

EC COMICS



RACE SHOCK & SOCIAL PROTEST

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2019

COMICS
CULTURE

QIANA
WHITTED



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EC COMICS

**RACE, SHOCK, AND
SOCIAL PROTEST**

Qiana Whitted



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PREFACE

When I read *Mad* as a kid during the early 1980s, my favorite part was the back cover “fold-in.” My parents allowed me to buy the humor magazine long before I was old enough to understand its political satire, so instead I opted to spend most of my time with the advertising parodies and the sitcom spoofs: *Magnum P.U.*, *The Cloddy Show*, *The Dopes of Haphazard*. Waiting at the end of the issue was a zingy tableau by the artist and writer Al Jaffee. Beneath the tagline—“HERE WE GO WITH ANOTHER RIDICULOUS MAD FOLD-IN”—Jaffee illustrated colorful, modern landscapes and scenes of people in everyday situations. Each picture was accompanied by a verse that posed an enigmatic question for readers to answer by folding in the page until the arrows marked “A” lined up in the middle next to arrows “B.”

Condensed just so, the page revealed a new picture and a clever quip made from the abridged text. In the October 1981 issue of *Mad* (#226), for instance, Jaffee asks, “What convenient place has the chemical industry found to dump its toxic products?” When you fold in the picture of a laboratory’s churning machines and vats of strange liquid, revealed are a carton of milk, a tuna can, and a block of cheese—simple grocery items—and the answering caption: “In our bellies.”

The feature served—and continues to serve—as the magazine’s parting laugh, a gimmick with satirical bite that I now realize was also an invitation into the creative process. Like so many *Mad* readers, I loved comparing the places where Jaffee blended the second cartoon inside the first. Leaning close to the surface of the page, pulling the arrows back and forth, I marveled over the story that our hands made together. Even now I remain fascinated by the way the words and

images that seemed so familiar could be reoriented to expose something wholly unexpected from within.

The *Mad* fold-in's sleight of hand suggests a fitting analogy for this book's examination of the Entertaining Comics Group (EC). The controversial publishing company is widely remembered for producing horror, crime, war, humor, and science-fiction comic books in the late 1940s and early 1950s. EC "mags" gained a reputation for terrorizing adolescents with the Crypt Keeper's fiendish glare; for splitting open panels with severed heads, oozy swamp monsters, and alien tentacles; and for cranking out punch lines that ended with Alfred E. Neuman's toothy grin.

Yet my study devotes little attention to the company's best-selling horror comics or to *Mad* itself, EC's longest-running title. The focus of this book, instead, is on a profoundly influential type of story that EC writers and artists developed to directly engage the problems that Americans faced during the early Cold War and civil-rights eras. I analyze how these social-protest comics draw on the conventions of EC's signature genres to confront racial prejudice, religious intolerance, anticommunist rhetoric, and other forms of social discrimination. Such progressive messaging was not limited to a single EC series; sandwiched between bizarre tales of shock and gore, the stories that EC publisher Bill Gaines referred to as the "preachies" were just as likely to appear in a work of fantasy as in one focused on suspense.

This book demonstrates how integral the preachies are to the larger picture of Entertaining Comics. I argue further that the narrative, aesthetic, and marketing strategies of "the EC way" constitute one of the most effective means through which questions of social justice were explored in American comic-book culture after World War II. To fully grasp the significance of these stories and the conditions that produced them, I offer my own version of the fold-in, starting with a set of interpretive arrows that call attention to key historical, political, and cultural contexts. My readings are informed by the work of comics historians and cultural studies scholars who have been chronicling the story of EC since the company discontinued its comics division in 1956 in response to the restrictions imposed by the Comics Magazine Association of America's Comics Code.

Vital to my investigation is the dialogue between EC and its reading communities, past and present, through letters, fanzines, editorials, and social media posts that deliberate over each issue and connect the stories to lived experiences. And in my observations of the comics themselves, I take great pleasure in highlighting the unexpected merits of the visual and verbal features that mark their cultural status as formula fiction. The so-called clichés and constraints of genre ultimately serve as an important conduit for EC to disrupt normative assumptions about race and ethnic identity and to complicate relative notions of patriotism, tradition, safety, and authority in the process. As an alternative view of EC emerges through this study's critical analysis, my hope is that readers will come away with deeper insight into how American comic books advance the public understanding of complex social problems through popular media.

* * *

Writing this book has been the experience of a lifetime. As much as I value the time, access to resources, and institutional support that allowed me to begin the project, I am especially thankful for the people who helped me to find the confidence and courage that I needed to finish it. To my husband, Kenny, for his love and boundless support, and to our two little superheroes, Naima and Alex, I am grateful to have taken each step of this journey with you. Thank you to my parents and to my sisters, Thena and Jaimé, for always cheering me on.

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EC COMICS

INTRODUCTION

THE PREACHIES

During the Q&A for “The Horror Panel” at the 1972 Entertaining Comics (EC) Fan-Addict Convention, an audience member raised a question about “Judgment Day!”—the futuristic antidiscrimination story that first appeared in 1953. “I just wanted to congratulate you on doing stories about race and religion. You were the first comics to do that,” he began, prompting EC’s publisher, William M. Gaines, to deadpan, “Yes, I think in these days that’s called ‘relevance.’” When the attendee went on to ask where the story ideas originated from, EC’s lead editor and writer, Al Feldstein, explained, “We came out of World War II, and we all had great hopes for the marvelous world of tomorrow. And when we started writing our comics, I guess one of the things that was in the back of our minds was to do a little proselytizing in terms of social conscience. So Bill and I would try to include, mainly in our science fiction, but I think we did it in the horror books too, what we called “preachy” stories—our own term for a story that had some sort of plea to improve our social standards.”¹

The proselytizing in “Judgment Day!” begins with a helmeted astronaut named Tarlton from the Great Galactic Republic who is sent from Earth to the planet Cybrinia to inspect its nascent robot civilization. During the course of his tour, Tarlton is to learn of the well-established segregation practices between the orange and blue androids in their transportation, education, and housing facilities, despite the fact that all are manufactured with identical parts. As a result, the planet of mechanical life fails the inspection. Tarlton determines that the robots have not yet reached the level of maturity attained by humans, prompting his dispirited robot guide to ask, “Is

there any *hope*, Tarlton? *For us?*" Tarlton replies, "Of course there's *hope* for *you*, my friend. For a while, on *Earth*, it looked like there was *no hope*! But when mankind on Earth learned to *live together*, *real* progress first *began*. The *universe* was *suddenly ours*."² When the space investigator removes his helmet in the comic book's last panel, viewers see for the first time that Tarlton is a black man. As the emissary from Earth, he is the embodiment of humanity's "real progress" (figure 1).

Scripted by Feldstein and illustrated by the artist Joe Orlando, "Judgment Day!" was published in *Weird Fantasy* #18 along with three other tales of interstellar travel and alien encounters, including "Zero Hour," adapted from a story by the science-fiction writer Ray Bradbury. While the comic book appeared during the months in 1953 when the US Supreme Court was hearing arguments debating



FIGURE 1. "Judgment Day!" from *Weird Fantasy* #18 (1953)

the constitutionality of racial segregation laws in education, the story depicted a future on Earth in which *Brown v. Board of Education* was already the norm. Among the many readers praising EC's world of tomorrow was Bradbury himself, who remarked that the comic "should be required reading for every man, woman, and child in the United States." A school principal requested additional copies of the issue for his students.³ Even the African American newspaper the *Chicago Defender* acknowledged the story on its editorial page as "worthy of special citation."⁴

Yet "Judgment Day!" is only one of a distinct group of EC stories designed to challenge readers' assumptions about racial, ethnic, and religious prejudice, Cold War paranoia, and other anxieties over social difference and American heterogeneity. The preachies—also referred to in this book as *social-protest comics* or *message stories*—are cautionary, discomfiting, and often quite grim; many rely on an extradiegetic narrator to drive home the lessons signaled by exclamatory titles such as "Hate!" and "The Guilty!" Critics of the preachies do not hesitate to characterize the stories as ham-fisted and overly didactic, while admirers speak just as effusively of the guts it took to print them. Their surprise plot twists tend to underscore the deep moral failings of the status quo through acts of violence and depravity that reflect the contradictions of the post-World War II era known as both the "Fabulous Fifties" and the "Age of Anxiety." During this period, scientific innovations generated lifesaving vaccines even as the United States and Russia tested hydrogen bombs that threatened mutual annihilation. The nation could boast of progress in industry and technology, along with extraordinary levels of economic consumption, but the prosperity also encouraged white American families to become more insular and complacent about the need for societal change.⁵

EC responded to this moment with stories such as "The Patriots!" from *Shock Suspense Stories* #2 (1952) that dramatize how swiftly a culture of containment within middle-class suburban enclaves can trigger a flash point of deadly mob violence. "Perimeter!" from *Frontline Combat* #15 (1954) captures the tensions among white and black American soldiers in newly integrated platoons during the Korean War. "Master Race" from *Impact* #1 (1955) concludes with the grisly death of a former Nazi commandant hounded in exile by the guilt

he feels over his role in the Holocaust. When Gaines and Feldstein began working together at EC with artists and writers such as Johnny Craig, Jack Kamen, Graham Ingels, Wallace Wood, Marie Severin, Jack Davis, and Harvey Kurtzman, their collaborative efforts not only “extend[ed] the limits of the medium in all directions”⁶ but also resulted in an idiosyncratic brand of narrative commentary.

This book broadens the critical conversation surrounding the representation of race and social protest in early US comic books. Of the many cultural historians and comics studies scholars who have turned their attention to EC over the years, few have parlayed an appreciation for the preachies into an opportunity for closer reading and more comprehensive assessment. To date, much of the writing about the company is composed of biographies, fanzine tributes, interviews with the creators, and other materials designed to accompany reprints and collector’s editions of the original comic art. The discussions of craft and the business of comic-book production are often coupled with personal anecdotes and reflections from EC’s most ardent admirers in key titles such as *The Mad World of William M. Gaines*, *Feldstein: The MAD Life and Fantastic Art of Al Feldstein!*, and *The Life and Legend of Wallace Wood*. My study takes a different approach by analyzing the creative choices and critical significance of the message stories within the EC brand and against the larger ideological contexts of the late 1940s and 1950s. Building on the work of Frank Nuessel, Frank Jacobs, Grant Geissman, Amy Kiste Nyberg, Bradford W. Wright, David Hajdu, Carol Tilley, Thommy Burns, and Daniel F. Yezbick, the nearly two-dozen titles that I discuss are not meant to stand in for the hundreds that Bill Gaines published, nor are they the sole evidence of the company’s “true” intentions. Rather, the social-protest comics are part of a larger continuum of strategies reified with each issue by a team of artistic collaborators nimble enough to produce both a cackling Crypt Keeper and a black astronaut from the Great Galactic Republic.

E FOR EDUCATIONAL: 1944–49

EC was not actually the first company to publish comic books about race and religion. After World War II, mainstream publishers, such as Fawcett, Parents’ Magazine Press, and National Comics Publications (later known as DC), endeavored to take a progressive stance

against social inequality in some of their comics too. Detective stories in *The Challenger* from Interfaith Publications explicitly pledged “to fight race prejudice, discrimination, and all other forms of fascism in North America”⁷ in 1946, while a year later, the journalist Orrin C. Evans boasted that “every brush stroke and pen line” in his *All-Negro Comics* was produced entirely by African American artists in order to showcase more positive stories for young, black comic-book readers.⁸ More common were one-shot historical and biographical comics of well-known African American figures: for example, the 1945 profile of Sojourner Truth in the “Wonder Woman of History” feature from *Wonder Woman* #13 or the 1947 issue of *Negro Heroes* that collected previously published pieces on Harriet Tubman, George Washington Carver, Matthew Henson, and Joe Louis in one comic.⁹

These important efforts were sporadic, short-lived, and often undertaken with significant financial risk in a market where crude racial, ethnic, and religious caricatures were popular and profitable. Furthermore, creators and publishers did not always share the same political and ideological interests or agree on how these messages should be conveyed through comics. Consider the Fawcett artist C. C. Beck’s disdain for “sermons about crime and race equality” in a 1979 interview when asked, “What didn’t you like about Fawcett comics?” He replied, “All of us at Fawcett always liked to produce a good comic. We liked excitement, adventures, strange locations, and interesting people. We didn’t like war propaganda, sermons about crime and race equality and other worthless stuff the publishers were always experimenting with. We were left alone the majority of the time, although they forced us to get rid of Billy Batson’s pal, Steamboat.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, a large publisher that was willing to experiment could afford to reach out to an inclusive audience with a limited series such as National’s “Johnny Everyman,” which occasionally tackled social issues in *Comic Cavalcade* and *World’s Finest Comics*.¹¹ Smaller, independent publishers, on the other hand, had the creative freedom to produce more provocative stories, but they suffered from narrow distribution and limited resources to publish more than an issue or two. Often these comics were produced for churches, youth groups, and civic organizations.

As a midlevel, New York comic-book publisher, EC lacked the kind of robust circulation that National would achieve with a character

such as Superman or Fawcett with Captain Marvel. Still, sales of EC's horror titles averaged almost half a million copies per issue, and *Mad* attracted even higher numbers.¹² The unexpected success allowed EC's white editors to produce story lines that addressed more controversial social and political issues—without facing the kind of scrutiny that put the black comics publisher Orrin C. Evans out of business.¹³ Likewise, EC's efforts tended to steer clear of heroes and inspirational plots, preferring instead to condemn the cruelty and indifference of everyday people. The African American studies scholar Gerald Early adds that “[Gaines] effectively combined pulp with liberal politics, and he offered a more challenging moral vision than usually directed toward adolescents.”¹⁴ Continued profitability allowed EC's message stories to accumulate over an extended period, beginning in earnest with the debut of *Shock SuspenStories* in 1952 until the reprint of “Judgment Day!” in *Incredible Science Fiction* #33 in 1956.

It is doubtful, of course, that hundreds of thousands of readers were picking up EC mags each month for thrilling tales about the consequences of racism. Monsters and murderers were showcased on the front cover; the preachies tended to be debated in the letters column at the *end* of an issue. Even so, readers consistently expressed appreciation for these stories, particularly after the public crusade against comic books began to associate children's exposure to the crimes and horrors represented in EC's more popular titles with the looming threat of “juvenile delinquency.”¹⁵ Fans leveraged plots such as “Judgment Day!” as a corrective, as proof that EC could not be all *that* bad—or, in the words of one 1953 letter, “Congratulations to Joe Orlando, the artist, and to Al Feldstein, the author, for the best story every printed by E.C. We have never read a story in a comic with so much meaning and moral. This is your answer to critics who say your mags are harmful.”¹⁶

The sustained visibility and success of EC has led fans and scholars alike to overstate the exceptionality of the preachies, as in Bradford W. Wright's claim that the pages of EC “became for a time the only forum in popular entertainment debating the issue of a racial segregation.”¹⁷ Yet Wright helpfully qualifies this assertion elsewhere by shedding light on the broader reading environment in which the comics were produced. He writes,

The true cultural significance of the EC comic books is lost unless one recalls that these were neither subversive underground pamphlets nor elitist musings on the state of American civilization. William Gaines and his staff were not seeking to compete with the *Daily Worker*, the *Nation*, or any other political tract. They were in the comic-book business first and foremost for profit. When the EC writers assaulted the mainstream, they actually believed that they were producing entertainment. And indeed they were. For in the comic books of EC, millions of young Americans saw the anxieties of their times as well as their own insecurities writ large. In some homes the mere act of purchasing and reading an EC comic book, perhaps at night with a flashlight under the bed-covers, was an act of individual defiance and affirmation in a culture of vapid conformity.¹⁸

Reframing "entertainment" as an assault on mainstream norms was key to the transformation of the company that Gaines inherited from his father in 1947. When Maxwell Charles Gaines (né Ginsberg) started the business three years earlier, EC stood for Educational Comics, with titles designed primarily for children and their teachers, including *Picture Stories from the Bible*, *Tiny Tot Comics*, and *Animal Fables*. Max Gaines (also called M. C. Gaines) had a history in the comic-book industry going back to 1933, when he worked for Eastern Color Printing. Along with sales manager Harry Wildenberg, Gaines came up with the idea of reprinting *Mutt & Jeff* and other syndicated newspaper comic strips in the saddle-stitched booklet that would become known as the modern American comic book.

Initially the comics were produced as promotional giveaways for retailers such as Proctor & Gamble and Kinney Shoes before Gaines later convinced newsstands to sell an expanded version called *Famous Funnies* for a dime starting in 1934.¹⁹ In the decade that followed, Max Gaines went on to establish the All-American line, an enterprise funded in cooperation with Harry Donenfeld's National Allied Publications, which produced *Detective Comics* and was commonly referred to as the Superman-DC group. (Indeed, Gaines is credited with convincing Donenfeld to publish Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Superman in *Action Comics* #1.)²⁰ When Gaines sold his share of All-American in

1944, along with the rights to properties such as Wonder Woman, the Flash, and Green Lantern, Donenfeld merged the companies to form National Comics Publications.²¹

The series that Max Gaines retained, *Picture Stories from the Bible*, became the foundation of Educational Comics. Historians suggest that the elder Gaines turned to educational comics for children in the belief that they would be a better investment than superheroes, though his background as a school principal also factored into his decision. Nicky Wright notes that “in the cynical world of comic book publishing, Maxwell Gaines stood away from the pack. He believed comics books could be used as an educational tool, hence the Bible and History series.”²² Published under company aliases such as School Comics, Inc., these early “well-intentioned (but lackluster) titles” added new offerings to the Picture Stories series, including *Pictures Stories from American History*, *Pictures Stories from World History*, and *Picture Stories from Science*.²³

Interestingly enough, the fourth and final issue of *Pictures Stories from American History* in 1947 focused on the Civil War, Reconstruction, and westward expansion. Rather than treat the subject of slavery as incidental to the War Between the States, this comic’s first story, “A Country at the Crossroads,” foregrounds the perspective of a black fugitive from slavery in its opening pages. The man speaks to a group of Northerners about his race’s plight, recalling the experience of enslaved Africans transported across the Atlantic Ocean, sold at auction in the United States, and put to work in the cotton fields of the antebellum South.

The black man explains at one point, “often our masters were good . . . but sometimes . . .” A pictured flashback picks up where the caption leaves off, with a white man stepping between a black family and saying, “You’re no use here anymore, Mady. I’m selling you and your child down the river” (figure 2).²⁴ The story, by writer Jerry Coleman and artist Allen Simon, stops short of denouncing the white-supremacist ideology inherent in American slavery; instead, it targets the laws and economic practices that would deny a man the “freedom to choose his own way of life”²⁵—a strategy that also fosters empathy for the white abolitionists who were prevented from offering aid under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.



FIGURE 2. "A Country at the Crossroads" from *Picture Stories from American History* #4 (1947)

Elsewhere in the issue, the account of Reconstruction calls attention to the Black Codes and the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in ways that take seriously the aspirations of African Americans, depicting their speech and physical features as intelligent and respectable. As with other stories in the series, long narrative captions and generous dialogue dominate the comic's conventional layouts and visual perspectives. Moments of intense action, such as Lincoln's assassination and the Ku Klux Klan's night terrors, punctuate a largely informational narrative that moves methodically from one historical milestone to the next. Despite this "certain stiffness in the style," the historian Les Daniels describes the *Picture Stories* series as being "sincere and reasonably successful." Perhaps even more importantly, Daniels views these titles as part of Gaines's larger effort "to inject culture into the world of comic books."²⁶

The same summer in 1947 when *Picture Stories from American History* #4 was published, Max Gaines was tragically killed in a motorboat accident. Ownership of EC passed into the reluctant hands of his son, Bill, whose strained relationship with his father carried over into a strong aversion for comic books. The younger Gaines preferred science-fiction pulp magazines and grew up listening to old horror radio shows such as *The Witch's Tale* and *Lights Out*.²⁷ As for comics, Gaines recalled, "I hated 'em. Never touched the stuff. I wanted to be a chemistry teacher."²⁸ Indeed, after three years in the Army Air Corps, Gaines was studying at New York University when his mother, Jessie,

convinced him to take over the business. His feelings about comics did not change until months later, when he picked up a few copies of his father's comics himself.²⁹ Those early EC magazines presented a road map for charting the educational signposts of comics narrative, from the forthright depiction of America's past to each issue's paratextual features, including the list of educators who formed each title's advisory board.

