teamed up together to offer a visual send-off to "the mystic one" by working together on a parody of the Last Supper—a send-off that is rendered, by Griffin's ghostly presence as a comix Christ, both more and less than a parody.

For all the intensity of his turn to Jesus, Griffin's conversion should be seen alongside his psychedelic use, as part of his broader spiritual search rather than a fundamentalist rejection of it. Though he sometimes spoke disparagingly of his attraction to "symbolism", Griffin's work was saturated with archetypal visions drawn from the collective well of images in an

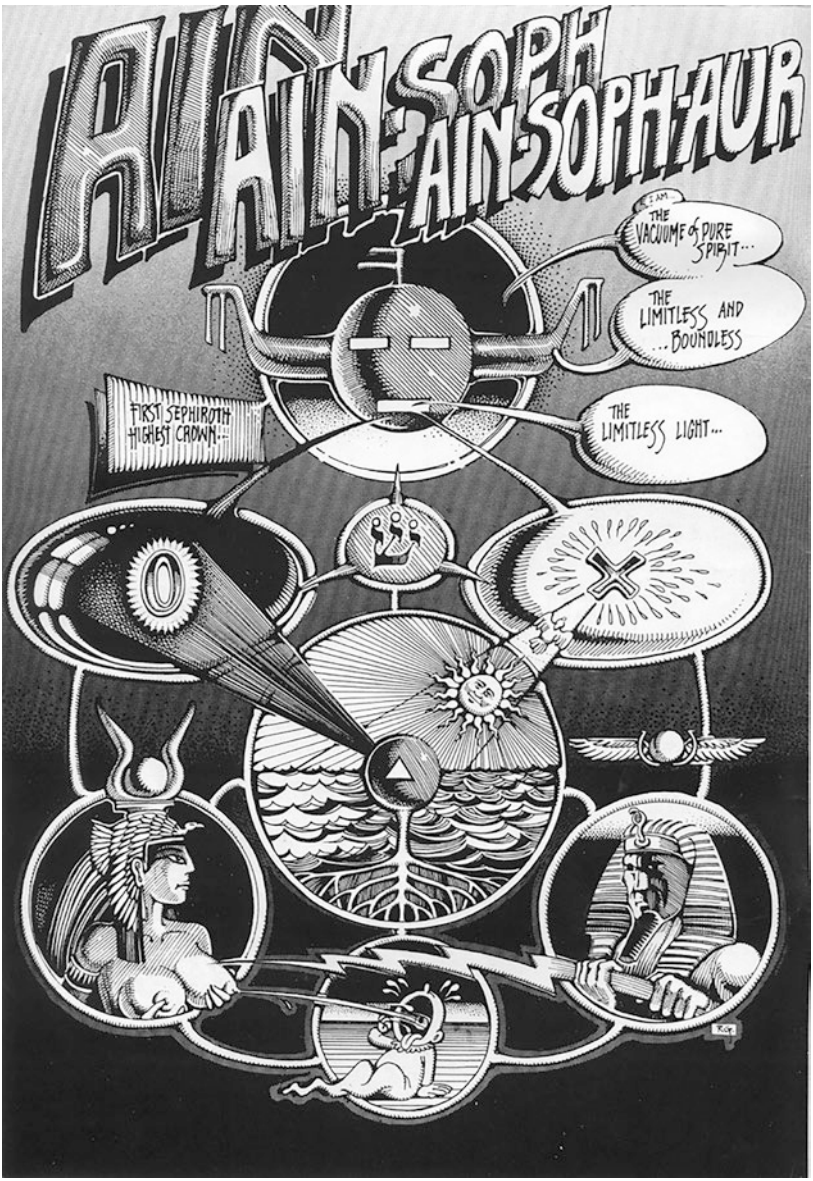
[19] Rosenkranz, "The Rick Griffin Interviews," 71.

utterly idiosyncratic and singular way. In his visions, commercial signs and sacred presences merge, as the hunger for enchantment and release is sated, temporarily, within the pulp-pop zone that Philip K. Dick called "the trash stratum." What unites the various worlds that Griffin traveled through is his artistic line, a restless, luxuriant, juicy vector that, like a wave, never stopped moving, even as it returned again and again to the same carnal mysteries. There is something like fate to Griffin's line, something at once heavy and amusingly light, not unlike the destiny the artist believed was inscribed on the acorn of his name. As he explained in a late interview, "The name Griffin implies to draw with a pen, to scrawl and scribble and inscribe, to carve a groove, to form an image, to stand guard and to grip and to grapple. I like to think this is an inheritance of mine, my very name, and the things it implies…I guess it is part of my karma and destiny…I didn't plan it that way; that's just the way it is."[20] Drawing himself forward into forming images, Griffin carved the groove he rode.

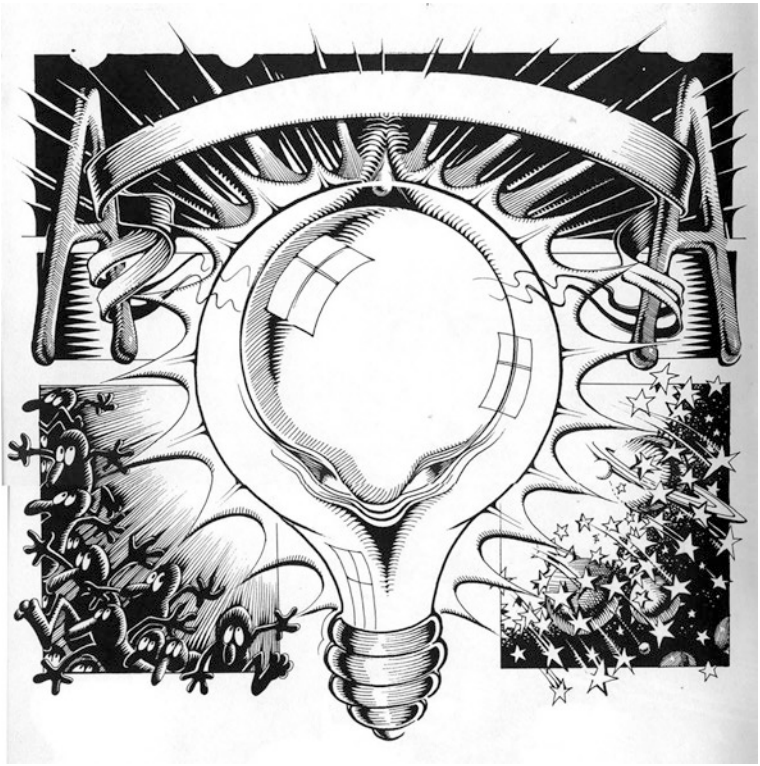


Zap Comix #2 (1968). © Rick Griffin. Used with Permission

[20] Rosenkranz, "The Rick Griffin Interviews," 84.



"Ain-Soph-Aur," *Zap Comix* #3 (1969). © Rick Griffin. Used with permission



From "Silver Beetles or Mystery Monitor," *Man from Utopia* (1970). © Rick Griffin. Used with permission

From "Silver Beetles or Mystery Monitor," *Man from Utopia* (1970). © Rick Griffin. Used with permission

Frontispiece, *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae*, Athanasium Kircher (1646)

From "Our Darling/Rock of Ages," *Man from Utopia* (1970). © Rick Griffin. Used with permission

"Grant Me Lord," Calendar (1977). © Rick Griffin. Used with permission

Graphic Mythologies

Evans Lansing Smith

Abstract This chapter explores the mythologies of the Egyptian Books of the Dead, Navajo Sand Paintings, and C.G. Jung's *Red Book*, with a focus on the journey to the otherworld. Such texts form the archetypal ground for the emergence of graphic media such as comic books, animated film, and video games.

Keywords Egyptian Books of the Dead • Navajo sand paintings • C.G. Jung • Red Book • Nekyia

This chapter explores the mythologies of the Egyptian Books of the Dead, Navajo Sand Paintings, and C.G. Jung's *Red Book*, with a focus on the journey to the otherworld. I argue that such texts form the archetypal ground for the later emergence of graphic media, such as comic books, animated film, and video games.

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Egyptian Books of the Dead

Civilization's oldest graphic mythologies—those which combine text and image—are the so-called Egyptian Books of the Dead, a category which would include the Pyramid, Coffin, and Papyrus Texts. All share the central theme of the soul's journey to the otherworld, and therefore implicate the complex mythologies of Ra, Osiris, Isis, and Horus. The oldest of these, the Pyramid Texts, dating back to at least 2400 BCE, were inscribed on the subterranean walls and sarcophagi of the pharaohs (Piankoff 1968). They were not illustrated and were concerned primarily with the celestial destination of the departed soul. The Coffin Texts, dating back to 2100 BCE, were available to ordinary Egyptians who could afford them; they combined funerary spells having to do with the soul's journey through the underworld, with a rich tradition of painted and engraved images on tomb walls, stelae, canopic jars, sarcophagi (both wood and granite), and mummy masks. The Papyrus texts—known collectively as the Books of the Dead—emerged from this tradition and developed increasingly elaborate narratives of the soul's journey and last judgement, with a finely sophisticated fusion of text and image (Goelet 1994). These texts come later, at the beginning of the New Kingdom, yielding such splendid documents as the Papyri of Hunefer (c. 1275 BCE) and Ani (c. 1250 BCE). These latter may be regarded as truly archetypal—the first narrative texts accompanied by images which can be amplified by comparative mythological analysis.

I use the term "necrotypes" to refer to these images, combining the words "archetype" and "nekyia," the Homeric term for the journey to the underworld.[1] There is a wide range of such images, catalyzed by the descent to the underworld—whether it be in the form of the Books of the Dead, inscribed on tomb walls, sarcophagi, mummy cases, and papyrus scrolls; Mesoamerican codices and Navajo sand paintings; the great texts of the literary canon; or in contemporary films, comic books, and graphic novels. Examples of the necrotypes would include the kind of threshold, ocular, oreographic, astronomical, aquatic, ornithological, diurnal, oreographic, and textual imagery characteristic of the Books of the Dead, in which doorways, eyes, mountains, solar, lunar, and planetary symbols,

[1] Technically speaking, *nekyia* refers to the necromantic invocation of the shades of the dead (as in Book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey*), while the word *katabasis* refers specifically to the descent. In common usage, however, the term *nekyia* is used to refer to both the descent to and return from the underworld.

river crossings, birds, mountains, and actual books recur as central motifs associated with the journey to the otherworld.[2]

In the Egyptian versions of the *nekyia*—for example, as exemplified by the Amduat texts on the walls of such tombs as that of Amehhotep II—one typically finds the journey of the soul of the Pharoah on a barge along the Nile, flanked by symbols of the western mountains of the Valley of the Kings, and passing through twelve hours of the night, often represented by doorways and chambers, with uraeus serpent guardians and magical spells, prayers, and incantations inscribed around the portal. The images accompanying the text often include key necrotypes central to Egyptian mythology: the ornithological symbolism of the wings of the vulture goddess or the human-headed bird representing the Ba soul; the ocular symbolism of the Eye of Horus; astronomical symbols of the phases of the sun, moon, and Venus; and various zoomorphic necrotypes, such as the dog-headed Anubis, the falcon-headed Horus, or the demonic crocodile of the depths, Seebek.[3]

The famous judgement scene from the Papyrus of Ani may serve as a point of departure for this exploration of the necrotypes in the graphic mythologies of the Egyptians. The integration of text and image is, of course, exquisite in this scene, the former relating the prayers, spells, incantations, and invocations associated with the soul's journey, and the latter incorporating many of the necrotypes associated with Egyptian mythology. These include the kind of clothing symbolism associated with the *nekyia* from its very earliest origins in the Sumerian story of the Descent of Inanna, in which the goddess descends through seven doorways, shedding an article of royal clothing she had put in on in preparation for the journey, before she is killed by her sister Ereshkigal's "Eye of Wrath," and then hung up on a peg on the wall for three days and nights.

[2] For a comprehensive overview and graphic summary of the images, see my *Myth of the Descent to the Underworld in Postmodern Literature*, "Chapter 1: A Brief Genealogy of the Necrotypes."

[3] For examples see, among many others, Erik Hornung, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1999), and Hornung & Abt's *Knowledge for the Afterlife: The Egyptian Duat* (Einsiedeln: Daimon Verlag, 2003), and of course, the much older Ur-Text by E.A. Budge, *The Book of the Am-Tuat* (1905).

Judgment Scene, "Papyrus of Ani" (British Museum)

Here, in the Judgement scene, we see Ani escorted into the chamber by Tutu, carrying the sistrum, and both clothed in the fine linen associated with Egyptian burial practice. The implied clothing symbolism of divestiture and reinvestment has already occurred, whereas in the Descent of Inanna, both are vividly described in the cuneiform text. The central panel evokes the zoomorphic and ornithological necrotypes so characteristic of Egyptian iconography: we see the human bird standing on the top of a tomb (with the portal in red just visible below the cornice), representing the Ba Soul, perched directly above the canopic jar containing the heart on the scales of the judgement, and the ostrich feather representing the Goddess Maat, the principle of truth, law, and universal harmony on the opposite scale. In addition, we have the crucial representation of Thoth, the scribal inventor of writing, with the head of an Ibis, recording the judgement in his own little book of the dead.

This is a fascinating, self-reflexive image, since we can imagine the book that Thoth is writing as the very same hieroglyphic text surrounding the judgement scene. It represents what I call the textual necrotype, a term I use to indicate the many variations on the *nekyia*, across the millennia, in which a sacred text is revealed at the climax of the descent. Examples include the death dream of Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in which Belit-Sheri, "she who is recorder of the gods, and keeps the book of death," looks up directly at Enkidu from the tablet from which she read." The implication is that the nekyia itself serves as a complex allegory of the

creative mysteries of the twin energies of *poiesis* (writing the text) and *hermeneusis* (the reading or interpretation of the text). Both are central to the imaginal journey into the realm of the imagination that we undertake when we read and write. Another example of the textual necrotype associated with the mythology of the soul's journey would be Michelangelo's Last Judgement Altar in the Sistine Chapel, in which we see two figures holding books directly below the risen Christ, in a cluster of angels blowing the seven trumps: the one to our left turned towards the resurrected dead holding a small book (in which the names of the saved are to be imagined), and the one to our right, holding a large book (with the names of the damned) directly above the head of Charon in his ferry boat, rowing the souls across the Styx to their eternal home in hell.

The zoomorphic necrotypes in the judgement scene of the Papyrus of Ani include the dog, the crocodile, and the baboon. Anubis is the jackal-headed deity of mummification, crouched beside the scales, his left hand holding the strings of the scale with the feather of Maat, and his right the plumb bob that steadies the scales. One needn't rehearse here the widespread diffusion of the dog as a guide and or guardian into the mysteries of the underworld, from the Cerberus to the Hounds of Hell that haunted the great blues singer Robert Johnson. The composite chimera with the head of a crocodile, torso and paws of a lioness, and haunches of a hippopotamus is more specific to the Egyptian terrain. Its role is to devour the unfortunate soul who fails the test of the scales, its heart falling into the jaws of the beast, to suffer the second and final death, one that precludes further passage through the underworld. The lioness, however, is indeed an archetypal symbol of the Great Goddesses of death and rebirth in the ancient world, representing the solar principle that devours the lunar bull—who will be reborn from her womb—during the monthly cycles of the year.[4]

The feline necrotype occurs most prominently in Chap. 17 of the Papyrus of Ani, depicting the lioness called "Tomorrow" looking back to our left, towards vignettes of Ani and his wife Tutu playing *senet*, a board

[4] The inversion of the genders of the solar lioness and the lunar moon bull was a frequent motif in Joseph Campbell's lectures, during which he would often point out that German retains the distinction in the gender of its articles: *die* Sonne, and *der* Mond, as opposed to the French, *le* soleil and *la* lune. He also writes about the associated mythologies of death and rebirth in the ancient world in the chapter called "The Consort of the Bull" in *Occidental Mythology* (1964, 54f.). Curiously enough, we also find the lioness as a goddess of death and rebirth in a marvelous little Russian folktale called "Two Ivans, Soldier's Sons."

game "serving as an allegory for the successful passage into the next world" (Goelet 1994, 158) in one, and sitting as bird souls on the tomb of the Ba soul of Osiris on in the other. The reciprocal lioness, called "Yesterday," faces to our right, towards the mummy of Osiris lying in his tomb. I suspect there may be a mistake in the editorial captions for these two lions, as it would make more sense to reverse "Yesterday" and "Tomorrow" to represent Ani and Tutu while alive, playing *senet*, and moving both towards an eternal "Tomorrow" presided over by Osiris, Lord of the Resurrection. This is the logic Marie-Louise von Franz (1974) suggests in her commentary on the Egyptian double lion, Rwti, Yesterday and Tomorrow, representing the moment of enantiodromia when the sun "reappears after its journey through the underworld, i.e., the rebirth of consciousness after the 'night-sea journey'" (71).

In addition to the feline, canine, and aquatic necrotypes in this judgement scene, there is also the less-prominently visible figure of the royal baboon seated on top of the central axis of the scales of judgement, at the exact point of the cross. The baboon is an alternative animal form of the god of writing and judgement in this scene, the Ibis-headed Thoth. It is more prominently depicted in a papyrus fragment from the Book of the Dead of Kenna (1405-1367 BCE) reproduced in Joseph Campbell's *Inner Reaches of Outer Space* (1985; Fig. 11). The crocodile Sebek appears in this image as the "Swallower," with its snout inserted between nodules 3 and 4—out of a total of seven, which Campbell relates to the chakras of the Kundalini system—and pointing directly towards the large figure of Thoth, in the form of a baboon, balancing the scales to our right. As Campbell suggests, "Thoth is the Egyptian counterpart of Hermes, guide of souls to the knowledge of eternal life," while the African baboons are famous for their cacophonous greeting of the rising sun. Hence, they serve also as symbols of the resurrection in the Egyptian Books of the Dead, as for example in the concluding scene of the journey through the underworld, when, at dawn, six of them are shown with upright hands on either side of the Djed pillar (symbol of Osiris) with a solar disk inscribed on the axis of the Coptic cross, the Ankh (Plate 2). The baboons reappear in a spectacular mandala scene (Plate 32), which depicts four royal apes sitting at the corners of a rectangular pool of "firey liquid, reminding one of the 'Lake of Fire' frequently mentioned in the BD" (Goelet 1994, 168). Remember this association between the apes, writing, and the underworld when we come to explore the Mayan iconography of the monkey scribes in the *Popul Vuh*.

Another zoomorphic necrotype—in addition to that of the baboon, the dog, and the lioness—is that of the wild boar, quite dramatically portrayed in a judgement scene from another the Book of the Dead, in which Osiris is shown seated on a throne with nine figures climbing a staircase leading up to the platform where the scales of the judgement are suspended from the shoulders of a mummy. In the upper right background there are two baboons whipping a huge boar in a barge, presumably representing Set being driven off into the wilderness after losing the battle with Horus (Campbell 1974, fig. 391). The jackal-headed Anubis stands in the upper right corner, observing if not supervising the scene. As Campbell persuasively demonstrates, the wild boar is an archetypal image associated with the mysteries of death and rebirth, typically presided over by a goddess. One of the most powerful amplifications of the symbol comes from John Layard's work, *The Stone Men of Malekula*, in which the departed soul must inscribe half of a labyrinth drawn in the sand by a pig-headed goddess of death who draws the labyrinth at the base of a stone leading into the underworld. She then erases half of it, which the departed must restore, having memorized the maze during its puberty initiation rites.[5]

The image of Osiris as the Lord of the Staircase, therefore, situates the necrotypes of the night-sea journey (journey by barge up the Nile), the boar, and the dog in what we might call the architectural necrotype, in which thresholds, staircases, and chambers form labyrinthine structures associated with the underworld mysteries of death and rebirth. As in the Sumerian story of the Descent of Inanna, the iconography of the Egyptian *nekyia* is consistently structured by elaborate passages through complex, labyrinthine spaces structured by doorways, stairs, and corridors (witness the great tombs carved into the mountains on the west bank of the Nile in the Valley of the Kings). Wallis Budge (2021) focused on the journey of Amon-Ra through the twelve chambers of the Amduat in his account of the Books of the Dead, in which spells, incantations, stories, and prayers frame each of the twelve portals. In the Papyrus of Ani the image is compounded by a double row of thresholds through the soul of Ani must pass through on his journey: the upper register shows a sequence of seven thresholds, and the lower a sequence of ten (Budge 2021, Plate 11). Each has its own named pair of gatekeepers and guardians to be reckoned with,

[5] Campbell (1974) provides numerous amplifications of the motif, including the role played by the boar in the stories of Odysseus and Adonis, and in the Eleusinian Mysteries, which involved sacrificial pigs (450-81).

as in the sequence of seven doorways in the Sumerian myth of Inanna's descent. And the lower ten doorways are differentiated by the iconic images of the journey into the land of the dead that I refer to as necrotypes—ocular images of the Eye of Horus; zoomorphic depictions of the lioness, the hippo, the ram, and the crocodile; the herpetetic imagery of the uraeus serpents; and the ornithological symbolism of the Ibis and the Falcon. This complex synthesis of archetypal images associated with the journey of the soul into the land of the dead lays the foundation for the thousand and one variations on the iconography to come, as the tradition of graphic mythologies develops across the millennia, right up to the present day.

Navajo Sand Paintings

Where the Two Came to Their Father

Where the Two Came to Their Father: A Navaho War Ceremonial was the first volume of the marvelous Bollingen Series, published in 1943. It was a collaborative effort: Maud Oakes befriended the Navaho healer Jeff King, who shared with her the story and the images for the sand paintings, for which Joseph Campbell provided his commentary and analysis. Seven years later, Bollingen published his *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, in 1949, so it was inevitable that various themes of the later book would inform Campbell's approach to this famous story, which he would retell many times during the course of his long career, with slide illustrations of the unique paintings recorded by Maud Oakes. For those interested in the development of graphic mythologies, the book is a cornerstone, most especially in the first editions, with the large reproductions of the images (later to be reduced in size to meet the needs of the paperback edition). One also finds smaller reproductions and synoptic commentary on the myth in Campbell's last work, *The Historical Atlas of World Mythology: The Way of the Animal Powers* (1983, 244-51). The story therefore frames Campbell's long, prodigiously productive career, and exemplifies many key themes of his comparative method. For students of the archetypal foundations of graphic mythologies, both volumes of the Atlas are indispensable, covering a wide range of traditional media—rock art, birchbark etchings, Aboriginal landscape art, stelae and temple inscriptions, and of course sand paintings.

Conception, Departure, and Journey

The texts for the sand paintings were not written down, nor included in the images. They were transmitted orally, and subsequently recorded by such artist/anthropologists as Maud Oakes, Gladys Reichard, and others. We are fortunate, however, to have the images to refer to from the Bollingen plates. The first has to do with the 'Immaculate Conception' of the Hero Twins, Monster Slayer and Child born of Water. They are conceived when their mother Changing Woman goes to sleep in the sun near her Hogan on the top of Gobernador Knob, wakes up pregnant, goes to wash in a spring, and conceives the second child. Changing Woman then puts the babies into holes by the fire to protect them from the monsters haunting the territory. The twins grow up quickly and depart on two crosses via Cloud and Rainbow. Wondering where they have gone, Changing Woman 'casts her breath' in four directions, with no results. But when she casts her breath upwards, it doesn't return, so she knows they have gone in search of their father, the Sun. The painting illustrating this scene is called "Starting Place from Where the Warrior Starts." The circle in the center represents Changing Woman's Hogan, with a large white cross marking the hearth, and two blue crosses that the boys stand on to mount up the clouds. Footprints of the twins, Monster Slayer and Born of Water. Their footprints lead downwards to four triangles (black, purple, yellow, and white) representing the clouds they step on, in order to reach the Rainbow Goddess arched across the bottom of the plate. She will carry them to find their father.

The rainbow is "an insubstantial apparition composed of both matter and light [….] Thus it is at once material and immaterial, solar and lunar" (Campbell 1985, 97), and therefore an archetypal symbol of the interface between the earth and the heavens. It and appears prominently over the teepee of the six elders in Black Elk's Great Vision. One also finds it as a bridge in Wagner's *Rheingold*, over which the gods cross to Valhalla. A farther-reaching amplification would include the image of the souls of the dead climbing up from a sea of suffering on a rainbow that leads them to the entrance of one of the many heavens of the Buddhas of compassion in the tradition of the Tibetan Thangkas. It therefore serves as a symbol of the permeable boundaries between the physical and the spiritual worlds in alchemical texts, such as the Splendor Solis, or in such dreams as the one I had shortly after Joseph Campbell died, in which I found myself climbing a staircase at the end of a dark alley in Manhattan, to enter a room

where Joseph was sitting quietly, staring into a glass beaker, in which a cloudy mist rose from the residue at the bottom, to form a rainbow, under which a tiny homunculus danced. In the dream, Campbell turned to me with that marvelous smile, as if to say, "Isn't that the darndest thing!"

The next series of images in the sand paintings illustrate the various trials and ordeals the twins encounter at the beginning of the journey. These include a Sand Dune Monster who threatens to devour them, but Waterspouts and the Rainbow carry them across while they stand of crosses singing and praying in Plate II. They then encounter a decrepit woman, stooped and tiny, who represents Old Age. The boys ignore her warning not to follow directly in her footsteps, with the result that they get very old very fast. She rejuvenates the boys by anointing them with the sweat from her armpits and singing a Song of Old Age. It turns out that she is Spider Woman, a hugely important figure in the mythologies of the Southwest. The boys manage to crawl down into the tiny hole where she lives, and she casts a web over the Sun to delay its setting. She then takes four baskets (White Shell, Turquoise, Abalone, Jet), fills them with White Cornmeal, Yellow Cornmeal, Seeds, Beeweed, and adds a pinch of Turquoise and White Shell, which the boys ingest. She then gives them Eagle feathers they will shortly need in their next ordeals.

House Made of Dawn

All these trials are in preparation for their ultimate ascent to the House of the Sun, and include encounters with Cutting Reeds, where they think of the turquoise and shell ingested in Spider Woman's lair, then blow on the Reeds and stand on their Feathers, passing through to the Clashing Rocks, which they elude by standing on the Rainbow back and their Feathers. Then come the Cat-Tail People, where a Little Wind tells them to sing and blow on the cattails. Plate III illustrates this scene with admirable concision: the reeds that cut to the left and the cattails that stab to the right, with the rocks that clap together to be imagined in between. One half of a tall white feather on the left edge connects the upper and lower portions of the composition. Its prominence emphasizes the archetypal nature of feathers, suggesting the ornithological necrotype and reminding us of the central role of feathers in Native American rituals and prayer sticks made for the occasion. In addition, one thinks of the beautiful metaphor in Farid Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, in which we learn that a feather of the mystical Simorgh has fallen from the heavens to China and impressed its image on all human hearts and souls, inspiring the birds in the poem to

begin their heroic quest. One also thinks of the feather of Maat in the Egyptian Books of the Dead.

The ascent via feather and rainbow will, in a similar manner, bring them to the celestial home of the Father, following the crucial passage over the Big Water, where they see Water Bugs skating on the surface, chasing hoops. A mysterious man appears and the Water Bugs make a path, while Little Wind tells them to sing while standing on their feathers. They pass across and upwards, to arrive at last at their celestial destination, the House of the Sun—or, as Scott Momaday would put it, *The House Made of Dawn*, the title of his great novel. Plate V represents the House of the Sun, with the powerful condensed simplicity of a quadrated mandala. There are four crosses on the path to the left, representing the four holy places the brothers stop, before encountering a standing at the entrance. The Sun's daughter (variously called Turquoise Girl, White Shell Girl, Grandchild of Darkness) stands on the other side of the House, to our right, holding cobs of male and female corn in her upraised hands. It will be in the black and blue rooms that Monster Slayer and Child Born of Water will be given their names.

But before entering the house, the twins encounter sets of four threshold guardians, depicted in Plates XV-XVIII. These are quite marvelous compositions, beautifully replicating the mandala structure in each, moving from the Bears to the Snakes to the Thunder Beings and the Winds. The Big Bear Plate has a ceremonial basket with a small opening facing east, with a cross in the center made of pollen, signifying the movements of the singer. The East-West arm connecting the two crosses at the top of the inner white rectangle represent the singer's journey to the ceremonial hogan and return home. Four semi-circles represent the strength given off by the stars. These are all complex abstractions, with hieroglyphic motifs relevant to the details of the chant and its ritual, which would be performed in the Hogan, where the young soldier being sent off to war would sit on the image. Both the bears and the snakes of course, play central roles specific to the mythological chants of the Navaho. We see them again in the *Beauty Way* chants recorded by Father Berard Haile and again illustrated by Maud Oakes, in which two sisters are abducted during a dance after a Pueblo War.[6] The older sister is taken to the Bear homes. Her adventures are recorded in the Mountain Way chant. The younger sister finds herself in a cave with the Snake People, and her adventures are recorded in the Beauty Way chant.

[6] Edited by Leland Wyman in the Bollingen Series (1957).

The bear and the snake are both archetypal manifestations of those zoomorphic necrotypes associated with the journey to the otherworld. Campbell (1983) devotes a series of spectacular pages in *The Way of the Animal Powers* to the bear (54-58)—perhaps the most archaic of all symbols of death and rebirth, due to its hibernatory cycles and overwhelming, numinous presence. The same may of course be said of the snake, petroglyphs of which in the American Southwest are numerous indications of its importance in that domain. One could do no better than refer again to Joseph Campbell's writings on the archetypal, universal significance of the serpent in a wide range of cultures, and also central to his own skeleton key to world mythology—kundalini yoga.[7]

Once past these threshold guardians, the Sun's Daughter comes to the aid of the twins, hanging them from the ceiling inside the House of the Sun in black and blue clouds. Plate V, illustrating the House of the Sun, is a deceptively simple rendition of what I call the architectural necrotype, since the otherworld is so often depicted as a mysterious, complex, sinister, and quite frequently labyrinthine domicile. In the Mayan story of the twins confronting the Lords of Xibalba, for example, there are five underground chambers, with severe tests associated with each. While Plate X of the Navaho story shows a simple blueprint for the House of the Sun—a mandala, with four rectangles of white, yellow, black, and green rooms—the situation turns out to be far more complicated in the narrative. When the Sun returns home, the tests and ordeals characteristic of the hero journey in general, and the *nekyia* more specifically begin. These begin when the Sun returns and instructs his daughter to lead the twins to a blistering hot Sweat Lodge, which they survive only because his daughter digs holes for the twins to hide in to escape the heat. A series of ordeals and revelations then proceeds, in the following sequence:

- **1st Room**: Poison Meal: Inchworm says to turn the bowls and eat only half;
- **2nd Room**: 4 Poles covered with knives; Sun pushes them off but the twins float by on their feathers;

[7] On the serpent as a necrotype, shedding its skin to be reborn, and a plethora of images and texts, I would recommend "The Serpent Guide" in *The Mythic Image* (Campbell 1974, 281-303), "The Serpent's Bride" in *Occidental Mythology* (1964, 9-41), "Threshold Figures" in *The Inner Reaches* (1985, 69-92), and the extraordinary pages devoted to the Raimondi Stela in *The Way of the Seeded Earth* (1989, 2.3.377-79).

