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Camp is Undead(?):  
Queer Vampire Becoming in the Age of Nonconformity

Maelcum Thayer  
American Studies Senior Thesis  
Fall 2022

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## Abstract

Beginning from their establishment in Gothic literature, vampires have always represented the Other: people of color, Jews, sex workers, and queers have always inhabited the illegibility of the vampire. By taking on this label through identifying with representations of the vampire in film, there's a potential for the transformation of a subject that allows for retooling kinship, embracing non-normative forms of being, and existing beyond thresholds of static identity. Employing the philosophy of becoming posited by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, I argue that analyzing the figure of the queer vampire through its transformative, 'becoming' potential both problematizes and reinforces its function as a discursive figure in media. This reading of queer vampire media (particularly lesbian vampire exploitation films and their antecedents) reveal the political potential for identity and community formation of becoming-vampire in a posthuman framework, and allows for the phenomenon of Real Vampires that emerges from Goth subcultures and the advent of queer/vampire/Goth subjectivities.

## Introduction

“I believe there will be no racial or sexual peace, no livable nature, until we learn to produce humanity through something more and less than kinship. I think I am on the side of vampires, or at least some of them.” - Donna Haraway<sup>1</sup>

“But to die as lovers may—to die together, so that they may live together.” - J. Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*<sup>2</sup>

I am a queer person who has always loved vampires: I would come home from school and watch *Interview with the Vampire*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or *Nosferatu* (the Werner Herzog adaptation was always my favorite). I’m unsure why I was so drawn to horror and vampires in particular, everyone my age loved the *Twilight* books and films, but the recognition of the innate queerness of my favorite films only occurred to me later. My whiteness in part facilitates this identification, allowing me to see myself in most vampire representations, and to find copious spaces for me to act out my queerness and love of horror where most people looked like me and had similar backgrounds. In living with and loving other queer people, and particularly transitioning, I finally understood immortality—stalking down dark streets holding hands with my queer/trans family, injecting hormones and feeling the drugs mutate my body I realized, I am deliciously living the monster movies I have devoured my whole life. The queer vampire is not only an icon in my becoming, but my sibling. For that reason, this analysis celebrates the messiness of identification, the ways monstrous queerness transforms us, and the ways queer people uniquely use their icons in media to shape their own becoming in creative and complex ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Haraway, *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium.FemaleMan—Meets—OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 265.

<sup>2</sup> J. Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*. (Maryland: Wildside Press, 2000), 26.

The vampire as we know it today, as a fixture in film, literature, TV series, video and roleplaying games, graphic novels, and general supernatural discourse emerged from Gothic literature at the turn of the 19th century. Drawing from foundations in Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), Anne Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), Gothic literature is defined through its pre-Romantic interest in the sublime, dark aesthetics (centering around castles or monasteries) and the role of the supernatural as a matter of fact or as a pervasive explanation within the plot. As the popularity and pedigree of Gothic literature grew, it spawned into subgenres of "supernaturalism, anticlericalism, psychological horror, sentimental romance."<sup>3</sup> The figure of the vampire emerged from cultural anxiety around South eastern Europeans as national identities solidified at the turn of the 19th century in Europe. Generally, the figure of the vampire as we know it today is often considered to be derived from the Romanian *strigoli*— a spirit with the ability to raise from the dead and transform into animals— and adapted through fiction to meet the cultural needs of those constructing the monster.

One of the earliest Gothic vampire novels was J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, a tale of a young girl who visits a castle with her father and falls in love with the mysterious Carmilla. She must stake Carmilla in her coffin when her family discovers that Carmilla is a vampire. The love story of these young women served to demonize lesbians as predatory, and connected queerness to the establishment of vampires in Gothic literature. *Carmilla*'s publication in 1872 served as a precursor for the far more

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<sup>3</sup> Victoria Nelson, *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the new Supernatural* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 6. Throughout this paper, I follow Victoria Nelson in using the term "Gothick" to denote a mode of aesthetics derived from the Gothic period, specifically the aesthetics of Gothic literature, that take manifold forms after the early 19th century.

popular *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, which brought international attention to the figure of the vampire. The vampire became a staple of Gothick aesthetics and media from novels to early horror films, particularly for its position between the grotesque and the “delightfully repulsive.”<sup>4</sup> Films like *Nosferatu* (1922) solidified the figure of the vampire in American popular culture, and queer coded vampires like those in Anne Rice’s novels established a framework where a “bite takes the place of sex, creating an atmosphere that is perversely erotic by virtue of this displacement.”<sup>5</sup> Lesbian vampire exploitation films and pornography in the 1960s and 1970s emphasized female fang penetration and the relationship between aggressive lesbians and unassuming straight (white) women as a model for anxieties around gender and sexuality that plagued straight society. As the horror genre became more and more popular, vampires led the pack of monsters that the growing counterculture clung to, and the vampire maintained cultural relevance as a figure of aversion and attraction in media through today.