Nevertheless, EC was \$100,000 in debt. Neither the kids' comics nor the "dry stuff," as Bill Gaines referred to *Picture Stories from the Bible*, were making money.³⁰ He and EC business manager Sol Cohen realized that they would have to be savvier than the elder Gaines in order to turn "the smallest, crummiest outfit in the field" into a thriving company.³¹ With interest in crime comics reaching a peak in 1948 and Lev Gleason Publications selling one and a half million copies of *Crime Does Not Pay* per issue, EC launched its own crime comics, *War Against Crime* and *Crime Patrol*.³² The late 1940s also saw the company attempt to draw readers of western and romance comics through *Gunfighter*, *Saddle Justice*, and *Modern Love*. Superhero comics were suffering a postwar decline, but Gaines was able to generate some interest in a succession of titles featuring Moon Girl, EC's version of Wonder Woman. Ultimately the strategies that Gaines and Cohen developed were aimed at promoting popular genre comics for reading enjoyment and sales. This meant that as the direction of the company changed, the name needed to change too. EC fanzine editor Ted White recalls Cohen's straightforward assessment of the matter: "'Educational' was a word no comic-buying kid wanted to see. It was a kiss of death on any comic book."³³

A NEW TREND IN MAGAZINES: 1950-55

In 1948, Gaines hired Albert Feldstein to develop a comic called *Going Steady with Peggy*. Feldstein had been a part of the comic-book industry since the age of fifteen, when he worked as a gofer after school for the S. M. Iger studio and later advanced to backgrounds, inking, and drawing.³⁴ After serving in the Army Air Corps, Feldstein became a freelance artist and occasional writer, making a name for himself with the teenage books at Fox Comics. *Going Steady with Peggy* was to be EC's latest foray into teen romance, but Gaines reconsidered the

decision to push the comic into a market that was already showing signs of oversaturation. Feldstein was retained at EC under a new contract and worked instead on the western and crime comics for several months as he and Gaines became friends. Once Feldstein began to take on more editorial duties, he came to EC's owner with a proposition: "Look Bill, why are we following these idiots and, when the trend dies, getting caught? Why don't we innovate, and why don't we have people follow *us*?"³⁵

The two Brooklyn natives shared a lifelong love of horror and science-fiction stories going back to the old radio shows. Feldstein even had experience with earlier efforts in horror and suspense as a contributing artist on *Adventures into the Unknown* #3 from American Comics Group in 1949.³⁶ He and Gaines experimented in April 1950 by placing their own original horror stories in two of EC's crime comics. The subsequent bump in sales persuaded Gaines to transform *War Against Crime* and *Crime Patrol* into the EC's first horror series: *The Vault of Horror* and *The Crypt of Terror* (which later became *Tales from the Crypt*). A third title, *The Haunt of Fear*, appeared a month later. Among the comics that followed were a pair of science-fiction mags, *Weird Science* and *Weird Fantasy* (which later merged into *Weird Science-Fantasy*); a new crime comic called *Crime SuspenStories*; two war titles, *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat*; two humor titles, *Mad* and *Panic*; and near the end of EC's run, the short-lived *Piracy*, about adventure on the high seas. Artists such as Graham Ingels, Johnny Craig, and Jack Kamen were hired to join Wood in creating what EC proudly advertised as a different kind of comic book: "Introducing a New Trend in Magazines . . . Illustrated *SuspenStories* WE DARE YOU TO READ!"

Within a year of debuting this "New Trend," EC began to turn a profit by producing the kind of genre comics that would mark a transitional era in the industry, known as "The Atomic Age of Comics."³⁷ Bill Gaines did not hesitate to credit his father for "starting the comics magazine industry," but he proudly staked his own claim in horror: "I was the first publisher in these United States to publish horror comics. I am responsible, I started them."³⁸ Harvey Kurtzman, who was originally hired as an artist in 1949, was later promoted to writer and editor of the war titles, as well as *Mad* in its early years. Responsibility

for *The Vault of Horror* was turned over to Johnny Craig. Feldstein served as the lead editor of the remaining titles, scripting stories that he developed with Gaines for a variety of artists. In a 1969 interview, Gaines explained the process that he and Feldstein followed:

We'd plot together, generally. I would come up with the "spring-boards," and then we'd sit down, the two of us, and we'd plot out the idea. Then Al would go off and write the story from about one o'clock to four o'clock. Al would actually write the story in pencil on the drawing board, breaking everything down into panels as he went. Then, the story would be sent out for lettering. As you know, we used Leroy machine lettering. When the thing was lettered it was given to the artist, already broken down into panels, the balloons drawn in, and the lettering already in the balloons. And that's all the artist would get; he got no other script. Al would go over the story with him, and then the artist would take it from there, with no other directions.³⁹

Because each issue contained four to six stories, the production schedule was grueling, with Feldstein scripting four stories a week for months at a time. Despite the fact that he claimed to be solely concerned with "meeting the deadlines and grinding out the stuff,"⁴⁰ Feldstein helped introduce innovations such as the three GhouLunatic narrators of the horror comics, and he developed the distinctive approach to visual storytelling that served as the foundation for EC's most successful formulas. "Feldstein's scripts were vastly superior to many short story writers," observes Nicky Wright, while Jarrett Keene refers to the EC editor as "a natural born storyteller with a knack for pacing and twist endings." Daniels compares the sharp focus, brevity, and tone of the visual narratives to Edgar Allan Poe's notion of the *unity of effect*. The writer Larry Stark, a first-generation reader whom the EC staff affectionately called the company's number-one fan, referred to the writing as "Pulitzer Prize material" when compared to other comics.⁴¹

Just as importantly, the scripts were customized according to each individual artist's style. Feldstein, who had previously worked in larger comics studios as part of an assembly line of uncredited artists, allowed EC's pencilers to sign their work and gave each room to design the

visual aspects of the narratives according to their strengths.⁴² Short profiles on the artists in the comics helped to further acquaint readers with the talent behind the scenes. One of the company's most popular artists was Wallace "Wally" Wood, who illustrated stories for nearly every genre that EC produced and was often singled out for his work in science fiction. Like Feldstein, Wood freelanced at Fox and Avon before being retained permanently by Gaines as a staff artist in 1950. As Daniels notes, "His attention to detail, his skill in delineating the human form, and the imagination employed in depicting the unknown, placed him in the front rank of comic book illustrators."⁴³

Along with developing tightly plotted stories with high-quality art, EC's creative teams were known for tempering spine-chilling scenarios with gallows humor, puns, and inside jokes that, as Matthew Pustz notes, heightened the comics' appeal: "Although the stories could be very grim, the puns gave readers the idea that nothing should be taken too seriously, that they were involved in a secret, inside joke that non-readers or those not devoted to EC Comics simply could not understand."⁴⁴ This approach was best suited for older readers, and Gaines and Feldstein were unequivocal in their desire not to underestimate their audience by attempting to produce comics that would appeal to very young children. Feldstein reiterated the point at the 1972 EC Fan-Addict Convention: "We were writing for teenagers and young adults; we were writing for the guys that were reading it in the Army. We were writing for ourselves at our age level, and I think perhaps that was responsible for the level we reached."⁴⁵

The 1951 story "Reflection of Death!" from *Tales from the Crypt* #23 offers one memorable example. At the start, a splash page of the Crypt Keeper beckons, "Welcome, dear fiends! Come in!" Ghosts, werewolves, and mummies crowd around his chair. With a shrunken head hovering above, he promises that "this one is sure to freeze the blood in your veins" before inviting readers to turn the page.⁴⁶ As the main character, "you" are a white man named Al on a long road trip with a friend who drives late into the winter night. After your car veers into a set of oncoming headlights and crashes, you see through Al's eyes as he emerges from "empty . . . eternal" blackness in search of assistance. The men and women you subsequently encounter (including a hobo cooking stew under a bridge) refuse to help and flee with mounting fear and revulsion. At last when you behold yourself in a mirror, a



FIGURE 3. "Reflection of Death!" from *Tales from the Crypt* #23 (1951)

dead, rotting reflection gapes back. If this is a nightmare, then *you* are its monster (figure 3). With a jolt, you wake up, only to find yourself behind the wheel of the car, prompting the vicious cycle to begin again. "Heh, heh! Well, kiddies! That's it!" the Crypt Keeper says in the closing panel. "Like it? Like being a *corpse*? Well, you might as well get *used* to it! It's *bound to happen eventually*. Oh come, come! Why the *grave* look?"⁴⁷

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of the New Trend comics was the "snap-ending," Feldstein's term for the surprise plot twists that brought stories such as "Reflection of Death!" to a thrilling close. EC's editors were influenced by "The Gift of the Magi" author, O. Henry, as well as the suspense and science-fiction pulps of the period. As a storytelling maneuver in EC scripts, the snap-ending would become

inextricably tied to notions of poetic justice that marked the horror and crime comics in particular.⁴⁸ Daniels, in his discussion of the “off-beat endings which stopped the story dead at the moment of greatest impact,” characterizes the effect as “providing simultaneously a definite chill and the satisfaction of seeing an unpleasant character get a suitable comeuppance. . . . This was reinforced by the fact that the plots were constructed so that the source of horror was also the source of justice.”⁴⁹

For instance, in “Taint the Meat . . . It’s the Humanity!” from *Tales from the Crypt* #32, a butcher named Mr. Gristle tries to work around the food rationing during World War II by greedily selling a combination of stale beef and horsemeat to his customers. He ignores his wife’s protests, and as a result, their own son is accidentally poisoned after a bad meal. In the final snap, the comic’s focalization shifts abruptly to a dazed Mrs. Gristle; she stands behind the butcher case in a blood-smeared apron and dispassionately offers pieces of her husband’s corpse for sale: “Tainted meat . . . ? Tainted meat anyone?”⁵⁰

The vengeful ends of what Yezbick refers to as EC’s “angry little fables” are all but warranted in the story worlds of these comics when the originating offense is so deeply unconscionable.⁵¹ Murderous deception driven by greed, power, and self-interest sets the stage for retributive justice. Gaines was explicit in his contention that the stories he published “were really quite moral.” He explained, “If somebody did something really bad, he usually ‘got it.’ And of course, the EC way was he got it the same way he gave it.”⁵² When asked about the formula, Feldstein remarked, “That I think was partially due to the fact that we plotted all the stories together and we as a team, Bill and I, had a feeling for the kind of story we enjoyed, which was that kind, with the snap-ending, or the kind with some social injustice that we could chastise.”⁵³

The brand also relied a great deal on perspectives designed to boost reader identification. Stories such as “Reflection of Death!” deploy the second-person mode—visually as well as verbally—to heighten readers’ ability to connect with the thoughts and sensations of unfamiliar bodies, to immerse themselves in lives they may never encounter on their own (a chilling thought for readers who are asked to imagine themselves as a walking corpse). “Readers were lured into

identification with what they also feared,” Daniels reminds us.⁵⁴ Taken together, these narrative and artistic patterns constitute the creative tradition that bridged all of EC’s comic books. It is through what Gaines refers to as “the EC way” that his publishing company could corner the market on 1950s horror comics while also compelling readers to engage the most urgent problems of American society.

STORIES OFF THE BEATEN PATH

When *Shock SuspenStories* debuted in 1952, the comic series was advertised as an EC sampler that featured a science-fiction, war, crime, and horror “SuspenStory” in each issue with a snap- (or shock) ending. As the comics critic Thommy Burns notes, Gaines and Feldstein decided to replace the war offering in the second issue with an unclassifiable type of tale that they categorized as a “*Shock SuspenStory*,” and it went on to become a permanent fixture in the second slot.⁵⁵ “The Patriots!” was the first shock comic to debut, followed in issue #3 by “The Guilty!,” a story in which an innocent black man is accused of murdering a white woman but is shot by the sheriff before being exonerated. When a reader wrote to ask about the change, the editors explained, “We want *Shock* to not only contain crackerjack yarns in E.C.’s CHOSEN fields, but also to contain occasional ‘off-the-beaten-path’ stories that we feel are worthwhile, . . . stories that do not fall into the categories of horror, s-f, suspense, or war, but that still retain the SHOCK motif!”⁵⁶ Just as EC experimented with horror two years earlier, Gaines and Feldstein took a calculated risk in making these “worthwhile” stories a regular feature.

It is not uncommon for readers, past and present, to treat all the stories that appeared in *Shock SuspenStories* as preachies, given the extent to which the series gained a special reputation for controversial plots that drew on the elements of the EC tradition to “do a little proselytizing.”⁵⁷ The series undoubtedly serves as a home for the kind of social realism that has come to be associated with the preachies; still, it is important to emphasize that EC’s message stories cut across genres. Its most well-known story to venture off the beaten path appeared in a science-fiction title (“Judgment Day!”), while another celebrated story, “Master Race,” was originally slated for an issue of *Crime SuspenStories*. Here it may be useful to keep in mind that the term *preachies* was not a label that EC used in an official capacity but rather a tongue-in-cheek

pun originally coined by Gaines to mock the pretense of a company that claimed to no longer be interested in educating anybody. He and Feldstein, along with EC fans, continued to circulate the ironic term in later years; there are even instances in which it is used to signify any EC comic that expressed concerns about real-life social conditions and prevailing attitudes.⁵⁸ In an unpublished monograph, Frank Nuessel defines the preachies simply as comics “with a significant moral to tell” and fittingly locates their aims at the place where the educational and the entertaining meet.⁵⁹ Nuessel’s scholarly overview of EC indexes the New Trend line into numerous subcategories that feature social commentary on McCarthyism, racism, capital punishment, drug addiction, rape, corruption, false patriotism, nuclear war, animal cruelty, and more.⁶⁰

Voices that are more critical of EC’s efforts push back against what the comics scholar Bart Beaty calls “the myth of quality that is attached to EC comics.”⁶¹ This includes commentary by writers, such as Lawrence Watt-Evans, who assert that the horror and suspense comics from Avon, American Comics Group, and Trans-World deserve as much attention as the titles that Gaines developed do.⁶² Among the most scathing criticisms of the company is “EC and the Chimera of Memory,” written by the critic Suat Tong Ng for the *Comics Journal* in 2003 and reprinted on the blog *Hooded Utilitarian*. Frustrated by devotees who, to his mind, overstate the artistic worth of EC as the “best comics ever made,” Ng purports to take a more clear-eyed view of stories that are ultimately “stifled by a certain intellectual laziness.”⁶³ He argues that outside the early issues of *Mad*, EC offered no meaningful insight for any but the youngest readers; the comics were too “shackled by commerce” to achieve the lasting value of Goya’s prints, the film *Citizen Kane*, or the work of the comics auteur Joe Sacco. Ng acknowledges the progressive subject matter of the social-protest comics, but he adamantly insists that EC did not go far enough: “The ‘preachies’ were hopelessly didactic, simplistic, and inarticulate,” he writes, “failing at every point to delineate character or elicit sympathy for their cause.”⁶⁴

I do not regard the preachies as a failure, of course. Nor am I arguing their unmitigated success. The work that EC did to represent race and social protest is complex, as is its influence in popular culture. Yet I agree with Ng that scholars need to apply critical scrutiny to the

actual content of these stories and refuse to treat even the most sincere celebrations of the company's genius as self-evident. Ultimately the field is better served by the clear articulation of the measures by which even the self-styled proselytizing of the preachies can be deemed useful and worthy of all this attention. EC's visual and verbal formulas for riveting genre comics were born out of the struggle to creatively reconcile mass appeals to social conscience with a reputation for carefree entertainment.

Even bound by the constraints of commerce, the comics that EC produced stood apart for many 1950s readers. Wright explains that "with only nine titles and a weak distribution network, EC was a relatively small publisher, but it enjoyed commercial success disproportionate to its size. Moreover, it seemed, the more outrageous the stories, the better they sold."⁶⁵ Stark and others point out that the horror stories became even more gruesome in later years in order to keep up with the competition and that EC relied more on "house-plots" and less on "artfully conceived stories."⁶⁶ Fierce competition for readers in a market that had swelled to several hundred horror titles does appear to have influenced the decision to publish stories that even their creators would later regret, such as "Foul Play!" The snap-ending in this revenge tale from *The Haunt of Fear* #19 featured a baseball game being played in the dark of night with the body parts of a nefarious teammate.⁶⁷

Still, EC held fast to the preachies, and the editors continued to expand and defend their content once the industry came under fire. When Gaines volunteered to appear before the US Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency in 1954, his prepared remarks reiterated a common line of defense against anticomics critics, namely, that the publications were harmless diversions. "Pleasure is what we sell, entertainment, reading enjoyment. Entertaining reading has never harmed anyone," he stated.⁶⁸ But Gaines strayed from these prepared remarks to address a claim made earlier that morning by the psychiatrist Fredric Wertham about a story called "The Whipping" from *Shock SuspenStories* #14:

I would like to discuss, if you bear with me a moment more, something which Dr. Wertham provoked me into. Dr. Wertham,

I am happy to say, I have just caught in a half-truth, and I am very indignant about it. He said there is a magazine now on the stands preaching racial intolerance. The magazine he is referring to is my magazine. What he said, as much as he said, was true. There do appear in this magazine such materials as "Spik," "Dirty Mexican," but Dr. Wertham did not tell you what the plot of the story was.

This is one of a series of stories designed to show the evils of race prejudice and mob violence, in this case against Mexican Catholics.

Previous stories in this same magazine have dealt with anti-Semitism, and anti-Negro feelings, evils of dope addiction and development of juvenile delinquents.

This is one of the most brilliantly written stories that I have ever had the pleasure to publish. I was very proud of it, and to find it being used in such a nefarious way made me quite angry.⁶⁹

Chapter 1 takes this testimony as a starting place for a more in-depth discussion about how EC's editors partitioned elements of the comics form to distinguish between "entertaining" and "educational" messaging. Such efforts, while seldom as straightforward as Gaines claimed, nevertheless reveal a dynamic set of reading practices that the company worked to cultivate among consumers—beginning with the decisive role of EC's narrative captions. As for that issue of *Shock SuspenStories* that was passed around Senator Estes Kefauver's subcommittee in April 1954, I use it as a case study to examine the formal and aesthetic storytelling strategies of EC.

I take a closer look at EC's engagement with blackness through image and text in chapter 2 and focus on the stories "The Guilty!" and "In Gratitude . . ." from *Shock SuspenStories* as well as "Perimeter!" from *Frontline Combat*. I analyze the forthright condemnation of discrimination in these comics. I also address the physical depiction of racial difference and the infrequency with which the black characters are permitted to speak or act for themselves. Readers who look to EC for stories about the interior lives of people of color will be disappointed, finding instead narratives more concerned with tracing the corrupting power of racism on white society in a way that, interestingly

enough, recalls the moral trajectory of M. C. Gaines's *Pictures Stories from American History*.

Chapter 3 shifts more pointedly to the nature of justice in EC preachies that ask, if hate is learned, "how can it be untaught?"⁷⁰ In response, I single out the coercive use of shame to explore how the act of shaming functions as the impetus for individual and collective transformation. This is especially the case in *Shock SuspenStories*, where the antagonists from "Blood Brothers," "The Patriots!," "Hate!," and "A Kind of Justice" suffer few punitive repercussions for criminal acts of racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and sexual assault. In these communities, where the principles of democracy are supplanted by the vigilantism of mob rule, punishment comes instead through affect, the humiliating rupture of social bonds. As readers, even our body schema becomes invested in the sentimental tears and slumped shoulders of the shame experienced on the page. This chapter concludes with a discussion of how the story "Master Race" strays from this template in a way that not only denounces Hitler's regime but also indicts the silent bystanders for whom self-righteous pangs of regret are not enough.

I return to "Judgment Day!" in chapter 4 to focus on the comic's critique of Jim Crow through speculative fiction and argue that the visual narrative's departure from the social realism of *Shock SuspenStories* raises questions about the tensions between social identity, technology, and the idealization of progress. I place Feldstein and Orlando's comic in conversation with Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, as both share outlaw protagonists and engage the surreal machinery of sight and semblance. While "Judgment Day!" is not without its own shortcomings, the allegorical fantasy is, in many ways, the culmination of the quintessential formulas that have come to define the Entertaining Comics Group as an unabashedly "commercial venture" that had the capacity to show, as Feldstein once stated, "that the world *can* be righteous if we allow it to be."⁷¹

Perhaps it is no surprise then that "Judgment Day!" also marks the end of EC's comic-book division. The Comics Code Authority (CCA) was formed by the Comics Magazine Association of America in 1954 after the Senate hearings to monitor the content of participating

comic-book publishers. Gaines responded to the restrictions of the CCA's Code for Editorial Content by replacing the New Trend line with "New Direction" comics that included titles such as *Impact*, *Valor*, *Psychoanalysis*, and *Incredible Science Fiction*.⁷² None lasted for more than five issues. In the winter of 1955, the CCA refused to give its seal of approval to a story slated for an issue of EC's *Incredible Science Fiction*.

