

**“If I stop doing that job, they don’t stop eating”:
iZombie and the Sociopolitical Dimensions of Food**

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Zombies serve as a handy metaphor for any number of interpretations: fear of revenge from enslaved or colonized individuals (*White Zombie* [1932], *I Walked with a Zombie* [1943]); rampant consumerism (*Dawn of the Dead* [1978]) (Posey 2014); pandemics (*28 Days Later* [2002]) (Abbott, 2018: 13-23); and contemporary fears of both immigration and one another (*The Walking Dead* [2010-present]). It is a trope that filmmakers and creators continue to turn to, with a significant spike in zombie narratives over the past 20 years (172 released between 2000 and 2010, and 176 released or produced between 2011 and 2016) (Crockett and Zarracina, 2016). Because of their liminal not-dead/not alive status, zombies, like other hybrid monsters, are feared as “the products of the culture that shapes them and bear within their myths the imprint of existing social conditions” (Lauro and Embry 100). They can only infect; “no zombie body is relieved of its condition by passing it on” (Lauro and Embry 100), and thus zombie-ism as a symbol cannot be transformative or liberating, unlike the image of the cyborg (Lauro and Embry 87). The zombie body can, however, symbolize (or reflect) the society in which zombie narratives are employed.

Given the general lack of voice inherent to their state, zombies’ individual desires and appetites are frequently reduced to a desire for food; that is, flesh or, in some later variations, brains. “The lack of individual identity continues to ‘other’ the zombie,” argues Stacey Abbott, “rendering the body devoid of soul, spirit, or consciousness”; that is, one of a faceless, abject horde (2018: 162). Amanda Oldring, in her analysis of “apocalypse” media, suggests that since zombies are a “symbol of social decay,” their increased use in political

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protest “embrace[s] that reality, and so arbitrarily cuts at the systemic failure that created that symbol in the first place” (2013: 17). Yet the increase in zombies as sentient, sympathetic protagonists in both film and television complicates this reading (Abbott 2018: 162). Rather than a faceless horde, these zombies are both “less” (in that they are undead) and, in the case of horror films such as *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Otto; or, Up with Dead People* (2008), and *Warm Bodies* (2013)—or the horror TV series considered here, *iZombie* (2015-2019)—more (Canavan 2012: 285-296). In that respect, the sentient zombie, like the more sympathetic vampire of works that came in the wake of Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), can serve to challenge audience assumptions about the “other” by allowing the zombies to speak for themselves, even if they will never be fully “domesticated” (Abbott 176).

This increased sentience, however, does not obviate the zombies’ need to eat, and for *iZombie*’s zombies (perhaps in a tribute to Dan O’Bannon’s *Return of the Living Dead* [1985]), eat human brains in particular. Given the obvious importance of food to maintain life, as well as the increased focus on sustainability (Morawicki and Diaz Gonzalez 2018: 191-196) and ethics (Thompson 2016: 61-74) of its production, food itself has taken on a sociopolitical and socioeconomic resonance. For example, the potential horrors of climate change on crops and food production (Cho, 2018) means less yield, greater insect and parasite activity, and fewer (and possibly sterile) livestock, making the lack of basic necessities such as food a potential geopolitical hot point across the globe.

iZombie’s story arcs have consistently engaged with issues around socioeconomics, power, and class, as did Rob Thomas’ earlier series, *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007, 2019). Adapting a series about zombies, however, allows the narrative to focus on an element rarely engaged with on television (outside of advertisements): food.¹ As Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry suggest, the “indeterminable boundary” of the zombie body is perhaps most emblematic when focused on the mouth, effacing “the boundary between zombie and not-zombie” (2008: 99). Within the narrative world of *iZombie*, this “food”—its procurement, consumption, and availability—is a vital thread throughout the four extant seasons of the series. These zombies can speak for themselves, rather than serving as only as a metaphor, as well as “speaking” for those whose brains they consume. Despite the differentiation of *iZombie*’s zombie-sentience from, for example, the mute hoards of George Romero’s cycle of zombie films, the series’ focus on consumption provides a strong link to such predecessors (particularly *Day of the Dead* [1985] and *Land of the Dead* with their increasingly intelligent and politicized zombie characters). In this essay I will

examine the ways in which *iZombie* builds upon this sentient monster to focus on food in particular as central to current issues around consumption, with two particular strands: provenance and food deserts (i.e., places in which fresh food is not readily available due to distance or cost).

“We eat people, Liv”: The Ethics of Sourcing and Eating (Brains)

Ethical eating—that is, making food choices based on sustainability and environmental and social impact—has grown into big business (Macvean, 2009). As Jonathan Kauffman suggests, the 60s countercultures’ (i.e., “hippies”) focus on organic foods such as chard, granola, and brown rice, has gone mainstream, shifting how consumers think about their food choices to a degree unimaginable a generation earlier (Kauffman, 2018). Reducing one’s carbon footprint through eschewing meat and dairy products has also gained traction (Carrington, 2018), and there is continuing research on the ways that both consumer food choices and production-level processes impact the global environment, as well as the ways that both can work together to blunt the consequences (Poore and Nemecek 2018: 987-992). Considering recent journalistic (Schlosser, 2001) and videographic exposés on factory farms (e.g., Shaun Monson’s 2005 film *Earthlings*), as well as questions over organic labeling (Whoriskey, 2017), and the ethics of game hunting (“Does hunting help...”, *Scientific American*), the exigencies of food provenance and consumption practices remain a multifaceted issue in contemporary North American culture.