With the mainstreaming of the vampire, the queer vampires remained lurking, and depictions of queer-coded and explicitly queer vampires continued to shape representations of the vampire. The advent of Goth subculture that celebrated vampirism and all things Gothick, as well as the emergence of fan cultures who used canonical literature and film to develop their own worlds in fanfiction, roleplay, and online communities, highlighted people’s identification with the figure of the vampire. The trope of the monstrous queer and the relationship between queerness and vampirism in the portrayal of sterile reproduction through contagion and kinship that eschewed notions of blood

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<sup>4</sup> Max Chia-Hung Lin and Paul Juinn Bing Tan, “Vampirism: A Secular Visceral Religion of Paradoxical Aesthetics,” *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 17,49 (2018): 121.

<sup>5</sup> Nelson, *Gothicka*, 124.



families became a matter of course in queer studies scholarship and vampire discourse, yet the queer vampire as represented in films remained largely divorced from those who were taking up vampirism as a lifestyle, religious, or holistic identification. Questions that shape this inquiry include: What is the history of queer vampire media and identification; where do the figure of the vampire and image of the vampire meet? What politics of desire are operating in camp responses to lesbian vampire films? How can politics of becoming inform the way we interact with queer vampire/monster media? What are the advantages of reading queer vampire subjectivities and media identification through feminist and queer ontologies that draw on Deleuze and Guattari; what is lost in terms of accessibility and the importance of 'street theory' or informal analysis based on lived experience? This analysis follows the framework of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, a French philosopher and psychoanalyst respectively who worked together on their two volume tome *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (comprised of *Anti-Oedipus* (1973) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980)) where they explore schizophrenia as a product of culture, and the ways that rethinking individuals' relationships to institutions like the nuclear family, capitalism, gender, and race can fundamentally reorganize the ways we interact with the world. These static institutions are recognized as boundaries that restrict human potential, and can be transcended (or at least we can live at the thresholds of them) through "becoming" processes and embracing a decentered or deterritorialized concept of reality.

Analyzing the figure of the queer vampire through its transformative, 'becoming' potential both problematizes and reinforces its function as a discursive figure in media. Deleuzio-Guattarian readings of queer vampire media (particularly lesbian vampire films) reveal the political potential for

identity and community formation of becoming-vampire in a posthuman framework. To be a vampire in the 21st century, one must know the foundations of their estrangement from mainstream culture, as well as look to the possibilities for radical change through vampirism.

### Reading the Vampire

The construction of the monster in popular culture through Gothick fiction and its subgenres solidifies a dominant gaze that proscribes transgression to the monstrous Other and relegates them outside of societal boundaries. Throughout the history of vampire fiction, this has taken the form of Eastern Europeans, Jews, sex workers, enslaved people, and queers to represent anxieties around race, gender, and sexuality.<sup>6</sup> Queer discourse has adopted the figure of the vampire by shaping discourse in queer studies through working “not at the site of gender, but ontology, to shift the ground of being itself, thus challenging the Platonic parameters of being- the boundaries of life and death.”<sup>7</sup> This discourse frames the vampire as the ideal subject to both embody dominant fantasies of the queer, and to represent identification within queer communities with the monstrous and their ‘sterile’ forms of family making. Applying French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s politics of ‘becoming’ to the figure of the queer vampire demonstrates both the liberatory and restrictive aspects

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<sup>6</sup> The relationship between whiteness and the figure of the vampire is explored in more depth in Shannon Winnubst, “Vampires, Anxieties, and Dreams: Race and Sex in the Contemporary United States,” *Hypatia* Vol. 18, 3. (2003), See also: John Edgar Browning and Caroline Joan Picart, eds. *Draculas, Vampires and Other Undead Forms: Essays on Gender, Race and Culture*, (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2006); Vanessa Dion Fletcher, “Twisting Conventions: A Feminist Indigenous Perspective on the Horror Genre,” *Offscreen*. 18 (2014); and Giselle Liza Anatol, *Black Female Vampires in Nineteenth-Century Writing and Folklore*, (New York: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Sue-Ellen Case. “Tracking the Vampire” *differences* 3(2) (1993): 3. Case and other authors offered in this section specifically explore the figure of the ‘lesbian vampire’ because of her role in filmic queer vampire discourse and as an iteration of the queer vampire with specific societal specifications. This specification will be discussed in more depth in my analysis.