- **3rd East Room:** black clouds, lightning, flowers;
- **4th South Room:** game animals (deer, sheep, antelope, elk);
- **5th West Room:** domestic animals, grain, flowers;
- **6th North Room:** big house: Sun asks where they are from, Little Wind Whispers answers; this room is an armory (with bows, arrows, knives, white-tailed eagle arrows); the twins ask for the medicine bundle over the doorway
- **7th Room:** darkness, lights, yellow and red Sunlight
- **East Room**: Rugs and Girl's Girl's Medicine Massage
- **8th Room**: Sun tells Water Carrier to fetch the Thunder men
- **9th Room**: Sparkling, blinding colors; twins stand on buffalo rugs; Thunder Men come; the Boys are armed with flint shoes and caps, eat turquoise and jet effigies, and the Sun names them Monster Slayer and Child Born of Water, and identifies himself as their Father

This is indeed a labyrinthine rendition of the architectural necrotype, which is always a kind of *temenos*—a sacred space of revelation and transformation where the initiation rites are performed, here preparing the twins for their heroic return to the world below.

Return to the Mother

Their return begins when they leave House of the Sun and say they want to kill the Big Giant living on Mt. Taylor. The Sun says they may only do so with his permission (since the Monster is also one of his children!) and instructs to gather his four lightning arrows—a variation on the universal theme of the arming of the hero. When they leave the House, they suddenly duplicate themselves and become four figures, instead of two (Plate VII). One of the Lightning Beings then carries them to the hole in the Sky, where they identify the four sacred mountains, and the Mountain Around Which Moving was Done (where they were born and hidden outside Changing Woman's Hogan). The Sun gives them his wisdom and they descend to Mt. Taylor at the time of the May Moon, arriving at dawn. This image of the hole in the sky is a fascinating motif of world mythology: it is obviously a portal to the upperworld and is often represented in the great domes of sacred architectural tradition (such as the Buddhist Stupas, the Pantheon in Rome, and indeed the Hogan itself). All have an oculus in the center of the high ceiling to represent the threshold between the worlds. Additionally, as Ananda K. Coomaraswamy pointed

out, the soft spot in a baby's head represents the same point in the body through which the spirit enters at conception, and departs at death—it is therefore called the Brahma door.[8]

The remarkable Plate VII shows the twins preparing for their descent, and the four footprints on Mt. Taylor where they land, and begin their heroic role as Monster Slayers. This begins with the Battle with Big Giant who sees their reflections in the lake pictured on the Plate, drinks up the water to drain the lake four times, shoots arrows at the boys four times, until the boys shoot him on both sides of the heart and block the flow of blood so he cannot be revived.

They drop their arrows as they return to mother, encountering Talking God along the way, who teaches them six songs, doubled to 12 when they run outside the Hogan where their journey begin. Here, the complete hero journey cycle is represented by the reunion with the mother, rather than the patriarchal pattern most often found in the great theme of the atonement with the father. The fire poker in Hogan tells them where Mother is hiding from the monsters, and they are all reunited.

Battles with Monsters

Another series of exploits then proceeds, before the boys have completed their mission. They must fulfill their original mission to rid the land of the various monsters plaguing the community. The first is the Horned Monster, who lives in a flat place; the twins kill him and cut his heart out with flint knives, and then return to their mother. The second is Monster Eagle, living near Shiprock: they kill it and its nestlings, but they are then stuck on top of Shiprock. A tiny old woman passing by far below becomes Bat Woman, who helps the boys cut off the wings of the Eagle, and then carries them down to the ground in her pockets. They chop up Eagle Monster and throw pieces to sky, which will spawn a new generation of eagles). Then they return to mother for a second time—the whole sequence is a series of hero journey cycles, embedded within the larger frame of their journey to the House of the Sun and return to Changing Woman's Hogan.

[8] "An Indian Temple: The Kundarya Mahadeo," *Parabola* III.1 (1978), and relevant essays in *The Door and the Sky*. Ed. Rama P. Coomaraswamy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

The next monster to be dealt with is called Slayer with Eyes that mesmerize people inside a hill south of Mt. Taylor. The boys shoot the front and back of his head, and cut out his eyes. The rest of its body turns into snakes, before they again return to their mother a third time. Their next exploit involves a pursuit of a monster called the Bear that Tracks, which they chase and corner in a canyon, where they cut out its heart, take meat from its fat cheeks, and to dismember him to create the next generation of bears. They then return to their mother a fourth time. This leaves one final monster to be rid of: the Traveling Stone. It crushes people. The twins chase it way up to the north, the region from which sickness, cold, bad dreams, and witchcraft come. And then they for a final fifth time return to their mother. But they are at this point so sick and exhausted that they must move from their Mountain Around Which Moving is Done to Navaho Mountain, where the Holy People recite four prayers, make a sand painting of the Twelve Holy People, and perform "Where the Two Came to the Father" four times—with the result that the twins now feel fine and can move around again, talking of the "making of the future people" (29).

As Joseph Campbell points out in his "Commentary" on the Chant, the final plates (initially omitted by Jeff King), communicate the ultimate secret hidden within the story: "that of the final identity of the heroes themselves with the wonderful objects of their dreamlike journey, as though the dangers of the way had been merely aspects of their own psyches, dream figments; which indeed they are: the archetypal dream figments of the eternal dream of man [….] And the field of this marvelous dream, the whole soul, is represented in the fourteenth picture: the picture of the Sky Father and Earth Mother" (46). This Plate (XIV)) shows the night sky above, an elongated figure of one of the Talking Gods (with a feather in his cap, so to speak) stretched across the top, covering the field from East to West. Below we see the Milky Way, the Sparkling Star of the East, a White Horned Moon, a small yellow Coyote Star below it, seven Eastern Stars, the Pleiades, the twelve stars of Dipper, a golden Sun, and the Big White Star of the West. Below, in the yellow rectangle representing the earth, we see the White Mountain Around Which Moving Was Done and Fir Mountain to our left, and the four holy mountains of the Navajo to our right.

Perhaps most notable in this final plate is one of the grand symbols of fulfillment often associated with the conclusion of the hero journey cycle: that of the union of the solar and lunar necrotypes, both images

embracing the opposites of life and death. The Sun and Moon are delicately portrayed with feathers on the hooks at the top of their heads, as if to suggest the ultimate apotheosis of the twins. The union of the Sun and the Moon, of Sol and Luna in the alchemical version of what Jung (1955) called the *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (frequently depicted at the conclusion to the Opus), is an archetypal symbol of the union of time and eternity—as represented in the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope, and in the Christian iconography of the Crucifixion, in which we see prominent images of the Sun and the Moon on each side above the Cross (as in Albrecht Dürer's famous engraving).[9] Hence this final Plate in the series is a "picture of the soul, because, mythologically speaking, the microcosm is a precise reproduction of the macrocosm; the whole mystery of the cosmos is the mystery of every atom; the embrace that sustains the universe is the embrace of every living cell and is the secret of every living soul" (46).

C.G. Jung's *Red Book*

While others have focused on the mythology of the descent to the underworld in the text and narrative of Jung's *Red Book*, none to my knowledge have explored its pervasive imagery in the paintings. There are several, beginning with the majuscule capital "D" on the first page. This first letter of *The Red Book* is the part that contains the whole. Practically everything to follow in Jung's life and work is prefigured by it. Like the "seed syllable" of the Hindu tradition (AUM), the first letter of the name of Allah in the Koran (*bismallah*), the tetragrammaton of the Old Testament (JHVH), or the Aleph in the short story by Borges of that title, this one image embraces the opposites of the entire work to follow. I call such images "hologlyphs," a coinage combining the words "holograph" and "hieroglyph." In a holograph, the whole image is contained in every particle of the plate, in the same way that each cell of our bodies contains the genetic information of the whole organism—if not also of the entire created cosmos (William Blake's "world in a grain of sand"). By "hieroglyph" I simply mean an image that communicates a spiritual truth or idea. Hence, a hologlyph is a single image that contains and embraces the opposites of the entire system—creation and destruction, Alpha and Omega,

[9] On the union of the sun and the moon—including the kundalini system, in which the two nerves (Ida and Pingala) are solar and lunar, converging at the position of the crown chakra—see Campbell's *Inner Reaches* (1985, 70-73), *Occidental Mythology* (1964, 162-64).

Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva, male and female, life and death. Our world mythologies are founded on such images, and on the idea of the hologlyph, perhaps most succinctly stated by the alchemical maxim of the one figure that "contains the entire treatise" in the famous engraving in Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens* of the alchemist squaring the circle with the use of the triangle.

To begin with the necrotypes associated with the mythology of the descent to the underworld, we note the imagery of what Jung (1952) called "the night-sea journey" (a term he took from Leo Frobenius, cited frequently in *Symbols of Transformation*) in this first illumination of *The Red Book*: we find a fascinating evocation of the mysterious creatures of the depths, below the water line of the lake in the foreground; and we note the boat in the mid to background in its passage across the waters to the yonder shore. And there we see a *temenos* (a sacred space of revelation and transformation, here, an ancestral space) in the depiction of the medieval city with its prominent steeple pointing up into the mountains beyond. This yields a rich fusion of necrotypes long associated with the journey to the underworld: zoomorphic (creatures commonly evoked by the myth, like the deer, the dog, or the whale), aquatic (the crossing of the waters to the land of the dead, as in the river Styx), and the oreographic (mountains as the destination of the Nekyia, as exemplified by such works as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Egyptian Books of the Dead, or Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*).

Of particular interest, perhaps, are the coral formations below the surface of the lake in the foreground, which link the imagery of the *nekyia* to the alchemical symbolism, also apparently present in this first image—let's call it the "Urbild aller Bilder," following Hermann Broch's lead. From the perspective of the hermetic iconographies of the alchemical tradition we notice several motifs in the image: first we have the serpent coiling up from the alembic of fire at the base, to its crowned head at the top, on the left side of the page. The belly of the snake is golden, and there are gold dots running along its black top, suggestive of the emergence of philosophical gold from the blackness of putrefaction. We also find common symbols of the alchemical tradition at the top of the painting: the astrological motifs of the signs of the zodiac, and the union of the cycles of the sun and the moon—so often figured in hermetic engravings by the *mysterium coniunctionis* of Sol et Luna, King and Queen, and of the Hermaphrodite in such texts as the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, central to

Jung's (1946) engagement with alchemy in his book on the *Psychology of the Transference*.

Alternatively, one might see the coiling serpent as a prefiguration of Jung's later interest in the symbolism of yoga, where we find the seven coils of the chakras through which the kundalini serpent ascends to the crown chakra at the top of the skull (*ajna*). Hence this first image of the text brings together the mythologies that would so engage Jung throughout much of *The Red Book*, and of his life's work: the *Nekyia*, alchemy, and kundalini yoga. In a very real sense, the whole of his work is contained in this first image.

When we turn to the narrative recorded in the chapters following this initial image in the "Liber Primus," the mythologies of the *nekyia* continue to play a central role, only now with a shift to Nordic and Egyptian motifs. The key chapters here are Chaps. 5, "Höllenfahrt in die Zukunft" (Descent into Hell in the Future) and 7, "Heldenmord" (Murder of the Hero). Both involve the death of Siegfried—hero of the *Nibelungenlied*, and central protagonist of Wagner's *Ring*—and the mysteries of the depths revealed during Jung's imaginal explorations by the "geist der Tiefe" (the spirit of the deep), which, at the beginning of Chap. 5, gives him a "glimpse of inner things, the world of my soul" ("die welt meine Seele") in the form of a waking dream:

> I see a gray rock face along which I sink into great depths. I stand in black dirt up to my ankles in a dark cave. Shadows sweep over me. I am seized by fear, but I know I must go in. I crawl through a narrow crack in the rock and reach an inner cave whose bottom is covered with black water. But beyond this I catch a glimpse of a luminous red stone which I must reach. I wade through the muddy water. The cave is full of the frightful noise of shrieking voices. I take the stone, it covers a dark opening in the rock. I hold the stone in my hand, peering around inquiringly. I do not want to listen to the voices, they keep me away. But I want to know. Here something wants to be uttered. I place my ear to the opening. I hear the flow of underground waters. I see the bloody head of a man on the dark stream. Someone wounded, someone slain lies there. I take in this image for a long time, shuddering. I see a large black scarab floating past on the dark stream.
>
> In the deepest reach of the stream lies a read sun, radiating through the dark water. There I see—and terror seizes me—small serpents on the dark rock walls, striving towards the depths, where the sun shines. A thousand serpents crowd around, veiling the sun. Deep night falls. A red stream of blood, thick red blood springs up, surging for a long time, then ebbing. I am seized by fear. What did I see? (2009, 237)

Of the "luminous red stone" in the vision, Shamdasani notes that "*The Corrected Draft* has: 'It is a six-sided crystal that gives off a cold, reddish light'" (in Jung 2009, 35), and then cites Albrecht Dieterich's *nekyia*, which represents the underworld in Aristophanes's *The Frogs* as "having a large lake and a place with serpents," motifs which Jung "underlined in his copy" at three places in Dieterich's text, with a focus on the symbolism of "Mud" (n. 83; 237). Then Shamdasani cites the 1925 seminar, during which Jung narrated this episode, and said that the "light in the cave from the crystal was, I thought, like the stone of wisdom," and that "The beetle of course I knew to be an ancient sun symbol, and the setting sun, the luminous red disk, was archetypal. The serpents I thought must have been connected with Egyptian material" (n. 85; 238). The note adds that Jung said that "soon after I had a dream in which Siegfried was killed by myself," which he interprets as "destroying the hero idea of my efficiency. This has to be sacrificed in order that a new adaptation can be made; in short, it is connected with the sacrifice of the superior function in order to get at the libido necessary to activate the inferior function" (n. 85; 238).

Both notes reinforce the central themes of the descent to the underworld in the text and images of Chaps. 5 and 7, in which a kind of synthesis of Nordic and Egyptian necrotypes occurs—in a way that reminds one curiously of James Joyce, who does the same thing in *Finnegans Wake*. Jung's vision is a synthesis I would call speluncular, aquatic, insectomorphic, and solar necrotypes: he descends to the muddy waters of a deep cave, where he sees a dead body floating on waters farther below, with a black scarab floating past, in the light of an apparently setting sun. Shamdasani's notes show that Jung soon became aware of the Greek and Egyptian motifs associated with the underworld, partly from Dieterich's *Nekyia*, and that the Nordic mythologies of the death of Siegfried would shortly emerge, in the "Heldenmord" of Chap. 7 of the *Liber Primus*.

The illuminations that accompany this narrative vividly represent this impressive variation on the descent to the underworld. In the first we see that slain body of the vision followed by the scarab and solar disk menaced by black serpents: And in the second, from Chap. 7, we see the moment of the murder of the hero, Siegfried, shot in the back in a mountainous landscape at sunset (imagery which evokes the diurnal and oreographic necrotypes). The murder of Siegfried by Hagen is, of course, one of the most magnificent moments in all of Wagner's *Ring*, with its famous "Funeral March" as Siegfried's body floats back down the Rhine for the final apocalyptic burning of the pyre in "Götterdämmerung." The murder

is a key moment both in *The Red Book* and in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (Jung 1965), and Siegfried's battle with the *Fafnir* (the giant turned into a dragon, hoarding the Rhine Gold in the Ring) is the subject of one of the most spectacular plates in *The Red Book* (Jung 2009, 119).

One sees here the golden disks in the coils of the dragon, in the process of being dismembered by Siegfried, so that, in the Nordic myth, he may retrieve the treasure of the Rhine maidens, and forge the Tarnhelm of invisibility and the Ring that confers power but negates love. The myth of the dragon slayer is, of course, a universal motif in world mythology: one thinks of St. George and Perseus, both of whom slay the monster to rescue the feminine that has been captured and imprisoned. Farther afield one may consider the Hindu mythology of Indra slaying the dragon Vritra with his thunderbolt, to release the sun and the waters of life. It is a mythologem beautifully explored by Joseph Fontenrose (1959) which connects the material to Apollo's slaying of the dragon and founding of the oracle at Delphi. There are even suggestions of Old Testament variations on the myth, the focus of Mary Wakeman's (1973) evocative study, in which Jahweh does battle with a demon of the depths variously named (Rahab and Leviathan, for example).

Both Wakeman and Fontenrose narrow their discussion to the theme of the emergence of cosmos from chaos that results from the conquest of the dragon, as for example in the Mesopotamian variation in which Marduk dismembers Tiamat to create the forms of the earth (the Tigris and Euphrates rivers being the tears streaming from the murdered Goddess's eyes). Closer to the Jungian world, however, would be Marie-Louise von Franz's (1989) study of *Creation Myths*, especially the sections devoted to the sacrificial victim. But even more to the point in the context of *The Red Book* would be the Gnostic studies that Jung was engaged in when the material was beginning to emerge during this critical period of his "Confrontation with the Unconscious" (Jung 1965). In such Gnostic myths as the Syrian "Hymn of the Pearl," the dragon of the deep represents the material world, into which its soul—Anima mundi, Sophia, Shekinah—has fallen, been taken captivity, and imprisoned. The hero's task is typically to dive to the bottom of the sea, retrieve the soul from the dragon, and return with it to its heavenly source.

The redemption of the feminine, of course, would become a central motif of Jungian studies following the refiguring of the myth in *The Red Book*, in which it is associated with the central task of the birth of the new god image, which is the primary purpose of the descent to the underworld

recorded in the text and images. Hence, Siegfried's battle with the monster and the Nekyia remain central motifs in the illuminations that accompany the text in the second part of the book, *Liber Secundus*, such as the image of "Der Tod" in Chap. 6 (Jung 2009, Plate 29).

This image of death exemplifies what I call the insectomorphic, or more precisely the lepidopteric necrotype: because the Greek word *Psyche* means both butterfly and soul, the butterfly becomes a symbol of the soul emerging from the cocoon of the corpse in the form of the chrysalis. It is a motif abundantly illustrated by Marija Gimbutas (1989) in her *The Language of the Goddess*, which includes several stunning images from Minoan Crete (large vessels, the coffin of a child) in which the unfolding wings of the butterfly represent the double-bladed axe, a symbol of the labyrinth, while the chrysalis serves as a symbol of the soul (fig. 430). Jung's image seems also to echo the symbolism of both the Egyptian and Oriental mythologies first announced in the initial capital "D" of *Liber Primus*: here again we find the solar disk associated with the journey of the soul through the twelve hours of the night in the Egyptian Books of the Dead, and also a hint of kundalini symbolism, with the chakras suggested by the coils of the caterpillar standing on the red sun.

The hieroglyphics of the two borders of the image of Death, and particularly of the lower register, beneath the solar disk, bring Siegfried back into the picture, and combine the motifs of the Nordic Nekyia with Biblical and Mithraic mythologies. In the lower right side of the bottom panel we see a reclining figure waving to us—like Siegfried, I would suggest, lying on his funeral pyre, but indicating the possibility of rebirth by his upraised left arm (Jung 2009, Plate 29). In the glyph immediately to the left, in the middle of the bottom panel (in the depths of the underworld), it seems that Siegfried has been devoured by the dragon: He is in the belly of the whale—like Jonah, who cries out to us in the beautiful "Hymn of Thanksgiving" that he has gone down to the "roots of the mountains," into "Sheol" (a Hebrew name for hell); or like Raven in the Eskimo myth, swallowed by the whale, in whose belly he creates fire to burn his way out; or like Pinocchio, who meets his father in the belly of the whale. We could adduce numerous amplifications of the motif, in which the belly becomes both the womb and the tomb, a temenos of death and rebirth.

The image of rebirth, and of return from the underworld, is implied by the image to the immediate left, at the lower corner of the bottom panel. This image is clearly of Near Eastern provenance, a Mithraic motif of the

birth of the god from the egg of Mother Night, which we find in Orphic cosmologies as well, and which most likely derives from the Zoroastrian mythologies of Ancient Persia, in which Ahura Mazda is typically represented in the center of a wingèd oval (Campbell, *Mysteries*: Plate III). The motif also occurs at the top of Jung's first mandala, the "Systema Munditotius" previously noted, where the deity in the egg is identified as "Erikapaios or Phanes, thus reminiscent of a spiritual figure of the Orphic gods" (Shamdasani qtd. in Jung 2009, 364). It is an image we know as well from a relief sculpture in Modena, in which we see Phanes born from the egg of night (with the top and lower halves of the shell), holding a lightning bolt and a staff, with a serpent coiled up his body, enclosed in a mandorla illustrated by the signs of the zodiac, with the four winds at each quarter. For Jung, in the context of *The Red Book*, the symbol is of that new god image to be reborn from the depths of his descent; hence the recurrent motif of the egg that runs through all the images of the *Liber Secundus*, often in association with the mythologies of the underworld.

Another plate which brings the various mythologies of the *nekyia* into a complex new relationship combines Egyptian, Mithraic, and Nordic motifs (Jung 2009, Plate 22). This image gives us the full cycle of the *nekyia*: the descent to the lower world of the bottom panel (beneath the central tree) on our right; and the ascending return from the domain of death and dismemberment on our left. The scarab beetle of Egyptian iconography figures largely in both: on the right, pushing the solar disk into the Amduat at dusk; and, on the left, pushing the sun up from the underworld at dawn. And, on both sides, we find the serpent on the cross (downward pointing on the right, upwards on the left), a Biblical symbol of death and rebirth, of crucifixion and resurrection (the two poles of the Christian *nekyia*). And on the upper right and left registers we find again the Zoroastrian images of the wingèd disks, emanating from the rays of the central sun, symbolic of the god of light and truth, Ahura Mazda.

The infusion of Nordic motifs may be implied by the tree in the center of the green lozenge, and by the narrative that seems to unfold in the underworld of the bottom panel. The arboreal necrotype recurs throughout the imagery of the *Liber Secundus*, and is the subject of many of its most beautiful plates. In this plate, the tree evokes Yggdrasil from Nordic sources, with its branches in the heavens, its trunk in middle earth, and its roots in the underworld of Nifelheim. It is the same tree that Odin hangs from nine days and nights to win the runes of wisdom. In Jung's image, we find a battle in progress immediately below the roots of the tree, in the

center of the lower panel. I would suggest that this image is another variation on the theme of Siegfried's battle with the monster (the giant Fafnir, hoarding the Rhine gold), which is also depicted in a "devouring" posture on the lower right side of the panel. Our hero seems to emerge triumphantly from the encounter on the lower left side, with his arms upraised in a posture of rebirth and return from the underworld. Immediately above him we see the scarab beetle pushing the solar disk upwards at dawn.

This image is itself flanked by palms, a miniature version of the huge tree in the green lozenge in the center of the plate—an image that may evoke the motifs from the hermetic *Nekyia*: the alchemical tree and Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus, and dismemberment. This latter motif recalls the image of Siegfried previously noted, in which he is simultaneously encoiled by and dismembering the dragon. One recalls here the importance of the Visions of Zosimos of Panopolis (300 A.D.) that will emerge later in Jung's life, when he consciously engaged the iconographies of the alchemical traditions. In the second of the series of dream visions in that document, Ion encounters a dragon at the entrance to a temple with no beginning and no end, and with a spring of pure water inside. The dragon is then flayed and dismembered, its bones made into stepping stones leading into the temple (Linden 52).

The night-sea journey returns as the subject of one of the largest and most beautiful illuminations of the *Liber Secundus*, which combines elements of the Egyptian and Nordic *Nekyia* (Plate 55). Shamdasani notes the allusions to the Egyptian Nekyia:

> The solar barge is a common motif in ancient Egypt. The barge was seen as the typical means of movement of the sun. In Egyptian mythology, the Sun God struggles against the monster Apophis, who attempted to swallow the solar barge as it traveled across the heavens each day. In *Transformations and Symbols of the Libido* (1912), Jung discussed the "living sun-disc" (CW B, §153) and the motif of the sea monster (§ 549f.). In his 1952 revision of this text, he noted that the battle with the sea monster represented the attempt to free ego-consciousness from the grip of the unconscious (*Symbols of Transformation*, CW 5, §539). The solar barge resembles some of the illustrations in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*.... The oarsman is usually a falcon-headed Horus. The night journey of the sun God through the underworld is depicted in the *Amdaut*, which has been seen as a symbolic process of transformation. (in Jung 2009, n. 128, 284)

He also translates the calligraphic passage above the image:

One word that was never spoken.
One light that was never lit up.
An unparalleled confusion.
And a road without end. (284)

Hence, the image echoes the other plates in which the night-sea journey occurs, often in close connection with the motif of the Belly of the Whale. Here also one might add that the curved prow of the barge in which the solar disk is being transported seems rather more Nordic than Egyptian, more typical of Viking ships, than those to be seen in the *Books of the Dead*. If this is the case, associations with Siegfried's journey down the Rhine, or even perhaps of Thor's tangle with the World Serpent, would not be irrelevant here. In addition, one might add that the language of the inscription ("An unparalleled confusion/And a road without end") evokes the mythology of the labyrinth, often equated with the journey to the underworld (as in Dante's *Inferno*). And, as we will see, elements of the Nordic *nekyia* will come back to Jung in association with the building of the Bollingen tower.

Conclusion

These explorations provide an archetypal foundation for understanding and interpreting the (re)emergence of our contemporary "graphic mythologies" in popular culture, including comic books, video games, animated films, etc. The comparative perspective of mythological studies, incorporating the work of Joseph Campbell and C.G. Jung, among others, opens the conversation to historical precedents that enrich our appreciation of the long lineage of visual art—sometimes, but not always accompanied by, some form of text—that stretches back to Paleolithic cave paintings and rock art in Europe, Africa, and the American Southwest, and moves forward to the Egyptian Books of the Dead, Native American sand painting, Mayan and Aztec codices, and temple sculpture all over the world. Add to this the sophisticated fusion of text and image in the alchemical engravings of the Rosicrucian era (e.g., Michael Maier and Robert Fludd, among many others), or the narrative sequences of such artists as William Hogarth in Augustan England (e.g., "The Rake's Progress"), and one has the sense of the infinite possibilities of a newly emerging field of genre studies, one that engages the material from historical, multicultural, and transdisciplinary perspectives.

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PART II

Archetypal Amplifications: Comic Books, Comparative Mythology, and Depth Psychology

Archetypal Dimensions of Comic Books

Jeffrey T. Kiehl

Abstract Psychologically, the long-standing popularity of comic books rests in their connectedness to the deep archetypal dimensions of the psyche. C.G. Jung argued that creativity emerges from the play of imagination with fantasy images within the unconscious. From a depth psychological perspective these fantasy images are personified forms of archetypal energies within the collective unconscious. A key archetype within the unconscious is the savior, in which this figure facilitates engagement with evil and opens pathways to wholeness. In this chapter, I explore how comics provide images of the savior archetype and the psychological dynamics associated with this figure. I analyze the archetypal patterns and dynamics within the *Fantastic Four* stories published during the Silver Age and then provide a parallel analysis of Alan Moore's comic series *Promethea*. The analysis considers how each of these series illustrates a religious function within the psyche and explores how changes in the social arena over the fifty years between the *Fantastic Four* and *Promethea* have affected thematic elements within comic book storylines.

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Introduction

My experience with comic books began in 1961 when I was nine years old. I still remember walking a few blocks from my home to a small, neighborhood corner store to purchase the latest issue of the *Fantastic Four*, *Spiderman*, or the *X-Men*. The back of the store had a soda fountain where you could sit at the counter and have an ice cream sundae or root beer float. On the wall opposite to the soda fountain were rows of comic books. Reading the comic books without purchasing them was strongly discouraged, but kids did it anyway. If I had enough money after spending ten cents for the latest issue of the *Fantastic Four*, I would sit at the counter, order an ice cream sundae, and peruse my comic book. After finishing my ice cream, I would walk back home and find a secluded place to read and re-read the adventures of the *Fantastic Four*. You did not read through an issue only once, no, you read and reread the comic paying special attention to the colorful images, the letters from fans and, yes, even the advertisements ("you too can make $3 a day by training in electronics!"). Reading comics were entertaining, but also provided a means to expand my imagination in ways I couldn't understand at the time. I knew little about the people who were creating these stories and how they were created. I also knew nothing about the psychic depths from which these images and words arose.

I now recognize that my early self was following the alchemical dictum of "*Ora, lege, lege, relege labora et invenies,*" or "Pray, read, read, reread, work, and discover!" Looking back sixty years, I realize how appropriate this alchemical saying is for reading comic books. First, I prayed that a new issue would soon arrive at my neighborhood store, I prayed that Stan Lee and Jack Kirby – creators of the *Fantastic Four* – were working on new, exciting issues, I read, read, and reread. Most importantly, each time I read a comic book I discovered something new about myself. Psychologically, the archetypal images in the comic books were working on me all the time. I felt a numinosity, which I could not have articulated at the age of nine or ten. Nevertheless, the feeling was real and has stayed with me, such is the power of a comic book.