The ethics of food consumption is not unique to *iZombie* as a horror series; for example, in Joss Whedon’s series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its spin-off *Angel*, the line delineating “good” versus “evil” monsters is frequently related to said monsters’ consumption patterns. Not only do “reformed” vampires such as Angel (David Boreanaz) and Spike (James Marsters) no longer consume human blood, but demons such as Clem (James Leary) are considered harmless based on a diet consisting of junk food (“Two to Go” 6.20) and felines (“Life Serial” 6.5). *iZombie*, however, foregrounds this element. The series, about Liv Moore (Rose McIver), a young woman accidentally turned into a zombie at a corporate-sponsored boat party (“Pilot” 1.1), deals with Liv’s need to consume human brains in the first five minutes of the pilot. Explicitly making humans a source of food rather than a consumer of it allows the series to deal directly with these issues while positioning its zombies as both predators and prey.

iZombie's zombies are not arisen from the dead (a la Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* [1968] or Wes Craven's *The Serpent and the Rainbow* [1988]), but exist in a state similar to vampires: pale skin, almost undetectable heartbeat, and super-strength. It is one of several recent series (and films) that draw parallels between vampires and zombies; the "i-vampire" is joined by the "i-zombie" (Abbott, 2018: 145).² Like vampirism, zombie-ism in *iZombie* can be spread by blood/fluid transfer; thus, Liv breaks off her engagement to her fiancé, Major Lillywhite (Robert Buckley), and leaves her cardiac surgery internship for a job at the morgue, allowing her to both avoid contaminating humans and gain access to a steady food supply without killing humans.

In terms of food, and given their "dead" state, the series' zombies' taste buds are compromised; most drown their food and drink in various hot sauces for flavor. Initially, Liv takes little care with her meals; she sprinkles chopped brains on pizza, or mixes them with ramen noodles. This is presented as a consequence of her depression over her transformation, which comes with not only lost opportunities and relationships, but the fact that her desires have narrowed to a single point: the acquisition and consumption of brains ("Pilot" 1.1). However, the first episode also reveals that its zombies' food is personalized; that is, they receive the abilities and memories of the brains' former owners after they consume them. In that respect, for many zombies within the series, there is no buffer between source and preparation; not only are they what they eat, but they also cannot deny the origins of their food, as one might do in a supermarket or butcher shop. That is, many zombies must remove and prepare the brains themselves, using either their enhanced strength to break the skull, or particular equipment, such as bone saws or knives. (This, not surprisingly, exempts the wealthy client base of one of the show's villains, Blaine McDonough [David Anders], who have their brains prepared and delivered.) While Liv has access to professional equipment to ease the process, she still has an intimate relationship with her food in a manner not unlike hunters who not only kill animals, but prepare them for consumption (e.g., skinning, preservation, etc.). Further, this intimacy takes on an additional dimension: Liv experiences visions/memories of the deceased she consumes, leading her to team up with Seattle police detective Clive Babineaux (Malcolm Goodwin) to solve crimes. The added role of crime-solver provides a redemptive purpose to her state that ameliorates the loss of her career, her fiancé, and her family inflicted by her zombie-ism.³ "I need this. This is my one thing," she tells Clive ("Cape Town" 2.9). Neither in preparation nor consumption is Liv (or similar zombies) necessarily allowed to deny her food's provenance. Fellow zombie Lowell—formerly one of Blaine's

clients—forces himself to acknowledge that “We eat people, Liv,” emphasizing the sourcing aspect of ethical eating (“Patriot Brains” 1.9).

Complicating this give-and-take dynamic of zombie-ism as a condition that lies somewhere between blight and potential superpower, is the aforementioned Blaine McDonough, former drug dealer, scion of a wealthy family, and the zombie who turned Liv. His unhappiness with his zombie state does not prevent him from turning several others into zombies, with particular focus on Seattle’s wealthiest (“Brother Can You Spare a Brain?” 1.2) and/or most powerful (“Flight of the Living Dead” 1.5/“Zombie Bro” 2.2).⁴ Operating out of an upscale charcuterie called Meat Cute, Blaine employs an artisanal butcher/chef who prepares high-end meals such as “Motor Cortex Asada” or “Cerebellum Sashimi” (“Patriot Brains” 1.8), all artfully designed to mask their origin. This origin, revealed by the middle of the first season, is the brains of homeless or drug-addicted teens, frequently lured by Blaine and his associates with the promise of free drugs or meals. Blaine’s feeding the rich the brains of the poor—chosen because they would be less likely to be reported missing—literally embodies Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” itself a satirical invective against willfully overlooking real solutions to hunger and poverty.