of literalizing identification with vampires through camp sensibility and queerness. Scholarship on this topic traverses the fields of philosophy, media and film studies, and queer studies as modes of interacting with and inventing the queer vampire. By employing queer and feminist discourse on Deleuze and Guattari to inform readings of queer vampire films, my analysis will emphasize both the role of camp in queer identification with the vampire, and the limits of this identification as it intersects with Deleuzio-Guattarian concepts of ‘becoming-Minoritarian’ and the ways we construct identity in the age of the internet.

The modern Western vampire as a trope emerged as European national identities solidified at the turn of the 19th century in Europe, and a simultaneous rise in Gothic literature that emphasized the sublime and supernatural constructed the figure of the vampire as a manifestation of cultural anxiety around racialized social mores. Generally, the figure of the vampire as we know it today is often considered to be derived from the Romanian *strigoli*, and adapted through Gothic fiction (particularly Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*) and became a stock trope in Gothick subgenres.<sup>8</sup> Bram Stoker first introduced international audiences to the vampire in *Dracula* (1897), as well as establishing the creature’s role as a socio-sexual monster. *Dracula* also solidified the vampire figure’s relationship to blood and soil as Dracula needs soil from his home in Eastern Europe as he moves to infect England. This representation solidified the vampire as a sexual threat to (white and, particularly, upper middle-class) women and to the social order as a foreign threat, while simultaneously constructing an attraction around the mysterious, aristocratic vampire. The first cinematic representation of the vampire is

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<sup>8</sup> The figure of the vampire was not unique to South-Eastern Europe, its function in fiction in the Gothic period was unique to European national literature sensibilities until the vampire was globalized with interest in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897).

*Nosferatu* (1922), which cemented the vampire in the image of Dracula in American popular culture and film, and the figure of the vampire only continued to grow as a metaphor for cultural anxieties and threat to white masculinity.<sup>9</sup>

The vampire's trajectory in film is manifold, representing anxiety around race, gender and sexuality (as well as national identity, religion, social class, etc) through time. In "Tracking the Vampire," Sue-Ellen Case traces the figure of the vampire through queer media emphasizing what she calls the "recreational use of the lesbian" in media that allows representations to take on transgression and invisibility scribed to both the vampire and the queer in dominant discourses.<sup>10</sup> Lesbian vampire exploitation films and pornography in the 1960s and 70s popularized the figure of the 'lesbian' vampire in film, drawing on Gothic literature like *Carmilla* (1872) and stories about Countess Elizabeth Bathory that emphasized sexualized fang penetration and the lesbian vampire as a social threat.<sup>11</sup> In *Vampires and Violets*, Andrea Weiss argues that the emergence of these films responded to loosening censorship and as an outpouring of anxiety around feminist movements that allowed producers to showcase a sinister and infectious version of an often straight-passing lesbian, oversexualized for the male gaze. Shannon Winnubst similarly draws on Jacques Lacan's concept of the monstrous Other as constitutive of dominant subject formation where a (phallic) 'body-in-control' must uphold rigid boundaries in order to maintain dominance against the Other (in the form of the racialized subject, the

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<sup>9</sup>*Nosferatu* followed the story of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* closely but technically the vampire was named Count Orlock and had no affiliation with the *Dracula* novel.

<sup>10</sup> Case, "Tracking the Vampire," 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> Countess Bathory was a Hungarian aristocrat who allegedly was a serial killer of young girls who would bathe in their blood to preserve her youth, forming one of the earliest mythologies around predatory vampiric women that has been adapted and reproduced as one of the main inspirations for lesbian vampire media. For more information see: László Kürti. "The Symbolic Construction of the Monstrous - the Elizabeth Báthory Story." *Narodna Umjetnost* 46 (2009).

foreigner, the queer) that create anxiety around phallicized whiteness.<sup>12</sup> This position on subject formation necessarily privileges what become legible subjectivities (those of whiteness and maleness) while also fetishizing Otherness. When it comes to the representation of queer vampires, however, this position values dominant discourses of normality and reinforces the spectatorship that objectifies representations, rather than illuminating heterodox modes of being. The shifting narrative around vampires by the 1980s positions them through a sympathetic lens, lending vampire media to viewers' (particularly queer viewers') identification with the vampire as a complex transgressive figure, despite the ways they're positioned as a threat.