What did I find out or discover (*invenies*) about myself? I discovered whole new worlds to explore. I experienced feelings for the characters and

their struggles. I discovered new sciences and facts about the universe. Most of all I discovered whole new dimensions of imagination. Alchemically these were the great treasures that helped me through some very dark times. They transmuted my psyche through the *nigredo* to the *albedo* from dark loneliness to seeing a semblance of light within and outside of myself. In addition, my comic book experiences served as a gateway to reading *The Adventures of Tom Swift* to the novels of Jules Verne and the science fiction stories of Isaac Asimov. Those comic books that I looked forward to reading every month transformed my young, developing psyche in so many ways; I am forever grateful to *Marvel* comics for creating so many worlds that animated my young life.

The outline of this chapter is as follows: first, I provide a brief overview of the development of the *Silver Age* of comics and the psychological dynamics within these comics. I then explore archetypal patterns in the *Fantastic Four* comic book and provide a parallel analysis of the more contemporary comic book series *Promethea*. I conclude with personal reflections on the importance of comic books for psychological self-awareness and our current culture.

A Brief Overview of the *Silver Age* of Comics

Before discussing the *Silver Age* of comics, it is necessary to consider the origin of comic books in America. Modern comics began in 1938 with the appearance of the first issue of *Superman*, a year before the beginning of World War II. Even before the beginning of the war there were clear signs of growing, dark, dictatorial regimes in Germany and Italy. Although the United States did not enter the war until 1941, the awareness of this growing evil was quite evident. One explanation for the popularity of *Superman* and other comics of the *Golden Age* is that they were America's reaction to the collective darkness appearing in the world. The growing evil needed to be confronted by a being with superpowers. Jung (1950/1989) notes, "In one form or another, the figure of the redeemer is universal because it partakes of our common humanity. It invariably emerges from the unconscious of the individual or the people when an intolerable situation cries out for a solution that cannot be implemented by conscious means alone" (776). Thus, psychologically, the appearance of superhero comics can be viewed as an unconscious reaction to the presence of collective evil which transcends an individual's ability to cope with

it. American culture in the 1930s needed superheroes to overcome what perhaps felt otherwise unstoppable.[1]

As mentioned, my early comic book experiences began in the late 50s and early 60s, as *The Silver Age of Comics* was just beginning. The *Silver Age* is usually marked to span from 1956 to circa 1970. Historically, *The Silver Age* occurred at the height of the Cold War, when as kids, we were training to avoid nuclear fallout by hiding under our desks. It was the age of "Duck and Cover!" I distinctly remember walking to school during these times wondering if this was the day someone would 'push the button.' Of course, this was also a time of overt racial discrimination, immense inner-city poverty, and the beginnings of the Vietnam War. Amidst these dark temporal disturbances existed the excitement surrounding science and technology. Sputnik was launched into space in 1957, soon followed by space journeys by dogs, monkeys, and men. Nuclear energy was promising to provide cheap energy for all. Plastics were going to revolutionize life as we knew it. There was a palpable tension between the dark shadows of looming global nuclear annihilation and the bright horizons offered by science and technology. Looking back on these times, I wonder how I, or any kid, held the tension of these diametrically opposed forces of archetypal destruction and creation. In contrast, the mid- to late- '60s provided a gigantic release valve for these archetypal tensions from the late '50s to the early '60s. Perhaps Rock and Roll, the British invasion, the wholesale arrival of Eastern religions in the West, and the appearance of psychedelic mind expansion saved all of us from complete implosion. These means were contained ways that the demonic forces could be released, renewed, and reinvigorated without ending the world. I believe comics in the mid- to early- '60s provided a prescient foreshadowing to the rebirth experiences that appeared in the late '60s.

During the mid- to late- '60s, *Silver Age Marvel* comics didn't shy away from the world's problems but integrated them into their manifold storylines. The tremendous popularity of *Marvel* comics and their later transition to widely popular films indicates how well they transmuted and transmitted deep archetypal imagery to the public. The comic book images with their rich colors, dynamic, and multi-dimensional structures were captivating not just to young people but adults as well.

[1] On the history of comics, specifically *Marvel Comics*, I recommend the following: Dauber (2022), Howe (2012), Thomas (2020), and Wolk (2021).

Compared to the *Golden Age, Silver Age* comics provided a great leap into the exploration of new thematic elements, creating more nuanced villains who could evoke sympathy, and explored the flawed nature of the superheroes themselves. Central to virtually all comic book storylines is the struggle of good against evil, in which individuals using special powers fight on either side of this archetypal dyad. Good represents the status quo, the dominant paradigm, a society with order that allows for basic freedoms and human rights. Evil represents any power or entity that wants to subvert the status quo, the ordered society, and replace freedom with autocratic, domination. It is a struggle between Chaos and Cosmos. Evil is rooted in power and those who align with the central power figure live in a state of servitude, even if they too have superpowers. While superheroes who strive for good create order, are in healthy relationship with one another, and exhibit teamwork.

Psychologically, this represents the savior archetype, the image of a being who strives for good, while the savior's opposite strives for evil. The archetypal nature of the savior dyad suggests that this motif has existed throughout history. For example, Manicheanism and Zoroastrianism are ancient religions rooted in the eternal struggle between good and evil, in which each religion has its savior fighting for good. The Judeo-Christian religions have God and Satan, who struggle for the soul of man. Given the struggles that humanity faced through its evolutionary development, it is not surprising we would be immersed in this dyadic dynamic. As Jung argued, archetypes are rooted in nature itself, in our evolutionary experiences over vast time spans. Thus, natural human internal and external struggles to survive and thrive, to find meaning in life led to the polarity of good and evil. Given the preference for life over death, we yearn for an 'Other' who will help us overcome the dark exigences of life. The savior, therefore, becomes a necessary part of our meaning-making to keep the threatening dark forces at bay. Jung (1958/1989) notes that:

> … immense power of destruction is given into [man's] hand, and the question is whether he can resist the will to use it, and can temper his will with the spirit of love and wisdom. He will hardly be capable of doing so on his own unaided resources. He needs the help of an "advocate" in heaven. (459)

Our daily challenge personally and collectively is to 'temper our' will to power with the 'spirit of love and wisdom.' This is the fundamental struggle of good against evil. But, as Jung observes, we need more than our

conscious will to do this, we need an "advocate in heaven" to prevent us from destroying ourselves and the planet. Psychologically, this means we need help from the archetypal realm of the collective unconscious. Again, Jung (1956/1990) states:

> What we seek in visible human form is not man, but the superman, the hero or god, that *quasi-human* being who symbolizes the ideas, forms, and forces which grip and mould the soul. These, so far as psychological experience is concerned, are the archetypal contents of the (collective) unconscious, the archaic heritage of humanity, the legacy left behind by all differentiation and development and bestowed upon all men like sunlight and air. But in loving this inheritance they love that which is common to all; they turn back to the mother of humanity, to the psyche, which was before consciousness existed, and in this way they make contact with the source and regain something of that mysterious and irresistible power which comes from the feeling of being part of the whole. (178)

The struggle between our egoic-focused 'will' and the deeper 'spirit of love and wisdom' cannot be won through ego consciousness, since it is biased towards will. We need to transcend our one-sidedness, which according to Jung is the seed of neurosis, to a state of balance and wholeness. Psychologically, we need to develop a working relationship with the collective unconscious to avoid catastrophic destruction. This fundamental struggle and aid of an advocate are the basic ingredients of most comic book stories. When we open a comic book and fall into its colorful, multidimensional world, we come into contact with 'the advocate.' Perhaps it is this deep psychological experience that unconsciously draws us to the world of comic books, in which advocates abound.

Another interesting aspect of comics is the continuation of their complex stories and motifs over many issues. Certain antiheros continue to come back to subvert the dominant world order. For example, Dr Doom, the Fantastic Four's archnemesis, returns over and over to do ill. The antihero is rarely destroyed in comics. If they are captured, they escape. If you think the evil one is destroyed for good, they miraculously appear in a forthcoming issue. The struggle between good and evil is never fully resolved in comics – it transcends temporality. Archetypally, comic books contain no eschatology, they are never-ending. Of course, the more mundane interpretation of this situation is continued sales of comics, but there is a deeper meaning implied in the never-ending struggle between good

and evil. As noted, *The Silver Age* also introduced more nuanced villains, individuals who readers could sympathize with in some way. The first antihero to appear in the *Fantastic Four* series was Mole Man, who was a simple person denigrated and put down by those around him. To escape this persecution, he fled down into the bowels of the earth and slowly mutated into an evil being. As Jung (1954/1977) states, "Isolation in pure ego-consciousness has the paradoxical consequence that there now appear in dreams and fantasies impersonal, collective contents which are the very material from which certain schizophrenic psychoses are constructed" (101). Thus, a common antihero motif is their isolation into pure egoism and alienation from the world, ultimately leading to madness. At times, the antihero's actions may be antithetical to their goals, a theme that resonates with Mephistopheles (Kaufman 1963) who says to Faust that he is "part of that force which would do evil evermore, and yet creates the good" (159). Clearly, the development of comic books in the 1960s led to antiheros who are more nuanced and ambivalent.

Another feature of the *Silver Age* superhero is how they exhibit internal and interpersonal flaws. Psychologically, it is now possible to see the shadows of the superhero and how these darker aspects affect their ability to fight an antihero. Often a villain appears who carries the shadow of the hero and uses this knowledge to thwart the hero. With *Silver Age* comics, we enter the realm of paradox representative of the collective unconscious. Infighting among superheroes often risks everything. Superheroes can become inflated with their specialness and behave intolerably towards their colleagues, including the mere mortals around them. They may even fail at their mission, or display humor amidst tremendous turmoil. Simply stated, *Silver Age* superheroes are more human than their *Golden Age* counterparts, thus making them more relatable.

The Fantastic Four

Historically, the creation of the *Fantastic Four* arose from a competition between *Marvel* and *DC* comics. In response to the popular *DC* comic series *Justice League*, the head of *Marvel* asked Stan Lee to create a comic book that would best the *DC* comic. Encouraged by his wife to let go of conventions and follow his instincts, Lee came up with the *Fantastic Four*. Lee took his idea and storyline to his colleague Jack Kirby, who was an accomplished illustrator. Interviews with those who worked with Kirby describe how he would sit with a drawing board and large sheet of paper

and, starting at the top left corner of the paper, with nonstop motion, work his way down to the bottom right corner of the sheet. Thus, images and storyline literally flowed out onto the paper with no hesitation. The only prompts he had for the page were textual fragments provided by Lee. Kirby told people that he never knew beforehand what he would draw, but once his pencil touched the paper images and story flowed out onto the blank sheet before him. He was comfortable with people sitting beside him to witness this spontaneous creative process (Kirby Continuum 2016). Clearly the comic book images were not generated consciously, but through unconscious processes. Jung (1956/1990) notes that:

> We have … two kinds of thinking: directed thinking, and dreaming or fantasy-thinking. The former operates with speech elements for the purpose of communication, and is difficult and exhausting; the latter is effortless, working as it were spontaneously, with the contents ready to hand, and guided by unconscious motives. The one produces innovations and adaptation, copies reality, and tries to act upon it; the other turns away from reality, sets free subjective tendencies. (18)

Interestingly, Lee and Kirby's collaboration brought together these two kinds of 'thinking.' Lee's narratives depended on his ability to weave linear storylines together that would communicate to the reader both action and purpose, while Kirby's colorful images spontaneously arose from his unconscious and were universally praised for their ability to grab the reader's imagination. The combination of directed and fantasy thinking insured their stories included personal and archetypal images. For example, Ben Grimm of the Fantastic Four often refers to the rough guys from Yancy Street and how they are out to get him. Kirby grew up on Delancy Street in the Lower East side of New York City, a rough and tumble neighborhood, and as a young boy he was often bullied by the Delancy street gang (Jack Kirby Museum and Research Center 2012).

In the first *Fantastic Four* issue published in 1961, readers learn that the superheroes obtained their powers by accident. In an effort to beat the Soviets into space, genius scientist Reed Richards convinces three of his friends to join him on a spaceship journey into outer space. While in space, the four humans are exposed to high intensity cosmic radiation which transmutes the travelers into superhuman beings. Three of the members preserve their human form, while Ben Grimm's body is transformed into a massive, orange rock-like form. Jeffrey Kripal (2011, 121-172) argues

that human transformation in comic books occurs commonly through accidental exposure to radiation. Given that many of these stories began in the late 1950s and early '60s, it is not surprising radiation would play a critical role in superhero transmutation. Anna Peppard (2017) writes that:

> The Fantastic Four and the Marvel Age's other atomic-spawned superheroes are products of this science of transmutation; arriving in the wake of not only the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also the nuclear tests at Bikini Atoll, the first nuclear power plant, and the first nuclear submarine, the Fantastic Four and their brethren explicitly react to, reflect, and embody a world in which the vast productive and destructive capabilities of atomic energy were truly enacted and spectacularly displayed for the first time. Significantly, atomic energy had often been perceived as monstrous to the extent that it seems to disrupt the natural order. (65)

At this time, the Cold War was in full swing fueled by an out-of-control nuclear arms race. Testimony to this public awareness are the many science fiction films from this era filled with monsters created by radiation exposure. The ambivalent message from these stories is that radiation is a dangerous energy that can lead to tremendous destruction, but also the creation of superheroes.

The *Fantastic Four* comic book contained some novel twists compared to previous comics. For example, members of the Fantastic Four did not hide their identities behind masks, they chose to be less invested in a *persona*. In most episodes readers see the members of the *Fantastic Four* walking down the streets of New York City mingling with the public. Furthermore, the team members revealed not only their superpowers, but also their frailties. We see them questioning each other's decisions, we witness Reed's guilt of exposing his friends to deadly cosmic radiation, and, particularly, his guilt about Ben's transformation into a monstrous nonhuman form. We witness constant bickering, teasing and emotional battles among the team. Despite their superhero powers, the *Fantastic Four* experience fear, guilt, jealousy, and shame. Most of all, the Fantastic Four are a family, unlike any other superhero series at the time. The team members live together, work together, and care deeply for one another and willingly risk their lives and the lives of others to protect each other.

Beyond the more personal, psychological aspects of a superhero, lies its archetypal dimension. Archetypes are universal lenses through which we perceive the world; lenses that represent particular patterns of perception

common to all beings. The specific imagistic form we perceive is modified by the culture and times we live in, but the underlying pattern is universal. Importantly, the perception of the pattern evokes within us *affect* and *numinosity*. When we engage with an archetypal image, we are moved in deep ways. Jung (1959/1977) states that archetypes, "can rearise spontaneously, at any time, at any place, and without any outside influence" (79). The number of patterns perceived is very diverse, but certain patterns seem quite prevalent in our lives, including: shadow, soul figures, mother, father, magician, hero, savior, and wise old woman. Jung further notes that an "archetypal content expresses itself, first and foremost, in metaphors" (157). Metaphors arise from the second kind of 'thinking,' and, as such, are imaginal, fluid, and often transrational. Essential to the idea of archetypes is that they have *polarity*, which for comic books is the hero-antihero dyad. A comic book series, like *The Fantastic Four* contains all of these archetypal ingredients, thus capturing the hearts and imaginations of the public.

The superheroes of the Fantastic Four include Dr Reed Richards, Sue Storm, Johnny Storm, and Ben Grimm. Reed Richards, Mr Fantastic, is the unquestioned leader of the foursome who possesses superior intelligence and constantly invents new machines to explore the micro- and macro- universe. Reed is always extending his intellect into new discoveries, new theories to benefit mankind. His superpower due to radiation exposure is an ability to reshape his body in fluid ways. Peppard (2017, 59) notes that Reed represents the element of water due to this fluidity. Psychologically, Reed is a thinking type who analyzes and reasons his way through problems, which implies his most difficult function to access is feeling, which is reflected in how often Reed does not immediately perceive the relative value of a situation. His thinking can lead to placing himself and his friends in difficult situations. Archetypally, Reed is the quintessential modern magician. Jung (1959/1977) notes that the magician, "pierces the chaotic darkness of brute life with the light of meaning. He is the enlightener, the master and teacher, a psychopomp…. Like all archetypes, it has a positive and a negative aspect" (37). Moore and Gillette (1990) further state that collectively, "Ours … is … the age of the Magician, because it is a technological age" (102).

Sue Storm, the Invisible Girl, can become invisible and create force fields of various shapes. She is the peacemaker within the team and intuitively recognizes when things are going wrong, which indicates a dominant typology of intuition implying an inferior sensation function, which

reflects her superpower of invisibility. Peppard (2017, 59) associates Sue's superpower with the element of air. Archetypally, Sue carries both heroine and wisdom archetypal energy. She is a strong anima figure for Reed, who is in love with her, as she is with him. The motif of invisibility appears in many myths and fairy tales, including the more recent popular story of Harry Potter with his cloak of invisibility. Often stories about invisibility convey a temptation to use this power for ill purposes. Thus, despite the transparent nature of the power, it comes with a great shadow quality.

Johnny Storm, the Human Torch, is Sue's brother. He carries the *puer* energy within the group. His superpower is the ability to become a human flame, thus his element is fire. He is someone who cares deeply about the other members of the Fantastic Four. Johnny being the youngest team member is impulsive and often leaps into the fray before Reed can discern the best strategy to defeat the antihero. Johnny's power of becoming a human torch reflects his volatile, sulfuric nature. He is constantly thinking about girls, which is another reflection of his youthful, burning, passionate nature. Given how strongly Johnny values his team members his dominant function is feeling. His foil is Ben Grimm, who he constantly pushes until Ben explodes in anger. Johnny's inferior function is thinking for he is constantly acting before thinking. Archetypally, Johnny is not only the *puer*, but also a trickster. His use of fire as a special power represents intense psychic energy, which he can direct for creative and destructive purposes.

Ben Grimm, The Thing, Reed's old college roommate, is all muscle. His superpower is tremendous strength, but with this power comes a monstrous physical appearance. As such, Ben is unique for he is the only member who lost his human form in the radiation accident. His very appearance terrifies people, coupled with irritability, he is not a pleasant person to be around. He resents Reed for turning him into a monster and is jealous of Sue's attraction to Reed. Yet, beneath Ben's rough exterior lies a man who has deep feelings for others. He is committed to using his strength to help the weak. Ben's dominant function is sensation for he is the most down to earth member of the team and represents the element of earth. He has a tough exterior, but a heart of gold and is willing to risk his life for his friend's. Ben's power of extreme strength is a direct reflection of his pre-superhero self.

Just as early Greek science and alchemy believed that all things arise from the combination of Earth, Water, Air and Fire, the combination of the four superpowers of the Fantastic Four insure near invincibility against the antiheros they constantly encounter. As a totality they form a

quintessence which transcends a simple sum of their individual powers, indicating how the hero archetype unifies varied archetypes for as Jung (1956/1990) states, "The hero symbolizes a man's *unconscious self*, and this manifests itself empirically as the sum total of all archetypes" (333).

As noted, a central motif in any comic book storyline is the antihero, or archnemesis. Without an antihero there would be no dynamic tension required to generate psychic energy. Jung (1997) states, "you have to admit that the spirit of life will at times take on an aspect of evil. Life consists of night and day, and the night is just as long as the day; so evil and good are pairs of opposites without which there is no energy and no life" (140). Thus, the antihero is necessary for life to be lived fully. Imagine a superhero story without an evil nemesis! For the Fantastic Four, one of their most persistent and challenging archenemies is Dr Victor von Doom, a scientist gone mad. Doom is the shadow magician to Mr Fantastic. He attended the same university as Reed and during this time von Doom carried out a tragically flawed experiment leading to the disfigurement of his face. Although the scar was minor, von Doom's vanity drove him to becoming power hungry. He blamed Reed for the accident which is the source of his many attempts to destroy the Fantastic Four. As a symbol of his loss of feeling for others, Doom creates a metallic suit covering his body. His superpower is superior intelligence and vast wealth, which he uses to invent machines of destruction. He is the archetype of the modern technocrat gone mad. Doom's character provides an example of how archetypes can take over a person's life for if one identifies too closely with an archetype, they become possessed by it. The archetype literally seizes them. Victor von Doom through vanity and hubris has fallen under the archetype of power, which reflects Jung's (1953/1977) statement that, "Where love reigns, there is no will to power; and where the will to power is paramount, love is lacking. The one is but the shadow of the other" (53). Thus, Doom's hateful actions towards the world, and especially the Fantastic Four, are a direct manifestation of such possession, while the opposite of this alienation and separation appears in the characteristic of deep caring held by the Fantastic Four.

Before leaving the Fantastic Four, it is important to consider how cultural complexes of the late 1950s and early '60s appeared in comic books. Reed's scientific knowhow and ability to extend himself beyond normal bounds are emblematic of the United States' focus on scientific excellence and inventiveness at the height of the Cold War. Funding for scientific research continued to grow over this time and employment in the sciences

and engineering boomed. The number of films and TV shows during this period increased and science fiction was a very popular genre for these media. Sue's invisibility reflects the rise of the spy culture in both the political sphere and the world of film and television. All of this was a direct result of the perceived need to infiltrate and know what the 'enemy' was thinking and doing. At this time, the CIA was carrying out remote viewing research again reflecting the cloak of invisibility in order to spy on the Soviet Union. Johnny's flammable powers capture the youthful mood of the country in the late 1950s and early '60s. This was the time when rock and roll was 'born in the USA.' A form of music rooted in the burning passions of the hearts of young Americans. Ben's power of overwhelming strength clearly reflects the notion that America was the strongest, mightiest nation on Earth. The arms race of the late 1950s and '60s was a very visible display of United States might. Thus, the *Fantastic Four* comics contain many aspects ascendant in the culture of the United States in the late 1950s and early '60s. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby were keen representatives of this culture. They both fought in World War II and participated in the overcoming of collective evil. They both witnessed the transition from the poverty of the Great Recession to a post war economic boom fueled by scientific and technological innovation. Like most of this generation they must have witnessed how science could be used to build the most destructive weapon known to mankind. All these political and social forces were at play in the culture of the times and hence in their psyches when they created the *Fantastic Four* and other *Marvel* superhero stories.

Promethea

Promethea is a comic book series that appeared from 1999 to 2005. It was written by Alan Moore, illustrated by J.H. Williams III, and inked by Mick Gray and consists of thirty-two issues, which have been reissued as a three-volume set (Moore et al 2019–2020). *Promethea* has been heralded as one of the most innovative, spiritual, and consciousness-shifting comics of all times. Moore is known for his imaginative storytelling in the comic series, including: *Watchmen*, *V is for Vendetta*, *From Hell*, and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. Moore's works are immersed in esoterica, including the tarot, kabbala, and magic and *gnosis* (Kraemer and Winslade 2010; Hanegraaff 2016). The story of *Promethea* is a portal to directly experience transcendence, which makes reading this comic series extremely innovative. An essential aspect of Moore's work is that he views the play of

the *imagination* as central to the transformation of consciousness, a belief supported Jung (1971/1990) who states;

> …we know that every good idea and all creative work are the offspring of the imagination …every creative individual whatsoever owes all that is greatest in his life to fantasy. The dynamic principle of fantasy is *play*, a characteristic also of the child…without this playing with fantasy no creative work has ever yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of imagination is incalculable. It is therefore short-sighted to treat fantasy, on account of its risky or unacceptable nature, as a thing of little worth. It must not be forgotten that it is just in the imagination that a man's highest value may lie. (63)

It is impossible to give a detailed description of the *Promethea* series for it is an expansive, multi-layered tale. Each issue contains rich, colorful complex images with equally detailed text. Suffice it to say that I had never seen a comic book like *Promethea* before first encountering it. The full-page layouts of multidimensionality with poetic text were clearly created to provide more than mere entertainment for the reader. When readers immerse themselves in an issue of *Promethea* they enter the wild imaginations of Moore and Williams and are on the road to a direct connection with *gnosis*. Archetypally, *Promethea* is a story of the Kore, the maiden. Jung (1959/1977) states, "The figure of the Kore … when observed in a man [belongs] to the anima type; and when observed in a woman to the type of *supraordinate personality*" (183). By *supraordinate personality*, Jung means the *Self*, the archetype of wholeness. So, we must recognize that in reading *Promethea* we are seeing both the animas of the male creators and the archetype of the feminine in various manifestations.

On the surface, the comic book is about a young college student, Sophie Bangs, who is writing a term paper on a fictional character named Promethea. Sophie's research has uncovered a long history of Promethea figures beginning with a little girl from 411 AD who lived in Egypt. The girl's father, a gnostic, sends his daughter into the desert to escape a murderous group of Christian zealots. There she is met by the gods Thoth and Hermes who take her to the realm of *Immateria*, a place where imagined ideas are alive. Jung states that, "the Kore often appears in woman as an *unknown young girl*," and that, "the maiden's helplessness exposes her to all sorts of *dangers*" (184). The girl learns she can leave *Immateria* and reenter the physical world if someone evokes Promethea's image from the physical, earthly world. The first manifestation of Promethea in this world

occurs in the eighteenth century when a writer imagines Promethea in a work of poetry. Over the following two centuries Promethea appears in the physical world in various forms through fiction being turned into reality. According to Jung (1959/1977) for a woman there is:

> … the feeling that her life is spread out over generations—the first step towards the immediate experience and conviction of being outside time, which brings with it a feeling of *immortality*. The individual's life is elevated into a type, indeed it becomes the archetype of woman's fate in general. This leads to a restoration or *apocatastasis* of the lives of her ancestors, who now, through the bridge of the momentary individual, pass down into the generations of the future. An experience of this kind gives the individual a place and a meaning in the life of the generations, so that all unnecessary obstacles are cleared out of the way of the life-stream that is to flow through her. At the same time the individual is rescued from her isolation and restored to wholeness. All ritual preoccupation with archetypes ultimately has this aim and this result. (188)

On the personal level, *Promethea* is the story of a young woman living in New York City with her emotionally damaged mother, while attending college. We get the sense that although Sophie has relationships, something is missing in her life. Like so many people she is living a provisional life, a life with little meaning. Such a life finds one doing what is expected by family, peers, and culture; living according to what others say. Sophie is sufficiently awake to realize there must be something more to life than doing what is expected of her by others. Her work on the term paper sparks something within, which is apparent from the passion with which she pursues the involved story of Promethea. The term paper has seized her in ways she cannot understand, she intuitively knows she must find out who Promethea really is. From a Jungian perspective Sophie Bangs is being called (*vocatus*) from a deeper place within her psyche to find out more about the archetype, the Kore or Promethea. Ultimately, a call like this originates with the archetype of wholeness, the Self, and those who hear such a call are well advised to heed it.

On the archetypal level, Sophie's journey places her in touch with the *Immateria* realm in which imagination rules supreme. Psychologically, this is the realm of the collective unconscious where image and metaphor predominate. It is in this realm where space and time can exist and not exist, where one can transcend the spatial and temporal dimensions of materiality. The drawings of J.H. Williams III magically capture this realm

in astounding ways. Clearly, Williams was accessing the depths of his own psyche when creating such vivid imagery for the series.

On yet another level, the action taking place in *Promethea* explores the intersection of the material world and that of the *Immateria*. Jung called the intersect where psyche and matter meet *psychoidal*, where synchronicities occur. Interestingly, the way Sophie transmutes to embody Promethea is through the composition of poetry, which contains image and metaphor. What better way to enter a state of reverie opening the door to the *Immateria*? As the reader works through the whole series, one realizes Moore's message is that, in our own way, anyone of us can connect to this imagistic realm.

Another important theme of the story are the varied forms of evil. As noted, the story begins with Promethea's father being killed by Christian zealots. Interestingly, the father is using a mind manipulation technique (*a la* Obi-Wan Kenobi) to focus the anger of the crowd on himself leading to his death, thus giving his daughter time to flee into the desert and to safety. In the present time of 1999, we learn that someone has hired hitmen from the *Immateria* to kill Sophie before she can transform into a new embodied Promethea. The people who hired the hitmen are religious fundamentalists and direct descendants of the fifth century zealots. They fear the appearance of a new Promethea and want to protect their children from her pagan ways. Here Moore cleverly uses the storyline to explore the dark, paranoic side of fundamentalism and its fear of the feminine. There are other shadow elements to the story involving a government agent trying to capture Promethea and incarcerate her for scientific study, again rooted in the fear of the power of the feminine. What Moore makes clear in the story and in interviews is how we need to acknowledge the existence of darkness and realize it too is a part of the imaginal realm. Psychologically, this refers to how the collective unconscious holds both light and darkness, good and evil, which are archetypal forces that appear personally and collectively. If we create a system that one-sidedly believes it is pure goodness, then evil falls into the unconscious leading to isolation, paranoia, and destructiveness. Moore and Jung agree that we must consciously recognize the reality of both good and evil. This does not mean we act out evil; indeed, it minimizes the potential for us doing evil if we are in conscious relationship with it. The comic book provides an excellent example of how to work with these forces. In *Promethea*, it is through engaging with the *Immateria*; from a Jungian perspective, it is using active imagination to work with unconscious forces.

One of the most meaningful dimensions of Sophie's journey is her experience with the Kabbala Tree of Life, in which she and a previous incarnation of Promethea travel along twenty-three paths through the ten sephiroth. Moore provides the reader with an experience of what it is like to work with the Tree and how each sephiroth provides an opportunity for conscious transformation. William's imagery is equally evocative. Theirs is not an intellectual teaching on the Kabbala, but a deep experiential immersion into the energies present in this esoteric path. By the time we enter this journey with Sophie we realize that we have left the traditional genre of comics behind and have entered a whole new way of reading Moore's phantasmagoria. Jung was very knowledgeable about the Kabbala. He viewed it, with other esoteric ways, as a symbolic representation of our psychological development to wholeness, for it asks us to go inward to discover and work with archetypal energies present in the collective unconscious.

Unlike most comic book series which are never ending, *Promethea* actually comes to an end for there is a *telos* built into the story line from the beginning. We learn from a previous incarnation of Promethea that Sophie as the new Promethea is to bring about 'the end of the world.' Sophie is shocked by this message, but by the end of the series she realizes what is meant by this, for the 'end of the world' is not a physical, apocalyptic destruction of Earth, but a radical shift in consciousness for all humanity. It is the pronouncement that anyone of us can access the realm of imagination and see the sacred, numinosity of the everyday world. We need no intermediaries to open us to this realization. It is a global *gnosis* and each one of us has this ability to see the world as it truly is. There is no need for a special superhero to free us from our ignorance of the world. Again, unlike traditional comic series, we transcend the need for a unique, exterior savior. Psychologically, this demonstrates the individuation process *par excellence*.