Not that these wealthy customers are necessarily satisfied. Jackie, a trendspotter Blaine seduced and turned into a zombie, responds to a late delivery from Meat Cute by killing and consuming the brains of the delivery boy (“Virtual Reality Bites” 1.6). While Blaine eventually kills Jackie for this transgression, it is clearly not out of any sense of justice or propriety; rather, it is practical: given that the delivery staff is composed of high-school-aged local kids (including Liv’s younger brother [“Blaine’s World” 1.13]), the threat of exposure if they went missing is higher than the already-forgotten kids Blaine uses as food. Another client, Lawrence Kaiser (Ben Wilkinson), specifically requests brains from (fictional) astronaut Alan York in hopes of visions of being in space. The provenance of his food troubles him only because of its low “entertainment” value: “These visions from runaways and junkies are worse than depressing; they’re boring” (“Patriot Brains” 1.9). While none of these individuals asked to be turned into zombies, the suggestion that they are entitled to the “best” brains underscores the class divisions at play throughout the series. In essence, by having the 1%-er zombies so easily take their place as the new top of the food chain allows the series to comment on the ruthlessness of late-stage capitalism by having its most powerful zombies literally embody it.

Most of the zombies, however, fall in between this near-sociopathic corporate nonchalance and Liv's productive repurposing of her food to solve murders, with their increased awareness of their food's source often having fatal consequences. Lieutenant Suzuki (Hiro Kanagawa), turned by Blaine to facilitate covering up Blaine's crimes ("Maternity Liv" 1.7), relies on him for brains, but the actions required to get them, including pinning the aforementioned murders of runaways on others ("Maternity Liv" 1.7), eventually lead Suzuki to take his own life and attempt to implicate Blaine ("Blaine's World" 1.13). Lowell Tracey (Bradley James), a musician turned by Blaine "because he liked my music," initially accepts Blaine's excuse that his brains come from a funeral home until pressed by Liv ("Patriot Brains" 1.9). Lowell in turn forces himself to viscerally accept that "we eat people" by attending the funeral of a recently deceased, beloved teacher, digging him up, and removing his brain. This realization that his food source comes from murdered teens, as well as the full scope of what his brain-eating implies, also leads to Lowell's death. (In his case, it is at the hands of Blaine, after Lowell makes a futile attempt to kill him ["Patriot Brains" 1.9]).

While Meat Cute is eventually destroyed at the end of the first season—a newly human Blaine instead opens a funeral home, appropriately named Shady Plots⁵ ("Grumpy Old Liv" 2.1)—the provenance of how zombies acquire food remains an issue throughout the series. Blaine transitions to using the brains of already-deceased individuals, claiming that Liv inspired this shift through her example. In essence, Blaine is separating himself from the "labor" of procurement. As a butcher shop, Meat Cute allowed no filter for the zombies who owned and staffed it; they saw, in Blaine's own words, "how the sausage was made" ("Virtual Reality Bites" 1.6); they "hunted" humans, harvested their brains, and then created the meals sold to upscale customers. While the employees of Shady Plots still prepare the meals, the "hunting" aspect has been removed, bringing them closer in terms of ethical preparation to Liv; however, the socioeconomic stratification of brain distribution remains intact, with high-end clients receiving "interesting" brains and employees given the leftovers. In season four, however, when Blaine opens an upscale restaurant called Romero's, it becomes obvious that murdering individuals for their brains continues; the only difference is this task has been outsourced to others ("Brainless in Seattle, Part 1" 4.3), allowing Blaine—and his customers—plausible deniability with regards to how this food is procured.⁶

As for Liv herself, the second season and beyond shows a marked difference in how she prepares her brains for consumption. If she had an influence on Blaine in terms of "letting the brains come to you" ("Grumpy

Old Liv” 2.1), Blaine’s influence on Liv is also obvious in the ways in which she takes particular care in making her brains a meal, rather than merely a necessity. Frequently, the type of food Liv prepares is thematically resonant: nachos when she ingests a frat boy’s brain (“Zombie Bro” 2.2); a hero sandwich for the brain of Chris Allred,⁷ a shop teacher who moonlights as a vigilante crime fighter (“Cape Town” 2.9); or a cheeseburger for pathological liar Corey Carp in an episode entitled “The Whopper” (2.13). (See Figure 1 below.). While Liv continues to remove and prepare the brains herself, the increased complexity of her food preparation suggests the same masking of the food source that Blaine and Meat Cute/Romero’s engage in, as well as Liv’s increased comfort with her zombie state. Unlike either Seattle’s wealthy zombies or those created by season three’s (planned) outbreak, Liv has a steady—and free—food supply as part of her work, meaning procurement is rarely a concern. (The implications of this in the series’ fourth season will be explored below.)