Feldstein submitted "Judgment Day!" as an alternative, but it was also rejected. He explains, "We wanted them to give us a good reason why they were turning it down, but they were smart enough not to. It was a straight plea for racial tolerance, orange and blue robots, and the only objection I understand they had was that they wanted us to remove the sweat from the Negro's temples and forehead in the last panel, which we refused to do."⁷³ Gaines reprinted the story unchanged and discontinued the production of nearly all his comic books, leaving only the humor magazine *Mad*. With companies such as EC unable to withstand the stricter regulations of the market, as Carol Tilley points out, "the CMAA's code effectively marked the end of comics' reign as the most popular print medium among children in history."⁷⁴

And so there would be no more new springboards of *Shock Suspense Stories* or *Incredible Science Fiction* after 1956. No more letters for "The Crypt-Keeper's Corner." No more snap-endings done the EC way. While the company's reputation for social and political critique would continue to flourish through the biting satire of *Mad*, EC's legacy as a maverick in the mainstream comic-book industry grows out of these Atomic Age controversies, from the gore of "Foul Play!" and the cruelty of "The Whipping" to the black man's sweat in "Judgment Day!" The company's ambitions went on to inspire new generations of comics creators, particularly those associated with underground and alternative comics from 1960s and 1970s. Tributes featured in fanzines, such as *Blab!* by Monte Beauchamp, capture the lasting impact of the publisher on mainstream and independent comics creators such as Alan Moore, Daniel Clowes, Lynda Barry, Peter Bagge, Drew Friedman, Moebius, Gary Panter, and Carol Lay.⁷⁵ Such accolades have drawn new readers to EC, creating a demand for reprints from publishers

including Russ Cochran, IDW Publishing, Dark Horse Comics, and Fantagraphics. They have generated a wealth of spirited commentary, biographies, indexes, interviews, gallery exhibitions, and rare memorabilia. By keeping the narrative and aesthetic provocations of the preachies in circulation, the chapters that follow contribute to this archive with a critical analysis of race and social protest in EC.

CHAPTER ONE

"SPELLED OUT CAREFULLY IN THE CAPTIONS"

How to Read an EC Magazine

Oh, by the way . . . here's a little hint! READ ALL THE CAPTIONS IN E-C MAGAZINES AS WELL AS THE BALLOONS. They contain thrilling descriptions, important information pertaining to plot, and time sequences, etc. YOU CANNOT FULLY ENJOY . . . IN FACT, YOU CANNOT FULLY UNDERSTAND OR FOLLOW . . . ANY STORY WITHOUT THOROUGHLY READING EVERY WORD!

—THE CRYPT KEEPER

EC publisher Bill Gaines strived to make the experience of reading an Entertaining Comic fundamentally different from that of other comic-book serials. Continuing story arcs were rare in EC, and there were no recurring superheroes, funny animals, or cowboys to hitch one issue to the next. The bimonthly titles typically adhered to an anthology format with four to six distinct stories—each with a beginning, a middle, and a devastating end.¹ Over time, however, the comics of EC's New Trend line became associated with a shared network of narrative, aesthetic, and promotional strategies that were designed to cultivate serialized reading practices among regular readers. Gaines and his lead editor, Al Feldstein, adopted the portmanteau word *SuspenseStories*² to brand the intense action of their tightly plotted narratives and the range of artistic styles across genres. As Gaines explained in the February 1954 issue of *Writer's Digest*, "The EC approach in all these books is to offer better stories than can be found in other comics. At EC the copy itself—both caption and dialogue—has taken the

number one position. This is a switch from the old days of comics when the art was most important and the story secondary. We take our stories very seriously. They are true-to-life adult stories ending in a surprise. That's our formula."³

The formula that made EC's "Jolting Tales of Tension" so successful also helped to create the conditions for more explicit social and political protest, particularly in the comics known as the preachies, which challenged racism, anti-Semitism, anticommunist red-baiting, and other forms of social discrimination in the United States. As horror and crime comics came under fire amid the uproar over juvenile delinquency in the early 1950s, Gaines and Feldstein often pointed to the preachies as evidence of their creative team's ability to successfully target their messages through the comics form.

This chapter analyzes EC's attempt to establish clear boundaries between "entertaining" and "educational" reading practices that were mindful of the public's anxieties over how comic books could influence young readers. Essential to this effort was an editorial emphasis on how narrative captions, dialogue, and other words acted as signposts of meaning. If comics were indeed as hazardous as critics such as Sterling North, Fredric Wertham, and Estes Kefauver feared, the social-protest comics might prove that EC's writers could contain those dangers and redirect the medium's unstable visual forces at will. It was an approach that sounded better in theory than in practice, as "The Whipping" from the controversial issue of *SuspenseStories* #14 demonstrates. Yet the creative aims, execution, and impact of the preachies function not only as an extension of the EC tradition but also as an example of the comic-book industry's early attempts to use the medium and its generic conventions to combat racism and other social ills.

EC writers and artists generated an expansive knowledge base of stock-character tropes and narrative perspectives for the New Trend line that would tantalize first-time readers while empowering more experienced subscribers to navigate any story the company produced. Comics scholars such as Linda Adler-Kassner, Carol Tilley, and Jared Gardner also single out the strategic appeals on EC's interactive letter pages that encouraged readers to make connections with one another in a "raucous community of misfits."⁴ When readers began

to follow the Crypt Keeper's hints to "READ ALL THE CAPTIONS IN E-C MAGAZINES AS WELL AS THE BALLOONS" and once they could assess the differences between the EC artists after turning so many pages, Gaines and Feldstein took more creative risks with consumers in mind. Whether the comic's surprise twist uncovered a werewolf's deadly revenge or the racial terror of a lynch mob, Gaines was confident that EC fan-addicts knew the difference between real blood and the fake stuff.

"VIRTUE DOESN'T ALWAYS HAVE TO TRIUMPH"

In *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, Thomas J. Roberts explores the devalued pleasures of so-called low-taste reading habits in genre fiction most commonly associated with pulp magazines and paperbacks. Given that readers who delight in science fiction, western, romance, mystery, and other popular genres often regard these stories as if they were "written by a tradition rather than by an individual," Roberts's observations are useful in considering the ways in which EC's genre comics are consumed as part of a system of texts and contexts.⁵

Roberts helpfully underscores the kinds of learnedness required to find satisfaction within these traditions, their plot devices, and their character types, and he notes the ways in which each genre's enthusiasts generate different thresholds of quality: "Most of what seems inexcusably unintelligible in popular fiction is crystal clear to the people who have learned how to read it."⁶ Furthermore, as the volume of stories grows, the genres accrue richer, more sophisticated meanings and thematic concerns, which reward those who read in bulk. "Genre reading is system reading," Roberts explains. "That is, as we are reading the stories, we are exploring the system that created them. Further, the system is always changing, and in reading the new stories the system is writing we are following the changes in that system."⁷ An editorial note in the EC war comic *Two-Fisted Tales* reiterates this view: "As all our old readers know, the E-C line stressed quality . . . TOP-NOTCH QUALITY . . . both in story content and art. If you enjoy this magazine, you'll enjoy all E-C magazines."⁸

Gaines's call for story ideas in *Writer's Digest* offers a glimpse into how EC artists, writers, and editors operated within and against these discursive systems during the early 1950s. The feature, titled "Madman

Gaines Pleads for Plots,” invited writers to submit scripts and synopses for their horror, crime, shock, and science-fiction comics. Gaines begins, “We give up. For five years my editors and I have been writing an average of a comic book every six days; five a month, 60 a year. Each magazine contained four stories. That’s 240 plots a year, 1200 in five years. Now we’re written out. Bone dry. And we need your help.”⁹

The piece goes on to provide a brief history of the company that M. C. Gaines started in an effort to produce educational comics before shifting under his son’s direction to more sensational fare, including *Tales from the Crypt* and *Mad*, that proved to be more profitable. The familiar image of Bill Gaines that emerges in the feature is of the reluctant CEO burdened by his father’s legacy but converted by the power of comics. What follows is an intriguing précis of EC story types:

You should know this about our horror books: we have no ghosts, devils, goblins or the like. We tolerate vampires and werewolves, if they follow tradition and behave the way respectable vampires and werewolves should.

We love walking corpse stories.

We’ll accept an occasional zombie or mummy.

And we relish the *contes cruels* story.

On the other hand, *Shock SuspenStories* do not contain supernaturalism. We want shock endings to wind up plain, logical suspense stories.

Crime SuspenStories contain no shock. These are logical stories in which the villain tries to get away with murder—and probably does. No cops and robbers stories.

Virtue doesn’t always have to triumph.¹⁰

While Bradford W. Wright, David Hajdu, and others have referenced this passage as evidence of EC’s publishing philosophy,¹¹ we should also keep in mind that as an advertisement, the generic descriptions are part of a rhetorical self-fashioning to attract submissions. The categories are just as aspirational as they are explanatory; this is how Gaines saw his comics at their best and how he wanted others to see them.¹² Indeed, the emphasis on innovative copy that takes “the number one position” seems especially fitting for a call in a trade journal for writers.

At the same time, the sinister playfulness of the EC way is modeled rather effectively in the *Writer's Digest* descriptions. The list includes horror comics with a penchant for the weird, that rely less on the supernatural tricks of your run-of-the-mill haunted house and more on the terrifying twists of fate that were characteristic of the *contes cruels*.¹³ EC's crime and shock comics are anchored by logical progressions and, by extension, the semblance of social reality. Here the status quo is the stage on which the suspenseful windup takes place, thereby intensifying the notion of real-life shock. Wright notes, "Like [James M.] Cain's novels, EC's crime comics featured criminals who were for all appearances attractive, middle-class, suburban, 'normal' people who happened to possess a disturbing capacity for murder."¹⁴ From this perspective, the subsequent declaration that "virtue doesn't always have to triumph," while offered as a genre-specific storytelling trait, reinforces the implied ideological investments of EC's narrative and artistic choices. At issue in disrupting conventional ideas of normalcy is the question of how society defines virtue to begin with, particularly for those who treat difference as menacing or monstrous.

It is no wonder, then, that the first example of EC's formula cited in the *Writer's Digest* call is not a plot drawn from *The Haunt of Fear* but a message story called "Blood Brothers" from *Shock SuspenStories* #13. Gaines summarizes the story: "It's about Sid, who drives his best friend, Henry Williams, to suicide when he finds out Williams is part Negro. The surprise: after the tragedy has occurred, Sid learns that he too has Negro blood in him, from a blood transfusion that saved his life when he was a child."¹⁵ Readers quickly learn what happens to the downtrodden and the marginalized in EC's story world when there are no masked heroes to save them. A black man takes his own life in "Blood Brothers," and as I discuss in more detail in chapter 3, it is unlikely that the white man who terrorized him will be prosecuted for the crime.

"Madman Gaines Pleads for Plots" affirmed the notion that the readers who benefited the most from an EC comic were those interested in acquiring what Roberts refers to as the *genre competency* to see each story as participating in a larger tradition. By contrast, in the months that followed, the US Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency was discouraged from considering the merits of this systemic reading approach. Testimony from experts and

observers outside the industry often singled out individual comic-book issues and insisted on their status as “inexcusably unintelligible” story objects.¹⁶ Of the half-dozen comic books that Richard Clendenen presented to the Senate subcommittee that was led by Senator Estes Kefauver in April 1954, two were published by EC: *Haunt of Fear* #24 and *Shock SuspenStories* #14. The EC issues, marked by the chairman as exhibit number twelve, were cited as evidence of the “substantial degree of sadism, crime, and horror” contained in one-quarter of the seventy-five to one hundred million comic books that would be sold in the United States that year.¹⁷

On the *Shock SuspenStories* #14 cover (figure 4), bullet holes scatter across the chest of a man being shot. Empty shell casings float alongside the tip of an automatic-gun nozzle firing in the foreground, while a broken mirror reflects the menacing image of the shooter in a trench coat and hat. To his left, a terrified woman recoils at the vicious attack; as she twists away, shadows outline her full breasts and hips. This was the kind of comic that Clendenen, as executive director of the Senate subcommittee, had been charged to investigate in order to evaluate the medium’s popularity and influence on young readers.

As part of Clendenen’s testimony on April twenty-first, he read aloud plot summaries from the crime and horror stories and dispassionately enumerated the acts of dismemberment, suicide, and cruelty alongside a slideshow of images. Yet what seemed to trouble the executive director the most was not severed heads. Instead it was the plight of an orphaned boy preyed on by vampire foster parents in a story called “The Secret” from *The Haunt of Fear*. Clendenen took little comfort in that plot’s surprise twist, in which the boy is revealed to be a werewolf and kills his adult foes. Clendenen’s reading emphasized instead how kind, attentive, and “nice-looking” the mother and father pretend to be until the night they demand their foster child’s blood. He goes on to describe how in another EC story, “a small golden-haired girl named Lucy” turns out to be the criminal mastermind who sends her mother to the electric chair. Such a story exploited vulnerable youth, Clendenen suggested, based on his background experience as a social worker.¹⁸

The psychiatrist Fredric Wertham shared Clendenen’s concerns for the welfare of children, as he articulated in his book *Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books on Today’s Youth*, published

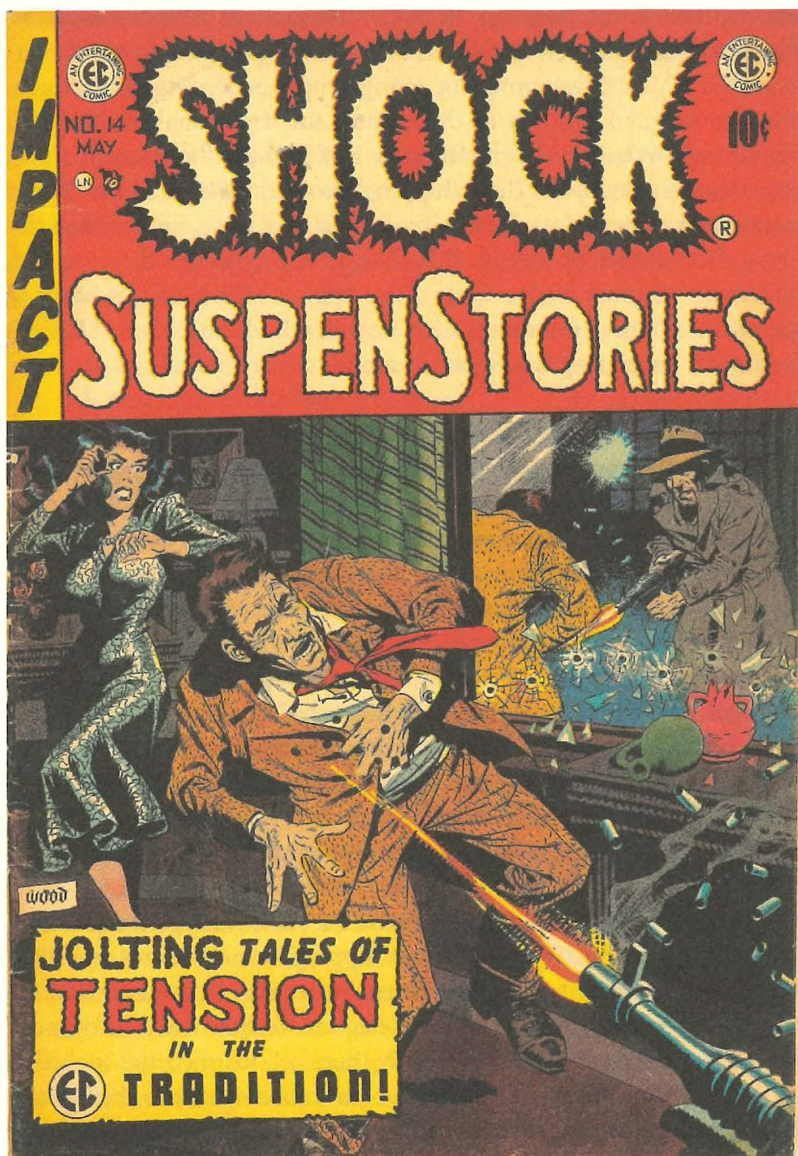


FIGURE 4. Cover of *Shock SuspenStories* #14 (1954)

shortly before the hearings in 1954.¹⁹ As Gabriel Mendes explains, “because [comic books’] depiction of violence and depravity threatened the ethical development of young people, according to Wertham, they constituted a threat to the mental and emotional health of all children.”²⁰ When it was his turn to testify that afternoon in April, Wertham singled out “The Whipping” from the *Shock SuspenStories* comic and criticized its depiction of social prejudice. Rather than tallying the number of mutilated bodies, as the executive director had, Wertham counted twelve uses of the epithet “Spick” in the story to demonstrate that the damage such a comic could cause rivaled Hitler’s regime in generating “race hatred” among white readers:

You know at the present moment New York City and other cities have a great social problem in integrating immigrating Puerto Ricans. It is very important to establish peace in these neighborhoods where friction may arise, or has arisen.

This particular comic book that I am referring to now has a story in which a derogatory term for Puerto Ricans, which I will not repeat here, but which is a common derogatory term, is repeated 12 times in one story. This greasy so and so, this dirty so and so. It is pointed out that a Spanish Catholic family moved into this neighborhood—utterly unnecessary.

What is the point of the story? The point of the story is that then somebody gets beaten to death. The only error is that the man who must get beaten to death is not a man; it is a girl.²¹

Wertham’s interpretation generated the most outrage from Gaines when his turn came to testify. “The Whipping,” which Gaines described as “one of the most brilliantly written stories that I have ever had the pleasure to publish,” was actually “designed to show the evils of racial prejudice and mob violence,” which therefore justified the inclusion of derogatory words. His rebuttal took a stance similar to the *Writer’s Digest* call for plots and drew on the genre-specific vocabularies that privileged system reading. He insisted that the dialogue was better understood not only within the context of one story but also in relation to others in the series.²²

Associate chief counsel Herbert Beaser was not so sure. His questions to Gaines during the Senate subcommittee hearings took up

the issues raised by "The Whipping" and prompted the following exchange about the way that EC claimed to transmit and withhold messages at will:

MR. BEASER: Mr. Gaines, let me ask you one thing with reference to Dr. Wertham's testimony. You used the pages of your comic book to send across a message, in this case it was against racial prejudice; is that it?

MR. GAINES: That is right.

MR. BEASER: You think, therefore, you can get across a message to the kids through the medium of your magazine that would lessen racial prejudice; is that it?

MR. GAINES: By specific effort and spelling it out very carefully so that the point won't be missed by any of the readers, and I regret to admit that it still is missed by some readers, as well as Dr. Wertham—we have, I think, achieved some degree of success in combating anti-Semitism, anti-Negro feeling, and so forth.

MR. BEASER: Yet why do you say you cannot at the same time and in the same manner use the pages of your magazine to get a message which would affect children adversely, that is, to have an effect upon their doing these deeds of violence or sadism, whatever is depicted?

MR. GAINES: Because no message is being given to them. In other words, when we write a story with a message, it is deliberately written in such a way that the message, as I say, is spelled out carefully in the captions. The preaching, if you want to call it, is spelled out carefully in the captions, plus the fact that our readers by this time know that in each issue of *Shock SuspenStories*, the second of the four stories will be this type of story.

MR. BEASER: A message can be gotten across without spelling out in that detail. For example, take this case that was presented this morning of the child who is in a foster home who became a werewolf, and foster parents—

MR. GAINES: That was one of our stories.

MR. BEASER: A child who killed her mother. Do you think that would have any effect at all on a child who is in a foster placement, who is with foster parents, who has fears? Do you not think that child in reading the story would have some of the

normal fears which a child has, some of the normal anxieties tightened, increased?

MR. GAINES: I honestly can say I don't think so. No message has been spelled out there. We were not trying to prove anything with that story. None of the captions said anything like "If you are unhappy with your step mother, shoot her."²³

Testifying before the US Senate subcommittee, it was arguably in Gaines's best interest to insist that the brutal story about a white supremacist who mistakenly kills his own daughter ultimately teaches young readers a valuable lesson, while the *Haunt of Fear* werewolf story offers only recreational pleasures. At risk were Gaines's professional reputation, his company's profits, and the livelihood of his employees. In the eyes of his critics, however, the fact that he appeared to have no qualms about placing such enormous trust in children to sort through potentially conflicting messages did not bode well for his qualifications as a responsible steward of youth culture. Linda Adler-Kassner points out that in the decade following World War II, "children's value systems were perceived as either 'totally malleable,' or pure and innocent until corrupted by society."²⁴ Gaines's defensive pivot to the question of narrative intent, instead of reassuring the Senate subcommittee, only seemed to reinforce the messiness of the comic book's interpretive demands. As a result, the publisher who the *New York Times* claimed saw "no harm in horror"²⁵ came to epitomize the volatility of comics as an inherently unstable visual form, one that was simply too pliable to be distributed to children without adult oversight.

The high stakes of this intense exchange with Beaser also demonstrate how Gaines unpacked the logic behind the creation of his comics. Rather than deny the cruelty and violence that comic books portrayed (and that could be found, he pointed out, in any newspaper), Gaines takes his cues from the reactionary measures of the Atomic Age in which he lived to argue instead for EC's creative decision-making as a *containment system* equipped with discursive barriers to shield readers from harm. Gaines's invocation of what is "spelled out carefully in the captions" alerts readers to these fail-safe measures and even concedes the idea insinuated throughout much of anticomics criticism that the fusion of word and picture is capable of great dangers when too much is required of the viewer's imagination. As Gardner

points out, "the comic, with its formal and inescapable demands for active completion by the reader, is therefore necessarily a most predatory aesthetic objects."²⁶ EC's careful approach to the interactions of text and image is important, then, for understanding how the taboo combination of explicitness, incredulity, and reading pleasure that the company branded as "shock" could also be adapted to engage more complex social messages—to "prove something," as Gaines states in his testimony.