Conclusion

This exploration of comics from the *Silver Age* to the present reveals two ways of looking at the polarity of good and evil; both views are present in the current "Spirit of the Times" (Jung 2009). One way, that of *The Silver Age* of comics reinforces a national myth of 'Truth, Justice & the American Way,' in which America is a nation of good, while other nations form an axis of evil, a way resulting in collective splitting and projection. The

Fantastic Four's powers arose from the space race, and they chose to use their superpowers to battle evil, an evil initially in the comic series associated with communism. With the *Promethea* comic series a new way is proposed with the message that good cannot exist without evil and, even more radical, that evil originates from the same psychic realm as good, i.e. the *Immateria*. *Promethea's* cosmology implicitly holds opposites. Early in the series, Sophie lives in the split, dualistic view of the American mythos, but after her Promethea initiation she opens herself to a cosmology transcending dualism. From a Jungian perspective, Sophie's individuation process leads her to the experience of the archetype of wholeness. She realizes her enemies are just as important to her *telos* as are her friends, perhaps best exemplified in the mercurial figure of Jack Faust, a sleezy looking magician who engages in 'sex magic' with Sophie so that they both may reach a new level of conscious realization. Faust is both light and dark and Sophie intuitively knows this. With *Promethea* we leave behind a naïve, exclusionary view of evil in the world and move into the realization of how good and evil coexist as an unbroken polarity.

Promethea's mission to bring about the 'end of the world' opens people's consciousness to a comprehensive, inclusionary cosmology of transformation which is mirrored in Jung's essay *Answer to Job*. For Jung, one of our greatest challenges is to realize that God is both good and evil, which psychologically means that the archetype of wholeness holds both good and evil in us. Perhaps this is why the *Fantastic Four* series can never end for it cannot hold the opposites but must split and project evil onto an outer antihero. By projecting the evil onto a separate entity, it relieves us of the responsibility of dealing with true evil. It is a *pharmakon* applied outwardly that cannot heal our inner split. It entertains us and creates the fantasy that evil can be destroyed by someone else, the superhero, the savior, but not by us. However, we can never destroy this outer evil and so we need one more *Marvel* comic story to assuage our inability to inwardly awaken to wholeness. We prefer entertainment as opposed to transformation for the inner work is just too difficult. Moore's *Promethea* series provides a more psychologically mature answer to this dilemma. We can dive deep and journey with the eternal feminine form of Promethea and learn how to integrate this primal polarity, and thus reach a *gnosis* of supraordinate transformation. Such is the archetypal power of comic books.

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All-Female Teams: In Quest of the Missing Archetype

Jennifer Maile Kaku

Abstract Tales of men setting off on quests, fighting battles, accomplishing great deeds together, have been part of the narrative landscape for thousands of years. Conversely, nothing comparable has existed for the opposite sex. The aim of the present inquiry is to set out in quest of the missing archetype. I begin by investigating the reasons behind this extraordinary dichotomy: If men have their celebrated Brotherhood archetype, why do women lack an analogous Sisterhood archetype? Stories of cooperation or even of friendship between women are rare, and the few that do exist depict such alliances as diabolical and destructive. The archetypal image of women teaming up resembles what I call "Furyhood," based on the mythical Furies of ancient Greece, rather than Sisterhood. The Furies, Maenads and Amazons of ancient myth resurface in the guise of male-bashing superheroine teams and female-ruled planets in the narratives of modern-day comics. Surprising as it may seem, stories of female bonding and collaboration are a very recent innovation in the history of comics and

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indeed in the Western narrative tradition as a whole. The rising trend in all-female superhero teams represents a paradigm shift that may finally be sowing the seeds of sisterhood in the pop-culture genre of the twenty-first century.

Keywords Archetype • Women • Gender • Comic books • Furyhood

> The commitment of women to women is represented
> as intolerable to men; that it might be represented
> as succeeding—even in myth—is therefore impermissible.
> —Christine Downing, *Myths and Mysteries of Same-Sex Love*

The world of comics abounds in futuristic environments, ultra-high-tech paraphernalia, heroes with sophisticated superpowers, but in spite of such visionary settings, props and characters, the underlying and sometimes not-so-subtle subtext can be dismally retrograde. This is especially true with regard to the depictions of women and female characters, which, as has been abundantly demonstrated, have almost always tended to be disappointingly conventional if not downright sexist. There is, however, a recent phenomenon that may be blasting the world of comics into the terrestrial twenty-first century: the rising trend in all-female superhero teams. Surprising as it may seem, such stories of female bonding and collaboration are a very recent innovation in the history of comics and indeed in the Western narrative tradition as a whole.

Glorious tales of men setting off on quests, fighting battles or accomplishing great deeds together have always stirred the imagination. In *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, Christopher Knowles (2007) links the popular superhero teams in the comic books of today to famous "brotherhoods" that date back to the myths of Antiquity: "The Brotherhood archetype has its roots in ancient mythology, most notably the pagan pantheons of Egypt, Greece, and Rome. In addition, Jason had his Argonauts; Buddha had his twelve disciples; Christ had his twelve apostles; King Arthur had his Knights of the Round Table" (170). All-male teams have, in other words, been part of the narrative landscape for thousands of years. And thus, for just as many years, they have inspired not only comic-book characters but real boys and men as positive models of comradeship, of pulling together for the common good, of valiance or beneficence or just plain old

adventure among brothers-in-arms. Conversely, for thousands of years, nothing comparable existed for the opposite sex. No models of valiant, beneficent or adventurous female comradeship are provided by the tradition. No ancient mythological archetype for women and girls shines forth in the narrative landscape of the Western world.

The aim of the present inquiry is to set out in quest of the missing archetype. I begin by investigating the reasons behind this extraordinary dichotomy: If men have their celebrated Brotherhood archetype, why do women lack an analogous Sisterhood archetype? Stories of cooperation or even of friendship between women are rare, and the few that do exist depict such alliances as diabolical and destructive. In other words, the archetypal image of women teaming up is one of "Furyhood" rather than of Sisterhood. The brothers-in-arms motif sanctifies male bonding from the myths of Antiquity to modern-day comics. How is female bonding portrayed in the classical myths that have irrigated and shaped the Western imagination? How do those mythological images persist in contemporary comics and how, after two thousand years, are they evolving? The landscape seems to be changing. The development of all-female superhero teams may finally be sowing the seeds of sisterhood in the pop-culture genre of the twenty-first century.

Astonishingly, the missing archetype went unnoticed for thousands of years. Virginia Woolf ([1929]1957) may have been the first to report on it at a lecture in 1928. Observing that female characters in literature do not generally like each other, she remarks, "I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends…. But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men" (86). Woolf imagines a hypothetical female novelist who might, in daring to write about a friendship between two working women, "light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been" (88). In other words, less than a century ago, the subject of female bonding and collaboration was as yet an unexplored frontier. Woolf attributes its absence to the fact that "until Jane Austen's day," women were portrayed in writing exclusively by men (86).

Woolf provides us with a first clue to the enigma of the missing archetype. If, in contrast to the abundance of strong, heroic male partnerships celebrated by bards and writers throughout history, there is an extraordinary paucity of analogous partnerships when it comes to women, one of the reasons can be ascribed to the sex of the poet. The bards and writers throughout history have been men: men lauding the powers of men, and

men imagining—or failing to imagine—the powers of women. For over three millennia,[1] women had no voice, no models, no archetypes of their own. They were instead, as Jeffrey Kripal (2011) puts it, "being written, and zapped and screwed with" (224). Although Kripal, in *Mutants and Mystics,* is speaking about paranormal experiences, his image of being "written" by alien forces endowed with special powers that entangle us without our consent "in a story (or stories) that we did not write and that we may not even like" (51) quite aptly describes the situation of women in a society in which, through the "special power" of writing, the production of narratives is monopolized by men. The one-sidedness of the archetypal dichotomy is thus the result of a Cyclopean perspective in which the hegemonic texts and images that have shaped the Western landscape have been articulated from an exclusively masculine point of view.

A classic example of what men opine about female relationships can be found in a letter addressed to a young bride by Jonathan Swift. In the eighteenth century, when women were beginning to form social circles and ladies' clubs of their own, Swift—who, like many men, did not look favorably upon this development—was of a mind to write, "To speak the truth, I never yet knew a tolerable woman to be fond of her own sex.… But a knot of ladies, got together by themselves, is a very school of impertinence and detraction, and it is well if those be the worst" (1803, 86). Admonishing the young lady to avoid the company of other women since they will only lead her astray, he concludes: "[T]he grand affair of your life will be to gain and preserve the friendship and esteem of your husband" (87). Here, the author of *Gulliver's Travels* quite neatly sums up the three main reasons why women have been kept from bonding under the pen of male writers for thousands of years: Women don't team up (because a woman only teams up with her man); women can't team up (because they instinctively abhor each other); however, if women do team up… beware!

The first two reasons simply exclude the possibility of intragender friendships or cooperation between women. Women's roles in stories tend to orbit primarily around men—as mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, lovers, whores, etc. If another woman (not of the same family) enters into the picture, she is typically set up as a rival. More often than not, the two female characters compete for the favors of a man and, more often than

[1] The earliest writings of the Hebrew Bible are thought to date from the fifteenth century BCE. The only depiction of female friendship is the story of Ruth and Naomi (Yalom 2015, 17).

not, as Woolf observed, they dislike each other. As a result, even a tale of two women ends up being triangular and androcentric: a man inevitably comes between them and ultimately keeps them apart.

The image of women as being incapable of forging strong and lasting ties has a long history. In *The Social Sex: A History of Female Friendship,* Marilyn Yalom (2015) explains that in ancient Greece, "Male authors extolled friendship as a male enterprise, necessary not only for personal happiness but also for civic and military solidarity" (3). Women, however, were considered "constitutionally unsuited for friendship at the highest level" (3). This stereotype continues to plague us today even though women as well as men know by experience that this is simply untrue. In *Girl Squads,* published in 2018, Sam Maggs describes a feeling that is commonly evoked in discussions and articles about the portrayal of women in popular culture.

> Female friendship is a *thing*. So why does TV portray women as catty, competitive, and constantly looking for opportunities to undercut each other? … And why doesn't the world recognize the amazing power that comes when girls and women team up, bond, and respect one another?
>
> For starters, until very recently, it was the men doing all the writing—men who either didn't think women's stories mattered or, worse, were invested in keeping women in their 'place,' which meant 'apart from one another.' (11)

Traditionally, women have been portrayed in relationships that are obsessively heterosexual (turned toward men) and divisively heterosocial (turned away from women). These two age-old scripts depicting them as primarily devoted to (even when conspiring against) the opposite sex, and, by the same token, as indifferent or inimical to their own sex convey the message that cooperation between women is inconceivable. Women, it implies, are "constitutionally" incapable of what men call "brotherhood."

There is a third script to which Maggs and Swift both allude, albeit from antithetical points of view. This third narrative in fact provides the one archetypal image of all-female bonding that stands out in the Western narrative landscape. It is not, however, the all-male model of courageous questing or pulling together for the common good. On the contrary, rather than constructive and beneficent, the all-female alliance is portrayed as diabolical and destructive, as sowing chaos and disorder. It is animated not by the heroic desire to combat evil or achieve great deeds, but by the

wild and uncontrollable emotions of anger and vengeance. Above all, it is perceived as threatening to men. When women join forces, their collaboration is fantasized as dangerous to the reigning order, which, in most cases, is unabashedly masculine. Rather than Sisterhood, we might call this the "Furyhood" archetype.

Among the all-female alliances found in classical mythology, the most notorious are: (1) the Erinyes, known as the Furies; (2) the Greek Maenads or Roman Bacchantes; (3) the Sirens; (4) the Amazons. The Furies are a sinister team of avenging goddesses who defend the rights of mothers. They appear in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, written in 458 BCE, like figures out of a chthonic horror story. Dark, bloody, fetid-smelling creatures, they pursue Apollo's protégé, Orestes, to avenge his matricide. "In the primitive portrayal of the Furies," observes Froma Zeitlin (1996), "there is a regression to the deepest fantasies of buried masculine terrors" (97). The Furies oppose the young male god, Apollo, who champions the masculine interests of his father Zeus. The "Angry Ones," as they are also known, are presented as embodying the last vestiges of a matriarchal past that is fantasized as brutal and chaotic in contrast to the civilized patriarchal order represented by Zeus, and his offspring, Apollo and Athena.

Orestes Pursued by the Furies. John Singer Sargent. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. (Wikimedia Commons)

The Maenads are not technically an all-female team since their "team leader" is a male deity.[2] The mythical image of the Maenads is nevertheless

[2] For all his phallic maleness, however, Dionysus—who was raised as a girl and was known to "cross-dress"—had an androgynous aspect to him. Downing (2006) suggests that Dionysus' worship "invited [women] (at least temporarily) to throw off the bonds imposed by patriarchy and discover their own power…" (163).

one of an all-female band travelling together without the presence of any man, and indeed opposing any masculine intrusion into their midst.[3] Leaving their husbands and homes, the Maenads rove the countryside in inebriated bands, dancing wildly, and occasionally ripping animals to pieces. In his *Metamorphoses,* Ovid (2000) describes them as "fierce" and "frenzied," fueled by rage and wearing animal skins. They pursue and attack Orpheus, "Apollo's poet," drowning out his beautiful music with their "breast-beating and howls" to finally tear him limb from limb with their bloody hands (11.1-66). Here, the civilized male, representing the Apollonian virtues of order and harmony, is overpowered by the violence of a bestial mob of women.

[3] Speaking of the Dionysian ritual of female initiation, Downing suggests, in agreement with Nor Hall, that the god represents "not husbands or male lovers but the woman's own inspiration, energy, capacity for a nonprocreative generativity…" (194).

The Death of Orpheus. Émile Bin. (Wikimedia Commons)

The Sirens are female creatures with the upper body of a woman and the wings and feet of a bird. The superpowers of this diabolical choir of female mutants lie in their voices. They swoop in and lure men to their death with the power and beauty of their songs. In the *Odyssey*, Circe describes them as living on an island surrounded by a "*large heap of bones*

/ Of men rotting" (Homer 1993, 12:44-46). On her advice, Odysseus famously has his crew lash him to the mast of the ship so that he can safely hear their singing. In this case, it is not the women who are dangerously out of control, but the men who are in danger of losing control.

As a remarkable society of women warriors united by an ethos of sisterhood (Downing 2006, 192), the Amazons come closest to what might be considered an illustrious all-female team—perhaps the only one in three thousand years of narrative history. They indeed have all the makings of a superhero team—except for one thing: they are all women. It is this aspect of their reputation that makes them problematic since "all-female" is inevitably interpreted as "anti-male." Regardless of their extraordinary accomplishments, their excellence in warfare, their skilled horsemanship, their ideal of sisterhood, the Amazons' *raison d'être* is simply reduced to a hatred of men. According to Downing (2006), "The Greeks imagined the Amazons as a society composed entirely of women who threaten men and engage in war against them" (190).

Known as *androktones,* "man-killers," in ancient Greece (Mayor 2014, 25), the Amazons were not portrayed as fabulous superheroes to be celebrated and esteemed but as powerful villainesses to be vanquished and destroyed. Defeating an Amazon was in fact a symbol of male superiority. The stories of heroes such as Herakles, Bellerophon, Theseus and Achilles conquering an Amazon were among the most popular "illustrated" subjects of the day in Greek art (Cartwright 2019)—the renowned potteries serving perhaps as the "superhero comic strips" of the ancient world. According to Downing, these stories are about "heroes seducing [Amazons], abducting them, raping them, stealing the belt that represents their virginity, their independence of men. To master them sexually is an essential part of challenging what is deemed their monstrous claim to live as self-sufficient women" (191). Regarded as wild barbarians (that is, foreigners) inhabiting the outskirts of the civilized world, the Amazons were mythologized as a threat to masculine hegemony and feared above all for their alternative and radical ideal of sisterhood. Winning the war against the *androktones* was a way of consolidating the patriarchy (Downing 190).

The Furies, the Maenads, the Sirens, the Amazons are sisterhoods, but sisterhoods interpreted with a sinister twist that turns them into Furyhoods. These mythical all-female teams of Antiquity have one thing in common: they are terrifying to men. They are portrayed as threatening in one way or another to masculine control or to male dominance. When women team up, they gang up—that is, they become Furies—and they do so

expressly against men.[4] This too distinguishes all-male from all-female alliances: while brotherhoods (those, for example, cited by Knowles) are not imagined as necessarily misogynist (even though they may very well be), their all-female counterparts are always imagined as misandrist, as if the only reason women collaborate is to conspire against men. One senses an underlying fear that women want revenge, that they want, like the "Angry Ones," to reclaim a more archaic power that is fantasized (from the male perspective) as savage and matriarchal in opposition to a more civilized patriarchal order. There is a corresponding sense of male vulnerability, a suspicion that when women join forces, they can overpower men. As in Aeschylus' *Eumenides,* these narratives reflect an anxiety about the return of the repressed. And the Furies would indeed return, over two millennia later, in the guise of man-hating superheroines.

Let us now fast-forward from Antiquity to the twentieth century, from ancient mythology to the invention of the comic book. It may come as a surprise to find that, in over two thousand years, there has been no significant change in the basic narrative: the landscape has remained as inhospitable as ever to female bonding and collaboration. Jonathan Swift, we will recall, wrote his "Letter to a Very Young Lady" in the eighteenth century. In 1928, the hypothetical novelist whom Woolf imagines might begin to explore the unexplored terrain of female friendship was still just that: hypothetical. Emerging during the first half of the century, the world of comics can in fact be viewed as a microcosm of the entire Western tradition. It condenses thousands of years of heroic all-male teams and inexistent or negative all-female teams into its eighty years of history and introduces a Sisterhood concept into the landscape only at the tail end of that history. It reproduces the same Cyclopean perspective, the same obsessively heterosexual and divisively heterosocial scripts, the same masculine fears and fantasies about Furyhood and female collaboration. In other words, in the world of comics, women were still being "written, zapped and screwed."

During the Golden and Silver Ages, female figures in comics continued to be confined to the two age-old "anti-collaborative" scripts. The token woman was usually a romantic interest for the male hero or, if two women were featured, they were inevitably rivals vying with each over their lovers

[4] Other ancient stories about "groups of women acting together against male domination" are the myths of the Danaïdes and the Lemnian women (Downing 2006, 188); we might include those of Actaeon, Diana and the nymphs, Lysistrata, and the Gorgons.

and/or their looks. One prominent example is the rivalry between Lois Lane and Lana Lang for Superman's affections in the DC series *Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane* (Coleman 1959). The two women are working journalists who even gain a few superpowers of their own, but in spite of these twentieth-century advances nothing else has changed: although they are supposed to be friends, they are (naturally) jealous of each other and (naturally) driven to compete for the favors of a man. It is the same old story of two women being kept apart by a man and thus "constitutionally" incapable of true friendship. The only difference is that the man is now a Superman.

As real women began to join forces in the women's liberation movement of the 1960s, some of the first stories featuring all-female superhero teams would be written as parodies of feminism. In doing so, their alarming depictions of "liberated" women would beam the Fury archetype up into the Space Age. Published in 1964, "The Revolt of the Girl Legionnaires!" (*Adventure Comics* #326) has been described as a reaction to Betty Friedan's 1963 bestseller *The Feminine Mystique*.[5] In the highly-advanced thirtieth century, the female members of the Legion of Super-Heroes team up to eliminate the male legionnaires with the cry, "Down with boy super-heroes! Here's to the Legion of Super-Heroines!!" (3). Looking much like enraged Furies in Legion costumes, we see them maliciously bashing statuettes of the male heroes they will later seduce and destroy. After carrying out what the episode calls "the most treacherous conspiracy in all legion history" (3), the girls are shown dancing ecstatically—much like their Maenad sisters did 3,500 years earlier—in "a scene of wild jubilation" (5). The revolt is then revealed to be the result of an "evil command" (16) by the Queen of "Femnaz," a matriarchal planet of man-loathing Amazons, who had hypnotized the girls into destroying the boys in order to take over the Legion for themselves. But after her planet's broken moon is repaired by a pair of superheroes, the Queen repents: "I realize that we Amazons were wrong in trying to harm Boy Legionnaires.

[5] See, for example, Wilson's blog on this episode (2018): "Around this time in popular entertainment, the battle of the sexes was fair game for a good story. Betty Friedan had just published *The Feminine Mystique,* Gloria Steinham had just donned bunny ears to do an expose of the Playboy Club, and second wave feminism had been born." And this comment from Siskoid (2018): "I think this story was a reaction on Jerry Siegel's and editor Mort Weisinger's parts to the publication of Betty Friedan's 1963 best-selling book "The Feminine Mystique", which questioned the vapidity of traditional roles for women in postwar American society."

If not for male super-heroes our world would have suffered a terrible disaster" (7). The futuristic female alliances depicted in "The Revolt of the Girl Legionnaires!" are shown to be the cause of chaos in the cosmos; whether among good-girl superheroines or galactic Amazons, feminine collaboration is branded as being both diabolical and delusional. In the end, the women regret their misandrous deeds and welcome the men back with open arms. The all-female threat is thus eliminated and order is restored.

The feminist revolt in the real world of the twentieth century, however, continued to grow. In 1968, DC's *Adventure Comics* #368 came out with a blatantly similar story. In "The Mutiny of the Super-Heroines!" the female Legionnaires, bewitched by a man-hating ambassador from another matriarchal planet, team up once again to conspire against the males and turn Earth into a female-dominated planet. They are eventually liberated from their illusion of perpetrating "a world revolution of women" (Shooter 1968, 30), but this time the consequences for the original misandrists are much harsher: the "she-devil" ambassador is killed and the matriarchy on her planet is overthrown.

The third example of Furyhood in the world of comics is emblematic because it indicates a turning point, a long-awaited change in the narrative landscape. Called the Lady Liberators, this all-female team invented in 1970 as yet another mock "women's libber" alliance would morph into a proto-feminist super-squad in 2008. In other words, from one millennium to the next, the team would undergo a metamorphosis from Furyhood to the beginnings of Sisterhood. In the '70s version of the Lady Liberators, we find the familiar storyline: a group of superheroines joins forces to plot the ruin of their male colleagues (***Avengers* #83**). Taking up the war cry "Up against the wall, male chauvinist pigs!" (Thomas 1970, 17), they decide to take revenge for the unequal treatment they feel they have received. As it turns out (once again), they are being mind-controlled by a maleficent, man-hating Enchantress. In the end, the Lady Liberators are liberated from the evil spell, the Enchantress is destroyed, and order is duly restored.

In these three examples of all-female teams, the ancient Fury archetype, which associates female alliances with anger and vengeance, chaos and destruction, with a desire to gang up on men and overthrow the patriarchal order, resurfaces in the guise of rebellious superheroine *androktones*. Women joining together in the form of twentieth-century feminism is interpreted in popular comics as Furyhood rather than Sisterhood. Such narratives clearly served a cathartic purpose. The group of mutinous

females is shown in each case to be under a sinister spell. Once they are freed from their collective illusion and "brought back to their senses," the status quo—to the great relief of all—is reestablished.

The original Lady Liberators appeared in a single issue in 1970 and were subsequently retired from service. Thirty-eight years later, in 2008, Marvel Comics decided to revive and revamp the team. In the new iteration, some of Marvel's most powerful superheroines join forces with She-Hulk to combat and temporarily defeat an outrageously chauvinist Red Hulk in *Hulk* #7-9 (Loeb 2008a, b, c). In spite of the consciously anti-sexist storyline, however, the females still exemplify the Fury archetype for two reasons: (1) they rally together in order to gang up on a man; (2) they are motivated by anti-male ire and revenge. And yet there is a major shift in perspective with regard to the representation of good and evil, of hero and villain. For thousands of years, as we have seen, female collaboration has been portrayed as misandrous, as diabolical and detrimental to the reigning masculine order. With the new Lady Liberators, however, the poles are dramatically inverted: it is a misogynist male who is the diabolical villain and an all-female alliance that is commended for its deeds. In other words, the response constructed by the narrative is—for the first time ever perhaps—to root for the Furies.

Lady Liberators. *Avengers* (1963) #83, Marvel Comics. (Used with Permission)

Lady Liberators. *Hulk* (2008) #9, Marvel Comics. (Used with Permission)

The evolution of Marvel's Lady Liberators between 1970 and 2008 is significant because it illustrates a paradigm shift in the characterization of all-female teams. While their one raison d'être is still limited to thrashing the other sex, they are no longer depicted as mind-controlled or "out of control." On the contrary, they are shown to be supremely in control and conscious of their motivations. Revamped and rewritten for the twenty-first century, the Lady Liberators might, to a certain extent, be seen as harbingers of a new era, as hovering on the cusp between traditional Furyhood and ground-breaking Sisterhood.

All-female superhero teams were still relatively rare in 2008. Knowles published his book on "The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes" in 2007. His chapter on superhero teams is called "The Brotherhood" and it does not mention a single all-female team. And yet there were, quite surprisingly, two very early exceptions to the rule: Wonder Woman's team of sorority students called the Holliday Girls and Pat Parker's Girl Commandos. Both of these intrepid all-female teams were created in the year 1942, the former by William Marston and the latter by Barbara Hall. They were radically ahead of their time, and although they did not survive the Golden Age, they remain two of the best examples of sisterhood in comics even today. Another pioneering example of superhero sisterhood that did not make it into Knowles' book was Birds of Prey, which became a full-fledged team in 2003. As Mike Madrid (2016) observes in *The Supergirls: Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines,* "When writer Gail Simone took over Birds of Prey in 2003, she accomplished the seemingly impossible—she created an all-female superhero team…. Working together these heroines helped each other to grow into the women they were meant to be" (313-4).

In the last few years, along with the growing number of female writers in the historically male-dominated world of comics, there has been a rising trend in all-female superhero teams. As Maggs remarks, "Fortunately, the tide is turning. Everyone is all about the girl squad. Which is awesome…. Believing in the strength of women and girls banding together is a shift in consciousness" (11). One aspect that is underscored in female teams is a sense of sisterhood based on mutual solidarity, mentorship and empowerment. According to Madrid, "Two common themes in comic books of the twenty-first century are women helping each other to grow, and the passage of knowledge from one generation of females to another" (319). Jennifer K. Stuller (2010) finds that Simone's Birds of Prey "presents sisterhood without getting bogged down in rhetoric about sisterhood;" and

even though Simone says she does not write specifically "female" characters, there is "an emphasis on deep and meaningful female friendships" (147). As Stuller observes:

> [S]uperwomen have also revolutionized depictions of collaboration in contemporary heroic narrative for women *and* for men.
>
> Generally, teams of male heroes are brought together by chance (The A-Team) or because of convenience (The Justice League of America). They participate in missions together, simply because it's pragmatic to combine their skills. But women's desire for companionship (as with Xena and Gabrielle) and tendency to support and nourish the skills of those around them (as with Buffy) has raised the status of cohorts, teammates, and side-kicks. (8)

Whereas male teams focus on pulling together to *accomplish* a deed, female teams focus on pulling *together* to accomplish a deed. Moreover, as Stuller suggests, burgeoning stories of Sisterhood may even be rewriting the much more ancient concept of Brotherhood.

At one time or another, in one way or another, we may find ourselves entangled, embroiled, entrapped in an alien story that, as Jeffrey Kripal puts it, we did not write and we may not even like. There is, however, an exit. The one way to stop being "written, zapped and screwed with" is to rewrite the story. Kripal calls this act of self-liberation "authorization:" "Authorization begins when we decide to step out of the script we now know ourselves to be caught in and begin to write ourselves anew" (Ch. 6). It was indeed only when women at last began to write themselves that they were able to begin (re)writing themselves. They were able to fill in the blanks and, above all, to pen their own vision of themselves as women from the *previously missing* perspective of women. At that point, the narrative landscape began to change. "[T]owards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history," Woolf remarks, "I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle-class woman began to write" (69). This change is being driven by women's voices and women's writing. In the world of comics, female creators are on the rise and female geeks are becoming more outspoken, demanding less sexism and more sisterhood in the narratives. However, even now, two decades into the twenty-first century, there is still a long way to go. Although some of the stories may cater to feminist concerns, much of the art is still

sexualized eye candy, as if the writing were aimed at women and the images were aimed at men. Nevertheless, positive images of female bonding and collaboration are being planted in the narrative landscape. After thousands of years of absence, a Sisterhood archetype is perhaps taking root and beginning to grow.

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Infirm Relatives and Boy Kings: The Green Man Archetype in Alan Moore's *The Saga of The Swamp Thing*

John Bucher

Abstract Traces of the archetypal Green Man date back to the second half of the first century C.E. Despite his lingering presence, agreement on details about who he was and what he represented remained largely elusive when compared to other mythological figures. While it has been argued that the Green Man reflects our oneness with the earth, the psychological possibilities behind such a commonly reappearing archetype remain somewhat unexplored, especially as they intersect with modern visual culture. In 1984, the Green Man made a triumphant return to the popular imagination in Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing*. His 42-issue run of *Swamp Thing* should be read as one of the most expansive explorations of the Green Man archetype, though the mythological figure is never referenced directly. Encompassing concepts ranging from the shadow and the ego to animal symbolism and lunar motifs, Moore's detailed textual approach

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and direction of images combine to form a mythopoetic and psychological observation of an archetype that has historically been often seen but rarely understood. The intent here is to demonstrate connections beyond the ecological and Dionysian, and instead embrace a lens that magnifies wounding in the representation and narrative of the creature.