Figure 1: The “hero” sandwich

If Liv gets her brains from the morgue, and Blaine from the society’s outcasts, and later from a funeral home, the second season introduction of Fillmore Graves, a private military contractor staffed entirely by zombies (“Salvation Army” 2.19), adds a third source: enemy combatants (“Spanking the Zombie” 3.5). Unlike Blaine, who charges his customers \$25,000 a month

for upscale brain preparations, or Liv, who personalizes her meals through both her preparation process and using their memories/personality traits to solve crimes, Fillmore Graves feeds its zombies “brain mash”; that is, a blended combination of brains served in plain plastic tubes. While this mass processing serves to make the brains more portable and avoid any memories or personality traits from ingestion (ones that might affect military readiness [“Zombie Knows Best” 3.2; “Looking for Mr. Goodbrain, Part 2” 3.13]), it also further depersonalizes those they have killed. By processing their “food” in a way that masks its origins—suggesting the industrial processing/doctoring of fast and convenience food—Fillmore Graves renders it that no soldier would thus have visions or traits of those they had been contracted to kill; the end result of the product denies them any understanding or empathy. In that respect, the corporate military contractor offers brains the furthest removed from their source; in essence, hiding the true nature of who they are and who they consume.

Energy drink company Max Rager (bought out by Fillmore Graves at the end of the second season) mirrors this distancing from the other side. Max Rager tracks the consumer habits of the initial 322 zombies living in Seattle (“Grumpy Old Liv” 2.1) through their purchases of zombie-specific products (such as the aforementioned hot sauce), thereby adding a further consumption element to the series’ focus on food. Additionally, the source of their infection stems both directly and indirectly from this corporation. Not only does an unlisted ingredient within the drink cause violent episodes (“Mr. Berserk” 1.10), but when mixed with a (fictional) party drug called Utopium, it immediately turns humans into violent zombies (“Pilot” 1.1; “Salivation Army” 2.19).⁸ It is this combination that first turns Blaine into a zombie, and allows him to create his “brain business,” turning Seattle’s economic 1% into his customer base. Vaughn Du Clark, Max Rager’s CEO, takes some level of responsibility for the initial zombie outbreak, both investing in research to figure out the “rogue” ingredient in his drink, and by “eliminating” the zombie problem: hiring an individual with the ability to physically sense zombies to kill them.⁹ Du Clark’s corporation and significant financial resources not only allow him to distance himself from the initial adverse effects of his drink but outsource the consequences.¹⁰ Indeed, despite the fact that the company’s new release, “Super Max,” is even stronger and more prone to cause violent episodes, they use the same type of cost-benefit analyses General Motors used in the 1970s to determine the cost of recall versus the cost of litigation, putting a monetary value on human life at approximately \$200,000 (\$1.6 million in 2018) (Ballaban, 2014). As Du Clark’s daughter Rita (Leanne Lapp), second in

command at Max Rager, puts it: “Accounting-wise, we factored in lawsuits. There’ll be violent episodes similar to the frequency we experienced with Max Rager” (“He Blinded Me...With Science” 2.15). The suggestion is that Max Rager/Du Clark employs similar reasoning as GM, in that human life can be sufficiently monetized for profit over risk. Rather than making a safer, if less effective, drink, Du Clark determines that the human cost of consuming Max Rager is less important than the financial gain. Fittingly, Du Clark himself is consumed; when the release of his SuperMax drink causes another zombie outbreak, Du Clark eventually is killed and his brain eaten by his own, now-zombified daughter, Rita (“Salvation Army” 2.19).

For both Max Rager and Fillmore Graves, this disconnect from either the source of their food or its consequences is part of the typical externalizing process of corporations. “The corporation is an externalizing machine,” argues Joel Bakan. “There isn’t any question of malevolence or of will; the enterprise has within it [...] those characteristics that enable it to do that for which it was designed” (2004: 70). As corporations are neither living nor dead—although legally personified (Kennedy, 2010)—one could argue that they share a similar liminal status with zombies themselves. Sarah Lauro and Karen Embry also draw the parallel to the zombie as a “capitalist icon”: “the monstrous figure of global capitalism is fed on the labors of the impoverished ‘third world’ labor force as well as representing both consumer and consumed” (2008: 99). This duality is expressed not only within the zombies themselves—particularly the humans killed and consumed for and by the wealthy—but in the connection between Max Rager and Fillmore Graves. Fillmore Graves buys out the energy drink company responsible for creating the zombie problem, but not for mass sale; Max Rager is available only to employees of Fillmore Graves, and like the classic zombie, its identity is stripped away. Following season two, Super Max is presented in plain silver cans, with no visible branding. Given both the narrative’s and Du Clark’s focus on the importance of the brand, Super Max’s fate mirrors that of its creator: both become just another meal.