Consider how Gaines attempted to counter Beaser's examples of what is visually "depicted" by pointing to what the captions have "spelled out." In doing so, Gaines introduces the Senate subcommittee to a way of reading and seeing that assigns certain elements of the page more interpretive weight than others. Pictures connote the precarious emotive and sensory registers of the predatory aesthetic object in this hierarchy; they astonish, disgust, and terrify. But words (or narrative captions, in particular) are used to foreclose the risks taken by the page's visual play when Gaines and Feldstein believed that the social coherence of the plot was at stake.

The notion that captions could more easily make the comic's intent clear regardless of how sensational the deeds may appear on the page is underscored by editorial messages to readers. The importance of reading every word is stressed in EC's back matter and in fan newsletters, along with paratexts such as the "hint" quoted at the start of the chapter. Emphasized in the Crypt Keeper's capital letters are the demands of EC's own cultural literacy, expressed not just for the benefit of *Tales from the Crypt* fans but to help all EC readers map the informational registers of any title and to encourage them to connect their enjoyment of the story with a deeper comprehension of how visual and verbal codes work together.

As a consequence of this approach, the EC tradition became associated with text-heavy comics. "Wordy" but also "well-written," notes one critic, while another observes about Feldstein, "the EC word-smith tended to overwrite, stuffing pages with text-heavy captions and speech balloons that pushed the art to the edges of the panels."²⁷ To develop original five- to seven-page stories without serial characters or established story worlds, Feldstein relied on opening exposition along with detailed omniscient and second-person narration to make the implications of the plot explicit. These techniques also

helped to reinforce the distinction that EC stressed in its marketing about “putting stories first” in order to create better comics. Gaines’s testimony bypassed the highly acclaimed talents of artists to spotlight the regulatory role of the text and the narrative voice-over. Critics such as Wertham had been successful in disparaging the process of “picture-reading” in ways that suggested, according to Bart Beaty, that “the medium itself was inherently problematic and was consequently irretrievable for a literate culture.”²⁸ In turn, EC regarded the caption’s written words—placed *deliberately, carefully, and by specific effort*—as a bulwark against claims that the very act of reading a comic could be dangerous.

EXHIBIT NUMBER TWELVE

A closer look at the issue of *Shock SuspenStories* that was submitted as evidence during the US Senate subcommittee hearings further highlights the challenges of isolating text and image in the manner that Gaines describes. The first page of “The Whipping” opens with a generous narrative description to introduce our protagonist, a white, middle-aged, slightly balding, family man named Ed. He stands beneath a streetlight with a white sheet folded over his arm and a leather strap in his hand. Once the reader learns that “the look of hate in his angry, angry eyes” had been triggered by the young Mexican American man who is dating Ed’s daughter, the extradiegetic narrative voice conspires with the bigoted protagonist, focalizing the events through his perspective in order to describe the helpless outrage and panic that turns him into a murderous vigilante.²⁹ When he visits the homes of his white neighbors to tell them about the “dirty Spick” who attempted to sexually assault his daughter, the captions alert us to the calculations behind the “shocking lies” invented by Ed to rouse other white fathers to anger: “frightening them . . . stirring them to action . . . prodding them toward violence.”³⁰

Once the mob pulls the white bedsheets over their faces, the allegiances of the narrative voice shift and turn accusatory. The captions begin to speak more frankly about the hateful delusions and the fictions that sustain the characters’ racist beliefs. Wallace Wood’s illustrations of Ed in costume emphasize his eyes, blown wide and seething with rage behind a mask, alongside the insistent rise and fall of his leather strap (figure 5). When amid the chaos of shadow and



FIGURE 5. "The Whipping" from *Shock SuspenStories* #14 (1954)

anonymity another father expresses concern, Ed silences him too, with the whip, and the captions berate the bystander's feeble attempt: "stung by his own work . . . suffering the pain of his own mission. He'd objected, yes! But he'd objected TOO LATE."³¹ Ed is repeatedly

described as a “whip-wielder,” “perpetrator,” and “bigot” until the dramatic last panel, when he also realizes—too late!—that his daughter is the fatal victim of his hate and not her olive-skinned husband; his fixation on whiteness and purity has yielded only the haunting shame of her “white dead face.”

In the comics historian Amy Kiste Nyberg’s reading of the story, she calls attention to the differences between what the reader learns from the captions and what is being depicted visually. She maintains that

Wertham’s misreading of the story may not have been deliberate, because there are actually two stories being told in “The Whipping,” one through the images and the dialogue in the word balloons, and another in the captions that accompany the story. The social message about the evils of racism is conveyed by the omniscient narrator through the use of captions. But if a reader skips the captions and skims the dialogue, a much different story is told, where the racism seemingly is justified by the attempted rape of Amy; the fact that it is a trumped-up charge is explained only in the caption.³²

Nyberg adds that “no one reading the entire story would construe it as one preaching racial hatred” and reiterates that despite Wertham’s misreading, the story’s intent was quite clear.³³ She points out, too, that Wertham was not alone in doing this; anticomics critics often isolated “panels and dialogue from comic book stories out of context” to bolster their argument.³⁴ Nevertheless, her explanation lends too much credence to the notion that separating page elements in this manner can legitimately yield “two stories” rather than an insufficient interpretation of one.

Wertham’s “skips” and “skims” are even more troublesome when used to argue the threat posed by millions of comics sold in the United States. His methods appeared to satisfy Senator Kefauver, who agreed after browsing through “The Whipping” that he simply could not “find any moral of better race relations in it.”³⁵ Yet in Wertham’s role as an expert witness and an authority on juvenile delinquency, his propositions for industry regulation were too often based on the menacing editorial intent he assigned to the most narrow, literal readings of comics such as *Shock SuspenStories* #14. Gardner explains, “Wertham

himself slows down and focuses on certain elements and fails to fill in others; his summary makes logical narrative connections of various panels while eliding or forgetting other extended (and very slow) passages and ignoring or missing key narrative information."³⁶

Gaines's efforts to provide an opposing view that defended the merits of EC to the US senators failed in 1954, although the subcommittee ultimately concluded that "there was little evidence to connect comic book reading with criminal behavior."³⁷ Wertham took particular offense to the notion that the comics that "were otherwise objectionable" could be used to combat racism and other social problems.³⁸ Stories that fell under what the psychiatrist described as such "barbaric neologisms as suspensories [*sic*]" could be of no help to young people. Put simply, Wertham stated, "You cannot clear up the muddy water in a stream by planning a clear brook that flows in the opposite direction."³⁹ And as Carol Tilley points out in her research on the "numerous falsifications and distortions" that Wertham incorporated into *Seduction of the Innocent* to make his case, the sentiments expressed in his study shaped the enduring perception of the comic-book industry as toxic.⁴⁰

For comic-book readers, however, a different standard prevailed—one that rewarded the kind of readings that synthesize multiple visual and verbal cues within each story and across genres. Many of these enthusiasts expressed their appreciation for comics as "harmless entertainment" in the hundreds of letters sent on behalf of EC to the US Senate subcommittee.⁴¹ Others such as Bobby Lee Jones, a white reader from Terre Haute, stressed EC's social interventions: "There is one comic on the market published by Entertaining Comics Publishers that has brought out a great help to the problem of racial segregation. Many of their stories have set a lot of people on the right track. At least a few of my friends now speak to a person of the opposite color and call him buddy now instead of the vile remarks they used before. All because they read a few of the articles in this group."⁴²

So what happens, then, if instead of following Wertham's lead, we listen to readers like Bobby Lee Jones? A more systemic analysis of "The Whipping" reveals plot devices and personalities that were designed to spark the EC reader's familiarity with certain narrative trajectories. Nyberg notes, for instance, that Wertham and other concerned adults may have been troubled by the fact that "the evil was perpetrated by a

figure of authority whom children have been taught to respect.”⁴³ But as Wright also points out, part of EC’s appeal came from the way the writers and artists consistently undermined authority figures.⁴⁴ The comics scrutinized the consequences of unchecked power that could come from socioeconomic entitlement in America—particularly, as I elaborate on in chapter 3, when associated with white, middle-class men and mob violence. Suspicions follow characters such as Ed in ways that are not the case with other comics and other areas of mass culture that normalize white, patriarchal authority, particularly when superheroes, detectives, or cowboys are the lead protagonists. For a comic-book company whose stories were often narrated from the perspective of villains and monsters, the white family man’s power was unstable from the moment he was first introduced with the whip in his hand.

Furthermore, racial and ethnic minorities, such as Louis Martinez in “The Whipping,” are seldom presented as subjects of ridicule or danger in an EC comic, although most of the stories are unequipped to deal with them as anything other than passive subjects in need of saving.⁴⁵ They exist mainly as victims of wrongdoing in segregated neighborhoods, graveyards, military platoons, and even in outer space. It would have been unusual for EC to allow acts of racial violence committed by vigilantes to stand without the repercussions being articulated to the reader, through visual cues if not more explicitly by the narrator. The notion that the pictures present Ed’s racism as somehow justified may have seemed reasonable to Wertham and other anticomics critics who read the issue in isolation, but such a reading would have been far-fetched to EC’s regular consumers.

Captions and dialogue act in tandem with the pictures in “The Whipping” to portray the evils of racism and guide the readers step by step through the warped rationalizations of a bigot. As mentioned previously, the narrator spends the first half of this story chronicling Ed’s fears. “All the way home, his rage had seethed within him,” the caption states after Ed sees his daughter out with Martinez. “He’d kissed her! He of the olive skin and raven hair had dared to touch his white daughter.”⁴⁶ Once Ed and his neighbors set out on a night raid to the Martinez home, the narrative voice shifts from a more impersonal description of Ed’s perspective to judge the actions of the mob. What begins as one man’s desperation becomes a collective act of terrorism

by men clothed anonymously in attire resembling that of the Ku Klux Klan.

Here Feldstein's captions join forces with Wood's visual representation to transform the hooded white supremacists of "The Whipping" into phantoms of horror. The story breaches the purported boundaries between text and image in ways that comics scholars theorize as an essential trait of the comics form. As Robert C. Harvey explains it, "the concurrent presence in the visual mode of speech as well as action, locale, etc., makes comics what they are, a unique kind of pictorial narrative. In fact, this concurrence, if not interdependence, may actually define the medium."⁴⁷

"The Whipping" vividly illustrates this concurrence. Despite Gaines's insistence on clear genre distinctions, the narrative's horror tropes make visual and verbal allusions to the kind of supernaturalism that *Shock SuspenStories* were not supposed to have. Racism is the monster, the insidious fantasy that drives what the narrator describes as "white ghosts in the dark night" to terrorize people whose skin color, religion, or language are different from their own. The men are "phantom figures on a phantom mission, for isn't the basis of most hatred and intolerance but fantasy."⁴⁸ As figures draped in the billowing folds of white break down the Martinez home with ropes, clubs, and sacks in hand, the captions use the kind of figurative language that one might easily expect to find in *Tales from the Crypt*: "And from the darkness, too, come the screams of the persecuted . . . the anguished cries of pain of those who are hounded down by these fantasies."⁴⁹ The shock comic is better understood as what Roberts calls a *genre mutation* in that it draws on conventions of horror to express and to condemn the social realities of racism.⁵⁰

The other three stories that appear in *Shock SuspenStories* #14 further test the limits of Gaines's claims about the entertaining and the educational. "The Whipping" is followed by "You, Murderer," a story adapted by Otto Binder that is based on the silent German horror film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Binder frames the dark tale of an unsuspecting man who is hypnotized into committing murders through EC's favored second-person perspective—a convention made all the more sinister by the sharp angles and somber tones of Bernard Krigstein's art. Another story, "And Ye Sow," uses elements from the EC crime comics. It depicts a wretched, emasculated husband whose attempt to

take revenge on his cheating wife results in his own demise. Neither of these entertaining stories was written or illustrated to make a point or prove anything other than the thrilling pleasures of the unexpected.

But “The Orphan,” the first story in *Shock SuspenStories* #14, by Feldstein and Jack Kamen, is more difficult to classify. As referenced during the US Senate subcommittee hearings, the story’s snap-ending involves a ten-year-old, blond girl named Lucy Johnson who kills her abusive father and frames her neglectful mother (and her mother’s boyfriend) for the murder. Significantly the bulk of the comic focuses on explicit representations of violence and cruelty against the child protagonist. Lucy’s father hits her at least three times, and her mother’s deception is made all the worse for the way that her smiling face and hugs in public are followed by hateful rejection of her daughter in private. Yet Lucy, with a conspiratorial wink worthy of Tom Sawyer, easily dispenses with her irresponsible parents and starts a new life with a much-kinder, older aunt. Even though child narrators were not unfamiliar to EC, the satisfaction of the shocking twist in “The Orphan” relies on assumptions about childhood innocence—particularly as applied to white children—that clash with the reader’s awareness of troubled marriage and spousal revenge plots.

Despite the comic’s implied critique of child abuse, however, Gaines did not categorize “The Orphan” as one of the EC preachies. The story did not protest the harms of negligent parenting as much as it delighted in the forbidden thrills of Lucy’s murderous ingenuity and resourcefulness. In “The Whipping,” the narrator speaks directly to the reader from outside the story, offering a running commentary of how the neighborhood’s racist actions are an affront to human decency. By contrast, Lucy narrates her own tale in “The Orphan” and selectively withholds details about her involvement until the end. Because she makes no effort to rationalize her actions, not verbally at least, Gaines insisted, “No message has been spelled out there. We were not trying to prove anything with that story. None of the captions said anything like ‘If you are unhappy with your step mother, shoot her.’”⁵¹ Readers are not directly encouraged to model their own behavior on Lucy’s criminal deeds. Nor is the unhappiness that she experiences framed as a systemic crisis requiring collective action. The story is, in other words, simply “designed to entertain.”

Ultimately neither the educational nor the entertaining comics

that Gaines produced adhere strictly to type. Although "The Orphan" stops short of advocating murder, the story does spotlight one of the recurring themes of EC's approach in its effort to expose the hidden horrors of the American family. Tight interior spaces predominate the images of the Johnson family's suffocating domestic setting, isolated and drained of virtue. Shouting is the only way that the adults in Lucy's household communicate. Honest feelings can only be gleaned from what is overheard behind closed doors or beneath the stairs. In this environment, the boys and girls who were often depicted in EC comics demonstrate a kind of cleverness and understanding that the adults have lost. Their rule breaking is often treated as a necessary means of survival.⁵²

As with most formula fiction, the genre comics that EC made famous relied heavily on the reader's awareness of these narrative structures, characterizations, and artistic styles. Variations of "The Orphan" can be found in "The Secret" from *Haunt of Fear* #24 and "The Screaming Woman" from *Crime Suspense Stories* #15. Likewise, readers of "The Whipping" might have recognized plot points from another story, called "Under Cover!," which was published a year earlier. That narrative also features a white woman being whipped and killed by hooded white supremacists as punishment for "consorting . . . with that trash element" and not her "own kind."⁵³

Yet Roberts reminds us that an important part of genre competency means being mindful not only of recurring elements but also of the ways in which these systems are constantly in flux. There are preachies, such as "Judgment Day!" and "In Gratitude . . ." that have very few captions and rely on the audience to make inferences from the character's actions. And it is not uncommon to find social and political critiques in comics that were intended only to provide reading enjoyment. In Frank Nuessel's analysis of "The Whipping," he points to a wide spectrum of social issues that the story may unintentionally raise in the process of condemning racism against Mexican Americans, including "child abuse, abuse of women, an inherent sexism in Ed's paternalistic attitude toward his young adult daughter, and an implicit anti-Catholic stance."⁵⁴

Indeed, no matter how deliberately written and formulaic Gaines claimed his comics to be, EC did not earn its reputation by simply churning out the same clichés and stock characters over and over

again. The company consistently broke its own editorial rules to test the limits of the medium, attracting controversy along with profit. It also earned the trust of readers who welcomed the kind of narrative and aesthetic play that allowed the EC tradition to invent itself with each new story.

“MOST CHILDREN LEARN ENOUGH TO KNOW
IF A COMIC IS SENSIBLE”

Gaines's emphasis on the messages that are “spelled out” in the preachies says as much about the changing status of youth culture as it does about EC's approach to the comics form. Historians such as James Gilbert mark the 1950s as a transitional moment when adolescents were increasingly regarded as consumers and emboldened by mass culture to make decisions about their lifestyles that were independent from their parents. The debates over comic books were intensified by these adult anxieties, with Gilbert noting that the post-World War II fixation on delinquency “represented a projection of uneasiness, a measure of the discomfort that adults felt about the social and cultural changes that touched them too.”⁵⁵

So when EC's publisher spoke of children as readers in terms that praised their discerning intelligence rather than their vulnerability and inexperience, his remarks were greeted with tremendous skepticism. In his testimony before the US Senate subcommittee, Gaines coupled assurances about how his comics circumvented the minefields of “unintended messaging” with a much-larger, riskier claim about what EC trusted its readers to *know*. Gaines reiterated this particular point years later in an interview with Gary Groth: “Our readers can tell when we're trying to make a point . . . and we signal it and therefore they know we're trying to teach them something, but normally they know we're just trying to entertain them.”⁵⁶

What EC fan-addicts *know* is at the heart of the cultural critic Robert Warshow's fascination with his eleven-year-old son's comic-book obsession in the June 1954 essay “The Study of Man: Paul, the Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham,” published in *Commentary* magazine shortly after the hearings. An editorial note describes the piece as “displaying one parent and one child in their cold war over the question of comic books.”⁵⁷ It also offers a compelling portrait of a young man as an EC reader.

The elder Warshow is less concerned in his essay about the *content* of a comic such as *Crime SuspenStories*—which he favorably compares to the works of Edgar Allan Poe—than he is about the *quality* of the medium. He complains that the form conveys its messages too plainly, too directly, for children, who must defer pleasure and “learn to wait” in order to value what their efforts have earned. By this logic, “a child’s developing appreciation of the complexity of good literature is surely one of the things that contribute to his eventual acceptance of the complexity of life.” When Warshow’s assessment singles out EC specifically, he counters Gaines’s claims about “deliberate effort” by pointing out the way that EC in particular amplifies the flaws inherent in the “bareness of the comic-book form.” EC, with its “undisciplined imaginativeness and violence,” frustrates the elder Warshow, and despite observations about occasional moments of cleverness, he repeatedly articulates his anxieties through the rhetoric of impulsiveness. *Mad* and *Panic* are characterized as “a wild, undisciplined machine-gun attack on American popular culture,” while the horror and crime comics are even more “unrestrained.”⁵⁸

Juxtaposed with this critique is Warshow’s fascinating study of his son Paul’s reading habits. To explain how and why an “alert, skillful, and self-possessed” young boy could have developed such a fascination for these undisciplined comics, Warshow begins by characterizing his son’s Fan-Addict membership card, shoulder patch, and pin essentially as a fad. The fervor with which the eleven-year-old tracks down issues from month to month are not unlike his “Pogo period” and make him no different than other children of the 1950s immersed in the temptations of mass media and consumer culture. Warshow’s doubts about EC and his fundamental distrust of the comics form falters against his understanding of Paul and the way that his son treats comics as little more than “objects produced for his entertainment.” He admits, “The bloodiest of ax murders apparently does not disturb his sleep or increase the violence of his own impulses. . . . So far as I can judge, he has no inclination to accept as real the comic-book conception of human nature which sees everyone as a potential criminal and every criminal as an absolute criminal.”⁵⁹ Warshow also notes that the preteen’s preference for EC does not seem to keep him from reading other kinds of books.

Yet even as Warshow resists the easy pathologization of Paul as

a comics reader, he is unable to relinquish the possibility that these stories can thwart his son's capacity to distinguish between right and wrong. He calculates the number of comics that Paul probably reads each year—three to four stories per issue, ten comics a week, fifteen hundred to two thousand stories a year—and, in the process, wrestles with the idea that such an immersion in comics could be having an impact that parents cannot see.