Keywords Alan Moore • Swamp Thing • Green Man • Ecology • Wounding • Grail legend

Creators of fictional narratives have had varying degrees of limitation placed on their endeavors. From the child that constructs a boundary-less world from her own imagination in a sandbox, to a new writer on an established and successful streaming television show on Netflix, the crafting of story may require an army of editors, producers, and gatekeepers or nary a soul beyond the creator. When Alan Moore was asked to begin telling the story of Swamp Thing, a few non-negotiable factors were in place. The world and characters within the comic had long ago been established. Len Wein and Bernie Wrightson had created and introduced the character more than a decade before Moore's involvement. First appearing in *House of Secrets* #92, released in July of 1971, the tale of Swamp Thing was a stand-alone horror story. From the beginning, the idea of an anthropomorphic pile of vegetation seemed an unlikely success at best. The publisher of *House of Secrets*, DC Comics, rarely invested resources in intellectual property that did not rely on their familiar superhero staples that had endured for decades, namely Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman. A horror story about a vegetable monster didn't fit cleanly within that pantheon.

Additionally, Swamp Thing's origin story didn't align well with what had been largely sustainable for DC in the past. Marvel had built an empire on human characters that would be endowed with superhuman abilities, largely because of scientific mishaps – think Spider-Man, The Hulk, and Iron Man. DC, in contrast, had built their stable with characters that were born superhuman – think Superman and Wonder Woman. The exception, of course, was Batman, who had no superhuman abilities either from birth or that were endowed. Like with Marvel's framework, Swamp Thing, in his origin story from Wein and Wrightson, was a human transformed into a monster. Moore, upon taking creative control of the character in 1984, sought (and eventually received) permission to alter the character's origin

story, making him a true monster. Moore unburdened the serialized narrative of the supporting characters and arc that had been established in the comic's reinvention and shifted the story in an entirely new thematic direction. The direction that Moore forged for Swamp Thing aligned with his own interests as an occultist, ceremonial magician, and anarchist (MacDonald 2005, par. 8).

Martin Pasko, writer for the first nineteen issues of the 1984 run, had written Swamp Thing with the background that Wein and Wrightson had established, as a human being named Alec Holland that was transformed into a "plant man." Moore reimagined the character as an actual plant-based entity that had absorbed Holland's consciousness upon Holland's death. Moore described Swamp Thing as "a plant that thought it was Alec Holland, a plant that was trying its level best to *be* Alec Holland" (Moore et al. 2012, 49). While the difference could seem arbitrary, the psychological basis for the character changes significantly, which Moore has acknowledged in interviews (Lee 2020, 4). Moore further suggested a shift in the character's psyche by writing in a temporary psychological break for Swamp Thing, when the revelation of his true origin is divulged. It is unclear if it was intentional on Moore's part, but the shift also evolved Swamp Thing into a true DC character, fully able to work within the realm of the ancient magic that separated the scientific natural world from that of the supernatural. This creative choice shifted Swamp Thing away from his early Marvel-like underpinnings and allowed for an expansion of the mythological framework of Swamp Thing's world, evidenced with the introduction of characters such as John Constantine, Cain, and Abel. The latter two characters appear in the narrative as reincarnations of the duo from Judeo-Christian mythology, caught in a never-ending loop of death and rebirth.

Moore would later work almost entirely within the realm of his own world-creating talents. It became undesirable and financially unnecessary for him to breathe life into the characters and worlds crafted by other creators. This transition began during his run of *Swamp Thing*. Moore's take on the character eventually overshadowed that of the original creators and narrative to the point where it is not uncommon in comics circles for fans to need to be reminded that it was Wein and Wrightson that created the character and world, not Moore. However, while Wein and Wrightson had created a *narrative* container for the character of Swamp Thing, it was Moore that housed the creature in an *ancient universal* container,

described by Carl Jung as an archetype (Jung 1977, 4-5). The archetype that Moore employed is known as the Green Man.

The Green Man

On an archetypal level, the Green Man has been an artistic and iconic representation in architecture, stained glass, sculpture, painting, mythology, literature, and folklore, that often emerges in times of upheaval (Araneo 2008, 43). The emergence of the archetype during seasons of conflict is germane to Moore's use in 1984, as the Cold War was at its height and political disruption, as evidenced by events such as the assassination of Indira Gandhi, was causing significant threats of global cultural turmoil. Primarily an artifact of Western civilization's collective consciousness, the Green Man's surfacing that year came at a moment when Western culture was journeying through self-reflection around George Orwell's dystopian novel, *1984*, which had been written in 1949 but loomed large as a potential warning of what the future could look like. Since 1984 – the year, not the novel – had arrived, many were considering the ways that Orwell had been prophetic as well as the ways he had been short sighted. Had we become the society that Orwell had warned us about? Were we moving towards or away from becoming that culture? Were we the "good guys" or the "bad guys"?[1] Everything seemed open to examination, including ideas of masculinity and femininity. Scholars have suggested that there is a historical correlation between the materialization of the Green Man archetype and the reinforcement of Patriarchal norms, which will be evidenced in Ronald Reagan's 1984 presidential re-election campaign later in this discussion (13).

Moving from the archetypal to the historical, the image of the Green Man has usually been represented as a human-appearing male head either with hair of vegetation or a leaf mask (Anderson and Hicks 1998, 34.) While its origins may be much earlier, the image began appearing in Roman art during the second half of the first century C.E. and rose to popularity in the second century C.E. (Basford 2004, 9). The images appear on temples dedicated to a variety of different deities and can also be seen on Roman burial containers. Images that share similarities with

[1] In 1984, use of the term "guys" indicated all gender expressions, including non-gendered expressions of humanity. A more accurate articulation of the question would have been, "are we good or bad people?"

Green Man motifs are also seen in early Celtic art, which could explain the Roman appearances, where the images may have been encountered in the conquest of Gaul around 56 B.C.E. The Celtic motif, as well as the Roman, if not derived from the Celts, shares similarities to descriptions and depictions of the ancient Greek god of vegetation, Dionysus. The Green Man also initially appears in Roman art in the context of the Dionysian mysteries, further suggesting Dionysus as a possible precursor to the Green Man (Anderson and Hicks 1998, 34).

A great deal of research and literature has been created on archetypal associations with Dionysus, little of which will be explored in this examination. However, the Green Man motif has also established itself as an evolving archetypal image, recrafting itself with each local and cultural expression, while continuing to maintain its universal archetypal qualities. Alan Moore aligned with this evolution, connecting the original Swamp Thing found in Wein and Wrightson's *House of Secrets* story to the Swamp Thing he envisioned, suggesting that there had been dozens, perhaps hundreds of Swamp Things since the dawn of humanity (Silverman 2009, 1:13).[2]

Mythic Wounds

In the concluding remarks of her chapter titled "Ecomasculinity, Ecomasculinism, and the Superhero Genre: Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing*," Victoria Addis states that "Moore's *Swamp Thing* presents, through its protagonist, a positive vision of masculinity based on a sense of deep interconnection with the natural world" (Addis 2021, 431). Addis goes on to suggest that Moore's representation of the relationships between masculinities and ecologies across his run of the comic evidences a commitment to exploring new and better ways of existing as a man in the world. Addis's work strongly supports this argument. However, the ecological point that Addis makes would draw even greater support from the mythological, as it is through this lens that we can see a new framework for the masculine navigation of ego-based pitfalls and other stumbling blocks in Moore's

[2] Moore briefly alludes to this idea throughout a series of interviews titled *DC Presents A Chat With Alan Moore*, which he gave in 1985. Readers interested in the entire series of interviews can view them here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJlZUpgXQJI https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ze3rCvyiISA https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EmiTqzF80 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpYPOfv08F8 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_gIrDgIKpas.

narrative. While Addis states that the ecological attitudes of the protagonist reveal "softer" and "tempered" attributes that point to a positive vision of masculinity, the mythological, which will be unpacked below, reveals a psychological chess match between the light and shadow side of the same ancient archetype, The Green Man. The mythological is most clearly explored through the interactions and subsequent battle between Swamp Thing and a creature referred to as Woodrue in issue 24 of the comic.[3]

To fully understand the context of the battle between Swamp Thing and Woodrue, one must return to a previous issue. The opening lines of *The Saga of Swamp Thing #21* are: "It's raining in Washington tonight. Plump, warm summer rain that covers the sidewalks with leopard spots. Downtown, elderly ladies carry their houseplants out to set them on the fire escapes, as if they were infirm relatives or boy kings" (Moore et al. 2012, 38). As often is the case with Moore's style, he takes no occasion to further expand on or articulate what the poetic description might infer, either in the story or in the larger scope of human understanding. The surface level interpretation that would suggest that the elderly women are simply carrying the vegetation with loving care is to ignore Moore's established thematic style, where poetic descriptions are used as reverse-rube Goldberg machines, wherein simple processes, or in this case simple poetic turns of phrase, are used to construct extremely complex ideas.

First, the opening image of "elderly ladies" being the caretakers of the green life-giving vegetation frames an allusion to the importance of the ancient feminine acting as an underlying vessel for and support system around the movement of whatever the vegetation may unfold to represent over the course of the story. Continuing, the use of the words "infirm" and "boy kings" in the same phrase conjure mythological images of the Fisher King motif from Arthurian legends. While specific narratives vary from myth to myth, the archetypal Fisher King is a maimed king, usually wounded in the thigh or groin. The wound is often a punishment for philandering, leaving him only able to fish in the wasteland he rules over. In many of the narratives, he must wait for a visitor who can ask a specific question that would bring forth his own supernatural healing and often the healing of his land. Numerous works explore this motif, however Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval, the Story of the Grail* from the late twelfth

[3] Woodrue is actually Dr. Jason Woodrue, a villain in the *Swamp Thing* narrative that also goes by the name Floronic Man and is a plant-human hybrid, like Swamp Thing.

century is the first known appearance of a wounded king involved with a Grail quest. It is worth noting, however, that Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* also features a wounded king, ruling over a cursed land, and a riddle that must be solved correctly, not unlike a question that must be asked correctly. While there is no direct link that connects *Oedipus Rex* and the later Celtic stories of Fisher Kings, the similarities suggest the motif may have archetypal or at least have had ancient roots.

There is no direct mention of the Green Man in Arthurian legends, however there *is* the mention of a Green Knight, whose depiction does resemble descriptions and images of the Green Man. The fourteenth century poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, was penned by an unknown author, who described the knight as "monstrous" and "green from head to toe" (O'Donoghue 2021, 7). The poem goes on to say that the knight had hair that wrapped around his shoulders and a huge beard, like a bush. Finally, the text states that the knight held in one hand a bough of holly (8). Numerous images featured in the photography of Clive Hicks, in a text called *The Green Man* that he created with William Anderson, favor these descriptions. The photos capture a multitude of Green Man images, created chiefly in architecture throughout history and varied geographic locations (47, 96, 114, 145)

The Wounded Masculine

Moore's subtle invocation of the mythological Fisher King/Green Knight image also works thematically with his execution of Swamp Thing in his run of the comic. While some critics have suggested that the wounded vegetation-based creature is a metaphor for human inflicted ecological damage, this perspective ignores another possible interpretation – that of the wounded masculine (Beineke 2010, 1). While the ecological interpretation of Moore's *Swamp Thing* run is well supported, it should not be viewed as the only valid interpretation (Banks and Wein 1998, 5). Both myth and comic book characters have a deep feminine character pool to draw from, but the Green Man and Swamp Thing have both always been portrayed as masculine. While the archetypal container has not always been filled by a gendered man, the exceptions are few and the energy of the archetype usually reflects the masculine. With this historical, mythological, and archetypal context, we can now further explore the masculine wounding divulged in the battle between Swamp Thing and Woodrue.

Issue 24 of *Swamp Thing,* titled "Roots," was released in May of 1984. Aside from the previously mentioned interest in George Orwell's *1984*, cultural interests around traditional concepts of good versus evil were significant in the United States that month for another reason. The Soviet Union had announced that they would boycott the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. The battle between Swamp Thing and Woodrue likely read to many as a motif where Swamp Thing embodied Western ideals inherently displayed as good. Woodrue, on the other hand, employed the mischievous, underhanded methods ascribed to Russia in that Cold War era. The cover of issue 24 has Woodrue attacking Swamp Thing with a chainsaw on a giant television monitor as the Justice League of America watches in horror. Superman restrains The Flash, who lunges at the screen. Wonder Woman buries her face in her hands in defeat. Green Arrow snaps one of his arrows in half, disgusted by the treacherous depths Woodrue is willing to sink to in order to snatch victory from Swamp Thing. Much of the issue focuses on the battle between Swamp Thing and Woodrue, who resembles traditional images of the Green Man popularly seen in European architecture more so than Swamp Thing, while the Justice League watches from far away, dropping in commentary as the epic battle progresses (Anderson and Hicks 1998, 67, 72, 81).

Despite the emphasis on ecology by scholars that have examined the narrative, in the clash between the two characters, we do not see two aspects of ecology in conflict. Instead, we see two aspects of *masculinity* at odds. While both characters are personified ecological vegetation and symbolically green in color, their worldviews are polarized and their wounds, and the sources of those wounds differ. Framing the two opposing masculine expressions is the juxtaposition between Swamp Thing's support by the collective Justice League and Woodrue's lone ego. At the root of Woodrue's anger, and subsequently his masculine wound, is the isolation he experiences, especially in the light of the united support from the Justice League that he sees Swamp Thing enjoying.

In one passage, Woodrue tells Swamp Thing, "I am the pain and the bitterness of the woods," later insisting, "For I am the regret and anger of the forests…" (Moore et al. 2012, 107-108). In the narrative, the woods are an isolated place of quiet stillness, as opposed to the swamp, which is full of creatures, noise, and activity. Woodrue's statement is that he *is* the pain and bitterness of the woods, not the pain and bitterness *caused* by the woods. This is significant as it communicates that his very being is the image of this pain and bitterness. He says that he *is* regret and anger, not

that he is the *product* of regret and anger. The regret that Woodrue alludes to is seen through the expression in his eyes, articulated through the art and color of Stephen Bissette, John Totleben, and Tatjana Wood. The word *regret* also suggests that a choice was made in favor of one decision when another choice might have been more beneficial to the chooser. Woodrue doesn't suggest he *made* a bad decision. He states that he *is* the bad decision.

This declaration of identity tells us that Woodrue symbolizes an idea, a worldview, a system. He *is* isolated and angry masculinity. "I am one with the wilderness…Its will works through me," he seethes (107). "I am Wood-Rue, grief and rage of the wilderness," he states later in the issue (112).[4] A few pages after making these statements, we see Woodrue begin to act on his rage. He traps Swamp Thing in a thicket of vines. Swamp Thing demands to be set free, stating, "You are afraid…To fight…As a *man* fights…," challenging Woodrue's expression of masculinity and reminding him that he is not a man, not human. Woodrue retorts, "*I'm* not a man. Neither are *you*, in fact…You're not *anything*."[5] The italicized emphasis that Moore places within Woodrue's dialogue communicates a juvenile masculinity, suggesting that the anger and isolation that Woodrue has fumed forth for several pages has resulted in a regressive maturity. The reader half-expects Woodrue to next taunt, "I know you are, but what am I?" At this moment, when it seems as though Woodrue's destructive vision of masculinity has defeated Swamp Thing's attempts at a more measured masculine response, calling out Woodrue's fear, Moore brings us back to the collective observation of the Justice League. Superman peers into space and states, "There's always hope." He then begins coordinating with other members of the League to communicate with Swamp Thing and Woodrue. It is of note that the collective does not strategize over how to help reconcile the situation, but rather how to *communicate* with these masculine creatures. This detail is a recognition that solving the difficulties of male wounding cannot even begin to occur until a successful solution is

[4] Moore often writes Woodrue's name as "Wood-Rue" when it is spoken aloud. This is likely to suggest the way that characters, including Woodrue himself, are pronouncing his name. It is also a play on the two words "wood" and "rue." While the use of "wood" is likely obvious to the reader, "rue" can mean either an actual type of plant or refer to bitter regret.

[5] This exchange between Swamp Thing and Woodrue resembles another mythological battle narrative found in the Christian text, *The Gospel of Matthew* 4:1-11, where Satan makes similar taunts at Christ, who also offers back clever responses.

found that allows effective communication with the wounded, in essence speaking to them in a way they can actually hear.

While the collective strategizes, Swamp Thing's consort that eventually becomes his spouse, Abby Cable, and an elderly African American man confront Woodrue directly. Abby attempts to appeal to Woodrue's humanity, which he viciously rejects, stating that this is who he has always been. The elderly Black man wields a chainsaw attempting to stop the green creature but is quickly thwarted. Woodrue concludes the episode with a small rant about the real villain being the entertainment industry as he grabs the chainsaw and edges toward Abby. While only a quick moment of dialogue, Moore is specifically referencing the intersection of masculinity and politics here. In 1984, Ronald Reagan was running to be re-elected President of the United States and his Republican party had been building their platform on economic prosperity grounded in "traditional family values." The platform explicitly stated that sex and violence in entertainment media, which included the comics that Moore was presently working in, were to blame not only for moral degradation in the country, but namely the physical and sexual abuse of children (Peters and Woodlley 1984, par. 331). Reagan, who had been an actor before turning to politics, had made a career playing roles that reinforced hyper and sometimes violent masculinity, ranging from cowboys to football players. Moore's brief reference to the entertainment industry being to blame for violence is likely a pointed commentary on the perceived hypocrisy of Reagan's recent change of heart on violent media after building a film career participating in the creation of such content, which he then parlayed into a political empire.

A final note for consideration about a relevant issue in the Republican platform of 1984 that intersects with the Green Man archetype. The platform has several planks lamenting and discussing the proliferation of pornography in the United States at the time of the platform's creation. Images of the Green Man are sometimes depicted with a female companion. Depending on the mythic tradition embraced by the culture where the duo appears, female figures such as mermaids are common. However, in several contexts, the Sheela Na Gig is the companion to the Green Man. This is especially common in architectural images. The Sheela Na Gig is a mythic figure and archetypal energy, possibly derived from the earlier mythic archetype of Baubo, represented as a naked woman displaying an exaggerated vulva. Marija Gimbutas inferred, in the forward to Winifred Milius Lubell's book on cultural appearances of Baubo-related images,

that while cultures often will see these depictions as pornographic, there is actually a different framework behind the occurrence of such imagery (Lubell 1997, xiii). The pornography of concern in the Republican platform of 1984 was notably primarily in the medium of print, as video pornography was not yet as widespread as it later would be. The pornography in print magazines was always posed and never improvised, due to the costs involved with technical production of such media. Many poses in these magazines resemble images historically seen in representations of the Sheela Na Gig (Trinks 2013, 163). These explicit feminine images, sometimes seen by culture as pornographic, and the Green Man archetype often arise in culture at the same time.

Masculine Victimization

Just before Woodrue uses his chainsaw to dismember Abby, Swamp Thing manages to untangle himself and stop the violent event. Woodrue then quickly pivots to his own victimization, shifting the focus from the violence he was just about to commit to his own pain and ill-treatment. He begins to make a scene about his arm being injured by Swamp Thing, who had simply knocked the chainsaw from his hands. Woodrue questions, "Why do you keep coming back and hurting me" (Moore et al. 2012, 122)? The moment is significant for three reasons. First, the angry, isolated, wounded masculine figure effectively changes the narrative from the destruction he was causing to the destruction that has been visited on him – a motif that remains common in current expressions of masculine wounding. Next, Woodrue has placed the blame for his pain on Swamp Thing, rather than himself or the isolation he has spent a great deal of time describing earlier in the scene. Swamp Thing is befuddled by Woodrue's question, but manages to articulate, "Because you…Are Hurting…The Green" (Moore et al. 2012, 122). While several possibilities could be explored as to what "The Green" symbolizes both in this scene and in the larger narrative, one possibility that is thematically consistent is that The Green symbolizes life.[6] In essence, Swamp Thing is suggesting that Woodrue's wounded actions are preventing everyone in the swamp from

[6] "The Green" is worthy of its own mythological exploration in the *Swamp Thing* narrative. However, in this context, another interpretation would be that Swamp Thing is suggesting that Woodrue is hurting the collective with his actions.

thriving lives. Third, and finally, Woodrue's wounded arm now also aligns him with the mythic Fisher King motif discussed earlier.

Woodrue appears shocked by Swamp Thing's suggestion. He immediately denies there being any truth to the accusation and begins making a case for how impossible the statement sounds. Swamp Thing stops him and points to the destruction all around them. He states, "Look at all…THIS! This…is not…the way…of the wilderness. This…is the way…of man" (Moore et al. 2012, 123). Within the narrative, Moore's use of the word "man" is likely meant to draw a juxtaposition between the floral creatures of the swamp and human beings. However, looking at the use of the term within the context of a discussion around the masculine, the word "man" can be interpreted as also referring to the masculine itself. In other words, Swamp Thing is telling Woodrue that the destruction surrounding them is the result of the "brand" of masculinity that he embodies. Abby reinforces the idea, telling Woodrue, "You are ill…Woodrue…and you poison The Green…with your *desires*." Though the term was not in popular use in 1984, the accusation resembles modern ideas about what is now called "toxic masculinity."

Woodrue still cannot accept any of what he is being told and retreats with a final justification to Swamp Thing that his actions are the only way to save the world from "those other creatures." The rationalization which is directed only to Swamp Thing and not to Abby, who is also standing there, insinuates that his "brand" of masculinity is the only way to save both he and Swamp Thing, creatures embodying two opposing types of masculinity, from "the others." Michael Smith has effectively made the case that the "wildness of the wilderness" in *Swamp Thing* is an expression of Dionysus energy (Smith 2015, 370). However, the energy that Woodrue embodies, and thus the "brand" of masculinity he appears to represent, amplifies beyond the bounds of the Dionysian. As Woodrue scampers away, tears roll down his face. He stops for a moment and speaks to a single flower growing from the earth saying, "…"It's so very lonely…" (Moore et al. 2012, 125). Moments later, Woodrue disappears and is swallowed up into the destruction. In a classic reunification with the feminine, Abby stands by Swamp Thing and asks him, "What happened to him?" He replies, "He…Fell…From Grace…With the World. He was … uprooted. It's over" (126). Like in most comics, however, no character is ever really gone. Woodrue appears again later, still complaining about his wounded arm.

The Return to Elysium

In issue 27 of Moore's run, the motif of wounded arms, a symbol of masculine strength and power, returns to the narrative. Swamp Thing loses his arm in a battle with a demon monkey king. The event echoes Woodrue's wounding earlier in the narrative. Stories of lost limbs are found in several mythological traditions from Nuada in Celt mythology to the Norse god of war, Tyr, who loses his right hand when the gods need to bind the wolf, Fenrir. Tyr voluntarily puts his arm in Fenrir's mouth, knowing what the outcome will be. He willingly sacrifices for the safety of Asgard. Moore continues, throughout the run of the series, to present Swamp Thing as an expression of the masculine seen in other mythological figures such as Tyr – willing to sacrifice for the greater good of all. This presentation subtly suggests a different "brand" of masculinity is being offered than that previously presented by Woodrue. Swamp Thing's masculinity is demonstrated with empathy and an owning of responsibility. Swamp Thing's wounding is greater than Woodrue's simple inconvenience. Woodrue only had his arm *injured*. Swamp Thing's arm is severed completely. In many respects, over the course of Moore's run, we see Swamp Thing fully become the infirmed king that Moore alludes to early on in issue 21. Woodrue remains a self-interested boy king with a slight wound, but primarily hurt feelings. Swamp Thing becomes a wounded healer that holds both the interest and potential for healing not only himself, but his land – the swamp. He evolves psychically from survivalist plant matter to a creature that reaches to embrace his full masculinity and humanity. It is notable, as well, the loss of Swamp Thing's arm comes at the hands of a demon monkey king – a character that we might see as symbolizing a self-serving monkey-brained patriarch. Unlike Woodrue, who spends his days complaining about his wounding, Swamp Thing takes responsibility for his own healing. He reattaches his own arm and allows the green vegetation to grow back into place, making him whole again.

After the battle with Woodrue, Swamp Thing agrees to take a young autistic boy named Paul back home, at the request of Abby.[7] The boy asks him if he was afraid when he had to fight the monkey king. Swamp Thing admits that he was. Paul tells him that knowing that makes him feel better

[7] Paul acts as a complex symbol of the developing young masculine that Moore was encountering in 1984 but also transcends that period by embodying a universal archetypal version of maturing masculinity, not bound by time.

and that if monsters get scared sometimes, maybe it isn't so bad to be afraid.[8] At the conclusion of the issue, when the two finally arrive back at Paul's home, we learn it is a residential school called Elysium Lawns (Moore et al. 2012, 204). Elysium was the mythic place that Greeks hoped to journey to in the afterlife. It was believed to be a place of peace and happiness. In Moore's narrative, Elysium is a stop on Swamp Thing's journey, not the final destination. True to the mythic nature of the story, Alan Moore's *Saga of the Swamp Thing* is a cyclical journey of death and rebirth. It is the loss and destruction of one form of the masculine and the rise of another – only to have that new form later wounded and in need of reintegration as well. It is a journey of masculinity never complete, but always in process. It is the emergence of an ancient archetype, needed for a season, and then returning below the surface, back into the swamp – waiting only to later rise in the zeitgeist when cultural consciousness calls it forth.

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[8] The conversation between Paul and Swamp Thing offers a subtext that can be read through a variety of mythological lenses. James Hillman's (2005, 27-28) discussion of the *senex* and the *puer*, as well as a juxtaposition between innocence and the monstruous, would be two of the possible lenses.

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The Shadow of the Bat: Batman as Archetypal Shaman

John Todd

Abstract Most early human cultures revered the bat. Not only was the bat held sacred for the essential role they play in our ecosystem as pollinators, seed dispersers, and natural insect control, they were also appreciated for their uniqueness. Bats are the only mammals that possess the ability for sustained flight, they nurse their young, and even share brainwave patterns common with those of primates. And yet, they mostly live underground in caves, sleep upside down, have the ability to see in the dark, and are nocturnal. Despite their clear benefit to humans and our ecology in general, Western culture has demonized the bat and therefore one is forced wonder why so much negative shadow material has been projected on the bat. What does the image of the bat hold for the Western psyche? What aspects of ourselves have been deemed demonic that are essential to our own inner ecosystems? And why, despite this fear of the bat, have we as a culture embraced Batman, a man dressed as a bat? A deeper exploration of the image of the bat as not only holding negative shadow material, but also holding that of the light bringer or psychopomp reveals a great deal

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about the human condition in the modern Western world. This chapter explores the image of the bat, Batman, and what it holds for the modern Westerner.

Keywords Batman • Bat • Shaman • C.G. Jung • Archetype • Ecology

Much like the human relationship to the literal bat, the human relationship to the image of the bat has swung dramatically from positive to negative throughout history. Many early civilizations saw the bat as a guide, savior, and protector of the divine; however, as more patriarchal traditions rose to prominence the bat was maligned and became associated with evil, vampirism, and disease. Like all symbols, the symbol of the bat is polyvalent and therefore holds both positive and negative aspects, including everything in between. The pendulum, however, has swung so far to the negative that it warrants reflecting on why this might be, and what it might say about our culture.

Bats have always presented a problem for those who like to divide things into clearly delineated, unequivocal categories. Not only are they nocturnal, but they also reverse what appears to be the normal order in other ways. They are mammals that can fly; they have hands that are actually wings; they hang upside down; their flight appears chaotic; they see in the dark when humans cannot. The people of ancient cultures often venerated and held sacred creatures often seen today as symbolizing anomaly and transformation. The bat is one of these creatures. For many cultures, it was, and continues to be, an intermediary to the gods, because of its unique ability to hold opposites, to penetrate darkness, and because of its clear harmony with – and service to – the environment. Some ancient cultures, such as the Navajo, saw bats as guardians of Mother Earth – nature's own gargoyles (Renfro 1988).

There is one further paradox worth mentioning here, regarding a story that I will examine in depth later in this chapter, and that is: Why, given the general repugnance for bats, has a Bat-man (a man dressed as a bat) captured imaginations since 1939? The modern-day bat myth defies all of the projections placed on the animal. The story of Batman resurrects the savior bat of ancient civilizations, and praises the hero of the night. Before delving into the story of the modern Batman, however, I will first explore the Bat-men that have come before him.

Bat-men: Bat-Man Images in Early Cultures

In contrast to the negative projections placed on the bat by modern Western culture, many early cultures projected positive qualities onto the bat (Renfro 1988). They often held bats in high esteem and represented them in their mythology as intermediaries between divine and human worlds. Some cultures held bats in even higher regard, speaking of them as light-bringers who led humans toward the light (Renfro 1988). This might be interpreted from a contemporary psychological perspective as a movement towards consciousness. The modern Jungian term for the psychological factor that functions in a similar way is the "psychopomp." According to Sharp (1991), the psychopomp "mediates unconscious contents to consciousness, often personified in the image of a wise old man or woman, and sometimes as a helpful animal" (108). As I continue this exploration of the bat's role as psychopomp, I will focus on the mythologies, folklore, and stories in which a human-bat figure is personified. In these stories, the relationship between human and bat manifests in a range of images from godlike to demonic. This shift from the image of an animal as the carrier of this projection (as psychopomp) to the image of an animal-human hybrid suggests a movement toward integration.

The indigenous people of Matangi Island, located near Fiji, revered bats. There are many ancient tales about the deity Toba Fu, who was the island's very first leader. Toba Fu was a hero bat, or bat-man, who taught people what they needed to know about being human, and also brought them fire. The Matangi natives regarded the bat as a carrier of prosperity, good fortune, long life, health, and happiness (McCracken 1993, 57). When interpreted from a Jungian perspective, the theme of psychopomp or light-bringer, as the carrier of consciousness, is clearly present. Toba Fu not only brings to his people literal light (in the form of fire), but also brings the "light" of consciousness to them in teaching them how to be human. Viewed symbolically, the "light" that Toba Fu brings lifts the community out of a purely instinctual existence, and into a more conscious way of being.

Central and South American peoples found bats fascinating as well. They are a significant motif in many styles of Pre-Columbian art, as well as a frequent theme in Indigenous folklore (Benson 1991, 7). A story from the Gran Chaco region of northern Argentina tells of a leader of the very first people, a bat-man who taught the people what they needed to know as human beings (Benson 1991, 8). From the Ge in Brazil comes a tale of

a tribe that moved through the night led by a bat who looked to guide them toward light (Benson 1991, 8). In Kogi (a Colombian tribe still in existence today) mythology, bats are the first animal of creation, and in at least one myth, the bat is considered to be the son of the sun (Benson 1991, 6). Here again, the image of the bat – particularly the bat-man as psychopomp – is present.