“They left you to starve on the streets”: Food Deserts

While seasons one through three of *iZombie* focus primarily on the provenance of Seattle’s zombies’ “brain food”—with a particular focus on the well-off/powerful zombies created by Blaine—the fourth season necessarily switches gears in the wake of a different type of corporate-generated zombie outbreak than that caused by Max Rager. In order to protect their “species”

from human interference, a rogue faction within Fillmore Graves (in a move that suggests an anti-vaxxer's nightmare scenario) engages in multi-level germ warfare; first, by introducing a deadly flu virus into Seattle's population, then, by contaminating its vaccine with zombie blood ("Looking for Mr. Goodbrain, Part 2" 3.13). Both those already suffering from the flu and those who receive the vaccine are made into zombies, upping the zombie population of the city from the few hundred of the first three seasons to at least ten thousand. The questionable logic of this plan is immediately apparent, as it is established that Fillmore Graves struggles to feed the zombies already in its employ ("Looking for Mr. Goodbrain, Part 1" 3.12). *iZombie's* zombies require regular brains to stay cognizant and not go "full Romero" ("The Exterminator" 1.3).¹¹ (See Figure 2 below.) Food itself becomes (even more) politicized within the narrative during season four, as Fillmore Graves' actions draw a bright line between zombie "haves" and zombie "have-nots," making large sections of Seattle into what are known as "food deserts."



Figure 2: A "full Romero" zombie from episode 1.3

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines “food deserts” as areas of the country that lack easy access to “whole foods” (fresh fruits and vegetables); that is, at least 33% of an area’s population must reside more than a mile (for urban environments) or ten miles (for rural communities) from a grocery store (“USDA defines...”, 2011). According to the USDA, approximately 24 million Americans live in food deserts, and thus rely on local convenience stores or accessible fast food franchises for their primary diet. The health implications are higher incidences of diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure within these areas (Diaz de Villegas and Rodriquez, 2016: 3-5). Both food deserts themselves and the health consequences they cause disproportionately affect minority and immigrant populations (Hall Lee, 2017). *iZombie*’s acute class sensitivity around food provision and consumption allegorizes such realities.

It is easy to draw a parallel to *iZombie*’s interpretation of zombie-ism—that is, a virus that can be exchanged through an exchange of fluids—to the AIDS virus. Indeed, at the end of the first season, Liv declines to donate blood to help her gravely injured brother to avoid contaminating him (“Blaine’s World” 1.13), an act that seemingly permanently alienates her from her family (“Grumpy Old Liv” 2.1). While “zombie-ism as virus/contagion” (2018: 81-82) has been the subtext of zombie films more generally, Stacey Abbott argues, it has become more overt in contemporary zombie narratives in light of both the AIDS virus and other viral outbreaks. *iZombie*, however, does not quite fit into other zombie narratives focused around pandemic infections caused by either negligence or ignorance. The so-called “zombie outbreak” within *iZombie* is a corporate ploy to force acceptance of zombies as a way of creating a new consumer market; while it is a virus that causes zombie-ism in *iZombie*, some, particularly Fillmore Graves and, increasingly, Liv, view their altered states as an identity rather than an illness, not unlike some HIV-positive individuals who have incorporated their positive (“poz”) status into their lives (see, for example, the online lifestyle magazine *Poz* [<https://www.poz.com/>]).¹² Fillmore Graves’ initial plan is to self-segregate on what is dubbed “Zombie Island” once humans discover zombies’ existence (“Heaven Just Got a Little Bit Smoother” 3.1); however, others within the organization believe that makes the zombies sitting targets: “They will nuke us into vapor” (“Looking for Mr. Goodbrain, Part 2” 3.13). While the US government’s response to “New” Seattle’s zombie population suggests this is a distinct possibility (“Goon Struck” 4.5), the new plan (infect thousands of Seattle-ites to stay the government’s hand), was built on deception. The zombies involved thought the aforementioned introduction of the flu virus

into the general population was to harvest the brains of the deceased: an “all-you-can-eat brain buffet” (“Looking for Mr. Goodbrain, Part 2” 3.13). This suggests that a number of zombies not only accept it as an identity, but, like the wealthy zombies of seasons one and two, believe that their condition makes them superior to humans.

Like its comic and television predecessor *The Walking Dead*, *iZombie*’s zombies borrow from a combination of earlier sources, including zombie-ism as viral outbreak (“Looking for Mr. Goodbrain, Part 2” 3.13), issues around consumption, and fear of the other. The sentience of the series’ zombies, recalling recent films such as *Warm Bodies* and *Husk* (2011), is a factor that Abbott argues, “move the genre [...] away from themes of apocalypse and cultural anxiety and explore questions of identity and self in a changing world” (2018: 145). In the case of *iZombie*, the themes of “cultural anxiety,” “social apocalypse,” and “questions of identity” converge explicitly on the element of food, both in creating the problem (Max Rager/Fillmore Graves) and in the economic stratification of its acquisition or limited supply. Indeed, it is economic stratification that pushes the Seattle of *iZombie* closer to apocalypse, as well as revealing the limitations of acceptance and integration of its residents whose “cultural” differences are strange or off-putting to the general population. With the fourth season’s diffusion of the virus beyond the elite, *iZombie*’s sentient zombies can literally speak to—and about—how they identify and their views on their semi-apocalyptic surroundings. As discussed above, the zombies’ relationship with their food further complicates the issue of identity (at least for those zombies not limited to the brain tubes provided by Fillmore Graves) due to the aforementioned side effect of zombies taking on the decedent’s memories, skills, or personality. That this food (i.e., “whole brains”) is limited to either the wealthy or those in government and law enforcement underscores the series’ focus on contemporary socioeconomic divisions within the United States.