Drawing from the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, Patricia MacCormack argues that transgression of these boundaries can serve to remove a subject from dominant discourse in a process of 'becoming-minoritarian'.<sup>13</sup> In Deleuzio-Guattarian philosophy, 'becoming' is a state of flux where matter and mind, the virtual and actual are inseparable. This can be powerful as a political force by countering heterodox modes of constructing community around stable categories like 'traditional' family structures. 'Becoming-minoritarian' through lines of flight between thresholds (specifically 'becoming-woman,' 'becoming-animal, 'becoming-molecular', 'becoming-imperceptible' and ultimately, 'becoming-revolutionary') act as a method of deterritorializing the subject so they exist in flux beyond boundaries and can move freely between them along these lines of flight.<sup>14</sup> MacCormack

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<sup>12</sup> Shannon Winnubst, "Vampires, Anxieties, and Dreams: Race and Sex in the Contemporary United States," *Hypatia* Vol. 18, 3. (2003); 3-4. I explore Lacan's relationship to this work further in the section "Transforming the Pack: Deleuze and Becoming Vampire"

<sup>13</sup> Patricia MacCormack. "Perversion: Transgressive Sexuality and Becoming-Monster," *thirdspace: a journal of feminist theory and culture* 3.2 (2004).

<sup>14</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

and other feminist scholars studying corporeality develop this concept of ‘becoming-monster,’ queering a feminist ethic of engaging with desire as being imminently manifested from the body and perversion as a tactic of becoming. Becoming-minoritarian “implies two simultaneous movements, one by which the term (the subject) is withdrawn from the majority, and another by which the term (the medium or agent) rises up from the minority,” enabling subjects to enact novel systems of kinship and transformation outside of dominant systems of power.<sup>15</sup>

Adopting perversion in the form of monstrosity (in vampire aesthetic, deviant sexuality and non-human identity) is part of the ‘becoming-monster’ process where subjects inhabit the precarity of monster/vampire. Typified by the pathologized boundaries between homo/hetero, perversion inscribes morality and relationship to dominant social norms in order to establish social boundaries of acceptable desire. This process names those outside of these boundaries as socio-sexual monsters, constructing the monstrous queer in opposition to society through social exclusion and derision. This exclusion is typically countered in queer discourses through the valuing of queer chosen families which supercede identity over blood relationships. MacCormack argues that transgressing the boundaries of allowable desire and participation through ‘becoming-minoritarian’ can be liberating, and in the case of queer vampire identification, inform a transformative and queer ethic of “retooling kinship categories” to form community and family that Winnubst and others argue attract queer people to vampires.<sup>16</sup> In part, this is allowed by the reconfiguration of the vampire in late Gothic literature from a once perverse figure to one that exemplifies the paradox of the boundaries it transcends (good/evil,

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>16</sup> Winnubst, “Vampires, Anxieties, and Dreams...” 14.

living/dead). This occurs through the transition of the grotesque monster that typifies early Gothic literature to one that is able to blend in (pass), creating more anxiety for the white men tasked with protecting white women. Vampires by the mid-20th century films pass as human among their potential victims, they render ambiguous moral and ontological distinctions that characterized earlier vampires. The repetition of Gothick themes and popular representations that frame the vampire solidify the relationship of the queer and the vampire and emphasize both their illegibility as a subject and threat to social stability.

The Gothick is a space that necessitates an aesthetic of artifice while also centering on anxiety around the supernatural. Case traces the queer vampire subject from literature to film through monstrous and transformative queer desire that constructs the queer subject and subsequent queer discourse around “the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny.”<sup>17</sup> This identification, according to Case, in combination with queer discourses, create strategies of queer spectatorship that inscribe desire and sexual practice onto spectatorship and discourse that makes these identifications liberatory rather than oppressive. While she argues dominant discourse will never allow for the imagination of the queer, one must find it themselves by embracing and “puncturing” the threshold of life/death, “generative/destructive bipolarities that enclose the heterosexist notion of being,” namely by employing camp as a discursive strategy.<sup>18</sup> First coined by Susan Sontag in her seminal work “Notes on Camp,” camp is a sensibility as an apolitical mode of aestheticism with an element of artifice that is often considered kitsch to those outside of the know: “camp is a vision of the world in terms of style. It