At the heart of Warshow's concern was a growing midcentury debate over how cultural ideas were transmitted, perhaps subconsciously, to act on the most vulnerable minds. Fears over Cold War-era brainwashing often resonated with concerns about the manipulation of mass media and advertising, particularly when directed at growing numbers of youth consumers. Echoing Herbert Beaser's line of inquiry from the Senate hearings, Warshow observes, "Almost anything in [Paul's] life is likely to seem important to me, and I find it hard to accept the idea that there should be one area of his experience, apparently of considerable importance to him, which will have no important consequences. One comic book a week or ten, they must have an effect. How can I be expected to believe that it will be a good one?"⁶⁰

Warshow agrees with many of Wertham's points, but he does not see comics as all that unusual from other media. Their sensational content simply intensifies the complexities already present in more respectable, classic children's literature. Warshow notes, rather wistfully, that the controversial crime and horror comics that he would prefer Paul avoid actually seem to be "better" (as in livelier, more engaging) than the morality tales of the "safer" comics such as *Lone Ranger* or *Superman*. These observations prompt him to linger on Wertham's unwillingness during the hearings or in *Seduction* to praise anything of value in comic books. Warshow is led to conclude that "Dr. Wertham is largely able to ignore the distinction between bad and 'good' because most of us find it hard to conceive of what a 'good' comic book might be."⁶¹

In Warshow's dialogue with his son, however, we see a different standard of quality being put forth and treated with surprising thoughtfulness. Warshow learns from Paul that comics are "stupid sometimes" but that they can also fall into a range of "pretty good" to "really good." These observations are further affirmed in the letter that the eleven-year-old wrote to Wertham two weeks after the publication of the *Commentary* piece:

Dear Dr. Wertham,

Thank you very much for your letter. I have read my father's article and I think it is very good. I don't agree with all the things in it. I don't think comics do much harm to children. I don't think they are all good though. Most children learn enough to know if a comic is sensible. Only a few would take an unlikely story seriously. I don't take them seriously but I enjoy some of them. Thank you again for your letter.

Best wishes,

Paul Warshow

P.S. I would very much like to meet you.⁶²

Here we see that Paul is an astute consumer: one who has determined in his own mind that the question of harm is different from whether a comic is enjoyable and impactful—in other words, “good.” Paul demonstrates the agency of children as learned readers able to distinguish between the demands of a story that is “sensible” in contrast to one in which the content is unrealistic or “unlikely.” He can hold in tension a range of interpretive views, disagreeing forthrightly with the nation’s foremost anticomics critic on the one hand but concluding with the postscript, “I would very much like to meet you.” Readers such as Warshow’s son are the reason why Gaines could say before a US Senate subcommittee that a severed head is appropriate taste “for a horror comic.” The publisher’s mistake, of course, was assuming that the general public was part of the same community that carried EC membership cards, shoulder patches, and pins.

In the article “Why Won’t You Just Read It? Comic Books and Community in the 1950s,” Adler-Kassner explores how comics as a form of mass communication contributed to the formation of a subversive community that excluded parents. She takes the title of her piece from Warshow’s article, noting that for middle-class, American children such as Paul, “comic books were the gateway to a community which, in these parents’ eyes, undermined the goals they had set out for their children.”⁶³ It is clear that Warshow is struggling in his essay to reconcile his parenting goals with the comics’ crude representation of reality. But he is also concerned with the notion that comics have introduced “shared cultural symbols” to his son that he cannot decode. Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s concept of the shared meanings and

values of “imagined communities,” Adler-Kassner studied hundreds of letters from EC readers along with the fan newsletter correspondence in order to demonstrate how much the readers appreciated the space the comics magazine provided to express oppositional interests and enter into a dialogue with the story ideas.⁶⁴

One thing that Adler-Kassner does not make explicit in her study is the racial and gender demographics of comic-book readers during the 1950s. EC’s audience was made up typically of older children and teenagers who were predominantly white and male—boys such as Paul or a teenage Larry Stark.⁶⁵ Yet their interests and buying habits were not the only ones that galvanized EC’s reading communities. There were girls, adults, and nonwhite consumers among the millions of readers supporting the comic-book industry as well. Among the few readership surveys completed in these early years, one of the most widespread was a 1943 study by the Market Research Corporation for the publisher Fawcett Comics that found that “95 percent of elementary-aged children read comic books often,” with the percentages declining gradually as the children reached high school.⁶⁶ More qualitative studies by the educational psychologist Paul Witty in 1941 and 1945 in Illinois reiterated the fact that girls were active comic-book and comic-strip readers, reading titles with less frequency than boys but preferring the same high-ranked series such as *Superman*, *Batman*, and *Famous Funnies*.⁶⁷

Witty’s study from 1945 with Dorothy Moore focused specifically on black children’s comics-reading habits. This survey found that “the average number of magazines read by Negro children is considerably higher than the average for white children; about eighteen for the Negro group as compared with thirteen for the white group.”⁶⁸ In other words, black children—boys, in particular—read significantly more comic book titles than their white peers did and, as the study further demonstrated, read them more frequently.⁶⁹ While black comic book consumers remained outnumbered by their white counterparts, they constituted an especially devoted readership, purchasing and sharing a larger selection of comics. African Americans, particularly those living in urban areas, were most certainly among EC’s audience, and much like girl readers, they constituted an often-overlooked secondary market for the stories Gaines published.

Tilley’s extensive research on the civic engagement of comic-book

readers offers additional clues to the makeup of EC's audience and their interest in "protesting an *idea*—that comics might be regulated, that comics might cause harm to readers—rather than some *material* change."⁷⁰ Her study of the letters written to the US Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency has identified numerous African American readers who wrote in support of EC and other comic-book publishers, many emphasizing the moral lessons conveyed in the stories to counter claims about the medium's so-called harmful effects. In October 1954, a student named Curtis Meningall Jr. from Livingstone College, a historically black college in North Carolina, wrote to "defend the comic books which are hanging in the balance due to outside pressures." He expressed his appreciation for comics, including the more mature stories, in which he noted that "violence as read by the reader is looked upon as evil and immoral," in contrast to what appeared in the daily newspapers.⁷¹ Similarly, in a postcard from Newport News, Virginia, a black reader in her early twenties named Cleo Brown writes, "I read all kinds of comics and horror magazines, and I don't see why it should make any difference after reading them. At the *end of each story* it shows that *good wins over bad* no matter how horrible it is."⁷²

Meningall and Brown took pleasure in the kind of comics that EC made popular. Both share the savvy reading practices of other fan-addicts and emphasize the value of genre competency in their appreciation of the comics. To persuade the US Senate subcommittee, they commend the good and just ends of a violent imaginary, in which seemingly senseless horror is turned around to serve a restorative purpose. It is important, then, to remain attentive to the interpretive nuances that EC's comics could generate for a diverse readership—including enthusiasts who themselves were subject to the kind of social injustice depicted on the page—even if the stories were plotted with the perspectives of young white readers such as Paul Warshow in mind.

Adler-Kassner's study concludes, "there is no evidence that [children] believed that comic books were leading them away from home and hearth."⁷³ But in this, the EC preachies strived to be different. Leading white Americans away from the troubling social norms of home and hearth was precisely the point of "The Whipping" and other stories depicting realities that EC hoped its primary audience

would take very seriously. While Gaines often insisted that entertainment and profit were the company's only concerns, EC singled out the message stories for their deliberateness with respect not only to the creative labor but also to the uncomfortable conversations that the comics sought to initiate. Designed to "proselytize" and to "combat" intolerance but not to pander, the preachies conscripted the finest tools of the EC tradition, enlisting sensational strategies from across genres to heighten their educational impact.

Of course there are more to these comics than the messages that Gaines, Feldstein, and the artists of EC have given us. A clear and careful assessment of the EC preachies must be guided by more than the creator's intent. Even as we endeavor to counter Werthan's skips and skims with the Crypt Keeper's ghoulish pleas for more comprehensive reading practices, the fact remains that Herbert Beaser was right about one thing: "a message *can* be gotten across without spelling out in that detail."

Chapter 2 considers EC's efforts to represent African Americans and their struggles during the early years of the civil-rights era. It pays special attention to what is silent and unseen in the preachies in order to add a broader awareness of the period's social context and the legacy of race in comics. Doing so enables us to better evaluate how these representations succeed or fall short. Stories such as "The Guilty!," "In Gratitude . . .," and "Perimeter!" ultimately prompt the question, What are the messages that blackness communicates in an Entertaining Comic?

CHAPTER TWO

"WE PICTURED HIM SO DIFFERENT, JOEY!" Optical Illusions of Blackness and Embodiment in EC

But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.

—TA-NEHISI COATES, *BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME*

On the first page of "The Guilty!" (1952), a black man named Aubrey Collins has been arrested for murdering a white woman. As Collins is ushered inside the jail, a mob of white men surrounds the building with raised fists, grimaced faces, and vicious words. From the moment the cigar-chomping Sheriff Dawson calls for his deputy to "Bring the n—r on up!" it is apparent that the town's representative of law and order is virtually indistinguishable from the vigilantes who want Collins released so that they can "take care of 'im."¹ Not only does the sheriff have to be convinced to lock the jail-house door, but he is disappointed when the mob outside disperses, telling the district attorney, "Whaddya mean? What's wrong? We know he did it!"²

When a civil-liberties lawyer from out of town arrives to defend Collins, the sheriff takes matters into his own hands, and on the way to the trial, the sheriff forces the black man out of the escorting police car at gunpoint, telling him to run. Later Sheriff Dawson will explain, "I shot him while he was tryin' to escape!" but in the very next panel,

the reader learns that the so-called witness, a white man, confessed to the murder just moments before. A final narrative caption makes the story's message explicit: "Whether Aubrey Collins was *innocent* or *guilty* is not important! But for *any* American to have so little regard for the life and rights of any other American is a *debasement* of the *principles* of the *Constitution* upon which our country is founded!"³

Written by Al Feldstein and drawn by Wallace Wood for the June–July 1952 issue of *Shock SuspenStories* #3, "The Guilty!" was the first story in the series to focus on antiblack violence and the racial disparities of the modern criminal-justice system. Regrettably, the sheriff's brutal disregard for black life may not have been all that shocking when the story appeared, considering that the Fourteenth Amendment's promises of equal protection and due process were still being regularly denied to African Americans. What did seem to take many readers by surprise, however, was EC's decision to publish the story at all.

Two issues after "The Guilty!" appeared, the entire page of the "Shock Talk" letters column was devoted to the "tremendous amount of mail" the company received on the story, with readers offering observations about the story's stance against racism or weighing in on the comic's appropriateness.⁴ Most letters offered congratulations and encouragement: "I have been reading E.C. Publications ever since they came out, and I have always taken it for granted that they are the best in the business. But after reading *Shock SuspenStories* #3, I've found out something new. You guys have guts! Yes, it takes guts to print a story like "The Guilty!"⁵ Another writer called the story "outrageous," explaining, "I am not prejudiced against any race, but the story just shocked me. . . . I realize that it could happen, but I just don't think it should be printed in a comic book."⁶ Included in the column was a letter from an African American reader: "I am colored, and do not object to this kind of story. On the contrary, I wish there were more to show how shameful and horrid prejudice really is, how it is a mar on the beautiful face of America. This story is all too real and true. All America should read it!"⁷

This chapter examines the way "The Guilty!" and other EC comics illustrate "how shameful and horrid prejudice really is" by analyzing how Aubrey Collins and black male characters—including Hank from "In Gratitude . . ." (*Shock SuspenStories* #11) and Private J. Matthews

from "Perimeter!" (*Frontline Combat* #15)—were used to embody and to complicate the race problem of the early 1950s. These stories make a case for racial justice by appealing to Americans' civic and religious beliefs. In doing so, they condemn racism as the betrayal of the nation's democratic ideals, particularly in light of the Korean War and the Truman Doctrine's positioning of the United States as the international standard-bearer for democracy. These comics also focus our attention on the way that the subjective experiences of African Americans are represented in the EC tradition. On the page, these pictorial narratives often convey the pursuit of justice, equality, and respect through male-gendered norms that affirm the humanity of African Americans as soldiers, family men, and agents of the state.⁸ And while EC did on occasion develop stories with other racial and ethnic groups, including Native Americans ("Justice!" from *Two-Fisted Tales* #36) and Mexican Americans ("The Whipping" from *Shock SuspenStories* #14), more substantial effort was put into the depiction of black characters and the consequences of antiblack racism.

What interests are best served by these particular creative and editorial choices? For one thing, the preachies consistently took advantage of the visual and verbal medium of comics to disassociate white normative subjectivity from virtuous qualities such as innocence, courage, and moral authority. Even as the New Trend comics highlight racial injustice, however, they tend to dampen expressions of African American agency, often with the goal of foregrounding the contemptible actions of white characters. Nevertheless, EC's approach to portraying the complexities of black identity matured in subtle but important ways in the years leading up to the landmark decision to end public-school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

"IT COULD HAVE HAPPENED IN YOUR TOWN!"

What was it about a story such as "The Guilty!" that took *guts* to print? Prior to 1952, black characters held only minor roles in EC comics, typically as sly practitioners of "black magic" from Haiti or the African continent. These characters appeared almost exclusively in the horror comics with such titles as "Voodoo Death!," "Drawn and Quartered!," and "Zombie!" Their chilling resolutions tended to mock the arrogance of white travelers who ignored the black primitives' warnings about magic talismans and forbidden spaces.⁹ Aubrey Collins intro-

duces a completely different approach to the representation of blackness: his jailed and murdered body places racism at the center of "The Guilty!" and compels EC readers to grapple with the "all too real and true" existence of racial terrorism in modern America.

Fans who preferred to isolate the ghouls of EC from their larger social contexts would probably have been unsettled by the stark realism of *Shock SuspenStories* and the genre's dogged refusal to broker an excuse or an escape from the dark side of the American racial experience. Captions in "The Guilty!" directly challenge readers, for instance, to consider how their own lives intersect with the cruelty and intolerance illustrated on the page. Despite the visual cues that seem to locate Sheriff Dawson's town in the South, the comic's opening line insists, "This shameful story might have taken place *anywhere* in the United States!" and a later line exclaims, "It *could* have happened in *your* town!" This move effectively nationalizes the racial conflict while also making the implications devastatingly personal.

To be sure, the problems that "The Guilty!" and other EC preachies were addressing had already been making newspaper headlines in the United States. Amid the praise for Jackie Robinson's home runs and Ralph Bunche's Nobel Peace Prize, the accounts of bombings, voter suppression, housing discrimination, grass-roots civil-rights protest, and the stubborn opposition of the southern Dixiecrats were becoming more urgent and increasingly visible nationally and abroad. With racism being criticized as the "black" Achilles heel of American democracy by Cold War allies and opponents alike, President Harry Truman kept civil-rights initiatives at the top of his agenda after World War II.¹⁰ In 1948, he issued an executive order to effectively desegregate the armed services, and his administration supported a series of landmark cases involving the rights of African Americans to purchase land and to challenge segregation in schools and railroad dining cars.¹¹ These cases slowly set the stage for overturning the "separate but equal" edict of the US Supreme Court. Even a young reader picking up *Shock SuspenStories* #3 (which happened to come out just months before the 1952 presidential election) would have been aware that, as a *New York Times* editorial declared, "CIVIL RIGHTS IS AN ISSUE FOR BOTH MAJOR PARTIES."¹²

While the federal government was beginning to act, the everyday indignities that had plagued African Americans since the end of

Reconstruction continued unchecked. Duke University's Behind the Veil oral-history project documents the ordinary lived experiences of African Americans under Jim Crow through interviews with nearly thirteen hundred black southerners. In the project's companion book, the editors take note of the lessons afforded by these personal stories:

First is an understanding of the dailiness of the terror blacks experience at the hands of capricious whites—the man who told of his brother being killed in the middle of the night because he had not sufficiently deferred in the presence of a white man, another story of an African American being dragged to his death behind a horse-drawn wagon, or a pregnant wife having her womb slit, with both mother and child killed, because her husband allegedly had offended a white woman. From lynching to being denied the right to be called "Mr." or "Mrs.," to having car or school buses intentionally hit puddles of water to splash black people walking, there was neither escape from, nor redress for, the ubiquitous, arbitrary, and cruel reality of senseless white power.¹³

Along with being forced to negotiate these unspoken codes of social behavior, many African Americans felt a deep-seated fear and distrust of law enforcement. This fear is underscored in "The Guilty!" Like many law-enforcement officers all over the country, the fictional Sheriff Dawson uses his position of authority to criminalize black mobility and control expressions of assertiveness or dissent. The historian Leon Litwack explains that "the differences between the courtroom and the lynch mob were not always clear in the New South. Nor in the eyes of black men and women were there discernible differences between a speedy trial and mob justice, between lawless lynchers and lawless judges, sheriffs, constables, policemen, wardens, and prison guards."¹⁴

The publisher and writer Russ Cochran suggests that Gaines and Feldstein, in their effort to tackle these systemic injustices, found a model for their preachies in the acclaimed message films (or "race problem pictures") of the era, including *Pinky*, *Lost Boundaries*, *Home of the Brave*, and *Intruder in the Dust*.¹⁵ Some of the scenes that appear in condensed form in "The Guilty!" resonate in particular with *Intruder in the Dust*, directed by Clarence Brown and adapted

from William Faulkner's 1948 novel about a black Mississippi farmer named Lucas Beauchamp, who is wrongfully accused of murdering a white man. The comic visually echoes one of the film's most chilling moments, when the townspeople gather outside the jail and call for Lucas's death.¹⁶ Donald Bogle sums up the film's significance in this way: "Tough-minded and complex, *Intruder in the Dust* unearthed, among a number of things, a somber piece of Americana: a black man on trial has little chance for justice in our country, said the film, more than twenty years before such statements were fashionable."¹⁷ In the film's hopeful conclusion, Lucas is set free. With the help of the young, white protagonist, Chick Mallison, the black man lives to see the real murderer jailed and returns home unharmed. The fact that the actor playing Lucas, Juano Hernandez, had to remain segregated from the cast during filming in Mississippi indicates just how rare and aspirational such a film was in 1949.¹⁸

Once *Intruder in the Dust* was released, Hernandez received high praise for the dignity, solemnity, and resolve that he brought to the role, which ultimately earned him a Golden Globe nomination. Observers at the time called him a "new Negro" in the film industry, a figure too daring and too refined to play submissive roles typically reserved for blacks, such as the "janitor or shoe shine boys."¹⁹ In Bogle's study of African Americans in film, he too singles out Hernandez's groundbreaking performances as a cinematic prototype for the "defiantly proud black man." Though this assertiveness quickly became overshadowed by the more sensitive and youthful openness of Sidney Poitier, Bogle insists that Hernandez stood apart, describing his manner as "aristocratic" and comparing his stature and expressiveness to that of Paul Robeson.²⁰

The emphasis that observers placed on Hernandez's physical bearing in his depiction of Lucas Beauchamp offers a valuable point of entry into Wood's artistic choices for the "The Guilty!" and the "new Negroes" of EC. In fact, the way Aubrey Collins appears on the comics page warrants close attention, particularly for an American comic. During a time when minstrel caricatures continued to dominate mass representations of blackness in everything from songs and board games to soap advertisements, comic art was often the most egregious offender. Newspaper strips, editorial cartoons, and comic books frequently relied on stereotypical figures such as the Coon, the Mammy,

and the Black Brute to embody the full spectrum of nonwhite subjectivity.

When the EC New Trend line was launched in the late 1940s, two of the more prominent black characters in Golden Age comics— Steamboat from *Captain Marvel* and Ebony White from the Sunday-supplement comic book *The Spirit*—had only recently been discontinued. Both featured the pitch-black skin, oversized balloon lips, bulging eyes, and drawling vernacular of the Sambo. The comics scholar Brian Cremins explains that the removal of Captain Marvel's black valet, Steamboat, was made in response to an appeal by junior high school students to Fawcett Comics. When the buffoonish caricature first appeared in 1942, his presence helped to affirm the relative "power and social capital" acquired by Billy Batson as the young white protagonist learned to transform into the superhero Captain Marvel.²¹ Steamboat was dropped three years later after a group of multiracial students from New York, called the Youth-builders, visited Fawcett's executive editor, Will Lieberston, to make the case: "This is not the Negro race, but your one-and-a-half-million readers will think it so."²² While such victories and the fleeting efforts of mainstream publishers to attract more black readers were major steps, black caricatures still populated the landscape of Golden Age comics in demeaning roles, from the "pickaninnies" played for laughs in comic strips to the cannibalistic savages of jungle comics. Even EC's own horror stories drew on racial types when representing non-American blacks, for instance, in the case of Johnny Craig's illustrations of the evil Haitian witch doctors, each stripped to the waist and wearing gold armbands and hooped earrings.

"WHETHER AUBREY COLLINS WAS INNOCENT
OR GUILTY IS NOT IMPORTANT!"

By contrast, in "The Guilty!" Aubrey Collins is portrayed in defiance of racial typology. He is a lean African American man of average height, dressed plainly in cuffed blue jeans and a white shirt. Colorist Marie Severin adds medium-brown tones to the heavily inked figure, with a slightly darker shade for the tight curls of his hair (figure 6). His body is contoured in the deep shadows and expressive lines that distinguish Wood's style but does not appear ominous; captions follow suit by describing the way "the sunlight gleamed on his perspiration-covered



FIGURE 6. "The Guilty!" from *Shock SuspenStories* #3 (1952)

brown skin."²³ In the monochromatic blue scenes that emphasize his facial features, the eyelids, nose, and lips are delineated without exaggeration. Collins is not featured prominently in every scene, but when he does appear, he is drawn as realistically as white characters.