Some Meso-American tribes saw "bat medicine" as being connected with transformation, rebirth, and the shaman. This belief has been attributed to the bat's being "reborn" out of the belly of Mother Earth (i.e., caves) each night, as well as their ability to see when others cannot, just as shamans are called to see into the spirit world and guide and protect those who cannot make the journey themselves. According to Matthews (2004), shamans:

> were lorekeepers, healers, prophets, diviners, and ceremonialists, and ambassadors to and interpreters of the gods.... [T]hey were walkers between the worlds, people whose attunement to tribal consciousness and the spirits was so fine that they could slip between the hidden parallels of life and death, between the worlds, and report to the tribe what they saw there. (9)

As an image associated with the shaman, the bat continues to reflect the ability to go where others cannot and to see what others cannot see. The role of the shaman is similar to Jung's understanding of the psychopomp. According to Samuels et al. (1986) the psychopomp is:

> The figure which guides the soul in times of initiation and transition; a function traditionally ascribed to Hermes in Greek Myth for he accompanied the souls of the dead and was able to pass through the polarities (not only death and life, but night and day, heaven and earth). In the human world the priest, shaman, medicine man, and doctor are some who have been recognized as fulfilling the need for spiritual guidance and mediation between sacred and secular worlds. (122-123)

This particular association to the bat not only connects it again with the psychopomp, but with initiation as well. Some ancient initiation rituals included a bat figure as a potentially fearful presence (Benson 1991, 9). In the initiatory role, the bat functions as a paradoxical figure, with both positive and negative connotations, depending upon the differing aims of the initiation process.

Comparison: The Centaur

The human-animal hybrid is of such importance in the development of bat lore, that it is pertinent to offer a comparison with another mythological hybrid – the centaur. In Greek mythology, Chiron, a human-horse hybrid with the upper half of a human and lower half of a horse, was known for being a learned doctor who often tutored heroes. He was an expert on medicine, music, ethics, hunting, and martial arts. While Chiron was clearly trusted and revered, centaurs in general were feared and distrusted. They were known as monstrous creatures who lived in forests, ate raw meat, and often kidnapped women from their homes (Grimal 1951, 94-100).

When interpreted symbolically, the Centaur can be viewed as an interface between the human and instinctual realms. Within Greek mythology there appears to be great ambivalence regarding the relationship between the two. On one hand, the image of Chiron can be seen as presenting the wisdom and knowledge that comes from a relationship between human culture and the instincts. On the other, the image of the centaur in general appears to reflect the brutality and lack of awareness that can also come with such an interface. Such ambivalence remains to this day, and is reflective of the relationship that many contemporary humans have with their instinctual natures. The connection can lead to wisdom, but one can also be overcome by one's beast-like nature.

These two manifestations of the centaur provide a very clear distinction between two possible outcomes of a union of consciousness with the unknown regions where the instincts dwell. Applying this comparative mythological observation to the study of the bat, one can see the same fears and lofty possibilities expressed. There are dark and sinister images that have been associated with the bat, and there are also images of growth and transformation. Will the bat transform those who encounter it into a vampire, or will it transform them into Toba Fu or Batman?

The Chinese Bat-Man

The depiction of bat creatures in Chinese folklore differs from the treatment of the image in Central and South American folklore. In China, the bat-man is less terrifying, but no less fearsome. The bat has played a significant role in the mythologies and folklore of Chinese culture throughout its history. According to Kern (1988):

> Chinese admiration for bats began thousands of years before Christ. The Oriental world was viewed as an eternal interplay between active (male) and passive (female) forces. Bats were thought to embody the male principle—flowers and fruits, the female. The bat commonly was pictured with the peach, a popular female fertility symbol. We now know that the pairing of peaches and bats portrays an ecological as well as mystical relationship. Peaches (one of man's most popular fruits) were first cultivated in China approximately 5,000 years ago. Before that, peaches relied on bats for dispersal of their seeds. (39)

In the Chinese imagination, their deities dwelled deep within the earth, and bats became associated with – even identified as – incarnations of them. This could be attributed to the natural habitat of bats (the cave) and to their longevity, which is greater than most mammals their size.

The Chinese word for bat, *fu*, is also a homophone for the word happiness. There is an abundance of Chinese art depicting bats with images and words related to happiness, good health, and prosperity. The happy Buddha is often pictured with a bat, and Emperors and Empresses wore beautiful gowns adorned with bats (Von Glahn 2004, 122-128). And, similar to the Indigenous cultures mentioned above, the Chinese also had their own bat-man (Kern 1988, 39).

According to Chinese folklore, Zhong Kui (Fig. 1) was the god that drove away evil, captured demons, and brought good luck and happiness. Zhong Kui is depicted in traditional Chinese New Year pictures as being led by bats on his quest to drive away the evil spirits that threaten his people. In these images, he wields a sword and is accompanied by bats, suggesting that he is a god of formidable power (Von Glahn 2004, 122-128).

The Christian Bat-Man

In contrast to the positive associations that many early peoples had to the bat, the Christian tradition has often associated the bat with evil. In fact, the Devil himself has often been portrayed with bat wings. While the origins of the Devil within the Christian tradition are varied, the story that is often told is that Lucifer was God's most radiant and devout angel (Fig. 2). However, while God was creating man in the Garden of Eden, Lucifer, who was seated at God's left hand, became restless and wondered why he could not have the same powers as God. Thus Sin, Lucifer's first daughter,

Fig. 1 Zhong Kui (Source: Wikipedia)

was born from his head. When God returned to find Lucifer sitting on his throne, he became so angry that he cast him out. Before being sent to the center of the earth, Lucifer rallied a group of rebellious angels who accompanied him on his descent to Hell (Morgan 1996).

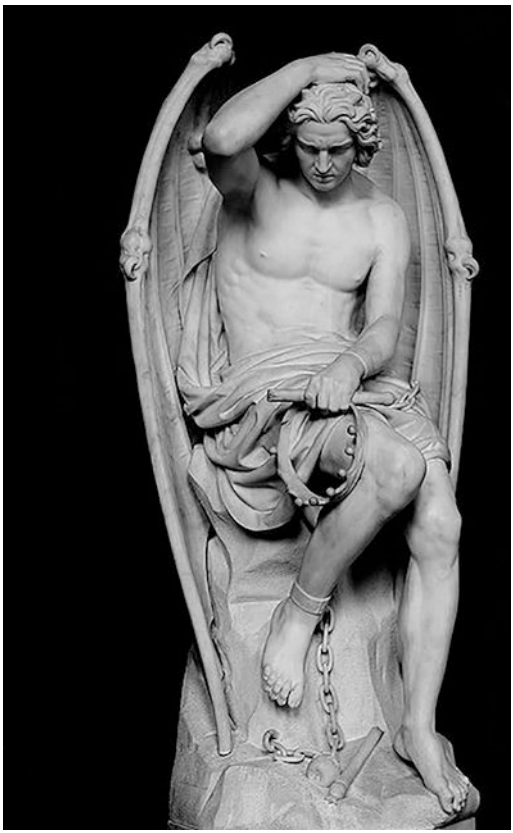

Fig. 2 Guillaume Geefs, "Le génie du mal," or "The Lucifer of Liège," 1848. (Source: Wikipedia)

The name Lucifer means "light-bringer" or "morning star." Given his name, Lucifer can be seen symbolically as a bringer of consciousness. In this story, Lucifer's first daughter, Sin, is born from the same head that begins to wonder if he too can possess the powers of God. The juxtaposition of sin and consciousness, or the desire for it, is highly significant. The theme of Lucifer as light-bringer is reminiscent of earlier stories of bat-gods as responsible for showing early peoples how to be human and even make their own light in the form of fire. There is certainly a visual connection, as Lucifer is often depicted with the wings of a bat, but there remains a connection with the Titan hero, Prometheus, from the Greek pantheon.

Prometheus steals fire from Zeus, king of the gods, and gives it to humans, therefore bringing them light. Prometheus was then cast out of Olympus and eternally bound to a rock, where an eagle ate his liver every day. Prometheus, whose name means "forethinker," has been interpreted as the bringer of the "fire" of consciousness, and therefore is seen as the impetus for the formation of human civilization and science.

A Russian myth incorporates a similar dynamic, with the bat now playing the role of thief. According to McCracken (1993):

> A Russian legend…relates that Satan wished to create a man, and after fashioning a human form from mud, could not give it life. Satan then enlisted the aid of the bat to fly to heaven and steal God's sacred "towel," which would give Satan's creation a divine nature. The bat complied, and according to the legend this is why God owns man's soul and Satan his body. God punished the bat for helping Satan by taking away its wings (presumably its feathers), making its tail naked, and fashioning its feet like those of Satan. (57)

There is a comparative pattern within more patriarchal, "sky god"-oriented religions and cultures, that considers it hubris, and therefore, disobedient, to think for one's self, or to defy the god's expectations, and that doing so will result in being "cast out." Symbolically, this pattern represents a psychological movement from a dependent and unconscious state, into cognition and self-awareness, which often involves much suffering and difficulty, and can be experienced by the ego as "punishment." Often, in similar mythologies, to remain unconscious is narrated as remaining in a state of "innocence" or "paradise," where everything is provided. Once the fire is "stolen," however, it necessitates becoming responsible for one's own fate, and the imperative to carry the resulting burden.

Judeo-Christian traditions often emphasize compliance with what is considered the "Word of God." From this viewpoint, wisdom that emerges from within the psyche is suspect. According to Zimmer (1948):

> Archaic man regarded himself as part of the animal world of nature and identified himself with the traits and powers of the more impressive among his surrounding animal neighbors.... If the animal within is killed by an over resolute morality, or even only chilled into hibernation by a perfect social routine, the conscious personality will never be vivified by the hidden forces that underlie and obscurely sustain it. The interior animal asks to be accepted, permitted to live with us, as the somewhat queer, often puzzling

> companion. Though mute and obstinate, never the less it knows better than our conscious personalities, and would be known to know better if we would learn to listen to its barely audible voice. (128-129)

When that voice is ignored, silenced, or demonized, there is little room for a light-bringer; therefore, the relationship with unconscious and instinctual selves, which often manifests in dreams, intuitions, and the body, becomes split off. Mercurius is ignored, Lucifer is cast out, the bat is demonized, and the wisdom that the feminine principle has to offer falls on deaf ears.

The Alchemical Bat-Man

Despite the trend towards the negative end of this archetypal pole within Christian culture, there is an underlying tradition in Western culture in which the image of the bat and the bat-man fared much better. While alchemy had been practiced in other parts of the world for hundreds of years, it began to surface in the West around the same time as the rise of Christianity. Within this tradition, the wings of the bat that have since become synonymous with evil in the Christian tradition, become symbolic of what the alchemists' considered perfection. Commenting on the above image from the sixteenth century alchemical treatise, *The Rosarium Philosophorum*, Cwik (2006) writes:

> The figure [above] is darker and therefore more complete. It is titled 'The Demonstration of Perfection.' It is symbolic of the capacity to be and live in a fully human manner, the *vir unus*. The Rebis of the White Stone, while reflecting a very difficult integration, lacks a relationship to shadow's blackness and death. These darker aspects are alluded to in the bat wings, now capable of traversing spiritual darkness, and the figures stand on a mound of earth with three dragons devouring themselves. This is a reference to the triadic unity of Mercurius.… This is "the chthonic, lower, or even infernal counterpart of the Heavenly Trinity, just as Dante's devil is three-headed" so 'Mercurius is often shown as a three-headed serpent.' (206) (Fig. 3).

The "darker aspects" symbolize the ability to navigate unknown regions of the psyche, and relate to the ability to remain grounded in the chthonic

Fig. 3 The Rebis, from *The Rosarium Philosophorum* (16th c.). (Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism [ARAS])

wisdom of the body, and matter in general. The alchemists symbolically represent this ability by pairing the human with the wings of bats. This image also reflects the role of the psychopomp as it symbolizes the ability to navigate within the darkness of the unconscious.

An image from the fifteenth century alchemical text, *Aurora Consurgens* depicts an earlier stage of the alchemical process where the masculine and feminine elements are beginning to comingle (Fig. 4). Each side brings something to the union: he holds a rabbit and she holds a bat.

Once more we see the bat associated with the feminine principle as it is in many cultures. Jung saw alchemy as compensating for the "one-sidedness" of Christianity, much as the unconscious compensates for what is lacking in the consciousness of the individual. According to Jung (1993):

Fig. 4 Hermaphrodite, from *Aurora Consurgens* (15th c.). (Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism [ARAS])

> [A]lchemy is rather like an undercurrent to Christianity [which] ruled on the surface. It is so to this surface as the dream is to consciousness, and just as the dream compensates the conflicts of the conscious mind, so alchemy endeavors to fill the gaps left open by the Christian tension of opposites.... The historical shift of the world's consciousness towards the masculine is compensated at first by the chthonic femininity of the unconscious...the higher, the spiritual, the masculine inclines to the lower, the earthly, the feminine; and accordingly, the mother, who was anterior to the world of the father, accommodates herself to the masculine principle and, with the aid of the human spirit (alchemy or "the philosophy") produces a son – not the antithesis of Christ but rather his chthonic counterpart, not a divine man but a fabulous being conforming to the nature of the primordial mother. (para. 26)

Again, the bat is associated with the psychopomp, the earthly, the unconscious, and the feminine, and as Western culture began to shift away from these energies, the bat too was cast out.

The Bat as Guardian of the Sacred

Images of bats and bat-men also depict them as guardians of the Sacred – what is considered divine or spiritually important within the culture, or to the individual. For example, in the traditional Navajo sand painting below (Fig. 5), Father Sky and Mother Earth are pictured holding hands, the eternal union of heaven and earth creating new life. This image represents both the sky and earth, as well as the mind and the body (Moon 1997, 203-205). The bat, as sacred messenger of the divine, guards Mother Earth from the East. The yellow patch on the bat's back was given by the Great Spirit as a reward for defeating a harmful spirit. From the belly of Mother Earth sprouts all the essential crops of the Navajo people. Ecologically, the bat served to pollinate plants and eat the insects that threatened the crops that they depended on and held sacred. The bat was held in high esteem by the Navajo and was seen as a guardian of Mother Earth. The bat protected the crops that sprouted forth from "her belly." While Mother Earth, as well as the feminine principle in general, can have both life-giving and life-devouring qualities, it appears that the Navajo experienced the bat in service to the fecund, life giving, and sustaining aspect of the feminine principle.

As Neumann (1954) writes:

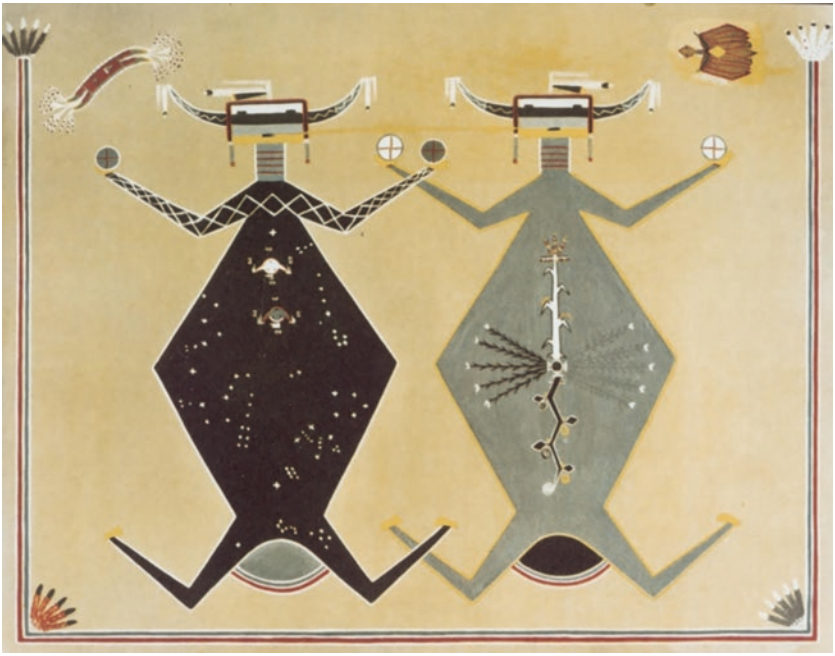

Fig. 5 Navajo Sand Painting (Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism [ARAS])

> At this stage, food symbolism and organs co-ordinated with it are of prime importance. This explains why Mother Goddess cultures and mythologies are so closely connected with fertility and growth, and particularly agriculture, hence with the sphere of food, which is the material and bodily sphere. The stage of the maternal uroboros is characterized by the child's relation to the mother, who yields nourishment, but at the same time it is an historical period in which man's dependence on the earth and nature is at its greatest. Connected with both aspects is the dependence of the ego and consciousness on the unconscious. The dependence of the sequence "child-man-ego-conscious" on the sequence "mother-earth-nature-unconscious" illustrates the relation of the personal to the transpersonal and the reliance of the one upon the other. (43)

From a psychological perspective, this Navajo image can be seen as reflecting the relationship between the ego and the unconscious. The

psychopomp (bat as divine messenger) is in service of the unconscious (The Great Mother) and ensures that the ego can receive "her" nourishment. Symbolically, this image can additionally be interpreted as presenting the divine elements of Heaven (Great Father), and Earth (Great Mother), whose union brings about human consciousness. Within the image, the bat is depicted as messenger and guardian of the feminine aspect of the divine. Thus, the bat ensures that the nourishment that comes from Mother Earth is received by all.

For the Navajo, the role of the shaman is similar to that of the bat, but in the spiritual world. As mentioned above, the shaman is often seen as possessing "bat medicine"; therefore, possessing the qualities of the bat. The shaman thus serves as an intermediary between the two worlds, and works with negative entities that pose a threat to the health and general well-being of the tribe. Much like the bat in the Navajo belief system, the shaman also functions in service to the life-giving, positive aspects of the feminine principle. This can also be said of figures such as the bats and bat-men who are light-bringers from many of the myths of native and Indigenous peoples. These figures foster the development of consciousness ("light") from within the unconscious, which is often portrayed via feminine qualities that can either nurture the life of the ego or devour it. The modern Batman narrative portrays a similar theme of the bat as guardian of the Sacred.

The Modern Bat-Man

Aside from Dracula, there are no modern images of bat-men except Batman. The significant difference between the two figures being that Dracula uses his bat-like qualities to prey on others, whereas Batman uses his in service of others. One additional primary difference is that one figure serves in the role of villain, while the other figure is a hero. I will now examine this dynamic further within the Batman story.

Given the general fear and disdain that Western culture appears to hold for the bat, both literally and figuratively, it is fascinating to consider the popularity and longevity of the modern fictional character Batman, a man dressed as a bat. Therein lies a concrete example of the psychological mystery in the relationship between Western culture and the bat. The image of this animal simultaneously repels and draws one in. Are certain people repelled by the image of the bat as reflecting something purely instinctual; yet drawn to the idea of a human who has integrated that instinct? This

dynamic continues to reflect back the conscious attitude that contemporary American culture has with the dark mysteries of the unconscious. Images of animals that show up in dreams, myth, or literature may often reflect such instinctual aspects of the psyche. The bat – and subsequently, Batman – can therefore be interpreted symbolically as an image of integration. From this perspective, Batman symbolizes a conscious relationship with the instincts embodied in the image of the bat: the ability to "see" what others cannot, the ability to navigate in dark (i.e., "unconscious") realms where others might fear to travel. It is equally important that Batman is able to be in relationship with the "bat" and not "go batty," or be overwhelmed by the contents of the unconscious. Therefore, Batman can be seen as one who has dealt with both positive and negative potentials contained within the archetypal image of the bat. However, to fully grasp what the image of Batman holds for Western culture, it will be important to explore the narrative and its history.

While Batman's "origin story" has been told with differing inflections, the core of the story has remained essentially the same. As a young boy, Bruce Wayne returns home with his parents from a night at the movies when they are confronted by a thief who murders his parents in front of him. He is orphaned and raised by the family's butler, Alfred Pennyworth. He spends much of his young adulthood preparing his mind and body to redeem the deaths of his parents by protecting the city's citizens from crime. While his oft-stated goal is to avenge the death of his parents, he is also clearly avenging, or perhaps saving, the boy who lost his innocence, his childhood, and his feeling of safety, the night that his parents were murdered before his eyes (Daniels 1999, 34-35).

From the beginning, Batman has been a liminal figure who often holds the opposites, much like the bat he symbolically wears on his chest. The first Batman comic introduced him on the cover as being "cowled like a monk but possessing the powers of a Satan" (Daniels 1999, 27). A cowl is a garment worn by monks, given to them when they take their monastic vows. With this reference, Batman was presented as a dark figure with the powers of those who live in the darkness and in service to something greater than themselves. Similar to gargoyle statues, which are placed on churches, for example, to ward off evil, Batman also possesses a dark and often demonic appearance; yet they each serve to protect people from evil. Batman is often even depicted perched atop gargoyles surveying the city below.

What does Batman serve? It could be said that he lives in service to his trauma by his perpetual meditation on how to exhibit power and control over perpetrators of trauma; therefore, potentially escaping his own sense of powerlessness. Batman often states that he lives in service of the city of Gotham, which he occasionally refers to with a feminine gender. It could also be said that Batman lives in service of life in that his thoughts and actions are focused on preserving the life of the people of Gotham. Life often appears as so sacred to him that he will not even take the lives of criminals who have themselves taken lives. While the answer is most likely a combination of the above, the latter would echo similar motifs of the "bat-men" of other cultures, many of whom also stood in service of life, or symbolically in service of a Great Goddess or Great Mother image.

The story of Batman, interpreted through a Jungian lens, portrays a confluence of vocation and trauma that gives shape and meaning to the young Bruce Wayne's life, which he spends preparing to avenge the death of his parents. Wayne prepares himself both mentally and physically for this task, but he is puzzled about how to manifest his idea. As he is pondering how to go about protecting the city, a bat flies in his window inspiring him to take on the identity of Batman. He subsequently fantasizes that criminals will be fearful of such a menacing and dark figure. While Bruce's conscious reasoning is understandable, it is important to ask what deeper meaning lies behind the bat as a chosen symbol to represent his crime-fighting alter ego? Why the bat?

At this point in his origin story, it could be said that Bruce Wayne has found his totem animal, or that his totem animal has found him. The belief in a totem or totem animal comes from the traditions of many Indigenous tribes (Hirschfelder and Molin 2001). The totem was often seen as a guiding and protective spirit that was connected with the tribe or the individual. In most traditions, the totem was viewed as an apical ancestor of the tribe or significant individual. Tribes who worshiped the bat often saw themselves as descendants of the bat: "In North America, there is a certain feeling of affinity between a kin group or clan and its totem. There are taboos against killing clan animals, as humans are kin to the animals whose totems they represent" (Hirschfelder and Molin 2001, 307). In some cases, totem spirits are clan protectors and the site of religious activity. In many of these traditions the totem animal chooses the tribe or individual through a special encounter with the animal in their inner or outer lives, much like the bat flying through the window of Bruce Wayne's study. The totem is said to reflect qualities of the tribe or the

individual, and gives them instruction on how to live their lives in accord with nature (Hirschfelder and Molin 2001).

If the bat is Bruce Wayne's totem, then what qualities does he possess that are reflected in the image of the bat? To many Indigenous peoples, the bat was seen as a sacred animal for several reasons. Tribal communities recognized how bats "serve" nature and themselves by eating the insects that plagued their crops, and by pollinating or reseeding the plants that their lives revolved around. Likewise, Batman works to stop criminals who prey on the innocents of Gotham, much like harmful insects prey on crops.

The bat also reflects the traits of the shaman. Like the bat, the shaman has the unique ability to move between two worlds, as well as the special gift of seeing and hearing what others cannot. Bruce Wayne lives and moves between two worlds as he runs his family business by day and fights crime as Batman by night. The similarity to the shaman is also reflected in Batman fighting the criminals who Gotham's police force is unable to stop on their own, much like the shaman is consulted to address issues that cannot be addressed by other members of the tribe. Like the psychopomp, the shaman is the intermediary or messenger between the human and spirit worlds who has the ability to bring healing and balance to the tribe or the individual plagued by malevolent spirits.

According to Pratt (2007):

> The costumes of Anglo-Saxon shamen often contained the energy of his or her helping spirits. These energies were often embodied in the costume by the application of feathers, stones, and other magical objects, which contained the energy of the helping spirits. To don the costume was to engage in the process of embodying one's helping spirit, and thus gain its powers. (25)

These helping spirits come to the shaman in animal form and possess the power of the entire species of that animal. They guide the shaman in healing work and in some way represent his or her identity in the spirit world. The proper relationship to the spirit animal is essential, for this is the source of the shaman's power. To the shaman, the animals are manifestations of a power far greater and wiser than themselves, and therefore, do not belong to them, nor do they control these animals. As the shaman merges with the animal spirit, he or she receives knowledge and the power to bring healing to others (Eliade 1972). In shamanic fashion, Batman has taken on the life-affirming qualities of the bat. These qualities were

experienced and revered by many early peoples. Bruce Wayne has come into relationship with the bat by heeding its call and donning its costume, thereby transforming from Bruce Wayne into Batman.

From a Jungian perspective, Bruce Wayne's transformation into Batman can additionally be interpreted as the individual assuming the form of a "mana personality."

As Jung (1977) writes:

> The mana-personality is a dominant of the collective unconscious, the well-known archetype of the mighty man in the form of hero, chief, magician, medicine-man, saint, the ruler of men and spirits, the friend of God. (para. 377)

> Historically, the mana-personality evolves into the hero and the godlike being, whose earthly form is the priest. How very much the doctor is still mana is the whole plaint of the analyst! (para. 389)

When Bruce Wayne becomes Batman, he enters an inflated state in which he gathers the power inherent in the archetype of the hero, potentially acting under the mistaken impression that it is his own power. Such inflation and identification with an archetype is typically unhealthy and inevitably unsustainable. However, the potentially positive side of this dynamic is when an individual consciously steps into the role of a mana personality out of necessity, and then consciously leaves it behind when it is no longer appropriate, such as when doctors, priests, or analysts perform – and complete – their duties.

Why does Gotham need a Batman-as-shaman? Gotham has a police force to combat criminal activity and protect its citizens. However, the Gotham City Police Department is not equipped to deal with the extent of the crime that plagues its city. Batman usually takes on the crime that is beyond the scope of the Gotham City police department. When the defenses that would normally serve to protect the city fail, Batman steps in. His typical foes can be seen more as embodiments of archetypes of negative forces in the world than literal people, or at least as individuals who are possessed by these archetypes. Much like the shaman, Batman enters the night to bring balance, healing, and hope to his tribe, the citizens of Gotham. The figure of Batman also functions as a carrier of this healing and hopeful energy in the psyche for his readers and viewers. As psychopomp, he offers psychological balance, facilitating the

re-establishment of the connection between consciousness and the unconscious. The Batman figure and its popularity also provide balance to the Western rejection of the bat's potential for transformation (the vampire who sucks and drains, but cannot transform), much as alchemy provided balance to the one-sided nature of Christianity in medieval times (Jung 1993).

Bruce Wayne is also depicted as a survivor of childhood trauma. The typical experience of the childhood trauma survivor is one in which affect and the complexes that surface from the unconscious tend to be much further from consciousness, and therefore may be experienced as less personal in nature (archetypal). The nature of these early wounds, and the child's inability to metabolize or experience the trauma, also lends to this dynamic. Therefore, the defenses of the average person (the Gotham Police) are not equipped to handle such powerful affect or "complex" forces. The Gotham Police Department can be seen as a reflection of a psychological intermediary (a kind of psychopomp) between consciousness and the unconscious, which serves to mediate the contents of the unconscious. From a psychological perspective, a well-developed and high functioning "police department" might employ appropriate defenses that result in emotional self-regulation; however, a "police department" that is either underdeveloped or overwhelmed by the contents of the unconscious, will often employ more pathological defenses, such as splitting, dissociation, and acting out, in order to cope. Many of Batman's enemies employ these pathological defense mechanisms. The story continues to reflect the struggle to maintain a healthy connection and relationship between consciousness and the unconscious.

Thus, it seems that despite the fear and disdain in Western culture for one bat-man (Lucifer), it has embraced another in Batman. While there could be many interpretations of this acceptance, I believe that it is in part a manifestation of a collective cultural need for a psychopomp. Much like the Matangi tribe needed Toba Fu to guide them, and the Chinese needed Zhong Qui to battle the demons, contemporary culture is in need of a light-bringer to lead people out of the darkness of the unconscious in order to connect more fully with their whole selves.

Conclusion

Human psychological experience tends to split into polarities, such as right and wrong, black and white, or good and evil. That which is experienced as "evil" is often relegated to the shadow and is projected onto animals, persons, and ideologies (among other things) that appear most alien or least unacceptable. The projection serves the vital function of giving us an opportunity to come into relationship with these aspects of ourselves. The repugnance of the bat (both literal and figurative) observed in Western culture, and simultaneous fascination with Batman, is a modern expression of a collective struggle with this tension of the opposites. There is a similar dynamic in the compensatory relationship between Lucifer and the Christian tradition, and the alchemical bat-man. By projecting one's darker psychological aspects onto bats, one *has an opportunity* to discover the darker, more vampiric elements of the psyche.

However, as Jung (1993) writes:

> If the repressed tendencies, the shadow as I call them, were obviously evil, there would be no problem whatever. But, the shadow is merely somewhat inferior, primitive, unadapted, and awkward; not wholly bad. It even contains childish or primitive qualities which would in a way vitalize and embellish human existence, but – convention forbids! (para. 134)

In order for a potential relationship with "shadow" aspects to be fruitful one, one must first become conscious of the projection, withdraw it, and begin to integrate that which has been cast out. In doing so, one often finds that which has been deemed "evil" actually has some "good" qualities as well. This allows consciousness to begin to shift from the tendency to split into polarities, and develop more of a capacity to hold the opposites contained both within itself, as well as in the outer world.