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<sup>17</sup> Case, “Tracking...” 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

is the love of the exaggerated, the “off,” of-things-being-what-they-are-not.”<sup>19</sup> She contends that camp has its roots in 17th and 18th century Europe, with Gothic and Romantic literature (“Pope, Congreve, Walpole, etc, but not Swift”) acting as some of the earliest examples of the “extraordinary feeling for artifice, for surface, for symmetry” that come to define camp aesthetics.<sup>20</sup> In “Revamping the Gay Sensibility: Queer Camp and *dyke noir*,” Cynthia Morrill argues that camp is a fundamentally queer (and political) mode of spectatorship, and while it has been adopted by feminist and postmodern discourses, this erases the function of camp sensibility to construct queerness as a radical reappropriation of dominant discourses:

Queer desire can only become perceptible through recognizing its proscription, since its only representation is through transgression against the essentialized ontology of the dominant... the vampire-like queer casts no reflection because the mirror of dominant representation cannot reflect the presence of same-sex eroticism.<sup>21</sup>

Because of the lack of queer representation in films, queer spectators projected their own desire and experiences through camp onto representations that were produced to be objectifying or scrutinized as perverse when viewed through a ‘straight’ lens. This is particularly relevant in lesbian vampire exploitation films of the 60s and 70s, produced to appeal to the male gaze by showing oversexualized lesbians on screen that also presented a threat to men but in a context in which “without the element of danger, the film becomes a burlesque, to be appreciated primarily as camp.”<sup>22</sup> As queer people saw

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<sup>19</sup> Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, (London, England: Penguin Classics, 1964), 3. The relation between camp and politics is contested by later camp scholars, and is often explicitly connected to queer spectatorship and creation as a means of survival, particularly in allowing for expansive gender expression.

<sup>20</sup>Sontag, *Notes...* 5.

<sup>21</sup> Cynthia Morrill, “Revamping the Gay Sensibility: Queer Camp and *dyke noir*,” *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005): 96.

<sup>22</sup> Weiss, *Vampires and Violets...* 106.



themselves in the representations of ‘deviant’ sexuality that were supposed to evoke horror, they adopted a camp lens to reread films that were meant to be demeaning.

Camp presents both the repetition of aesthetics that come to represent the vampire and a mode of spectatorship that allows for representation of queer vampires to be related to the lived experience of the queer spectator. Trevor Holmes expands on this, arguing that camp serves to bridge the gap between queer/vampire/Goth subjectivity and fluidity in queer communities by the 1990s through what he calls “embedded genealogical codes.”<sup>23</sup> These codes are manifested in the impulse to androgyny, S/M aesthetics, and camp sensibility that exist between queer and Goth subjectivities and are dutifully adopted in vampire media, offering an opportunity for identity to transcend taxonomies and reform kinship groups that reflect unstable identities. This impulse to ‘becoming’ through queer expression and families constructed outside of blood relationships are tied to the figure of the vampire through the repeated iteration of these codes on screen and in discourse. In other words, by coming to identify with the function of perversion in queer vampire media, camp can serve as a tactic in ‘becoming-minoritarian’ through the utilization of these inscriptions and readings.

While this identification with monstrous queer camp icons has been genealogically encoded by camp readings that existed within queer communities as camp canon handed down by elders (a process that Case would consider ‘street’ discourse or one based on lived experiences of LGBTQ people), the mainstream pop cultural influence of the vampire is connected to the boom in horror media and Goth subcultures in the 1970s, where the repetition and subsequent identification with the monster created

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<sup>23</sup> Trevor Holmes. “Coming out of the Coffin: Gay Males and Queer Goths in Contemporary Vampire Fiction,” *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture*. (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1997): 171.