Importantly, Wood uses visual anchors in the comic to ensure the easy recognition of individual white speakers and to aid in their character development. The heavy-jowled Sheriff Dawson puffs a cigar in nearly every scene, for example, seemingly to indicate his unscrupulous approach to the law. The two erudite lawyers wear glasses, and the fact that there appear to be both businessmen (in suits) and farmers (in overalls) among the angry white mob suggests that, in this story, the privileges of whiteness cut across socioeconomic classes. The strategy of employing visual cues to signal personality and social leanings, the cartoonist and critic Will Eisner suggests, "requires a familiarity with the audience and a recognition that each society has its own ingrown set of accepted stereotypes."²⁴

Among characters depicted through these class and occupational clichés, Aubrey Collins is nondescript, almost generic in a way that indicates an effort on Wood's part to underscore the character's basic

humanity and to elicit sympathy.²⁵ Of course, his dark skin is itself coded and culturally overdetermined; from Aubrey's first appearance, his skin marks deeply entrenched beliefs about his identity. His blackness, as the visual theorist W. J. T. Mitchell notes, is assumed to be the "transparently readable sign" of his character, particularly for the white men with rifles and fists who refuse to treat Collins as anything other than a murderous Black Brute.²⁶

A phenotypically realistic image of an African American man was therefore crucial in conveying this comic's message to 1950s consumers. Wood and Severin make Collins's blackness easy to see but difficult to read. The character walks forthrightly through the angry crowd, and even when handcuffed and frightened, his posture and grave expression aspire to the "quiet dignity" so reminiscent of Lucas Beauchamp in *Intruder in the Dust*.²⁷ There are significant differences between the two characters, however; whereas Lucas is defiant, the protagonist of "The Guilty!" is much more forbearing. When Collins is spit on by one of the townspeople, his face turns slightly to the side but remains aloft and solemn in the panel's foreground despite the white faces grimacing around him. The story's efforts to place pictured realities at odds with social assumptions comes to a head once the district attorney declares the accused black man to be "innocent as a baby."

The one thing that Aubrey Collins does not do, however, is speak. Visually he is a sympathetic figure, but without a voice in this comic, the depth of his individuality remains slight. We see him in the background of several scenes. His eyes are attentive and discerning as he listens to the sheriff and the lawyers discuss his fate, but he is isolated by his silence from the narrative's primary action. For one brief moment, when the district attorney raises the issue of the importance of a fair trial because "there's a man's life a stake," Wood frames the conversation from Collins's perspective, and we see through his eyes; the brown fists clenching the bars briefly become our own. What if we had been given access to Collins's thoughts in this moment? If he had been allowed to speak, what would he have said? How would the story have been different?

The concluding scene, in which Collins realizes that he is being set up by the sheriff, provides another opportunity to learn more about the accused, to see and hear him act on behalf of his own self-interest. Unfortunately, Feldstein mutes the black man's solitary act of protest



FIGURE 7. "The Guilty!" from *Shock SuspenStories* #3 (1952)

in the narrative captions: "Collins got to his feet! He stared at the gun for a moment, shaking his head!"²⁸ It is left to Wood to articulate the panic of these final, terrifying moments through the twist and arc of Collins's body as it catches the sheriff's bullet and breaks through the center border of a stunning three-panel sequence (figure 7). The scene's keen pacing is accelerated by frenetic auditory registers, sounds that range from the pouring rain to the shouts of "RUN!" and the gun's fatal "BLAM!" Collins, on the other hand, appears to be suspended from the rest of the page in a separate dimension. His wordless pantomimes may be an efficient way to convey physical actions that "transcend cultural boundaries,"²⁹ but the strategy also weakens the story's efforts to humanize him as an individual. That the all-caps auditory cues are privileged over Collins's speech further diminishes his status. As he collapses into the mud and bleeds to death, Collins does not even cry out.

Collins is what the critic Suat Tong Ng would describe as "the

typical EC African American."³⁰ Ng argues that from all the black male characters developed by Gaines and Feldstein, there emerges "a silent, passive individual; an innocent without voice or passion in the face of society's racism." He sees evidence of the publisher's failures in the relentless editorial sermonizing of stories that focus more on "sympathetic martyrs" than "angry, forceful activists." There is little doubt that Collins is a scapegoat characterized mostly by his victimization as a black male. But whereas Ng ascribes EC's creative decisions to "intellectual laziness," I see calculations of risk in the context of a racial advocacy that cautiously sets EC apart from other comics and popular-culture texts of the period.³¹

Consider, for instance, how "The Guilty!" compares to a 1946 issue of *The Challenger*, a small-press comic-book series that "pledged to fight race prejudice, discrimination, and all other forms of fascism in North America."³² The lead story in issue #3 also revolves around a black man falsely accused of murder, but it focuses almost exclusively on the crime-solving efforts of the white title character against the city's antiunion, race-baiting power brokers. To encourage readers to model the actions of the white detective, the back matter directly invites youth to sign the "Challenger Pledge" by fighting fascism and bigotry. Alternatively, proactive African and African American characters are central to the comic published by Orrin C. Evans in 1947 called *All-Negro Comics*. But in contrast to *The Challenger*, the stories Evans published were much more circumspect about addressing racial inequality. For Ace Harlem and Lion Man in *All-Negro Comics*, success was about "glorifying" positive black achievement in tales produced for and by African Americans.³³

Reading "The Guilty!" in the context of these other stories prompts us to ask what was at stake ideologically in Feldstein and Wood's creative choices, including the pacing, perspective, and story structure, and in the tensions between the images and the narrative captions. For one thing—as the comic's title indicates—the story is not really about Aubrey Collins and *his* guilt but about Sheriff Dawson's. The primary purpose of "The Guilty!" is to do what law enforcement will not do: affirm the value of due process in American society.

By featuring images that portray Collins as sympathetically humble and compliant, the plot directs its urgency to the question of what will happen to the black man, in Litwack's words, "at the hands of

capricious whites.”³⁴ As the sheriff continues to lend dangerous legitimacy to the mob’s rush to judgment, the comic encourages readers to ask if there is indeed a difference between “lawless lynchers and lawless judges.”³⁵ Once the trial date arrives, Dawson is much more concerned about whether the lawyer will “make a fool” out of him than he is about justice being served.³⁶ As a result, the comic largely ignores the entrenched social consequences of murder and rape accusations against black men in favor of captions that chastise the sheriff and spell out that the real crime here is the debasement of constitutional principles. When our narrator declares that “whether Aubrey Collins was *innocent* or *guilty* is not important,” the value of black life is set aside in order to emphasize white Americans who put their own lives at risk by failing to follow the law.³⁷

EC is part of the much-larger history of the struggle for African Americans to earn recognition in artistic representation as more than phantoms of white fear, even among whites with seemingly progressive intentions. This is a history of contradiction, one in which Captain Marvel’s Steamboat—a character Fawcett claimed was created specifically *for* Negro readers³⁸—exists right alongside Lucas Beauchamp’s “defiantly proud black man.” It includes the efforts of James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Chester Himes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Lorraine Hansberry—African American writers, poets, and playwrights who began interrogating the logic of white supremacy in a manner that pulled readers deeper into the complexities of black life in 1950s America. Mainstream comic books were still figuring out how to have these conversations. National, Timely, Dell, Fawcett, and other major publishers concerned with alienating white readers, parents, librarians, and distributors often limited their discussions of racism and social justice to nonfictional historical biographies and sports comics. By the time that “The Guilty!” was published, however, EC had cultivated a community of young, predominantly white, oppositional readers willing to engage a story that forthrightly addressed the racial violence and discrimination perpetuated by the people in power.

“A PERFECTLY SUTURED IMAGE/TEXT”

Feldstein and Wood took the strategies they initiated in “The Guilty!” a step further in “In Gratitude . . .,” a message story that demonstrates how EC’s approach to African American representation progressed

over time. Published in the October–November 1953 issue of *Shock SuspenStories* #11, "In Gratitude . . ." follows the injured Korean War veteran Joey Norris after he returns to his hometown of Centerville for a hero's welcome. As he enjoys his first home-cooked meal and prepares for a rally to be held in his honor, Joey tells his parents that he would like to visit the grave of a fellow soldier named Hank, whose actions on the battlefield saved his life. Because Hank had no relatives to receive his body, Joey requested that he be buried in the Norris family's plot. Over the course of the story, the reader learns that Joey's comrade was interred elsewhere because of his race. Hank was African American, and Joey's parents were pressured by their neighbors not to bury him in Fairlawn Cemetery, where presumably the dead are *whites only*.³⁹

In the process of condemning the treatment of the African American war hero Hank, "In Gratitude . . ." exposes the false notion that skin color inherently marks behavior or correlates with specific beliefs. The comic also targets the absurdity of America's segregated home front by once again undermining allegedly fixed and self-evident assumptions about race. Words and images conspire in the story to transform the racial designations of black and white into abstractions that are as illegible to viewers as they are to Joey Norris's confused parents. This is, in part, because we never actually see or hear Hank directly in the comic; much like Aubrey Collins in "The Guilty!," his voice is filtered through white characters, and his physical appearance is mistaken for that of a white man. What readers must grapple with instead is the reality of Hank's corpse, exploded into bits and pieces by the shrapnel of a grenade that, the narrator tells us, "didn't *know* its color . . . didn't *care* if it was *white* or *black*."⁴⁰ By arguing Hank's worth through his death and, more specifically, his dismemberment—a common trope in EC's horror and crime comics—the story takes advantage of the grisly shock of violence to jar the social constructs that the community insists on affixing even to the soldier's torn skin. It is Joey's memory that gathers Hank together again, as he attests in the letters he wrote to his parents about his friend's camaraderie and self-sacrifice. Joey returns with his own injury, wearing a prosthetic arm that also serves as a symbol of his moral and social transformation as a white veteran, but Hank's body is the narrative's highest manifestation of patriotism and brotherhood.

Since Feldstein and Wood withhold the reference to Hank's racial identity until the story's midpoint, the comic's strategy may also leave some readers puzzled as to why anyone would be reluctant to honor his service.⁴¹ Mrs. Norris, for one, regards the omission in Joey's letters as purposefully misleading. She associated the range of positive attributes that Hank exemplified with whiteness. Her pleas for forgiveness turn to resentment as she accuses her son of deceiving them about Hank (figure 8): "All those letters you wrote, Joey! You never mentioned it! It wasn't fair! We grew to love Hank from your letters!" She describes Joey's recollection of moments in which he and Hank worked alongside each other and engaged in difficult missions: "When you wrote about that *patrol* you were sent on, we could *see* you both . . . *tramping through the mud together*."⁴² In these moments, the illustrations shift to a series of flashbacks washed in the blue colors of smoke and the red hue of explosives. During the combat scenes, Wood depicts Hank as physically indistinguishable from the white men; indeed, all the helmeted soldiers resemble one another, with the same hard jaw and heavy brow.

Joey's recollections are the only space in which Hank speaks. On those three occasions, his silence and passivity disappear, and the two friends converse as equals.⁴³ Readers are likewise invited to see and hear through Mr. and Mrs. Norris's field of vision as they interpret Hank, in Joey's "raceless" prose, as unquestionably white. As Mitchell states,

The assumption is that "blackness" is a transparently readable sign of racial identity, a perfectly sutured image/text. Race is what can be seen (and therefore named) in skin color, facial features, hair, etc. Whiteness, by contrast, is invisible, unmarked; it has no racial identity, but is equated with a normative subjectivity and humanity from which "race" is a visible deviation. It's not merely a question of analogy, then, between social and semiotic stereotypes of the other, but of mutual interarticulation. That is why forms of resistance to these stereotypes so often take the form of disruptions at the level of representation, perception, and semiosis.⁴⁴

The subversive messages of both "The Guilty!" and "In Gratitude . . ." are visible in the multilevel disruptions of stereotype



FIGURE 8. "In Gratitude . . ." from *Shock Suspense Stories* #11 (1953)

described by Mitchell. The death of Aubrey Collins, the silent man whose innocence is at odds with his skin color, embodies the deeply flawed assumption of blackness as a "perfectly sutured image/text." The soldier's death in "In Gratitude . . ." decouples the image-text relation

even more extensively by unmarking Hank's otherness and equating his identity with a normative (white) subjectivity. The story's emphasis on secondhand visual perception, along with Joey's re-membering of Hank solely through written accounts, are also important in Feldstein and Wood's strategic use of the comics form's shock genre. Mrs. Norris would not have been the only one gasping, "We pictured him so *different*, Joey! When you *wrote* about him . . . we pictured him . . . well . . ." ⁴⁵ The sentence is left for the EC reader to finish. White readers, in particular, were asked to grapple with their own assumptions about race and humanity in the context of Joey's larger question: "What did he die for? What did I give my arm for?" ⁴⁶

Likewise, the decision to set "In Gratitude . . ." against the backdrop of the Korean War is important because it highlights the persistence of racist practices even after the July 1953 Korean Armistice Agreement had been signed. The historian Angelika Kruger-Kahloulou notes that "the Korean and the Vietnam wars brought home, with the bodies of soldiers killed in action, the realization that people good enough to die for their country were not even good enough to be buried in a place of their choice." ⁴⁷ Less than two years before *Shock SuspenStories* #11 was published, for instance, a restricted cemetery in Phoenix, Arizona, made headlines for allowing the burial of a young African American war veteran whose body had remained on a mortuary slab for over a month while the cemetery's authorities deliberated. ⁴⁸ Such travesties could have easily taken place in EC's fictitious Centerville or, for that matter, in *Tales from the Crypt*.

Through Hank's story, "In Gratitude . . ." corroborates the relevance of Executive Order 9981, issued by President Truman in 1948 to guarantee "equality of treatment and opportunity" in the armed services. As the historian Mary Dudziak points out, Truman turned to executive orders and encouraged the US Justice Department to file amicus curiae briefs for civil-rights cases when his efforts to usher legislation through Congress repeatedly failed. While critics accused Truman of forcing unilateral changes on the "American way of life," his administration often justified these actions in the interest of foreign policy. Dudziak explains, "At a time when the United States hoped to reshape the postwar world in its own image, the international attention given to racial segregation was troublesome and embarrassing. The focus of American foreign policy was to promote democracy and to 'contain'

communism, but the international focus on U.S. racial problems meant that the image of American democracy was tarnished. The apparent contradictions between American political ideology and American practice led to particular foreign relations problems with countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The Soviet Union capitalized on this weakness, using the race issue prominently in anti-American propaganda."⁴⁹

Global leadership demanded that the United States address this rift between the principle and the practice of democracy in order to serve as a compelling advocate for social justice abroad. As a result, a strategic domestic civil-rights agenda became an implicit part of the Truman Doctrine—that is, the vow to aid democratic nations under threat of communism. To quote the president's own words, "If we wish to inspire the people of the world whose freedom is in jeopardy, if we wish to restore hope to those who have already lost their civil liberties, if we wish to fulfill the promise that is ours, we must correct the remaining imperfections in our practice of democracy. We know the way. We need only the will."⁵⁰

"In Gratitude . . ." lends support to this approach by juxtaposing the overseas defense of democratic ideals with the dismantling of racial boundaries that treat African Americans as second-class citizens. Joey models the Truman Doctrine in his appreciation for his kinship with Hank, remarking at one point, "we *ate together . . . slept together . . . laughed together . . . cried together . . .* We fought for *democracy together*."⁵¹ Joey's approach to racial equality can even be likened to his gradual adjustment to his prosthetic arm, which he regards not as disability but as difference (figure 9). When his mother marvels over the ease with which he uses the metal clamp to eat, Joey remarks, "What, Ma? Oh! This? Naw! I'm used to it now. In the beginning it was tough."⁵² The adjustment to a racially integrated body politic, however, proves to be too hard a challenge for his parents and their neighbors. It is Joey's outrage at the white community's prejudice that constitutes the climactic shock of the story. Turning his back on his own family and, by extension, the readers who shared their attitudes was not what was expected from the town's decorated "soldier-hero."

The story certainly sparked intense debate on EC's letters page. Prominently featured in the next issue's "Shock Talk" column was a letter from A/3c Fisher, an air-force serviceman stationed in Biloxi,

FIGURE 9. "In Gratitude . . ." from *Shock SuspenStories* #11 (1953)



Mississippi: "I was reading your Oct.-Nov. edition of *Shock SuspenStories*. It was very good until I read a story about a soldier's black buddy. This story stinks the way they wrote it and I'd like for the person who wrote it to sleep, eat, and live with blacks or niggers. I'm in service, and I would not care to have a nigger eat at the same table with me, or anybody else with self-respect that I know. The niggers in my outfit, eat, sleep, and stay with themselves. And that is the way it will stay without a riot."⁵³ Fisher's challenge to the story's accuracy and sincerity prompted responses from other readers that were printed in subsequent *Shock SuspenStories* issues. Among the responders were members of the armed forces, including one from the 3505th Pilot Training Squadron from a base in nearby Greenville, Mississippi, who called Fisher's letter "shocking, nasty, and highly ignorant" and insisted that Fisher's views did not represent the air force's "or even his own outfit for that matter."⁵⁴

"I'LL BOTHER YOU!"

The ideas that circulate through "The Guilty!" and "In Gratitude . . ." help us to evaluate EC's creative engagement with racism and black representation. Hank and Aubrey Collins are much more than stereotyped minstrels, but neither are they dynamic characters. Their nobility is designed to do little more than prove their worth as citizens, while their tragic deaths only further the growth of white characters. These stock characteristics are reinforced in other EC preachies, including "Slave Ship" (*Weird Fantasy* #8) and "Blood Brothers" (*Shock SuspenStories* #13) in which stoic, silent black men anchor the plot.

Yet if we limit the scope of our analysis to black speech and action—or simply to the messages contained in the captions—we may overlook subtler artistic choices and narrative strategies that convey agency, complexity, and depth in EC's take on racial strife. The message stories are most effective when they call attention to the way blackness acts as an unstable image/text, a fraught sociohistorical signifier that is misread and misrecognized in American society with devastating consequences. Rather than creating well-developed stories about black life and experience, EC uses the comics form to productively complicate received ideas about racial otherness for a predominantly white, adolescent readership, often through optical cues that "unmark" race in black characters. Such disruptions are not merely figurative. Stories such as "In Gratitude . . ." tear bodies into unrecognizable pieces, conceal faces behind the guise of normative subjectivity, and dare readers to question what they are seeing with their own eyes.

However, an African American soldier named Private J. Matthews suggests one final example that breaks with the EC tradition. Matthews's active participation and his outspoken presence drives the central message even when he is overshadowed by the comic's white heroic figure. The story "Perimeter!" appeared in the last issue of *Frontline Combat*, published in January 1954, before Gaines discontinued the series because of declining postwar sales. Whereas most of the scripts for the EC preachies were written by Feldstein (and cowritten with Gaines), issue #15 of *Frontline Combat* was penciled, inked, and written by Wood and colored by Severin under the editorial direction of Harvey Kurtzman.

"Perimeter!" is not the first of EC's war comics to address difficult social problems. As the scholar Leonard Rivas notes, Kurtzman developed a strong reputation that distinguished the two EC series he edited—*Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales*—from the typical American war comic that "ignored or softened those truths about war that society regards as unsuitable for children, that the military regards as discouraging for enlistment or morale, or that readers find boring."⁵⁵ Kurtzman focused less on the heroics of World War II and more on the "Stalemate War" in Korea. He also wrote and oversaw the production of more realistic stories that did not shy away from the serious consequences of battle.⁵⁶ Two years before the *Frontline Combat* story I discuss here appeared, Kurtzman addressed the folly

of America's segregated army in "Bunker!" for *Two-Fisted Tales* #30 by depicting two separate black and white platoons arguing over who should get credit for taking the same hill.

Wood's approach in "Perimeter!" follows Kurtzman's lead in its narrative complexity, while it also draws on the visual strategies that he implemented as the illustrator in Feldstein's *Shock Suspense Stories*. In the comic's opening sequence, the narrator highlights the different national and cultural backgrounds of the soldiers battling against North Korea. Among the Americans, there is "a mixture of all the nationalities and racial origins in the world, all wishing they were home, but doing their job."⁵⁷ The unit is tired and restless, and morale is low (figure 10). When a white soldier named Miller wonders aloud why they are fighting these "gooks," Private Matthews looks up from reading his Bible and interrupts with, "They're *Koreans*, Miller, *Koreans*!" Miller tries to brush off the correction by saying, "Aaah, ya bother me, Matthews!" but the other man is insistent: "I'll bother you! If Han and his ROKs heard you, what would they think . . ."⁵⁸ Their frustrated sergeant, a white man named Tex, breaks up the argument. As he walks away grumbling about "mixed outfits," the reader knows that he is not referring to the infantrymen from the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the South who fight alongside the Americans but to his own racially integrated platoon.