To project only "good" or "bad" qualities onto an archetypal image or experience deprives one of a fuller experience of the archetype (and of the human experience that it leads to), and almost assures one that they will eventually encounter the shadow side of the archetype when least expected. The archetypal bat has been experienced in Western culture as a vampire that takes one's blood as well as one's will. As demonstrated here, however, through a cross-cultural exploration of comparative mythology involving bats, this vampire lore is only one of many aspects of the unconscious that bats open up. The mythic bat has the capacity to bring light to the people, leading them out of darkness; it protects the feminine

principle, as well as the Sacred. In these roles, the bat functions as psychopomp, a powerful psychic figure who mediates unconscious contents to consciousness, often imaged as a wise old man or woman and sometimes as a helpful animal (Sharp 1991, 108).

To allow the psychological development Jung (1977) termed *individuation* to unfold, it is essential that one stands in good relationship with that "helpful animal." The ancient Chinese figure, Zhong Qui, is led by the bats, which infers that he is in "right" relationship with them. The Batman story presents us with an image of one who has faced his fear of the unknown, symbolized in the story by the bat, and has thus formed a working relationship with the unconscious. Like Zhong Qui, he "follows" his bats. This relationship allows him to enter into the realm of the unconscious without giving into his fear. In facing his negative projections onto the bat, he has paradoxically opened himself up to the positive side of the archetype. That which was once his greatest fear, has now become his ally. In donning his cape, cowl, and the bat emblem, Batman becomes an embodiment of the psychopomp, and the guardian of the Sacred.

Jung (1990) describes the psychopomp and the wise old man in the following way:

> He is, like the anima, an immortal daemon that pierces the chaotic darkness of brute life with the light of meaning. He is the enlightener, the master and teacher, a psychopomp.… Modern man, in experiencing this archetype, comes to that most ancient form of thinking as an autonomous activity whose object he is. Hermes Trismegistus or the Thoth of Hermetic literature, Orpheus, the Poimandres (shepherd of men) and his near relation the Poimen of Hermes, are the formulations of the same experience. If the name "Lucifer" were not prejudicial it would be a very suitable one for this archetype. (paras. 77-79)

Not only is this an apt description of the role Batman plays, it also addresses the polarized thinking mentioned above. Modern culture is attracted to Batman because "he" holds something that contemporary culture dearly needs to integrate. The attraction in Western culture to Batman simultaneously reflects the need for a relationship with the unconscious side of life (i.e., an "inner bat," or psychopomp), and the need for a relationship with those figures in the outer world who once fulfilled this role for us, such as the shaman, "medicine man," or modern day professionals who are attuned to the unconscious, and the archetypal world in general.

In *Trauma and the Soul* (2013), Jungian psychoanalyst Donald Kalsched, offers an image of an Inuit whale bone carving titled "The Storyteller" (6). It is a human face with one eye open and the other closed. Kalsched explains that this image is reflective of the ability to keep one "eye" on the outer world and another on the inner world (the unconscious), simultaneously. He states that in order for trauma to be understood fully, both "eyes" must be honored. Kalsched writes:

> We are all accustomed to the familiar world that comes into view through the onward looking eye of this mask. Visible through this eye is the sensate material world of outer reality – the ordinary temporal world…. The world we see through the inward looking eye is less familiar – invisible to outer-sight and yet no less real – more mysterious perhaps and sometimes, because of this very mystery, uncomfortable for modern men and women. (6-7)

He goes on to state that while this is a strange notion for most modern people, it was not for certain Indigenous peoples who called on the shaman to be able to travel between the two worlds.

While this may indeed be a strange notion for the modern person on a conscious level, it seems related to our culture's attraction to the shaman-like image of Batman and repugnance of the bat. Images of the psychopomp, such as the mythic bat-men explored here, the modern-day Batman, and the shaman, are potential antidotes for the inner conflict that cultural "repugnance" reveals. They are possible guides who might aid in transforming one's relationship to the unconscious. The analyst in modern times, like the shaman, is called on to assist in the awakening of the "inner bat," or psychopomp, within analysands, and thus to aid in their development of an ability to mediate the contents of the unconscious, thus "travel between the two worlds" on their own. At some point in the analytic process this will entail the analysand facing his own deepest and darkest fears. For all of us, it is in the process of facing our fears both internally and externally that we have the opportunity to find the inner "bat."

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"To Survive and Still Dream": Ritual and Reclamation in *Little Bird*

Jennifer Tronti

Abstract Winner of the Eisner Award for Best Limited Series (2020), *Little Bird: The Fight for Elder's Hope* presents readers with a postapocalyptic vision which pits an obscenely corrupt totalitarian religious regime against an indigenously inspired rebel community. In pages steeped in rich, lushly saturated hues of red, aqua, and violet, writer Darcy Van Poelgeest and artist Ian Bertram's eponymous character Little Bird swoops into each comic panel – deftly fierce and gravely vulnerable. The comic is a picture of archetypal contrasts: between institution and individual, between other and self, between death and life, between real and imagined, between story and experience.

Keywords Little Bird • Ritual theory • Postapocalyptic • Indigenous land • Theocracy

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Winner of the Eisner Award for Best Limited Series (2020), *Little Bird: The Fight for Elder's Hope* presents readers with a postapocalyptic vision which pits an obscenely corrupt totalitarian religious regime against an indigenously inspired rebel community. In pages steeped in rich, lushly saturated hues of red, aqua, and violet, writer Darcy Van Poelgeest and artist Ian Bertram's eponymous character Little Bird swoops into each comic panel – deftly fierce and gravely vulnerable. The comic is a picture of archetypal contrasts: between institution and individual, between other and self, between death and life, between real and imagined, between story and experience.

Through subtle psychological and spiritual depths underlying a graphic spectacle of blood and violence, Van Poelgeest and Bertram's Little Bird gives voice and shape to the myriad ambiguities and ambivalences of the human condition. "I want to leap off the edge and fly," Little Bird tells us, "But the world – It calls my name" (Van Poelgeest and Bertram 2019). It should be noted here that in the image panels which contain these words Little Bird has been pierced by her biological father's sword. Bishop, her father, who is also the fanatic leader of the comic's violent religious regime, holds the skewered body of his daughter aloft while the tableau is mirrored in a stark shadow. Little Bird's discovery of who she is and concomitant navigation of who she chooses to be dominates the narrative. Her process of discovery and becoming is represented as a textual negotiation. What only becomes clear in the final issue of the series is that what has seemed to be the inclusion of Little Bird's internal dialogue throughout the narrative has all along been entries in her written account of her experiences. In discovery and reflection, Little Bird is written out and into – both the text itself and the reader's imagination.

In the context of this discussion, "writing" can also be used to encompass drawing or other forms of creation (e.g., *poiesis*) so that writing and becoming are inextricably linked in the comic *Little Bird* (Van Poelgeest and Bertram 2019), not only for Little Bird's diegesis but also for readers' nondiegetic position. In the context of comics, "writing" can arguably be viewed as a conflagration of word and image – a textual performance for the reader which demands the reader's participation in order to be meaningfully enacted or "read." In *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*, Jeffrey Kripal (2011) remarks:

> Authorization begins when we decide to step out of the script we now know ourselves to be caught in and begin to write ourselves anew. If Realization is

> the insight that we are being written, Authorization is the decision to do something about it. If Realization involves the act of reading the paranormal writing us, Authorization involves the act of writing the paranormal writing us. (254)

In his comments above, Kripal describes a reflexive textuality to the individual's as well as the culture's process of becoming aware and operating with agency. Kripal makes deliberate use of the textual metaphor as a means for interpreting personal and cultural awareness and development, and Kripal's comments can apply as much to the comic book genre as they can apply to a spiritual and cultural understanding of ourselves in relation to our many layered environments.

Kripal (2011) delineates the overarching endeavor of *Mutants and Mystics* to demonstrate "how these modern mythologies can be fruitfully read as cultural transformations of real-life paranormal experiences, and how there is no way to disentangle the very public pop-culture products from the very private paranormal experiences" (2). Kripal's exploration of comics does not shy away from the religious dimension; instead, employing his expertise as a historian of religions, his text wholeheartedly engages the religious dimension of the comic genre's content and creation. In this view, the textual experience created by comics, a complex genre-amalgamation of words and images, may best be interpreted through the performative and participatory features of ritual theory.

Classic definitions of ritual often revolve around initiation processes (Arnold Van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* 1960), societal patterns (Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process* 1995), or religious distinctions (Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* 1987). Historically, ritual theory has relied upon a variety of disciplines from religious studies to anthropology and art to literature and theater to sociology and psychology. Ritual theory's interdisciplinary nature has demanded an equally interdisciplinary approach, an interdisciplinarity which is echoed in comics. Longstanding critical proponent of the genre, Scott McCloud (1994) defines "comics" as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). The simultaneous relationship between comic text and reader is dynamic. Not unlike theories of ritual, McCloud's definition emphasizes the comic's participatory and performative nature. Interdisciplinary and experiential: comics and ritual share much in common.

In pragmatic terms, Theodore Jennings (1995) describes ritual as both "a pattern of action" and "a way of knowing" (325). Jennings's simple yet affective summation discloses ritual's, and I would add here comic's, textuality as an enacted work (text) and a methodology of embodiment (*poeisis*). McCloud (1994) concludes his creative treatise *Understanding Comics* by propounding reflexively and religiously, "Comics…offers range and versatility with all the potential imagery of film and painting plus the intimacy of the written word and all that's needed is the desire to be heard – the will to learn – and the ability to see" (212-213). McCloud's language here is revelatory, echoing Biblical references to the multifaceted nuances between capacity and application of the physical and spiritual senses (Ezek. 12:2; Mark 8:18). In *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, Christopher Knowles (2007) declares, "Comics are a profoundly intimate form of storytelling" (213). Knowles also insists upon the material, substantive carnality of comics, affirming that "they are something you can hold, something you can possess, something that speaks only to you" (213). While Knowles comments on the more "intimate" nature of comics, he employs a similarly revelatory, albeit idiosyncratic, description to that of McCloud's.

Yet again, within a similar vein, Kripal's (2011) critical focus of *Mutants and Mystics* is not only upon the religious dimension of comics but also upon the cross-cultural nature of comics represented by "popular culture [that] is suffused with …mythemes…which are forming a kind of Super-Story, a modern living mythology…[which] are completely indebted to other cultures, even as they profoundly transform that which they adopt and embrace from these other sources" (330). Kripal's language speaks of "forming," "living," and "transform[ing]" qualities of comics. Surely, these active descriptors speak in the language of ritual, the language of affirming and becoming so integral to the nature of ritualizing.

"Forming," "living," and "transform[ing]" – each of Kripal's words reflects ritual's propensity for embodiment and enactment. This language emphasizes the nature of ritual to make manifest boundaries. Mircea Eliade (1987) has famously explained that "every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different" (26). Later in his text, Eliade describes the hierophanic experience as one in which "*the real unveils itself*" (63). In his TED Talk, "The Visual Magic of Comics," Scott McCloud (2005) describes "media" in the form of comics as a "way back," as a means for "re-entering the world." And once

again, in *Understanding Comics*, McCloud (1994) argues that the comic's "creator and reader are partners in the invisible" (205). Considered in this light, the comic text as a whole as well as each individual panel of images within Van Poelgeest and Bertram's *Little Bird* (2019) can be viewed through the lens of a hierophanic moment.

The "profoundly intimate form" (Knowles 2007, 213) of comics – a textual form that Knowles also contends has "a special magic that affects the brain in ways prose does not" (213) – is tempered by the comic's spectacular propensity for melodrama and violence. Exaggerated gestures, sweeping and sinuous swaths of blood, mantra-esque refrains, and alternating rhythms of close and far, serene and chaotic – *Little Bird's* textual orchestration of words, images, and concepts lends itself to readers' active, participatory experience. There are several elements within *Little Bird's* narrative which lend themselves to a ritual studies approach, namely: the creators' use of a postapocalyptic and indigenous-inspired cosmology, Little Bird's identification with particular animals, the text's integral metaphor of blood, and Little Bird's own textual reflexivity.

The narrative events of *Little Bird* range between an imagined indigenous community located within the natural environs of the Canadian Rocky Mountains to the tightly controlled urban space of the perverse religious regime of the New Vatican of the United Nations of America. Despite writer Van Poelgeest's initial attempts to downplay "confusion from readers and reviewers that [he's] writing about the Musqueam people" (Johnson 2019) in an interview for bookseller Barnes and Noble's *Sci-Fi & Fantasy* blog, it is more than just the comic's "land acknowledgment" that is aligned with and indebted to an indigenous perspective. The very first page of the comic opens with a close up of Little Bird's mother Tantoo in what appears to be some form of traditional face paint. Tantoo, Little Bird, and the community are dressed in earthily organic, animal inspired dress, clearly relying upon iconic and culturally traditional indigenous clothing.

In the next panel, Tantoo addresses her people from atop the vantage point of a tall, totemic pillar. Tantoo's speech illustrates depths from which Little Bird's community values its land, its ancestors, and its children. In her rallying cry for battle, Tantoo declares, "This doesn't end here. Not like this. We've protected this land with our own blood for thousands of years, so if it's the land they want, it's blood they'll pay to get it! Let their screams be the song to which we fight! Their passing be the silence in which we dream!" (Van Poelgeest and Bertram 2019). Tantoo's

identification of the "dream" will be repeated through the comic, reminiscent of the Australian Aboriginal's notion of the "'Dreaming,' that is, within the mythical time of the ancestors" (Smith 3). This "dream" becomes a mythic sense of space and being with which Little Bird's community coexists, and her community's notion of the "dream" as both a literal and metaphysical temporal and spatial construct will contrast with the New Vatican's dogmatic, destructive, and subjugating approach to the world.

According to Kali Simmons (2019), "Scholars such as Kim Tall Bear, Grace Dillon, and Kyle Powys White have argued that indigenous peoples are already postapocalyptic. That is, indigenous peoples have already faced catastrophic violence, the loss of relationships, and the fundamental alteration of their ways of life to survive in spaces that are physically, emotionally, and spiritually toxic" (175). In a recent article for *The Nation* on the American and Indigenous responses to COVID-19, Julian Brave NoiseCat (2020) identifies himself as a "postapocalyptic indigenous" (31) person; NoiseCat further identifies his postapocalyptic vision not only within his cultural worldview but down to his culture's language itself. NoiseCat comments that "the traditional way to say 'good morning' is *tsecwínucw-k*, pronounced 'chook-we-nook'… It literally translates to 'you survived the night'" (31). Survival is a significant concept for both the indigenous postapocalyptic perspective as well as Van Poelgeest and Bertram's comic cosmology within *Little Bird*.

Little Bird's survival symbolizes not only the continuance of her familial lineage – however complicated it might be – but also her survival symbolizes the continuity of her entire community and its notion of the world itself. Throughout the five issues comprising *Book One: The Fight for Elder's Hope*, Little Bird repeats her mother's plan: "Free the Axe. Save the people. Free the north. Save the world. (Van Poelgeest and Bertram 2019). Broken into four semantic declarations, this plan's language is simple, directional, and ritualistic. Saving Axe, a Canadian hero imprisoned within one of the New Vatican's technological facilities, represents a horizontal move within the comic's diegetic landscape. Freeing the north, shorthand for her ancestral peoples and their implied ecological harmony, represents a vertical move in which Little Bird must make contact with the mythical realm of her ancestors, a realm at once subterranean and ephemeral, an interior realm of interior psychological depth, a transcendent realm of hope. "Free the Axe. Save the people. Free the north. Save the world": these words represent a ritual boundary marking, establishing the

intersection, the crossing, between one realm and the next, between a people and a land, between profane and sacred. "Free" and "save" are words that operate as declarative demands for redemptive action.

"Survivance," according to Kristina Baudemann (2016), "is Gerald Vizenor's term for the active survival of Indigenous peoples and stories through creative resistance. Rather than a specific theme or trope, survivance is a strategy that creates 'a native sense of presence'" (126). While Baudemann's essay argues that this is a concept and methodology employed by Indigenous artists themselves, it is not too much of a stretch to see similar vestiges of "survivance" within Van Poelgeest and Bertram's *Little Bird*, despite its creators' nonindigenous identities.

Speaking to this point, Van Poelgeest remarks, "I certainly didn't set out to tell a uniquely indigenous story…But as I began imagining this world, and the mechanics that drive it, it became more and more difficult to not see the protagonist as being connected to the indigenous community" (Johnson 2019). Within the context of identity politics and cultural appropriation, *Little Bird's* use of the Indigenous could be fraught with controversy, but the creators' obvious warmth for the character and her Indigenous-inspired perspectives as well as the comic's positive identification of an Indigenous-inspired worldview in direct contrast with the colonizing totalitarianism of a perverse religious state, perhaps, mitigates strident negative critiques. In recognition of the personal nature of the creative process, Van Poelgeest notes that, "Ian [Bertram] has pointed out on more than one occasion that Little Bird looks a lot like my daughter (who is mixed Black, white, Chinese and Indigenous)" (Johnson 2019). Little Bird, a young girl of mixed heritage (the white Canadian cultural hero Axe is her grandfather and the twisted religious tyrant of the New Vatican Bishop is her father), is raised within the Indigenous community of her mother. She is reared upon an Indigenous sense of survival that is attuned to a cyclical rather than linear sensibility. This cyclical sensibility moves and speaks in ritual rhythms.

Little Bird's individual identity and her psychological empowerment are infused with a steely post-apocalypticism. A postapocalyptic perspective can, in part, be defined by the aforementioned Indigenous understanding of survival in the midst of oppression and hardship. However, a postapocalyptic perspective may, also, be defined by inversions of expectations and polarizing tensions. In an essay titled, "Reorientations; or, An Indigenous Feminist Reflection on the Anthropocene," Kali Simmons (2019) argues that "apocalypse…exemplifies a dystopian impulse defined

by destruction and catastrophe and a utopian impulse that fuels the rebirth of new hope or a new world rising from the ashes" (180). Simmons's explanation articulates post-apocalypticism's inclusion of the opposites. Destruction and creation, life and death's impulses, are integrally intertwined within the postapocalyptic genre, for this genre emphasizes the generative nature of the aftermath (postapocalyptic). The postapocalyptic genre and ritual alike take the substance of the aftermath in order to consecrate memory and to create anew; this requires the religious engagement of ritual movements.

Simmons's explanation of the apocalyptic, like Little Bird herself, resonates with imagery reminiscent of the phoenix. While Jean-Pierre Darmon (1992) delineates birds themselves as representative "intermediaries between high and low" (131), Luc Brisson (1992), more specifically, designates the phoenix as "the mythic bird in which all opposites coincide" (172). While Little Bird's name evokes a diminutive fragility, Little Bird the person embraces the visceral violence upon which she is called to engage. Her appearance is often masked by a feathery cape and mask with large, rounded goggles and pointedly beaked nose guard so that her appearance conjoins the human and the animal.

Michael Chaney (2011) argues that "concerns with being in-between are themselves articulated at a boundary of identity and representation" (133), a boundary such as the distinction between human and animal. Chaney argues further, "That paradox is best expressed in the way comics routinely problematize the human by blurring the ontological boundary between humans and animals according to the same logic that fuses and separates words and pictures" (133). Little Bird's identification with animals, both the lofty owl and the grounded wolf, ironically allows her to distinguish herself from the dehumanizing figures of the religious regime. And her animal identification facilitates the development of agency for herself as well as for her community. Issue two of *Little Bird* begins with her initiation into her own genetic composition. After being shot and dying, she discovers that like her mother and grandfather her body contains the "resurrection gene." Certainly emblematic of the phoenix, the "resurrection gene" allows Little Bird to die and to be reborn for an indeterminant number of times. Little Bird is not immortal, but she is genetically predisposed for survival.

In an interview for *Image Comics's* website, artist Ian Bertram ("Little Bird" 2018) describes a shared creative "interest" with writer Darcy Van Poelgeest in "untold stories" and "how to show the 'soul' of a character."

Bertram also confesses to an "[obsession] with the subconscious and its manifestations." In *Little Bird*, Bertram and Van Poelgeest's interests in realm of the "soul," the sub/unconscious is accessed not only by Little Bird's repeated interior journeys courtesy of the "resurrection" process, but it is also accessed by consciously-driven engagement with the liminal features of ritual. In *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, Jonathan Z. Smith (1987) identifies "ritual [as] a relationship of difference between 'nows' – the now of everyday life and the now of ritual place; the simultaneity, but not the coexistence, of 'here' and 'there.' Here (in the world) blood is a major source of impurity. Here (in the ritual space) blood removes impurity" (110). Because Little Bird exists within a postapocalyptic cosmology, the ritual boundaries between Smith's "here" and "there," or Eliade's "profane" and "sacred," have themselves been blurred and inverted. In a postapocalyptic perspective, not only does the entire dystopic landscape represents liminal space, the body and its blood, too, may become a liminal site, a site upon and through which redemption and reclamation may be engaged and enacted.

By distorting our complacent perceptions of the "real," *Little Bird's* postapocalyptic milieu simultaneously affirms and transforms our vision – not unlike the nature of ritual itself. In *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion*, William Paden (2003) observes that "for [Emile] Durkheim the most important function of ritual time was to renew the foundations of society itself, to regenerate the 'life' of its own beliefs" (34). Conversely, Paden intimates that "ritual can also provide a space in which individuals transcend fixed social roles and experience a sense of equality" (35). As Paden's comments illustrate, ritual can both *renew* and *transcend* its cosmological perspectives.

At times, ritual may mirror the movements of the phoenix, a quintessentially postapocalyptic creature. As Little Bird will write, "More than anything – [her story is] about the all-consuming nature of fire. And the dreams we make of ash" (Van Poelgeest and Bertram 2019). While the phoenix itself is never named, Van Poelgeest and Bertram coalesce the turbulently regenerative qualities of the phoenix into a creative reclamation of story, word, and image. Little Bird writes her own story. Her journal entries speak in the personal first person, but they also make use of the second person "we." In fact, her mother Tantoo's first lines, "This doesn't end here. Not like this," will be echoed at the end of the comic. In a series of panels that demonstrate Little Bird's burgeoning control through an ability to enter the ritual ancestral "Dream" space, an obviously more

mature Little Bird declares, "The child has arrived. It doesn't end here. Not like this." Little Bird stands firmly within her Indigenous community's sacred space when she grabs hold of bloody tentacles within her fist to proclaim, "Not like this." It is a declaration of agency. It is a promise of transformative renewal. It is a visual and verbal marking of boundaries. It is a ritual move. While a sense of individual identity is significant, ritual emphasizes the integration of the personal with the communal. For *Little Bird*, the comic, and Little Bird, the character, ritual perspective revolves around the individual "I" negotiating with the communal "we" in patterns that inscribe, dismantle, and consecrate in body, blood, and book.

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Graffiti in the Grass: Worldbuilding and Soul Survival Through Image, Immersive Myth, and the *Metaxis*

Li Sumpter

Abstract Mythmakers are worldbuilders. We are living in a time when the world, as we know it, feels painfully unrecognizable, and increasingly dangerous. War and violence are raging all around us, pandemics claim the lives of millions, and the planet is burning. Ancient future visions of apocalypse permeate the visual landscape and the stories we tell—from the reality of our everyday experience to our wildest dreams and imaginary worlds. It is times like these—End Times—when the archetypes of religion resonate deeply and paths to salvation are eagerly sought after by the human race, by any means necessary. From mythic and ecological perspectives, apocalypse is not the ultimate end but a timeless process of change. It is a recurring pattern of transformation inherent to the phenomenology of life itself. It is a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that nature, the cosmos, and all existence are fated to face time and time again.

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Mythmakers are worldbuilders.

We are living in a time when the world, as we know it, feels painfully unrecognizable, and increasingly dangerous. War and violence are raging all around us, pandemics claim the lives of millions, and the planet is burning. Ancient future visions of apocalypse permeate the visual landscape and the stories we tell—from the reality of our everyday experience to our wildest dreams and imaginary worlds. It is times like these—End Times—when the archetypes of religion resonate deeply and paths to salvation are eagerly sought after by the human race, by any means necessary. From mythic and ecological perspectives, apocalypse is not the ultimate end but a timeless process of change. It is a recurring pattern of transformation inherent to the phenomenology of life itself. It is a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that nature, the cosmos, and all existence are fated to face time and time again.

From a religious perspective, each new age and the evolution of humanity brings the death of old gods and the birth of new ones. James Hillman (1974) claimed, "Psychologically, the Gods are never dead; and archetypal psychology's concern is not with the revival of religion, but with the survival of soul" (119). In *The New Gnosis*, Roberts Avens (1984) proposes, for the human soul to survive, humans must acquire Gnostic knowledge, salvational knowledge, "a recollection, a remembering of a worldly soul and of an ensouled world" (9). In apocalyptic times, we are called to recollect, re-member and radically re-imagine reality, as we know it, so we can rise from the ashes and build again.

As a human of this planet, I hold deep concerns for the future and the soul survival of all peoples and life on Earth that transcends cultural, political, and religious divides. As an African American woman with ancestral ties to the Lenni Lenape of the Delaware Valley and the Gullah-Geechie peoples of South Carolina, I stand in solidarity with black, brown, and indigenous communities who fight for land sovereignty, self-determination, and safe spaces to live and dream brighter, blacker futures. The communities and causes I am connected to continue to shape and deepen my practice as a mythologist and multidisciplinary artist while providing fuel for the fire of my creative resistance against all threats to my body, mind, and soul and the *anima mundi*—the soul of the world.

As a child of the '80s growing up under global threats of the Cold War and nuclear apocalypse, I was haunted by the question, "What If?" What if we go to war? What if Russia drops a bomb on us? These fears were fed by the nightly news, TV shows, and popular movies from *War Games* to *Red Dawn*. The world of film and visual culture is where my imagination around the art of survival ran wild. But it is my first-hand experience with survival that continues to ground my art and mythmaking in the realities of life's dangers and fragility.

Ecological disaster and the coronavirus pandemic have revealed glaring disparities in the distribution of resources and emergency aid to BIPOC communities often overlooked and underserved, particularly in times of crises. With this imbalance in mind, the messaging and aesthetics of my myth-based work focus on amplifying the voices and illuminating the survival stories of black and brown peoples and the places they call Home. Philadelphia is home to me. It is a deeply historical and mythical place where I was born and raised, and it is the epicenter of the *Graffiti in the Grass* multiverse.

Graffiti in the Grass is an afro-apocalyptic myth set in future Philly circa 2045. It is an immersive story of speculative fiction designed to be experienced on the page and on stage, on large and small screens, as a live action game, and through augmented reality. The story follows Roxi RedMoon, a legendary graffiti writer and local escape artist of African and indigenous descent on a desperate race through the multiverse to find her missing sister on the eve of Earth's imminent cosmic destruction. Octavia E. Butler's prophetic novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993) set in our current time—the 2020's—has been a source of inspiration and speculative insight into the power of apocalyptic transformation that also drives *Graffiti in the Grass*. Like Butler's heroine Lauren Olamina, Roxi RedMoon's personal gifts and journey of self-discovery are tied to the future trajectory of her community and the fate of the planet. Butler brought her observations and feelings about the world around her into her story world and onto the page of *Parable*. Through the imaginal freedom of her fiction, she conjured a new God, a new path to salvation, a tool for soul survival for her characters and readers alike:

All that you touch
You Change.
All that you Change
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
is Change.
God
is Change.
—Earthseed, The Book of the Living (Butler 1993, 3).

These times of uncertainty and change can cultivate new perspectives and clarity of vision, perhaps even birth new religions, new realities, and ways of being better humans. The world of speculative fiction can offer hope and possibility in times of great loss and suffering. The speculative world of *Graffiti in the Grass* is born from that same question that inspired writers like Octavia and once conjured unimaginable horror in my youth—"What if?" This simple yet limitless question no longer haunts me but has become the heart and soul of my mythmaking and worldbuilding practice I call the art of survival:

> *What if art was used as a tool of readiness and resilience against real-life threats to our well-being? What if the power of story was used to engage communities in the collective re-imagining of a better world of our own design?*

I created the *Graffiti in the Grass* transmedia narrative and related multidisciplinary projects to put this inquiry into action. *Graffiti* is an epic Quantum Quest, a Heroine's Journey told across multiple platforms including a mobile app, Tarot card deck, escape room, and graphic novel allowing multiple entry points into the participatory narrative. Through identification with the challenges of the protagonist, Roxi RedMoon, and the set and setting, readers/players are offered dynamic access to this story world and the opportunity to cultivate their own approach to the "art of survival." *Graffiti in the Grass* aims to create deeper connections to story and the power of myth while cultivating eco-awareness and survival skill sets that have practical application in real-world environments and emergency scenarios. It is a story designed as a tool of soul survival in urgent times as well as a future artifact intended to re-collect, re-member, and re-imagine, the soul of the world.

Mythmakers are time travelers.

To create an immersive myth like *Graffiti in the Grass*, readers/players must be effectively connected across multiple dimensions and fields of experience – the story world, the real world, and the archetypal field of

apocalypse activated through image and symbol. When discussing imagination and reality and bridges between these worlds, the concept of synchronicity is always a fascinating, almost magical explanation. Synchronicity is a phenomenon that links acausal events and the dimensions of psyche and matter through the power and image of archetype. Jung introduced and developed the concept as contemporary culture has come to know it. Moreover, he was the first to seriously consider its theoretical impact on reality and the quantum dynamic of synchronicities:

> Jung speculated that psyche and matter are simply two different aspects of the same thing. Consequently, he explained synchronistic events, which are temporally related but casually distinct, as being connected by a common archetype. This view of the indivisibility of psyche and matter takes us into what Jung described as the psychoid realm. In many respects, this notion of the psychoid and its bridging of matter and psyche is the concept that allows for the confluence of Jungian psychology and the new sciences, since each speaks to an underlying, generative realm from which psyche and matter arise. (Conforti 1999, 50-51)

Here, in the context of synchronicity, the common denominator between psyche and matter is archetype. To create an effective immersive transmedia narrative, *Graffiti in the Grass* employs the tools of myth- and meaning-making. Through the alignment of archetype, symbol, time, and place synchronicity becomes a portal between the psychic and physical dimensions, between the speculative world of Roxi RedMoon and living reality of the reader. What appears in the dimension of the psyche can, in turn, manifest in the phenomenological world in one symbolic form or another.