a mode of embodied vampire aesthetics, codes, and rituals propagated within growing communities of ‘real vampires’ both online and in real life by the 1990s. Scholarship on ‘real vampire’ communities and identification emphasizes religious, community, and identity-based aspects of the movement and sees the sharing and community building around these identities as a result of early 20th century Occult movements proliferating in the 60s New Age movement, the rise of Goth subcultures in myriad cultural forms, and the availability of forums and online spaces in the 90s that allowed for open expression of these identities.<sup>24</sup> Max Chia-Hung Lin and Paul Juinn Bing Tan argue that the growth of this identification and community allowed for an “atypical opportunity of undergoing rebirth and re-establishing a sense of belonging, liveliness, and a link to life itself,” particularly for people who felt they had no place in dominant culture.<sup>25</sup> This is particularly meaningful for queer communities with connections to goth and punk subcultures following the AIDs crisis. This opportunity allowed for a reinscription of identity and community in alternative spaces, imagining families connected by choice and shared experience rather than blood. Because the vampire reproduces sterilely, he “pollutes all systems of kinship... he infects the body and *alters the spirit*,” Winnubst argues, using the example of *The Gilda Stories* to demonstrate the way queer people have adopted the vampiric family that feeds mutually as a model to rethink the possibilities of ways we connect to one another.<sup>26</sup> Donna Haraway

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<sup>24</sup> Holmes, “Coming out of the Coffin...” 169. For more information on Gothic aesthetic informing occult and New Age movements see: Victoria Nelson, *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the new Supernatural*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>25</sup>Max Chia-Hung Lin and Paul Juinn Bing Tan, “Vampirism: A Secular Visceral Religion of Paradoxical Aesthetics” *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*. 17, 49 (2018), 132. See also Joseph Laycock, “Real Vampires as an Identity Group: Analyzing Causes and Effects of an Introspective Survey by the Vampire Community.” *Nova Religio* 14, no. 1 (August, 2010), 4-23.; and Emyr Williams “Emotional religion? Exploring the religious beliefs and religious experiences of real vampires,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 20:4, (2017).

<sup>26</sup> Winnubst, “Vampires, Anxiety, and Dreams...” 8.

sees this family-making as an inherent function of twenty-first century technoscience and the vampire itself, with its mazes of connections and affinity for fluidity as an attractive model for identity and subject formation in a posthuman framework.<sup>27</sup>

The legacy of scholarship on queer vampire figures in film grew in the 90s and 2000s with the mainstream development of popular vampire media like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *True Blood*, the *Twilight* series, and countless others that became cultural staples in the US and internationally, particularly among adolescent viewers.<sup>28</sup> This expansion naturalized the vampire as a pop cultural figure, with the queer vampire featuring prominently in media that came to represent the vampire as life-giving in accordance with queer discourses emerging from the exploitation films of the 60s and 70s.<sup>29</sup> Despite this, queer vampire films produced after 2000 remain largely untouched by scholarship because of an emphasis on vampire lesbian exploitation films and the shift of focus to queer vampire literature and anthologies.

By analyzing these films through the process and political implications of ‘becoming-monster,’ the relationships between the identification with the monstrous queer that has been increasingly embraced in mainstream media production elucidates the ways this representation can function in the lives of queer people who identify with these representations. Although there is disparate scholarship examining social transgression and straight male vampires through Deleuze and Guattari, it remains in

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<sup>27</sup> Haraway, *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium*. Posthumanism is explained in more detail in section 1: Transforming the Pack see also; Winnubst, “Vampires, Anxiety and Dreams...”

<sup>28</sup> This expansion of vampire media also existed in literature with growing vampire fanfiction and the work of Poppy Z. Brite created a canon of gay male vampires while ‘lesbian’ vampire novels like *The Gilda Stories* (1996) and the anthology *Daughters of Darkness: Lesbian Vampire Stories* (1993) gained popularity and spawned copious scholarship among queer studies scholars. For more information on this literature, see: Sabine Meyer, “Passing Perverts, After All? Vampirism, (In)Visibility, and Horrors of the Normative in Jewelle Gomez’ *The Gilda Stories*,” *Femspec* 4:1 (2002); and Anne Heath. “Lesbian Vampires, Goddess Traditions, and the Reclamation of Lesbian Herstory.” *Articulāte*: 1 (1996).

<sup>29</sup> Heath, “Lesbian Vampires...” .

a philosophical sphere rather than an engaged cultural studies standpoint of queer and film studies that analyze the significance of the queer vampire on screen in relationship to the discourses that shape them. This scholarship also often separates this canon from the phenomenon of 'real vampires' and vampire communities that emerged with the rise of forums on the internet. By integrating the representation of and subsequent identification with the queer vampire, I will expand on the holistic implications of discourses on queer vampires as a field that continues to grow with more and more queer creators having opportunities to make mainstream films that capitalize on the monstrous queer trope. The implications of connecting the phenomenon of representation on film and cultural discourse to manifestations of vampire identity and community formation based on the internet emphasizes the trajectory of the role of the vampire over time in queer discourses and can indicate the ways becoming-monster functions as a posthumanist process.