Nevertheless, Tex maintains a neutral stance and even refuses to be baited into cosigning Miller's racist remark: "You're a southerner! You hate 'em too!"⁵⁹ The comics scholars David Albright and Christopher Hayton single out scenes such as this to emphasize the problematic ways in which Miller stereotypes everyone in the story on the basis of difference. They state, "He repeatedly refers to the Sergeant and Southerners in general as rebels, stereotyping them with the expectation that Tex must be a racist if he hails from the South, as well as using the disrespectful term 'gooks' in blanket referral to Koreans."⁶⁰ As a result, Miller's attitude and his growing frustration with the impasse in Korea serve as the initial source of conflict in the story.

Nettled by dwindling resources, the rain, and the ruthless enemy, Miller starts "cracking up" and continues to rebuff Matthews's efforts to calm his fears. After nightfall, another devastating round of mortar fire scatters the soldiers, who are unable to hold the line against North Korea's Chinese allies. The narrative focus shifts at that point to Tex,



FIGURE 10. "Perimeter!" from *Frontline Combat* #15 (1954)

who stays behind once he discovers a badly injured, English-speaking man in the dark crying out. We will later discover that the wounded man is Private Matthews, but at that point, neither the white sergeant nor the reader can see or hear the black man clearly. Tex, driven solely by his need to protect a fellow soldier, spends the hours until daylight defending the two of them and uses up all of his ammunition until he is forced to fight the enemy in visually dramatic, hand-to-hand combat.

Miller and the rest of the unit find the exhausted pair the next morning. One soldier is awed by the number of dead bodies littered around Tex's hiding place; others express admiration for the sergeant's determination to rescue the wounded soldier. Miller, however, is incredulous. "Is *that* why you stayed, Tex? To *save him*?" he asks. "You stayed out there in the dark to rescue Matt! *You stayed out there to*

rescue a #@*;^ boy!" In response, Tex thrusts the Bible that Matthews had been reading into Miller's hands and says, "You need that more'n anyone else around here!" The comic's final panel leaves the reader looking over Miller's shoulder at a verse from Malachi 2:10: "Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us?"⁶¹

In Gerald Early's critical observations on "Perimeter!," he takes special note of Matthews's appearance with three other soldiers on the cover of *Frontline Combat* #15 (figure 11) as a "startling moment in American comics," explaining, "This was highly unusual. Blacks were almost never seen on the covers of comic books in the 1940s and 1950s—the heyday of comics—unless they were depicted as jungle natives or as comic caricatures. . . . This character is in an integrated unit; the other soldiers on the cover are white. He is not a comic caricature; he is drawn as realistically as the other men. And he is the subject of that issue's lead story."⁶² My research further indicates that *Frontline Combat* #15 is the *only* EC New Trend comic ever to feature a heroic black character on the cover. Wood's image is a rare testament to Matthews's value in the story as an individual whose aspirations, fears, and complex relationships with other characters are indispensable to the plot's development. Albright and Hayton describe Matthews simply as "an ordinary, responsible, principled male caught up in a war that's difficult to comprehend."⁶³ Their discussion highlights just how uncommon such quotidian features are for black comic-book characters. At the same time, they note that Matthews distinguishes himself by being "willing to stand up for what's right. This includes challenging insults to others, while tolerating personal attacks against himself, and placing the lives of his fellow soldiers before his own."⁶⁴

It is also important to note that the black man in "Perimeter!" survives his tale. This is unusual, given how expendable the lives of EC's African American characters can be. When compared to what Ng describes as the "sympathetic martyrs" of *Shock SuspenStories*, Matthews carries much stronger echoes of Juano Hernandez in *Intruder in the Dust*. Early also points out that the comic followed the lead of other popular depictions of racial integration in the armed forces, such as the 1952 film *Red Ball Express*.⁶⁵ The black figure that Wood creates demonstrates confidence and expresses empathy as an equal. Frequently pictured at the center of the three main characters or in the foreground, he speaks often and demands mutual respect among

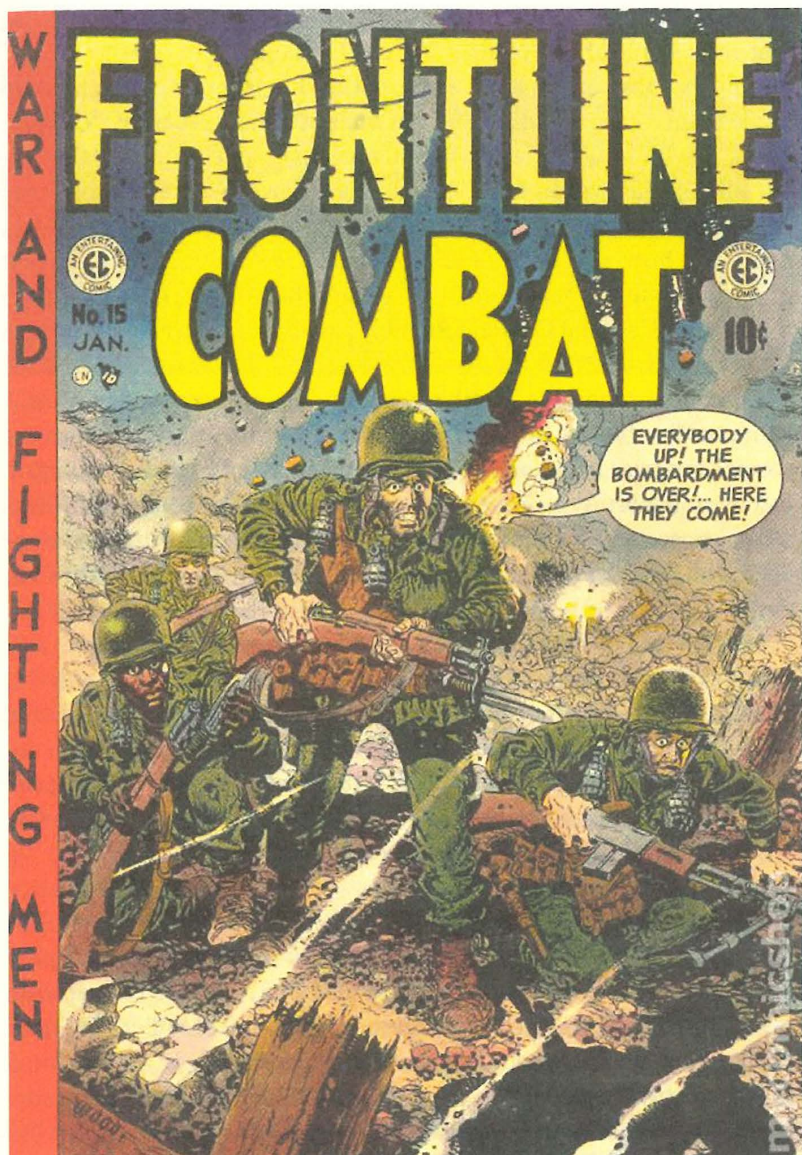


FIGURE 11. "Perimeter!" from *Frontline Combat* #15 (1954)

his fellow soldiers. He fights as part of the unit in the combat scenes that are a staple of war comics. Yet unlike Hank of "In Gratitude . . .," Matthews does not convey the value of his life through death; he does not leap on a grenade to save others but struggles to survive alongside them. The Bible he carries, rather than being used to model Christ-like humility or passivity, is for his own personal use, to shore up his inner resources in times of crisis. If, as his superior officer argues, "Matt's book tells him why we're here" in Korea, then the belief system that propels his view of justice may make him the one black EC character (outside of the Great Galactic Republic) who most closely resembles a "forceful activist."⁶⁶

Of course, alongside Matthews is Tex. The sergeant is one of EC's white soldier-heroes who invite explicit reader identification with the comic's fan base by embodying a familiar mode of ingenuity and grit. Just as noteworthy, however, is the way that Tex responds to Miller's refusal to accept comfort from a black soldier. The following exchange occurs after Miller breaks down in tears during an ambush by the Chinese:

MATTHEWS: Relax, Miller! It's gonna be all right, fella!

MILLER: Yeah? Then how come you're always reading that *Bible*?
You know we're gonna die!

TEX: That's enough, soldier! Matt's book tells him why we're here!

MILLER: Yeah? And does his book tell him you'll *accept him* if we get back? Does it tell him he . . .

TEX: All right! At ease, Miller!⁶⁷

On the perimeter, far removed from the United States, Tex is depicted as an officer who puts the mission first and evaluates the capabilities of his unit without any consideration to color. Yet Miller's question about acceptance, though crass and mean-spirited, is an invitation to Tex to think critically about the implications of his own attitudes beyond the battlefield. It is telling, then, that with the command "All right! At ease, Miller!" the white sergeant does not answer and keeps deeper reflection at bay. When the next panel's mortar blast sends the men scrambling for cover, the narrative barrels forward with no clear assertion from Tex that the life-threatening urgency of white and black cooperation abroad will translate into civic cooperation back home.

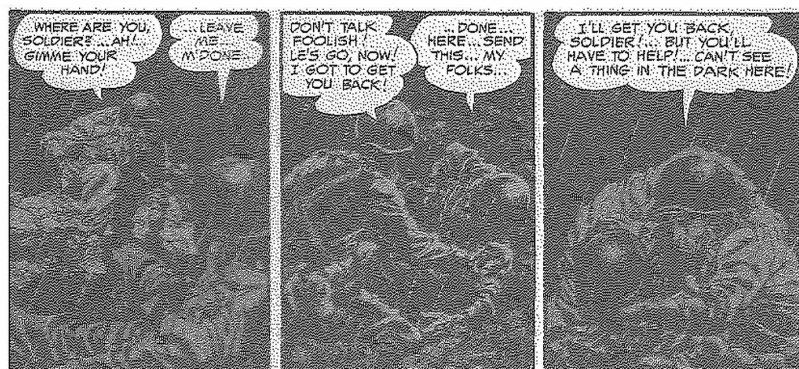


FIGURE 12. "Perimeter!" from *Frontline Combat* #15 (1954)

The argument introduces a productive tension into the narrative and adds nuance to Tex's role as an authority figure. Indeed, once Tex finds the injured soldier left behind, "Perimeter!" is poised to become the white man's story, with the sergeant as the valiant hero and the black man's prone body serving as an opportune object lesson. When night falls, Severin depicts the darkness through deep, monochromatic blue colors and repurposes her coloring strategy from "In Gratitude . . ." to obscure the skin color of the scene's participants. For all the reader knows, Tex could have been rescuing Miller or an ROK translator.

But even during these "color-blind" scenes, the relationship between the two soldiers retains a lively measure of complexity, such as the power dynamics still at work when the caption describes "Tex and his burden" or the way in which the Bible acts as a proxy for Matthews's beliefs once he is wounded. The story suggests that Matthews gave the sergeant the Bible when he was found ("mdone . . . send this . . . my folks").⁶⁸ At the end of the story, after combat is over, Tex removes this same book from his jacket to read from it. In these moments, the once-physical burden of the traumatized black body has been internalized by the white character as an even greater moral responsibility. Crucial here is the fact that Tex has been identified as a southerner and that he uses his authority as sergeant to listen and lead, even when he is unsure of his own stance. The lesson he has learned during the harrowing night is reinforced by the final transfer of the Bible and its message of spiritual kinship to the angry bigot, Miller. Whereas

Feldstein's stories take advantage of more generic settings and character types, Wood uses the specific circumstances of the Korean War and the integration of the US military overseas to stage an act of domestic reconciliation.

Private J. Matthews, Hank, and Aubrey Collins are the faces of EC's evolving racial imagination, one that extends from the panels and pages of stories to the paratextual discourse of cover images and letters columns. These male characters bridge the cruel everyday realities of post-World War II segregation with the fitful starts and stops of the federal civil-rights initiatives that took place in the early 1950s. They also reveal the company's enterprising range of critical attitudes and aesthetic approaches to blackness as a social construct with real consequences and effects. With measures such as Executive Order 9981 already in place, the aim of these stories is not necessarily to advocate for more civil-rights legislation but to demonstrate why African Americans need legal protections in the first place. Such a strategy does not always result in multidimensional representations of the black experience, but, as we will explore in chapter 3, it does have blistering implications for white Americans who refuse to heed the US Constitution or the biblical principles of brotherly love by promoting race hatred.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. John Benson, ed., "The Transcripts: 1972 EC Convention," *Squa Tront* 8 (1978): 22.
2. Al Feldstein and Joe Orlando, "Judgment Day!" in *Weird Fantasy* #18 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, March–April 1953), 7. To verify the creator credits for each EC title cited in this study, I referenced two main sources: *Tales of Terror: The EC Companion* (2000), edited by Fred Von Bernewitz and Grant Geissman, which has been updated since the 1950s in consultation with EC staff; and the *Grand Comics Database*, an online index founded in 1994 by Bob Klein and Tim Stroup and continually updated for accuracy, at www.comics.org.
3. See Ray Bradbury, letter to the "Cosmic Correspondence" column, in *Weird Fantasy* #20 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, July–August 1953); and J. B. Kenny, letter to the "Cosmic Correspondence" column, in *Weird Fantasy* #20.
4. "Comics and Propaganda," *Chicago Defender*, February 17, 1953.
5. David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), ix–xi. See also Lary May, introduction to *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 1–16; Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 53–76.
6. Les Daniels, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1971), 62.
7. *The Challenger* #3 (New York: Interfaith, September 1946).
8. *All-Negro Comics* #1 (Philadelphia: Orrin C. Evans, June 1947). Also noteworthy are the ways in which newspaper cartoonists in the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *New York Amsterdam News* addressed contemporary social problems for audiences made up primarily of African American

- readers. See also Tim Jackson, *Pioneering Cartoonists of Color* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016).
9. See “Wonder Woman of History: Sojourner Truth,” in *Wonder Woman* #13 (New York: National Comics, 1945); and *Negro Heroes* #1 (New York: Parents’ Magazine Press, 1947).
 10. Beck refers here to the decision of Fawcett executive editor Will Lieberman to remove Captain Marvel’s caricatured African American sidekick, Steamboat, from the comic after complaints from readers. For more information on Steamboat, see chapter 2. C. C. Beck, in P. C. Hamerlinck, “I’ll Never Forget C. C. Beck (1979),” in *Fawcett Companion: The Best of FCA* (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows, 2001), 138.
 11. For more on “Johnny Everyman,” see David L. Albright and Christopher J. Hayden, “The Military Vanguard for Desegregation: Civil Rights Era War Comics and Racial Integration,” *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 6, no. 2 (2012), www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v6_2/hayton_albright/.
 12. Al Feldstein, interview by S. C. Ringgenberg, in *The Comics Journal Library: The EC Artists: Part 1*, edited by Michael Dean (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2013), 64.
 13. The comics historian Tim Jackson suggests that racial discrimination prevented Evans from securing enough newsprint to publish a second issue of *All-Negro Comics* (*Pioneering Cartoonists of Color*, 80.) No African Americans or other creators of color were employed full-time by EC. Gaines and his lead editors, Al Feldstein and Harvey Kurtzman, were all born to Jewish families in New York. EC also employed the Italian immigrant Joe Orlando and one southerner from Atlanta, Jack Davis. The colorist Marie Severin, a New Yorker with Irish heritage, was the only woman on EC’s staff.
 14. Gerald Early, “Race, Art, and Integration: The Image of the African American Soldier in Popular Culture During the Korean War,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 57, no. 1 (2003): 36.
 15. Examples of commentary in popular magazines that raised alarms about the impact of the medium on children’s behavior include Judith Crist, “Horror in the Nursery,” *Collier’s*, March 27, 1948, 22–23, 95–97; T. E. Murphy, “The Face of Violence,” *Reader’s Digest*, November 1954, 54–56; and John B. Sheerin, “Crime Comics Must Go!,” *Catholic World*, June 1954, 161–65.
 16. Joe Mancini, Tony Mancini, and Dick Mazzaglia, letter to the “Cosmic Correspondence” column, in *Weird Fantasy* #20.
 17. Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 139.
 18. Bradford W. Wright, “Tales from the American Crypt: EC and the Culture

- of the Cold War, 1950-1954," in *Inside the World of Comic Books*, ed. Jeffery Klaehn (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2007), 22-23.
19. Nicky Wright, *The Classic Era of American Comics* (London: Prion Books, 2000), 12.
 20. Frank Jacobs, *The Mad World of William M. Gaines* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), 57-58.
 21. *Ibid.*, 58-59.
 22. Wright, *Classic Era*, 154. See also Jacobs, *Mad World*, 59. David Hajdu notes that Gaines followed through on a pledge to donate the profits from *Picture Stories from the Bible* to "religious organizations that supported the series." See David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 73.
 23. Fred Von Bernewitz and Grant Geissman, *Tales of Terror! The EC Companion* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2000), 10.
 24. Jerry Coleman (w) and Allen Simon (a), "A Country at the Crossroads," in *Pictures Stories from American History #4* (New York: School Comics, Summer 1947), 4.
 25. *Ibid.*
 26. Daniels, *Comix*, 62.
 27. See Bill Gaines and Al Feldstein, "Bill Gaines and Al Feldstein: An Interview," *Monster Times*, May 31, 1972, 30.
 28. "Madman Gaines Pleads for Plots," *Writer's Digest*, February 1954, reprinted in Von Bernewitz and Geissman, *Tales of Terror!*, 191-92.
 29. *Ibid.*, 191.
 30. Jacobs, *Mad World*, 64.
 31. Bill Gaines, interview by Dwight Decker and Gary Groth, May 1983, in *The Comics Journal Library: The EC Artists: Part 2*, ed. Michael Dean (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2016), 11, 13.
 32. Matthew Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999), 31.
 33. Ted White, "An Introduction to EC Comics," in *The Comics Journal Library: The EC Artists: Part 1*, ed. Michael Dean (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2013), 8.
 34. Wright, *Classic Era*, 176.
 35. Feldstein, interview by Ringgenberg, 74.
 36. Wright, *Classic Era*, 186.
 37. The Atomic Age of Comics (1949-56) is characterized by the decline of superhero comics during the industry's "Golden Age" and the increasing popularity of other storytelling genres—including crime, horror, romance, western, and science fiction—in the years following World War II and the nuclear arms

- race prompted by the US bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The comics historian Jess Nevins cites the cancellation of several prominent superhero titles in 1949 as the start of this transitional period, with others marking the years following the formation of the Comics Code Authority and the return of “Silver Age” superheroes in the mid- to late 1950s as the Atomic Age’s end. See Jess Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger: The 4,000-Year History of the Superhero* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2017), 242–48; and M. Keith Booker, ed., *Comics through Time: A History of Icons, Idols, and Ideas*, vol. 4 (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2014), 1853.
38. Jacobs, *Mad World*, 75; *Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books): Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary*, United States Senate, 83rd Congress, 2nd session (April 21, 22, and June 4, 1954), 98, <http://archive.org/details/juveniledelinque54unit>. Despite Gaines’s claim, comics anthologies such as Jim Trombetta’s *The Horror, the Horror: Comic Books the Government Didn’t Want You to Read* (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2010) offer evidence of other titles that preceded EC’s horror.
 39. Bill Gaines, interview by Rich Hauser, in *Spa Fon* #5 (1969), reprinted in Von Bernewitz and Geissman, *Tales of Terror*, 179.
 40. Al Feldstein, interview by John Benson, in *Comics Journal Library: The EC Artists: Part 2*, 64.
 41. Wright, *Classic Era*, 187; Jarret Keene, “EC Comics,” in *Icons of the American Comic Book: From Captain America to Wonder Woman*, ed. Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2013), 223; Daniels, *Comix*, 63; and Larry Stark, *EC’s Number One Fan: The 1950s Fanzine Writing of Larry Stark* (Bartlett, TN: Boardman Books, 2016), 4.
 42. Feldstein, interview by Ringgenberg, 73.
 43. Daniels, *Comix*, 66. See also Grant Geissman, *Foul Play! The Art and Artists of the Notorious 1950s E.C. Comics!* (New York: Harper’s Design, 2005), 123–29.
 44. Pustz, *Comic Book Culture*, 38.
 45. Benson, “Transcripts,” 23.
 46. Al Feldstein (w/a), “Reflection of Death!,” in *Tales from the Crypt* #23 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, April–May 1951), 1.
 47. *Ibid.*, 8.
 48. See Feldstein, interview by Ringgenberg, 76; and Pustz, *Comic Book Culture*, 37.
 49. Daniels, *Comix*, 64.
 50. Al Feldstein (w) and Jack Davis (a), “Taint the Meat . . . It’s the Humanity!,” in *Tales from the Crypt* #32 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, October–November 1952), 8.