Further, *iZombie* also differentiates itself from many other “evil corporation” series, including *Mr. Robot*’s E Corp, *Firefly*’s Blue Sun, *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*’ Cyberdyne Systems, or *Heroes*’ Pinehearst Company, by making these corporations’ employees and leaders not only a significant part of the narrative, but in fact frequently positioning at least one of the protagonists as a part of said organization.¹³ In that respect, it more closely resembles Joss Whedon’s series *Angel* (1999-2004) and *Dollhouse* (2009-2010), in which all of the protagonists either worked for or were trapped by Wolfram & Hart and the Rossum Corporation, respectively. In both instances, the simultaneous benefits of, and entrapment by a mega-corporation allows

the narrative to delve into both corporate motivations and the compromises those who work within them are forced to make (see Giannini, 2017). For *iZombie*, such compromises are addressed mainly through Major Lillywhite, who is involved in both Max Rager (through coercion) in season two and Fillmore Graves in seasons three and four. Particularly during the fourth season, positioning Major—previously established as an ethical and self-sacrificing individual—as an insider allows the viewer access to the reasoning, concerns, and trajectory of a corporate/governmental transition into autocracy without resorting to making either Fillmore Graves or Chief Operating Officer Chase Graves himself into a two-dimensional villain. As Michael Pepe suggests, post-Great Recession films frequently offer an “insider” view of corporate culture, which may not engender sympathy, but work to “dramatize iterations of greed that are psychological, philosophical, and institutional in nature” (Pepe, 2016: n.p.). Fillmore Graves deals with several issues within the fourth season in an increasingly autocratic/non-transparent way, including shutting down a newspaper for printing critical stories (“Don’t Hate the Player, Hate the Brain” 4.7), turning the daughter of a general arguing to “nuke Seattle” into a zombie (“Goon Struck” 4.5), and publicly executing human smugglers turning the sick into zombies (“Goon Struck” 4.5; “And He Shall Be a Good Man” 4.13). Yet, the narrative makes clear that the source of these actions is increased desperation because of the limited food supply.

The lack of adequate brain supplies has immediate—and numerous—consequences for both humans and zombies in Seattle. Fillmore Graves’ plan to feed Seattle zombies on brains donated from across the country (“Looking for Mr. Goodbrain, Part 2” 3.13) is eventually rejected by the US government due to Fillmore Graves’ actions (“And He Shall Be a Good Man” 4.13); the US government builds a wall around the city, trapping the majority of its residents (“Are You Ready for Some Zombies?” 4.1) and unintentionally creates a thriving smuggling business of both humans and brains (“Blue Bloody” 4.2). The series addresses these consequences in the first episode of the season; Major meets with teens ejected from their homes for being zombies,¹⁴ who indicate that the “brain tubes” they receive are so watered down they cannot survive on them. (That one of the Fillmore Graves employees is skimming brain shipments and selling them on the black market is a major [and Major] subplot of the season.) This altruistic act is immediately contrasted with a scene in which Seattle’s zombie mayor enjoys a meal at the high-end Romero’s restaurant, succinctly suggesting what a later episode will make manifest; that is, the complicity of Seattle’s local government with

Fillmore Graves, as well as the mayor's seeming blindness to the plight of the city until it is too late for him to be effective ("Mac-Liv-Moore" 4.9).

The focus on class divisions in *iZombie* was also a feature of showrunner Rob Thomas' earlier series, *Veronica Mars*, set in the fictional town of Neptune, California; the eponymous main character calls it "a town without a middle class" ("Pilot" 1.1). *iZombie*'s focus on "haves" and "have-nots" is equally as prominent as in the earlier series, and entirely centered on food, from Blaine's murders of homeless or at-risk teens to feed the rich in season one, to Fillmore Graves' later struggles to address a completely avoidable food shortage brought about by their own desire to save "their species" ("Looking for Mr. Goodbrain, Part 2" 3.13; "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Brain" 3.7). Given the season four's references to the current U.S. administration, including attacks on the press ("Goon Struck" 4.5) and the season-long arc around border walls and immigration, the food desert affecting Seattle's zombies is unsurprisingly politicized, and taken advantage of by those in or near power. While Chase Graves visibly struggles with the decisions he makes, others, such as his employee Russ Roche, clearly enjoy taking advantage of their positions. Roche is the one responsible for the watered-down rations, teaming up with a local gang member to appropriate shipments, doctor them (with gelatin) ("Chivalry is Dead" 4.8), and sell them on the black market. Angus McDonough (Blaine's father), who had his own father committed in order to take over the family business ("Zombie Bro" 2.2), has a conversion experience after Blaine takes revenge on him for the abuse Blaine suffered as a child ("Eat a Knieval" 3.8), and eventually starts a church preaching zombie supremacy over humans ("Are You Ready for Some Zombies?" 4.1). His congregation is mostly comprised of poor and struggling zombies, drawn in by Angus' promise to keep them fed. While his conversion seems genuine, he is still a rich and powerful individual seeking power, using the fact of his congregation's starvation to gain total control over their actions, from relatively minor (instructing them how to properly savor a meal) to horrifyingly significant (attacking and killing a bus full of prisoners and eating their brains ["Chivalry is Dead" 4.8]), and thus weaponizing their desperation.

