Better Off Dead
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The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human

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Our impulse is to try to thank everyone who has ever influenced or supported our study of zombies, but in the interest of saving some room to actually talk about said zombies we will limit ourselves to as small a list as we can manage.

SJL: Many people advised me as we began to put together a collection of this type, and others offered their sage advice as we endeavored to find the right home for it. Peter Dendale, Simon Sadler, and Eric Smoodin offered invaluable advice about the art of editing and publishing. I am so grateful that my advisers didn’t balk when I told them I was taking this on: Claire Waters, Scott Simmon, and Michael Ziser were encouraging and full of wisdom to share; Timothy Morton offered invaluable editorial advice; Colin Milburn was a constant source of support on all fronts—my contributions to this collection would have looked very different without his steadying guidance. Without the example, advice, and friendship of Caleb Smith, I doubt very much that I would have had the moxie to take on a project of this scope and size. In this, and every other endeavor, the late Marc Blanchard was my rock: He will be sorely missed. Last, however, I have to acknowledge the unflagging support of my darling husband and my lovely children, who sometimes endure nightmares, because Mommy works on zombies.

DC: Years ago, at a pivotal point in my graduate studies, I nearly turned away from the study of monsters, thinking that nobody would ever take that research seriously. Walter Kendrick convinced me otherwise and supported the idea that studying the things we fear is ultimately a liberating and uplifting experience. The world is a smaller place without Dr. Kendrick, who passed away in 1998, but it is my fondest hope that he would have been proud of the scholarship represented in this collection and of my continued pursuit of the darker mysteries of life and all things after. Ken Monteith, Margo Collins, and Mark Cantrell have been my support and my sounding boards throughout this project. I also need to thank...
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Patrick McCarthy, the English department, and the library staff at the University of Miami for providing me with the resources and encouragement to see this project through to completion. Much like my coeditor, I have to acknowledge the amazing support of my husband and my children, who have frequently had to do without me because of this collection. I could not do what I do without their support, and I would not be who I am without their love.

The editors would be remiss if they didn’t acknowledge that Steven Zani and Kevin Meaux are the biological parents of this collection. They conceived of the project of assembling a collection of scholarly essays on the zombie and solicited many of our contributors. We are so grateful that they allowed us to adopt the project, give it our own name and shape, and develop it as we saw fit, but we owe them an especial debt of gratitude for having first breathed life into it. Besides, we think it fitting that the collection has been reanimated.

We are grateful to the editorial board at Fordham University Press and all the hard work the staff—particularly Josh Jones, Tom Lay, Eric Newman, Nicholas Taylor, Kathleen Sweeney, and Kathleen O’Brien—has done on our behalf. We are immensely appreciative that editor Helen Tartar was willing to consider having such an acclaimed scholarly press publish a collection devoted to such an unusual topic.

This project has undergone many transformations, and in the process we have had the benefit of exchanging work and ideas with many scholars. We would like to thank Jillian Mcdonald, Alexandre Joseph, Christopher Zealand, Kyle Bishop, Jennifer Cooke, John Kitterman, Kriscinda Meadows, Dion Turbrette, Shelley O’Brien, and Martin Carter for sharing their insights with us.

Death is not the end . . . in fact, in this collection, it is quite literally the beginning.
That the zombie is ubiquitous in popular culture cannot be disputed: From popular literature and comic books to video games and performance art, in smartphone applications and in homemade films, zombies are all around us. Though horror film has been of interest to scholars for decades, some critics have heralded a resurgence of the zombie in popular culture and, subsequently, inaugurated a new boom of scholarly investigation of this fearsome figure of living death. Perhaps we can say with certainty that the zombie is more popular now than ever before; it has even seemed to have crashed the boundaries of narrative and stepped into real life. Newspapers are full of stories of large-scale games of zombie tag, of zombie proms, of zombie warnings posted on road signs by cheeky hackers: this transgression from the screen to the street is but one of the many types of “zombie evolution” we discuss herein. Assembling this collection in the year marking the bicentennial of Charles Darwin’s birth, and the sesquicentennial of his publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859)—the seminal text describing the principle of evolution and postulating that humans and apes descended from a common ancestor—we felt that our project was haunted by the zeitgeist, for this collection charts the evolution of the zombie, establishing how this myth has developed along with human civilization. With an eye toward the future (and perhaps a tongue
in cheek), we question whether the zombie resembles our prehistoric past, acts as a mirror reflecting our present anxieties, or suggests whether the future will house a more evolved post-humanity or merely the graves of a failed civilization.

We structured our collection around a basic rising—or evolving—principle. The book consists of three parts, representing the three most recognizable stages of twentieth- and twenty-first-century zombie configurations: the classic mindless corpse, the relentless instinct-driven newly dead, and the millennial voracious and fast-moving predator. Our dissection of the zombie myth is concerned with it not only as a fictive monster on which we stamp our society’s latest fears, but also as a model to which we have applied modes and methods of reading. This collection is a survey of the zombie’s cinematic history, but also an investigation of the zombie from an interdisciplinary perspective, with an emphasis on deep analytical engagement with diverse kinds of narratives. Just as we approach the zombie from many different points of view, looking across history and across media, we also employ diverse theoretical perspectives. Our collection’s deep engagement with narratives that reach beyond those found in film and literature to investigate zombies in art, life, and cyberspace reveals that the zombie has not just evolved within narratives—it has evolved in a way that transforms narrative. In this way, we feel our collection acknowledges the possibility that the zombie is post-human, and also illustrates that we are already living in the period of the post-zombie. Yet, for all this evolutionary progress, we acknowledge that any use of the word “post” is, as Neil Badmington writes, “forever tied up with what it is post-ing.”

The zombie may therefore be an apt icon for the post-human in its frustrating antipathy: Just as the post-human will always assert what the human is by that which it supposes itself to be beyond, the zombie both is, and is not, dead and alive. It was its complex sense of transformation, more than any other aspect of the “Millennial Zombie” (a category that Peter Dendle fleshes out in his essay here), that called for this collection. The zombie auteur George Romero, who was himself responsible for guiding the zombie from one iteration to another, has cast aspersions in a number of interviews as to whether the ravenous creatures in works like *28 Days Later* are “dead” enough to be legitimately called zombies. If the zombie has evolved so much over the course of the twentieth century that, at the beginning of the twenty-first, it is nearly unrecognizable, then surely there is a need to define exactly what we mean when we call something a zombie, to chart the evolution of this concept, and to map out the ways that this monster has been and will continue to be a useful theoretical