Roberts Avens (1984) describes this place of in-between as, "the ghostly region of *metaxis* or liminality—the place and time of soul-making, the dimension that permeates and transforms the profane duration in all its phases of past, present, and future" (56). This *metaxis*—the site of soul-making, and the multidimensionality of immersive, transmedia storytelling, aligns most fittingly with the reality of the psyche understood through the frame of today's apocalyptic worldview. In the paradigm specific to analytical psychology, Hillman (1975) explains the psychic nature of the polytheistic structure as it defies clean cut boundaries of space and time and distinctions between the sacred and the profane:

> Polytheistic thinking shifts all our habitual categories and divisions. These are no longer between transcendent God and secular world, between theology and psychology, divine and human. Rather, polytheistic distinctions are among the Gods as modes of psychological existence operating always and everywhere. There is no place without Gods and no activity that does not enact them. (168)

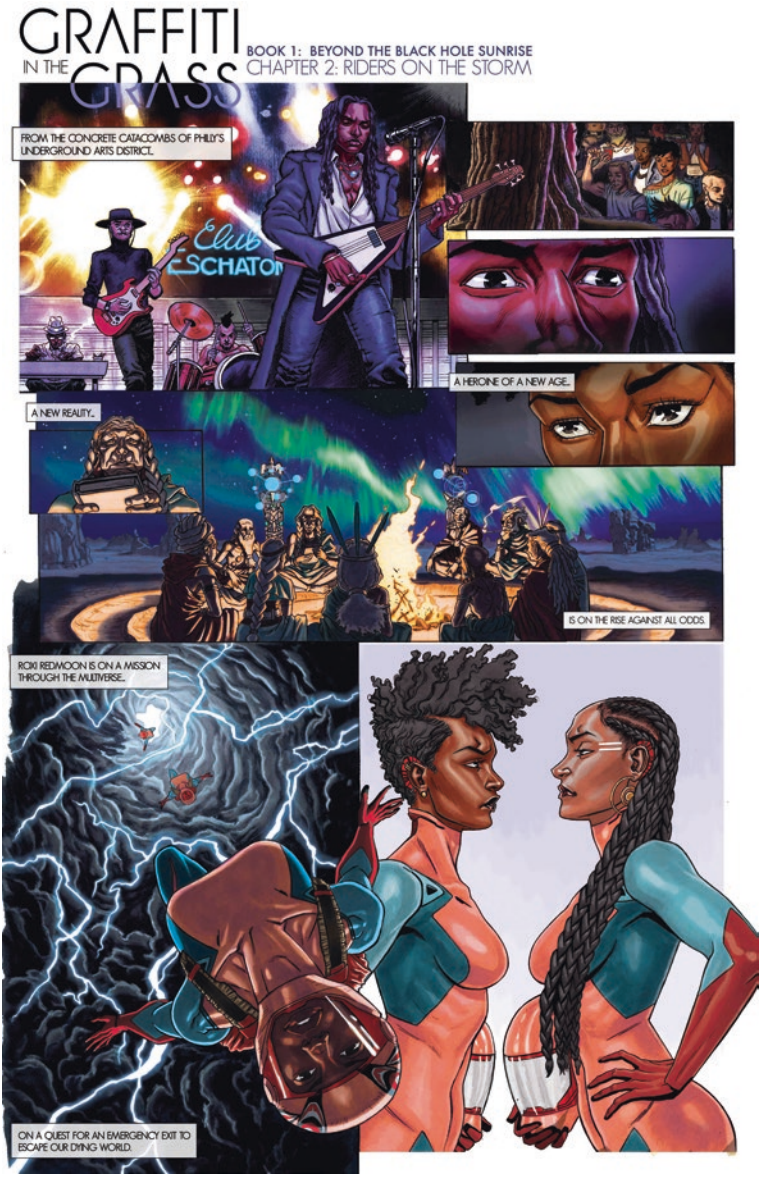
According to Hillman's perspective, Gods exist among us every day and in every aspect of life. Contemporary visual and media culture is how twenty-first century society documents most aspects of human activity. If such activity effectually enacts the Gods, how does art and media we create play a role in enacting the new Gods/Goddesses of our own soul survival? It is this relationship to and representation of the psychic realm via the modern image that makes art and cultural imagery the most powerful tool of myth and media makers of today's living generations.

Mythmakers are soul-makers.

My art is fueled by existential and metaphysical questions: What happens to souls of black folx who lack the hope to dream? How can feelings of danger and safety impact visions of our possible futures? If art truly does imitate life and myth gives rise to reality, can visual culture and the stories we tell manifest our collective destiny?

I use symbols of love, light, revolution, and rebirth to cultivate a lexicon of hope and healing that can be easily read, communicated, and replicated by fellow escape artists and everyday people. Through *Graffiti in the Grass* and other MythMedia projects, I invite my community to imagine new worlds where black and brown people, women, and all humans not only survive, but emerge more resilient and self-reliant, so they can thrive through whatever comes next. When popular art and aesthetics align with the images and aesthetics of the cultural complex, contemporary media, and platforms for storytelling from movies and games to comic books and graphic novels become more than significant. These myth-based media become profoundly transformative and even, life-saving. For me, engaging with the art and mythic language of these cultural forms becomes an act of ritual, soul-making and ultimately, soul survival.

Graffiti in the Grass: Triptych Trailer Concept Art. Artists: Ron Ackins in collaboration with Li Sumpter for MythMedia Studios



Graffiti in the Grass: Triptych Trailer Concept Art. Artists: Ron Ackins in collaboration with Li Sumpter for MythMedia Studios

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Afterword: Comics and Gnostics

Jeffrey J. Kripal

The genre of the afterword is one of appreciation and, where appropriate, thoughtful response. Please allow me a few autobiographical reflections. I do not mean to be narcissistic. It is my long experience that these actually help place and illuminate the ideas. They also set the life-context for what follows, namely, a response to a few of the essays that engage my work in some way.

The fundamental take-away of that work, crystallized in *Mutants and Mystics*, is this: superhero comics and science fiction more generally can and do function as transmission sites for what David Odorisio has called the "new gnosis."[1] Superpowers are real. So are the altered states of knowing and excessively weird paranormal phenomena or "special effects" in the physical environment that often lie behind the conception and within the very artistic execution of these genres on the page, on screen, and in

[1] Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Superhero Comics, Science Fiction, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). See also Kripal, "Can Superhero Comics Really Transmit Esoteric Knowledge?" in Wouter Hanegraaff, Peter Forshaw, Marco Pasi, eds., *Hermes Explains: Thirty-One Questions about Western Esotericism* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019). The question of the latter title is rhetorical. The answer is "Yes."

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life. This is, *by far*, the most important resonance between that book and this book—the gnostic transmission. I would immediately add that the vast, *vast* majority of such psi-fi gnostics will never be known as such. They exist silently in the margins of the culture, which, paradoxically, is also somehow the center.

Those, anyway, were the conclusions of *Mutants and Mystics* in 2011. But there are other things to say, particularly now, eleven years later, in 2022. The simple confessed truth is that there are many things that I have wanted to say about comics, science fiction, folklore, and, yes, religion since writing the book. I have occasionally said them in public or print.[2] And I have said them again in a much more theorized form in a recent monograph.[3] But this is a very good place to say them in a briefer format.

I admit that I am tempted to focus on all the new expressions in the present pages—especially "unfuckwithable," "freak esoterica," and "racist subliminalities." The new gnosis, it turns out, needs new expressions, which are new forms of consciousness coded in an emerging culture. But I will resist that and say other things. I want to thank David and his colleagues for allowing me to speak in these pages (the present text started as a brief blurb, which then became a longer foreword, which then became a fuller response or afterword). An author does not always get to talk to those who take up a work. I feel extremely fortunate to be able to do so here.

Superpowers and Historiography

If I have learned anything over the last decade or so, it is that taking superpowers as real should change how we imagine and so write history and subsequently study *everything* in that history, from literature to embodiment to religion to art to mind. To take the simplest and bluntest of

[2] I am a bit embarrassed to realize that "occasionally" is an understatement. I seem to be obsessed. For a few pieces that may fly under the radar and deal explicitly with the new gnostic themes of the present volume, consider Jeffrey J. Kripal, "How We Got to Super: Grant Morrison's Visionary Gnosticism," *Religion Dispatches*, 18 August 2011; "The Future Human: Mircea Eliade and the Fantastic Mutant," for Norman Girardot and Bryan Rennie, eds., special issue on "Remembering, Reimagining, Revalorizing Mircea Eliade," *Archaevs. Studies in History of Religions* 15 (2011); "Reading as Mutation," a Foreword to Whitley Strieber's *What Is to Come* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2011); "Receive the Hero," Foreword to Paul Selig, *The Book of Mastery* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2015); "The Most Cosmic Superhero of All!" Forward for Jeff Carreira, *Higher Self Expression: How to Become an Artist of Possibility* (Philadelphia: Emergence Education Press, 2021); and "Super Duper," a commentary on a Superman LSD blotter for Erik Davis, ed., *Blotter: The Art and Design of an LSD Medium* (MIT Press, forthcoming).

[3] Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Superhumanities: Historical Precedents, Moral Objections, New Realities* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022).

examples, if an individual routinely dreams the actual future, then, obviously, that future has already happened, and "history" is flowing backwards in time into the dreaming subject. "History," "literature," "embodiment," "art," "religion"—*none* of it is what we thought in these time-traveling moments. But then we knew that. Newton's empty three-dimensional space is not Einstein's relative space-time, after all. So why do we continue to imagine and write historiography in the former Newtonian pseudo-reality and not in the fuller Einsteinian reality? Why do we pretend that we do not know better?

My own story of coming to this goes something like this. I had just finished a big book on the history of the human potential movement in northern California and the counterculture.[4] As I finished that book, a strange conviction overtook me, possessed me, would not let me go. It struck me that the basic narrative of the human potential movement bore an uncanny similarity to a particular sidebar of my youth, the pop-mythology of the X-Men—both, after all, were about the cultivation and development of anomalous abilities that are understood to be evolutionary buds of a future human supernature. The two stories even appeared in their present forms at the exact same time—in the California of 1962 and New York City of 1963, respectively.

I always try to honor such ideas, particularly when they are accompanied by obvious synchronicities in space-time and grow to obsessive bounds, as if they are seeking or just demanding my attention. This one had all the marks. So I paid attention. And I acted. In particular, Michael Murphy and I hosted a four-year cycle on the paranormal and popular culture between 2008 and 2011 as I wrote what would become not one, but two books.[5] The titles of the symposia seem relevant now: "Esoteric Esalen: Altered States of History and the Human Potential Movement" (2011), "Plato's Theater: Mystical Realism and the Maturing of Metaphysical Film" (2010), "The Paranormal in History, Science, and Popular Culture" (2009), and "On the Supernormal and the Superpower"

[4] Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[5] I thought I was writing *Mutants and Mystics*. What actually came out first was its theoretical prolegomenon, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). So much for conscious human agency or control.

(2008).[6] We invited experiencers, intellectuals, artists, authors, film-makers, and special-effects professionals.

I do not know which year it was, but I remember asking some Hollywood professionals a single question. It went something like this: "Can you make a movie that is not fictional, one that engages the paranormal as an actual feature of human experience but does not involve spandex, fistfights, and things blowing up?" I was basically asking for public provocation, a calling of the question. I wanted historical biographies and documentaries. And if we had to tell fictions, I wanted them to be true fictions. I wanted what Michael Murphy calls "mystical realism," a kind of story-telling that stays very close to the phenomenology of actual experience, that tells it like it really is. I wanted the film-makers, in effect, to corner the viewers, not give them an easy way out: "Oh, this is only entertainment. None of this can happen."

The immediate response to my question went something like this:

"No, we can't."

"But why?"

"Because we have no idea if this will make money. We know what works, so we do that and not this."

Fair enough. They pointed out that most of the big box-office hits today are produced through elaborate and ever-more sophisticated CGI (Computer-Generated Imagery) techniques. This might seem cool. It is. But it also very, *very* expensive. In some cases, it costs literally hundreds of millions of dollars. Have you ever watched the credits to one of those movies? They just go on and on, and on. There must be over a thousand people (and salaries) involved in a blockbuster. The end result is that the studios will not take chances on films that move past the proven genres and so represent real financial risks. They want to stay in the groove.

Dang.

I certainly had other ideas. I wanted to put the film-makers in contact with the historians and philosophers, the people who actually know something about real-world paranormal experiences and powers. I wanted the studios to hire these colleagues as consultants and tell new, truly new stories. (Okay, I also wanted them to hire me.)

That was the idea. It didn't work. No go.

[6] For a playful report I wrote on the first symposium for Roy Thomas, in a comic-book fanzine no less, see Jeffrey J. Kripal "Esalen and the X-Men: The Human Potential Movement and Superhero Comics," *Alter Ego* 84 (spring 2009).

But that was then. This is now. Things are a'changing. Film is easier to make now. What once cost tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars in camera equipment can now be done with the cheapest of technology, including the smart-phone in your pocket.

Superhumans Among Us

The scholarship on folklore, mythology, art, and religion is also becoming increasingly sophisticated, bolder, more imaginative, and well, just more super. Witness, as a single example, Anya Foxen's recent *Biography of a Yogi*, an in-depth study of Paramahansa Yogananda and his über-influential *An Autobiography of a Yogi*—you know, the orange book with the Indian yogi on the cover and all the miracle stories inside that played such an influential role in shaping the American reception and transformation of yoga in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s.

One of the many things that struck me so about Foxen's book is her argument for the translation of the miracle stories or Hindu yogic siddhis. The latter powers have often been translated as "perfections." That is technically correct, since the word is related in turn to the *siddha*, the "perfected being" of Hindu and Buddhist Tantric lore. But it is not at all clear what "perfection" means (it sounds vaguely moral and upstanding to the American ear). And the technical translation of *siddhi* as "perfection" certainly suppresses the actual wild folklore and sheer excitement around such figures and phenomena in India. The Hindu or Buddhist *siddha* is no righteous citizen. Quite the opposite. The *siddha*s are, in effect, flying superbeings, with very sophisticated doctrines, rituals, psychosomatic techniques, iconographies, and institutions wrapped around their astonishing feats and persons.

Much better, then, Foxen argues, to use the pop-cultural references that we know so well. Hence the yogis possess not perfections, but "superpowers." And Yogananda himself was teaching a "superhumanity," in effect how to become an actual "superhuman."[7] In his own words, Yogananda was after "Mastering the Subconscious by Superconsciousness," "Your Super Powers Revealed," and "Quickening Human Evolution." He

[7] Anya P. Foxen, *Biography of a Yogi: Paramahansa Yogananda & the Origins of Modern Yoga* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11-12.

would even speak of "Using Super Electrons for Your Higher Success."[8] The word "super" is everywhere.

The skeptic or critic can sneer at such language, but it is *immediately* recognizable by those who know the comics and science fiction. And it means something. It carries a charge or jolt. It transmits. That is one reason that Yogananda's book sold so many copies and had such a profound and lasting influence on the culture, or counterculture. It transmitted something beside and beyond itself, like a lightning bolt from the blue (or orange). People did not just want to read about these superpowers. They wanted those superpowers. Indeed, they had them, they were them, which is to say that they had experienced them, and they knew it. And now they had a big orange book to affirm and make some cultural sense of them. It was not perfect. It never is. But it was something. It was really something.

Foxen's move seems exactly right to me. I have made the same argument about Friedrich Nietzsche's famous *Übermensch*. Some scholars have resisted the original American translation of "Superman," not because it is technically incorrect (it is), but because of its association with the Jewish-looking guy in blue tights and the red cape.

"No," I want to answer back, "that is exactly why we *should* sometimes use this particular translation. Superman is an alien-immigrant. Superman is cool. Fuck your academic uptightness." Okay, I don't say the last sentence. But I feel it (and I just wrote it.)

Moreover, the superheroic associations run *much* deeper still in this founding figure of the modern humanities. The fact that Nietzsche saw the coming superhumans (a much better translation still) as a speciation event, and that he firmly believed that the superhumans would exist alongside the regular or "last" humans renders the pop-associations even more relevant as a source of potential insight and serious reflection.[9] This, after all, is *very* close to the mythology of the X-Men franchise. It turns out, then, that the pop-mythology of the evolving superhumans—which is at the base of both the Marvel Universe and the California human potential movement—is rooted in the history of the humanities and philosophy, in

[8] Ibid., 150-1.

[9] The translation is indeed technically incorrect, as the German *Mensch* does not mean "man" but "human." Paul S. Loeb and David F. Tinsley have argued persuasively that *Übermensch* should be translated as "superhumans." See "Translator's Afterword," in Paul S. Loeb and David F. Tinsley, trans., *Unpublished Fragments from the Period of* Thus Spoke Zarathustra *(Summer 1882—Winter 1883/84)*, vol. 14 of The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche (Stanford University Press, 2019).

this case in Nietzsche himself. Indeed, it could well be argued that an X-Men figure like Magneto *is* Friedrich Nietzsche. But this is all very late to the game. As I wrote in *Mutants and Mystics*, the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philosophers, scientists, and mystical writers—including and especially Nietzsche—laid the foundations for all of this. They are the real "X-Men before their time."

It would be tempting to pass this all off on the madness of Nietzsche (people love simplistic reductions). And that would be wrong. Historical and contemporary practicing artists, it turns out, know and say much the same (or just the same). They know that artistic creativity is not what it seems, that there are often occult and paranormal processes involved—superhumans in disguise. I really cannot count the times now that a curator or art historian has contacted me because they need advice on how to think about an artist who takes ghosts or UFOs seriously, practices clairvoyance, experiences possession, sees the future, or believes in evolving superpowers. I find these moments especially powerful. I love artists. I think religion is art that does not know it is art. Or maybe art is religion that has not yet become religion. Same thing.

Sex and Race in the Super Story

I sometimes worry that my enthusiasms for the Super Story mislead. I take responsibility for this, but I can also assure the reader that I have never intended this misunderstanding. I have never wanted this. Quite the exact opposite, really. I think that the Super Story is always reflecting back on itself and criticizing itself, partly through the scholarship that we ourselves perform. *These very discussions, in these very pages, in this very book are part of the Super Story.* Through these authors and essays, the Super Story is correcting itself, righting itself in the stormy winds and waters of contemporary culture and new public knowledge.

Let me be more specific and less poetic. Let me get real. I sometimes worry that colleagues and readers come away with the impression that I think the Super Story is somehow always just and good, that it is always, well, super. I certainly do *not* think that. I think those who participate in the formation of this emergent mythology are often *very* wrong, or better put, that their thoughts too often hurt, maim, scar, even kill people. This is one reason I spent some time in the book on a figure like Fredric Wertham. His psychoanalytic thoughts of the 1950s were dramatically and consistently homophobic. Such thoughts were indeed progressive on

issues of gender and race, but they were no such thing on sexual orientation. For example, in Wertham's hermeneutic, Wonder Woman was likely a lesbian, and Batman and Robin were probably a gay couple. Maybe so, but these were very bad things in Wertham's 1950s values. These were horrific role models that were corrupting the American youth and causing juvenile deliquency.

It is important to admit that I reacted so in my book to this kind of homophobic reading because of my own personal history. After all, I had earlier found my own religious tradition, Roman Catholicism, similarly stupid and cruel in the 1980s. Young (gay) men were killing themselves, dramatically and violently, partly because of the teachings about homosexuality that were coming out of Rome in that decade. These were official teachings that equated homosexuality with psychopathology, with sickness. I saw this stupidity up close and personal. Three young men in my immediate religious orbit tried to kill themselves in the first half of the 1980s: with a gun, with a rope in a barn, and with a bottle of sleeping pills. The first two succeeded. *People died because of this idiocy.*

I will never forget that. I cannot forget that.

I ultimately left the religious life mostly over these moral crises, with the accompanying conclusion that the obvious and infamous misogyny of the Church was similarly constructed and appalling. I also could not shake the intuition that, paradoxically, this long Catholic misogyny is somehow related to the profound male homoerotic privileges and celibate structures of the Church, the secret psychosexual results of which were in direct contradiction to the public-facing homophobic teachings of the same Church (the tradition was dangerously homophobic on the outside but obviously homoerotic on the inside). Put too simply, I worried (and still worry) that closeted (or churched) gay men do not need or love women. In this worry, at least, the Catholic issue of male homosexuality is related in complex historical and institutional ways to the Catholic issue of religious misogyny. In short, there are moral contradictions: some of the Church's teachings lead to affirmation, playfulness, embodiment or incarnation, and a particular joy in the image and ritual performance; others lead to unnecessary guilt, self-inflicted violence, and death; and often the very same people (the churched and closeted gay men in power) are responsible for both. It is a moving complicated mess.

All of this moral complexity in turn leads directly into what I call the Super Story and how it gets taken up by different communities and individuals. I am thinking in particular of the essays of Amy Slonaker and

Yvonne Chireau. Since both scholars engage my work on the Super Story in some fairly significant ways, it seems worthwhile to reflect on those engagements here in the context explained above.

Slonaker, for example, engages the topics of sexuality and gender, particularly female sexuality and gender, in what she calls the Christian Hippie Comics. Such Christian hippies, it turns out, used women for "bait," to lure other men into their charismatic religious fold. Yvonne Chireau explores the category of race and Blackness in what she calls "Graphic Voodoo." Such an aesthetic was born of the European Gothic imagination, the very real challenges to colonial whiteness that a revolutionary country like Haiti represented, and the terrible histories of chattel slavery and anti-Black racism in the Americas, which are apparent everywhere in the comic culture, from Donald Duck to the Marvel superheroes.

Each colleague points, gently and generously, to what are basically real weaknesses or deafening silences in my treatment of the Super Story, but they also—and this is so important—participate in the correction and deepening of that very emerging mythology in their scholarship and this discussion. I love this. I love them. This is why I so believe in scholarship, in the humanities, in the colleges and universities. We can correct and redirect one another and, by so doing, our cultures.

There have in fact been two main regrets over the last decade or so since writing *Mutants and Mystics*. Both are well represented by Slonaker and Chireau. One regret involves the relative silence around women and female sexuality in the book. The other involves my silence around race and Blackness. Neither, I should add, were intentional or planned, and both were functions of my own training and interests of the time. Nevertheless, both are especially obvious and telling today in 2022 and deserve some comment. Let me try. Allow me to respond.

Mostly because of my experience in the Roman Catholic Church, the first half of my career involved a long meditation on three related topics: male sexual orientation, the psychosexual and social production of male sanctity, and the relationship of all of this to ecstatic religious experience and vision. I came into the field in the late 1980s, when feminist critiques were especially apparent and sophisticated. I was perfectly aware of them and, indeed, read widely in these very literatures. But I also learned, very early on, that *men should not speak for women*.

I was, and remain, a man, and a white heterosexual man at that. I agreed with the feminist conclusion that men should not speak for women. Accordingly, I concluded that I could best contribute to the study of

religion by studying male sexual orientation. So that is what I did. I did not talk about the women (for that would be speaking for them). I talked about the men.

Nevertheless, I got into a *lot* of trouble by talking about my own religious tradition, but also by venturing out into other cultures and religions, male gender identities, and male sexual orientations. Indeed, I became a kind of poster-boy of the harassed and threatened scholar of religion in the 1990s and remained so well into the millennium. I know what it is to be targeted by right-wing ideologues and their blatant lies. All too well.

I think many readers underestimate just how terrifying and real these threats were. I mean, I am talking about a debate in India's Parliament, two national ban movements, cover-stories throughout India, consistent scapegoating or misinformation techniques on the early Internet, and, for my second book now, a strong request by the American bishops to retract what I thought and wrote about Catholic celibacy and homoeroticism. Concerned Hindu readers and colleagues, whom I did not know, would write me and beg me to be careful. They were hearing even worse. I listened.

I took the lessons learned here and applied them to the feminist critique as well. I consciously and specifically avoided female figures and topics, because I was convinced, and I remain convinced, that I lack sufficient insight and, frankly, existential interest (and I was already in enough trouble studying and writing about the men). One can call this decision not to talk about the women a fault, I suppose, but I also see it as a moral position and a particular finitude borne of a particular existential situation (read: my body). Honestly, it was all I could handle just to be me. It was *that* bad. Indeed, it got so unbearable that I was treated for PTSD, twice, and I eventually left the field of my decade-and-a-half linguistic and cultural training

Accordingly, when I studied comics and science fiction later, I am sure I did this because these are, historically, overwhelmingly male genres, and I felt like I had something to say, and something that I *could* say. There are female, queer, and transgendered people, for sure, in these literatures, but they tend to inhabit and work as themselves in periods later than the 1940s, 50s, 60s, and 70s, which were the decades on which I focused. I am thinking of Octavia Butler (a female Black writer) in science fiction and D.W. Pasulka or Jenny Randles in ufology (the latter a transgender woman).

The same observations are true of the category of race. When I wrote *Mutants and Mystics*, I simply was not working or thinking about race and religion. My colleagues were. I worked (and still work) in a department with gifted intellectuals who had given their lives to these very subjects: particularly Elias Bongmba and Anthony Pinn. I saw no reason to repeat their thoughts, and no doubt badly so. I did not know this critical literature, and I did not want to pretend that I did. I admired it, did everything I could to support it as an administrator, but it was not me. I wanted to honor that, admit it.

This is all to say that when a colleague like Amy Slonaker focuses in on the misogyny of the Christian Hippie Comics, or Yvonne Chireau writes of the racist and white terror horrors of Graphic Voodoo, I only feel collegial gratitude and a kind of deep cultural mourning. I am relieved. I am thankful. I say, "Yes," and with an exclamation point.

I also remember in these moments that scholarship since I wrote *Mutants and Mystics* has focused on precisely these very feminist and racial topics. I am thinking of Adilufu Nama's *Super Black* and Ramzi Fawaz's *The New Mutants*, two texts that I have also taught and from which I have learned a great deal, or, in a different mode now, Jon Woodon's *To Make a New Race*, which focuses on the Harlem Renaissance and the Black writers' commitments to the sci-fi evolutionary vision and spiritual elitism of G.I. Gurdjieff.[10]

Nama is especially generous about how an Afrofuturist character like the Black Panther was created by two white men (Stan Lee and Jack Kirby) but then was taken up by Black creators and readers in complex, contradictory, but also positive and affirmative ways. Fawaz writes some very insightful things about queerness, sexual orientation, race, poverty, drugs, and social marginality, in comics for adolescents no less. I laughed many times reading his work, remembering my own boyhood and my strange, inexplicable attractions—erotic, no doubt—to the aching bodies, arching forms, and barely dressed bodies of the Marvel pantheon. Such comics were clearly the origin-point of my own literary and intellectual imagination (not to mention my sexuality), which I hope is as radical as Fawaz wants it to be.

[10] Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); and Jon Woodson, *To Make a New Race: Gurdjieff, Toomer, and the Harlem Renaissance* (University Press of Mississippi, 1999).

Super Social Justice

I should finally add that, even with the evolutionary esoteric currents that are so central to the Super Story, colleagues often miss or are not aware of the profound anti-colonial, non-white, and proto-feminist origins of the Super Story. These are hardly the only origin-points or currents, but they *are* origin-points and currents. I have written of all of this before, but it is perhaps worth summarizing here at the end of my comments.

No figure, after all, is probably more central in the story that I tell than the Bengali activist, intellectual, and guru Aurobindo Ghose. In his youth, Ghose was a freedom fighter, a "terrorist" by British standards, who spent time in jail and who spent the rest of his life in a French colony in eastern India, Pondicherrry, in order to avoid the British spies who surrounded the place and watched his every move. When Aurobindo turned from politics to spiritual writing, became a guru, and wrote of the coming "Superman" or descending "Supermind" (and he did), or when he wrote of his own practice and experience of the endless paranormal powers of the *siddhi*s (and he did), he was not advancing a white nationalism or yet another racist evolutionary vision. He was advancing a fusion of Indian philosophy and European science. In his own mind, he was speaking of the species, not of any single nation or race. We can disagree with him, of course, but it is simply not possible to avoid the radically anti-colonial and profoundly non-white nature of his person and evolutionary esoteric vision.

And this is before we get to a figure like the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who wrote of the evolutionary force of mystical experience and parapsychological experience. Readers do not generally know that Bergson died of pneumonia after he stood in the rain for hours to register against the Nazi occupation of France. He had every opportunity to accept the Nazi affirmation of his obvious public prominence, indeed fame, as an "Honorable Aryan." He rejected that racist title. And he died for that rejection.

We can also invoke the life-story of the Victorian researcher who lies behind both Aurobindo and Bergson—Frederic Myers. It is seldom pointed out, but this coiner of terms like "telepathy," "supernormal," and the "imaginal" (no, it was not Henry Corbin), spent his public life as a reformer of education in England. More specifically, he argued and worked for the education of women. Frederic Myers, the psychical researcher *par excellence*, was a proto-feminist.

Something similar again is true of the famous perennialism of the British-American writer Aldous Huxley, which in turn played such an important role in the same emergent mythologies of the Super Story. Scholars like to poke holes in perennialism, but they miss, usually entirely, the anti-war context and critical nature of Huxley's own. Aldous Huxley, after all, turned to perennialism partly, or largely, because of his famous pacifism, the devastations of World War II, and the religious ideation that helped produce the deaths of tens of millions of people (including the Nazi holocaust). In short, Huxley's perennialism was a moral protest, not a naïve affirmation of the religions or the nation-states, against which he firmly and famously stood. He also wrote quite explicitly that some religious beliefs and orientations *prevent* the perennialist revelation of Mind at Large, and that, oh by the way, psychedelics can reveal it. He was no naif.

Finally, the same is true yet again of the most immediate intellectual architect of the human potential movement, the Stanford professor of comparative religion Frederic Spiegelberg. Spiegelberg fled Nazi Germany for his and his family's lives. And when he wrote out of his own mystical experience around the middle of the last century, he did not write to affirm any particular religious tradition or nation, including his own Christian culture. He in fact wrote of a "religion of no religion." The phrase is complicated, paradoxical, and finally apophatic, as, I would argue, should our thought be here. The accent lands on the *no*.

That is probably enough for now.
Or too much.
Which means it is just right.
May the Super Story be told anew.

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[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

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