It is Blaine, however, that remains the main beneficiary as well as "patient zero" of the zombie epidemic and subsequent food shortage. His \$25,000/month brain business in season one, the opening of Romero's in season four, and the fact that he came from a privileged background full of wasted opportunities, all feed into a sense of entitlement as well as his criminal behavior. While the season makes numerous references to Trump, Blaine quietly serves as another: he "washed out" at Wharton, according to his father,

who had paid to get him in; he is perpetually looking for “easy money” schemes; and in season four, attempts a complex real estate scheme that crashes and burns (“Mac-Liv-Moore” 4.9; “And He Shall Be a Good Man” 4.13). It is Blaine who is responsible for creating the initial crop of 1%-er zombies in season one, including Harrison Graves, founder of Fillmore Graves, whose wife Vivian turns the rest of the staff of the company after they are exposed to a deadly pathogen while on assignment (“Heaven Just Got a Little Bit Smoother” 3.1), and whose brother, Chase, turns 10,000 Seattle-ites. In each season of the series, Blaine profits from the class divisions already in existence within American culture, whether feeding the poor to the rich, or manipulating his father into leading his starving flock into a confrontation with, and eventual massacre by, the U.S. military—this latter move made in order to spread the zombie virus across the United States, solely to open Seattle’s borders and raise the value of properties he bought (“You’ve Got to Hide Your Liv Away” 4.12; “And He Shall Be a Good Man” 4.13). It is his greed, abetted by others with their own motivations, including hubris (Angus); xenophobia/anti-human bias (FG soldier Enzo Lambert [John Emmett Tracy]); greed (Russ Roche); or pragmatic, situational ethics (Chase Graves, abetted by Major), that are primarily responsible for Seattle’s zombie food desert.

Liv, who works secretly to smuggle sick humans into Seattle and “cure” them by turning them into zombies, arguably exacerbates the issue that leads Chase to take ever-greater punitive measures to cease all human smuggling. As suggested above, Liv is fairly unique within the series in that her work at the morgue provides her food source, and thus she does not have to rely on either Blaine’s brain business or Fillmore Graves’ brain tube program. This benefit, combined with the increased care she enacts in preparing her meals, limits her perception of the strain she is putting on the food supply in a similar way to those who could afford either Meat Cute’s specialty meals or regular trips to Romero’s; feeding the zombies she creates is Fillmore Graves’ problem. (Literally; she creates fake ID cards so that they can access brain tubes.) That being said, Blaine is either directly (Liv) or indirectly (Chase) responsible for turning both of them; this suggests he is the root of the problem.

In keeping with the darkly comic tone of the series itself, it is significant that of the major players in creating or profiting from season four’s class-based food shortage (Chase, Russ, Angus, and Blaine), the only one to survive—and arguably thrive—is Blaine. The consequences he suffers when his plan to open Seattle’s borders goes awry—the loss of his father and millions of dollars—is almost immediately reversed when he is hired by

Fillmore Graves as their primary brain supplier (“And He Shall Be a Good Man” 4.13). Such an outcome underscores the series’ numerous references to the film *Chinatown* (1974) and its deeply corrupted Los Angeles; as Liv’s partner Clive puts it: “it speaks to the futility of obtaining justice in an inherently corrupt system” (“Goon Struck” 4.5).¹⁵

Conclusion: Eat, Prey, Live

Seattle changes in the fourth season of *iZombie*, but unlike zombie narratives such as *The Walking Dead*, it does not become a wasteland. Humans and zombies work, live, and eat together in the shadow of a corporate-run city where some residents are pale, crave brains, and have the power to declare martial law. While zombie narratives have represented numerous cultural elements—slavery and post-colonialism, consumerism, immigration, and viral contagion/biological warfare—*iZombie*, appropriately enough, creates a tasting menu of several of these elements to build its story world. It straddles the divide between the nihilism of *Night of the Living Dead*, which ends with its racialized hero shot and added to a lynching pyre, and the (slightly) more hopeful *The Girl With All the Gifts* (2016), which suggests its zombies are the future, by making New Seattle a work in progress that requires effort from both humans and zombies to survive.