51. Daniel F. Yezbick, “No Sweat!”: EC Comics, Cold War Censorship, and the Troublesome Colors of “Judgment Day!,” in *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Graphic Novels*, ed. Frances Gateward and John Jennings (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 27.
52. Gaines, interview by Decker and Groth, 19.
53. Feldstein, interview by Ringgenberg, 89.
54. Daniels, *Comix*, 64.
55. Thommy Burns, “Waking Up from the American Dream,” in *The Life and Legend of Wallace Wood*, vol. 1, ed. Bhob Stewart and J. Michael Catron (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2016), 179.
56. “Shock Talk,” *Shock SuspenStories* #3 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, June–July 1952),
57. Benson, “Transcripts,” 22. Bradford W. Wright’s exhaustive study of comics during the Cold War, for instance, singles out six issues of *Shock SuspenStories* as evidence of the EC’s “extraordinary qualities” (*Comic Book Nation*, 136). Burns also uses the terms *Shock SuspenStory* and *message story* interchangeably, but he defines the preachy as a story in which “racial prejudice is punished with a patented *Shock* snap ending” (“Waking Up,” 179, 185).
58. Feldstein was more inclined than Gaines to make the connection between the preachies and EC’s approach to storytelling more generally: “We did many switches on that kind of thing. We also got into some formulaic plots too, like what we called ‘The Preachies,’ which were poetic justice kind of things. You step on a cockroach and a cockroach steps on you kind of thing.” See Feldstein, interview by Ringgenberg, 78.
59. Frank Nuessel, “Social Commentary in EC” (unpublished ms., 1996), 16, James Branch Cabell Library Special Collections and Archives, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA.
60. *Ibid.*, 1–17.
61. Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 205.
62. Lawrence Watt-Evans, “The Other Guys,” *Alter Ego* 3, no. 97 (2010): 3–14.
63. Suat Tong Ng, “EC and the Chimera of Memory,” *Comics Journal*, no. 250 (February 2003), <http://hoodedutilitarian.com/2012/09/ec-comics-and-the-chimera-of-memory-part-1-of-2/>.
64. *Ibid.*
65. Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 149.
66. Stark, *EC’s Number One Fan*, 9.
67. Al Feldstein (w) and Jack Davis (a), “Foul Play!,” in *The Haunt of Fear* #19 (Entertaining Comics Group, May–June 1953). Regarding “Foul Play!,” Davis has said, “I hated to [draw] it, but Al Feldstein was the boss, the editor.” Jack

- Davis, *Jack Davis: Drawing American Pop Culture: A Career Retrospective* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2011), 192. See also Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 152.
68. *Juvenile Delinquency*, 98.
 69. *Ibid.*, 99.
 70. Al Feldstein (w) and Wally Wood (a), “Hate!” in *Shock SuspenStories* #5 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, October–November 1952), 7.
 71. Feldstein, interview by Benson, 61, 65.
 72. EC editors announced the end of the New Trend line due to CCA restrictions in full-page announcements in each major series. See “In Memoriam,” in *Tales from the Crypt* #46 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, February–March 1955), n.p.
 73. Benson, “Transcripts,” 23.
 74. Carol L. Tilley, “Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics,” *Information and Culture* 47, no. 4 (2012): 385.
 75. Monte Beauchamp, ed., *Blab! # 2* (Chicago: Monte Comix, 1987).

CHAPTER ONE

- Epigraph*: “The Crypt Keeper’s Corner,” in *Tales from the Crypt* #24 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, June–July 1951), n.p.
1. The three GhouLunatic hosts of the horror titles would have been the only faces familiar to EC readers, yet the Old Witch, the Vault Keeper, and the Crypt Keeper followed in the tradition of classic radio programs by acting as heterodiegetic narrators, escorting readers through the gruesome tales rather than taking part in them. The same can be said for Alfred E. Neuman, who began appearing regularly in *Mad* in 1956. On occasion, Feldstein and Gaines included short “EC Quickies” that told a connected story in two parts.
 2. While the term *SuspenStories* was included in part of two EC series titles—*Crime SuspenStories* and *Shock SuspenStories*—the term was often featured in promotional material to describe any comic in the New Trend line. EC’s “illustrated SuspenStory” represents an effort, like the “Illustories” from the comics creator Charles Biro, to brand the formal and thematic qualities of comics while distinguishing EC’s approach from that of other publishers. On Biro, see Robert C. Harvey, *Insider Histories of Cartooning* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014). Many thanks to Phillip Smith in Facebook’s EC Fan-Addict Group for suggesting the connection between EC and Biro.
 3. “Madman Gaines Pleads for Plots,” *Writer’s Digest*, February 1954, reprinted in Fred Von Bernewitz and Grant Geissman, *Tales of Terror! The EC Companion* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2000), 192.

4. Jared Gardner, *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First-Century Storytelling* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 98.
5. Thomas J. Roberts, *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 4.
6. *Ibid.*, 60.
7. *Ibid.*, 151.
8. "Combat Correspondence," *Two Fisted Tales* #22 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, July–August 1951).
9. "Madman Gaines Pleads for Plots," 191.
10. *Ibid.*, 192.
11. *Ibid.*, 191. See Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008); and Bill Gaines, interview by Dwight Decker and Gary Groth, May 1983, in *The Comics Journal Library: The EC Artists: Part 2*, ed. Michael Dean (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2016).
12. In at least one interview, Gaines has also indicated that EC's business manager, Lyle Stuart, might have been the one to actually write the *Writer's Digest* piece. See Gaines, interview by Decker and Groth, 18.
13. The writer Jess Nevins defines *contes cruel* as "those stories of the maliciousness of fate which hover on the border between fantasy and horror." See Nevins, *Homefront Horrors: Frights away from the Frontlines* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2016), 21.
14. Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 147.
15. "Madman Gaines Pleads for Plots," 192.
16. Roberts, *Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, 60.
17. *Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books): Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary*, United States Senate, 83rd Congress, 2nd session (April 21, 22, and June 4, 1954), 1–2.
18. *Ibid.*, 57.
19. Prior to Wertham's publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, the psychiatrist had established a national reputation as an outspoken critic of the comic book industry and its effect on children through his clinical research, speaking engagements, and commentary in popular magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Readers Digest*. Fredric Wertham, "What Parents Don't Know about Comic Books," *Ladies' Home Journal*, November 1953; Wertham, "Comic Books—Blueprints for Delinquency," *Readers Digest*, May 1954.
20. Gabriel Mendes, *Under the Strain of Color: Harlem's Lefargue Clinic and the*

- Promise of an Antiracist Psychiatry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 123.
21. *Juvenile Delinquency*, 95.
 22. Roberts, *Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, 108.
 23. *Juvenile Delinquency*, 100.
 24. Linda Adler-Kassner, "Why Won't You Just Read It? Comic Books and Community in the 1950s" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Washington, DC, August 1995), 10.
 25. Peter Kihss, "No Harm in Horror, Comics Issuer Says," *New York Times*, April 22, 1954.
 26. Gardner, *Projections*, 80.
 27. John Michlig, "EC Horror Comics," *Fully Articulated* (blog), accessed March 30, 2017, www.fullyarticulated.com/page30/page36/page69/page39/; Jarret Keene, "EC Comics," in *Icons of the American Comic Book: From Captain America to Wonder Woman*, ed. Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2013), 223.
 28. Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 140.
 29. Al Feldstein (w) and Wally Wood (a), "The Whipping," in *Shock SuspenStories* #14 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, April–May 1954), 1.
 30. *Ibid.*, 5.
 31. *Ibid.*, 7.
 32. Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 1998), 64.
 33. *Ibid.*
 34. *Ibid.*
 35. *Juvenile Delinquency*, 105.
 36. Gardner, *Projections*, 90.
 37. Carol L. Tilley, "Children and the Comics: Young Readers Take on the Critics," in *Protest on the Page: Essays on Print and the Culture of Dissent*, ed. Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, James L. Baughman, and James P. Danky (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 164. See also Nora Brown, "Reform of Comic Books Is Spurred by Hearings," *New York Times*, June 31, 1954.
 38. Fredric Wertham, letter to Bill Spicer, January 15, 1981, Folder 8, Box 92, Fredric Wertham Papers, Research Files 1818–1982, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
 39. Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books on Today's Youth* (New York: Reinhart, 1954), 311, 312, 144.
 40. Carol L. Tilley, "Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifica-

- tions That Helped Condemn Comics," *Information and Culture* 47, no. 4 (2012): 386.
41. In the *National E.C. Fan-Addict Club Bulletin*, EC's editors listed the address for the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency with the request, "If you agree that comics are harmless entertainment, write a letter or postcard today." See *National E.C. Fan-Addict Club Bulletin*, no. 3 (June 1954).
 42. Bobby Lee Jones, letter to the Subcommittee, received August 23, 1954, Box 169, "Corres Pro-Comic Letters," Records of the United States Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, National Archives, Washington, DC.
 43. Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 73.
 44. Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 147.
 45. As I discuss in chapter 2, non-American blacks are often an exception here, particularly in the stories modeled after "jungle comics" in places such as Haiti or in African countries.
 46. Feldstein and Wood, "Whipping," 3.
 47. Harvey, *Insider Histories of Cartooning*, 28.
 48. Feldstein and Wood, "Whipping," 6.
 49. Ibid.
 50. Roberts, *Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, 217.
 51. *Juvenile Delinquency*, 100.
 52. Examples of this childhood acuity extend even to "The Whipping" through Ed's daughter. Amy, a newlywed in the story, physically resembles the embittered, adulterous young wives of *Crime Suspense Stories*. As Nyberg notes, her sexualized visual representation makes her the object of Ed's gaze in problematic, incestuous ways (*Seal of Approval*, 65). At the same time, Ed's daughter is bullied by his bigoted views and by his physical abuse, which aligns her sympathetically with other forward-thinking children in EC. She states, "I'll make friends with whoever I please, daddy! When I meet a boy, I'm not interested in what country his ancestors came from" (Feldstein and Wood, "Whipping," 3).
 53. Al Feldstein (w) and Wally Wood (a), "Under Cover!," in *Shock Suspense Stories* #6 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, December-January 1953), 1.
 54. Frank Nuessel, "Social Commentary in EC" (unpublished ms., 1996), 4-25, James Branch Cabell Library Special Collections and Archives, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA.
 55. James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 41. See also Mark I. West, *Children, Culture, and Controversy* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1988), 79-85.

56. Gaines, interview by Decker and Groth, 28.
57. Robert Warshow, "Paul, the Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham," *Commentary*, June 1954, www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-study-of-man-paul-the-horror-comics-and-dr-wertham/.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
62. Paul Warshow, letter to Frederic Wertham, June 10, 1954, Folder 13, Box 159, Writings 1895-1983, Fredric Wertham Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, reprinted in Tilley, "Children and the Comics," 175.
63. Adler-Kassner, "Why Won't You Just Read It?," 23.
64. Ibid., 3.
65. Larry Stark was one of EC's most prolific letter writers during the 1950s and became well known among the editorial staff for his detailed, thorough reviews and commentary. See Stark, *EC's Number One Fan: The 1950s Fanzine Writing of Larry Stark* (Bartlett, TN: Boardman Books, 2016).
66. Carol L. Tilley, "Comics: A Once-Missed Opportunity," *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, May 2014, www.yalsa.ala.org/jrlya/2014/05/comics-a-once-missed-opportunity/.
67. Paul Witty, "Children's Interest in Reading the Comics," *Journal of Experimental Education* 10, no. 2 (1941): 100-104.
68. Paul Witty and Dorothy Moore, "Interest in Reading the Comics among Negro Children," *Journal of Education Psychology* 36, no. 5 (1945): 303.
69. Interestingly enough, the findings concerning white comic-book readers were used as proof of the medium's extensive popularity, with Witty offering suggestions for teachers to help maintain a balance of reading material that was based on the individual children's interests. Reading habits among black children, however, were seen as cause for alarm. Witty and Moore expressed concerns about the lack of quality reading material in black homes and schools (due to "inadequate funds" and "meager opportunities") and suggested that comics were filling the gap, especially given the ease with which the issues were purchased and recirculated among children in their comic book clubs. See *ibid.*, 304.
70. Tilley, "Children and the Comics," 173.
71. Curtis Meningall Jr., letter to the Subcommittee, received October 6, 1954, Box 169, "Corres Pro-Comic Letters," Records of the United States Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, National Archives, Washington, DC.
72. Cleo Brown, letter to the Subcommittee, received October 6, 1954, Box 169,

"Corres Pro-Comic Letters," Records of the United States Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, National Archives, Washington, DC. I would like to give special thanks to Carol Tilley for so generously sharing these letters from her ongoing research.

73. Adler-Kassner, "Why Won't You Just Read It?," 15.

CHAPTER TWO

Epigraph: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015), 10.

1. Al Feldstein (w) and Wallace Wood (a), "The Guilty!" in *Shock SuspenStories* #3 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, June-July 1952), 1.
2. *Ibid.*, 3.
3. *Ibid.*, 7.
4. Letter pages such as EC's "Shock Talk" column are a selective sampling and difficult to verify. By themselves, these letters offer an incomplete picture of the responses that comics readers may have had to a particular story. It is important to acknowledge that, as with other paratextual content such as editorial notes, promotional ads, and subscription forms, the letter page is assembled as part of a larger effort to extend and shape the reader's engagement in strategic ways. In my analysis, I have endeavored to couple discussions of letter pages with critical commentary from other sources including interviews, biographies, essays, and archival material. When asked about the legitimacy of the letters that EC published, Bill Gaines stated in a 1955 interview that "they're all real," with the exception of two "phony" letters that he wrote to "stir up trouble," including one by Mrs. Arline Grandon Phelan in *Vault of Horror* #25 (1952) that was highly critical of EC and prompted a flurry of defenses from readers in future issues. Bill Gaines and Al Feldstein, interview by Ted White, Fred Von Bernewitz, and Larry Stark, 1955-56, in *Tales of Terror: The EC Companion*, ed. Fred Von Bernewitz and Grant Geissman (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2000), 273-74.
5. Ralph Olmos, letter to the "Shock Talk" column, in *Shock SuspenStories* #5 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, October-November 1952).
6. J.H., letter to the "Shock Talk" column, in *Shock SuspenStories* #5.
7. James McDowell, letter to the "Shock Talk" column, in *Shock SuspenStories* #5.
8. Black women play no explicit role in the message stories and seldom appear in EC comics as more than background characters (such as the Haitian voodoo "high priestess" in "Voodoo Death" from *Vault of Horror* #25).
9. Two notable exceptions, "Slave Ship," from *Weird Fantasy* #8, and "The Slave Ship," from *Piracy* #3, are discussed in chapter 4.

10. Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 36.
11. *Ibid.*, 86.
12. Clayton Knowles, "Civil Rights Is an Issue for Both Major Parties," *New York Times*, May 4, 1952, E10.
13. William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad, introduction to *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South*, ed. William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad (New York: New Press, 2001), xxix.
14. Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 278.
15. Russ Cochran, "EC's Morality Tales . . . The EC 'Preachies,'" in *The EC Archives: Shock SuspenStories*, vol. 1 (Timonium, MD: Gemstone, 2006), 110.
16. E. Pauline Degenfelder, "The Film Adaptation of Faulkner's 'Intruder in the Dust,'" *Literature/Film Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1973): 139–40.
17. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 140.
18. Charles Hannon, *Southern Literary Studies: Faulkner and the Discourses* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 138.
19. Michael Curtis, quoted in Roberto C. Ortiz, "That Distinguished Negro Star: Juano Hernandez in Hollywood Cinema," *Centro Voices*, December 4, 2015, <http://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu>.
20. Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 139.
21. Brian Cremins, *Captain Marvel and the Art of Nostalgia* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2017), 101.
22. Quoted *ibid.*, 107.
23. Feldstein and Wood, "Guilty," 1. Light reflecting on the beads of perspiration on the face of a black character plays a central and controversial role in "Judgment Day!," which I discuss in chapter 4.
24. Will Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse, 1996), 19.
25. Interestingly enough, Wood's familiarity with the racial stereotypes so common in comic books is reinforced by the fact that while he was illustrating pages for EC, he was also working with Will Eisner on *The Spirit*. Wood contributed to an outer-space story arc in 1952 that included the title detective's African American sidekick, Ebony White, a Sambo caricature with saucer eyes, balloon lips, and heavy dialect. Wood's decision not to incorporate these features in his depiction of Aubrey Collins in "The Guilty!" is a strategic choice designed to suit the tone and purpose of highlighting a more sympathetic, realistic black figure in *Shock SuspenStories*. Michael T. Gilbert, "Total

- Control: A Brief Biography of Wally Wood,” in *Alter Ego* 8 (Spring 2001): 4–6. Many thanks to Andy Kunka for bringing this connection to my attention.
26. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Visual and Verbal Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 162.
 27. Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 141.
 28. Feldstein and Wood, “Guilty,” 7.
 29. Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling*, 17.
 30. Suat Tong Ng, “EC and the Chimera of Memory,” *Comics Journal*, no. 250 (February 2003), <http://hoodedutilitarian.com/2012/09/ec-comics-and-the-chimera-of-memory-part-1-of-2/>.
 31. *Ibid.*
 32. *The Challenger* #3 (New York: Interfaith, September 1946), 1.
 33. *All-Negro Comics* #1 (Philadelphia: Orrin C. Evans, June 1947).
 34. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 278.
 35. *Ibid.*
 36. Feldstein and Wood, “Guilty,” 6.
 37. A similar message concludes the story “Under Cover!” from *Shock Suspense Stories* #6: “How long can we stay ‘cool’ and indifferent to this threat to our democratic way of life? It is time to unveil these usurpers of our constitutionally guaranteed freedoms!” Al Feldstein (w) and Wallace Wood (a), “Under Cover!” in *Shock Suspense Stories* #6 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, December–January 1953), 7.
 38. Cremins, *Captain Marvel*, 106.
 39. Al Feldstein (w) and Wallace Wood, “In Gratitude . . .,” in *Shock Suspense Stories* #13 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, October–November 1953).
 40. *Ibid.*, 7.
 41. In fact, his identity as a black man is not mentioned explicitly until the final page.
 42. *Ibid.*, 4.
 43. *Ibid.*
 44. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 162–63.
 45. *Ibid.*, 4.
 46. *Ibid.*, 7.
 47. Angelika Kruger-Kahloulou, “On the Wrong Side of the Fence: Racial Segregation in American Cemeteries,” in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, ed. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O’Meally
 48. *Ibid.*, 131.
 49. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 12.
 50. Harry S. Truman, “Address of the President to Congress, Recommending Assistance to Greece and Turkey,” March 12, 1947, the Truman Doctrine

Research File, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, accessed March 30, 2017, www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/doc-trine/large/documents/index.php?documentid=5-9&pagenumber=1.

51. Feldstein and Wood, "In Gratitude . . .," 7.
52. *Ibid.*, 3.
53. A/3c Fisher, letter to the "Shock Talk" column, in *Shock SuspenStories* #13 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, February–March 1954).
54. 3505th Pilot Training Squadron, letter to the "Shock Talk" column in *Shock SuspenStories* #15 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, June–July 1954). Thommy Burns also points out that EC received another letter from a staff sergeant at the same Biloxi base who also shared the same last name as A/3c Fisher. The sergeant's letter, printed in *Shock SuspenStories* #16, announced that Fisher had "grossly misrepresented Keesler AFB." See Burns, "Waking Up from the American Dream," in *The Life and Legend of Wallace Wood*, vol. 1 (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2016), 185.
55. Leonard Rifas, "War Comics," in
56. *Ibid.*, 185–86.
57. Wallace Wood (w/a), "Perimeter!," in *Frontline Combat* #15 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, 1954), 1.
58. *Ibid.*, 2.
59. *Ibid.*
60. David L. Albright and Christopher J. Hayton, "The Military Vanguard for Desegregation: Civil Rights Era War Comics and Racial Integration," *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 6, no. 2 (2012), www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v6_2/hayton_albright/.
61. *Ibid.*, 8.
62. Gerald Early, "Race, Art, and Integration: The Image of the African American Soldier in Popular Culture during the Korean War," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 57, no. 1 (2003): 35.
63. Albright and Hayton, "Military Vanguard for Desegregation."
64. *Ibid.*
65. Early, "Race, Art, and Integration," 34.
66. Ng, "EC and the Chimera of Memory."
67. Wood, "Perimeter!," 5.
68. *Ibid.*, 7.

CHAPTER THREE

Epigraphs: Andy Andrews, letter to the "Shock Talk" column, in *Shock SuspenStories* #15 (New York: Entertaining Comics Group, June–July 1954); Leo Valdes Jr., letter to the "Shock Talk" column, in *Shock SuspenStories* #15.

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"Qiana Whitted's well-written study confirms and complicates EC's reputation as the most aesthetically ambitious and politically daring comic book company of the twentieth-century. A subtle exploration of the relationship between race, gender, and representation, it should be considered essential reading for anyone with an investment in modern popular culture."

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and for a publication that long outlived the company's other titles, *Mad* magazine. But during its heyday in the early 1950s, EC was also an early innovator in another genre of comics: the so-called "preachies," socially conscious stories that boldly challenged the conservatism and conformity of Eisenhower-era America.

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QIANA WHITTED is a professor of English and African American studies at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. She is the author of *A God of Justice?: The Problem of Evil in 20th Century Black Literature*.

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