The series’ focus on its zombies’ consumption habits as the strongest, and multi-season, narrative arc allows the series to provide commentary on the real-world social and economic realities of contemporary U.S. culture. Employing the sentient zombies of films such as *Warm Bodies* not only allows zombies to speak for themselves, but highlights the ethics of food consumption by also giving a voice to the “food.” Further, *iZombie* uses the dangers of food insufficiency—with fatal consequences to both humans and zombies—to highlight the socioeconomic element of the current class and political divisions within the United States. Zombies may be a “symbol of social decay” (Oldring, 2013: 17), but the narrative choice to focus on, and complicate, the zombies’ food source suggests that a new paradigm can be enacted beyond the “decay.”

Notes

¹ Frequently, the use of food in narrative is limited to storylines around weight and body policing; see, as per example, the character arc of Kate Pearson (Christy Menz) in the

melodrama *This is Us* (2016-present). While the series *Gilmore Girls* makes a character point of its eponymous mother/daughter pair's enjoyment and constant consumption of junk food, the lack of any physical consequences from their food choices puts it in the realm of fantasy (see: Mintz and Mintz, 2010: 235-256).

- ² Despite Romero's having cited Richard Matheson's apocalyptic vampire novel, *I Am Legend* (1954), as a source of inspiration for *Night of the Living Dead*, the latter film's ghouls are not given a clear biological cause.
- ³ While Liv maintains a relationship with her mother and brother throughout most of season one, her inability to tell them about her zombie status leads to a permanent break in their relationship by the end of the first season, when she refuses to donate blood to save her brother's life and cannot tell them why ("Blaine's World" 1.13). Due to time constraints, Liv's reconciliation with her brother is limited to a lengthy deleted scene in the episode "The Whopper" (2.13) and her family is not referenced beyond the second season in the main body of the narrative.
- ⁴ Blaine turns both Seattle's chief of police and the district attorney in order to operate his brain business with impunity and take down rivals, rather than the anti-capitalist sentiment his focus on the wealthy might suggest. In season two, when Major is forced to clean up Blaine's work at the behest of Max Rager, he obscures his work's true purpose by spray-painting anti-capitalist rhetoric at the homes/offices of these individuals.
- ⁵ Not only is Blaine's behavior shown to be generally "shady", but the funeral home is also the front for Blaine's attempt to corner the Seattle drug trade ("Zombie Bro" 2.2).
- ⁶ The same episode suggests there is at least one other upscale restaurant in Seattle that caters to zombies: Le Dome. However, the series gives no indication who owns and manages it.
- ⁷ There is another, meta level to Chris Allred's name; it is a tribute to the series' comic book source material, namely the writer Chris Roberson and artist Michael Allred. Liv also takes on the pseudonym "Gwen Tracy" in "He Blinded Me...With Science" to infiltrate Max Rager; Gwen Tracy is the name of the protagonist in the *iZombie* comics.
- ⁸ Whether intentionally or unintentionally, *iZombie* echoes Larry Cohen's anti-capitalist horror satire *The Stuff* (1985) both in tone (comic-horror blend) and in featuring narratives focused on food and consumption. Like the Max Rager energy drink in seasons one and two, consumption of the "Stuff" in *The Stuff* reduces its consumers to a zombie-like state, addicted to, and obsessed with the product to the point of murder. Thank you to Kristopher Woofter for pointing out this connection.
- ⁹ This individual, Major Lillywhite, was turned into a zombie by Liv in an attempt to save his life, and then (temporarily) cured by an experimental drug ("Blaine's World" 1.13). Rather than killing zombies, he incapacitates and freezes them, using decoys to simulate their murders to fool his employer ("Max Wager" 2.6).

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- ¹⁰ An internal memo detailing the violent episodes caused by the drink is accidentally leaked; those who see; those who saw it were killed or bought off and the memo buried (“Flight of the Living Dead” 1.5; “Mr. Berserk” 1.10)
- ¹¹ The danger of starving a zombie—that is, they will revert to “brainless shufflers”—is explored through Liv when she spends a weekend in jail for breaking into a car and nearly kills a fellow inmate (“The Hurt Stalker” 2.8) and when her connection to a murder investigation means she is barred from the morgue (“Dead Beat” 2.18).
- ¹² The comparison here is fraught, however, considering that identifying as Poz is a way of wresting stigma and stereotype from a phobic culture to lend critical and even political power to a sidelined community. Metaphorically, zombie-ism in *iZombie* is similar only insofar as its (unrealized) potential for such social change.
- ¹³ *Mr. Robot* (2015-present), *Firefly* (2002-2003), *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (2008-2009), *Heroes* (2006-2010).
- ¹⁴ “Are You Ready for Some Zombies?” does tie this in by pairing Major’s interaction with the displaced zombie teens with the central case of the episode: a young man whose mother killed his father after he wouldn’t accept his now-zombie son (who became a zombie after sleeping with his zombie girlfriend), suggesting the similar situation of many LGBTQ teens.
- ¹⁵ Indeed, “Chinatown” was Blaine’s nickname when he was a drug dealer; in order to establish dominance, he not only hired dealers with fake gang tattoos to attack a beat cop, making the police to crack down on the current dealers in the neighborhood, but also sliced open a rival’s nose in the same fashion suffered by Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) in the film (“Eternal Sunshine of the Caffeinated Mind” 2.14).

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