### **Methods**

The figure of the queer vampire in film has been substantially explored through the lens of representation and discourses in scholarship despite the disconnect with scholarship on how these representations manifest in identity formation. Like most scholarship which addresses the figure of the queer vampire, I will employ a critical discourse analysis centered on semiotics, as well as a representational analysis and close reading in order to trace the establishment of the queer vampire as a homogenous entity (though heterodox in its manifestations) through repetition of Gothick themes and aesthetics. These methods also lend themselves to a symptomatic analysis of the ways cultural fears and beliefs shape the figure of the vampire and its reception. Analyzing the ways queer vampires have been represented in literature and film and specifically in Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction* (1995),

illuminates the complications of race, class, and gender within dominant and queer discourses on the queer vampire. Deleuzio-Guattarian philosophy acts as a framework in this analysis to emphasize the ways these subjectivities and identification with them exist outside of thresholds of fixed identities and discourses, yet are proscribed through representation and dominant discourses.

Representations of the vampire have historically been framed from the point of view of their victims, and scholarship concerning the representations of the queer vampire fail to grapple with primary constructions of the queer vampire beyond the ways it's manifested in literature and film as a symptom of cultural sensibilities. Aspects of the queer vampire are proscribed as a function of the figure itself, valuing the rhetorical use of the vampire and its reception by 'straight' society in media while obscuring the vampire themselves. While queer discourses center the queer vampire and its functionality in queer taxonomies, this work, too, can be reductive of the experiential nature of vampire identification. Deleuze and Guattari oppose what they call arboric systems of knowledge, where ontology and discourse are organized hierarchically, opting instead to rhizomatic forms of organization. Rhizomes have no center, are typified by a network of discrete units that are horizontally linked, resulting in an intensely productive system that recognizes a multiplicity of modes of being. While this is an impulse in queer discourses, the nonetheless hierarchical structures that shape queer academic discourse and value them over lived experience and 'street discourses' restrict scholarship's ability to engage meaningfully with the complexities of the vampire's relationship to becoming as part of larger systems of power and ontology. To this end, though I cannot eradicate this impulse, my analysis follows lines of thought as productive representations of what queer vampirism can be as a

becoming, rather than asserting static scaffolding of what queer vampirism is as a construction of its context and inter/personal experience.

Employing a semiotic analysis to dissect the ways “linguistic and nonlinguistic cultural “signs” form systems of meanings,” and how these meaning convey specific ideologies of the film, allows for a focused analysis of the ways this film illuminates larger discourses around what it means to be a queer vampire and why it matters.<sup>30</sup> This analysis is shaped by my biases towards reading the film as a radical addiction to queer vampire canon and the ways reading *The Addiction* requires expanding the parameters of queer vampirism employed in most scholarship. By understanding close reading as a product of the position and argument of this scholarship, this project’s take on the film comes to represent only the ways it relates to this work and not a representation or review of the film as a whole.

An examination of the representations of queer vampires over a disparate canon of queer (and nominally lesbian) vampire films that emerges as a subgenre of the Gothick demonstrates the way the figure has evolved alongside cultural shifts, becoming a staple of vampire and Gothick media.

“Vampires are not manifestations of ‘fixed psychic fears’, but are better understood as something like ‘personifications of their age’” which lends to reading representations in media as products of cultural beliefs and feelings through time.<sup>31</sup> A symptomatic analysis grapples with cultural fears and beliefs as manifest in media and representations of groups. This method is limited by the establishment of canons of queer and lesbian vampire films centering 1960s and 70s lesbian vampire exploitation, which may exclude meaningful representations of queer vampirism as outside of dominant productions,

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<sup>30</sup> Douglas Kellner, “Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture,” *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader* Ed. Gail Dines, Jean M. Humez. 3. (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publishing, 2011): 12.

<sup>31</sup> David Baker, “Seduced and abandoned: Lesbian vampires on screen 1968-74,” *Continuum* 26 (2012): 554.

particularly pertaining to the ways racialization in the adoption of the vampire has functioned over time as scholarship has centered white lesbian vampire representation through focusing on movements like Hammer films' lesbian vampire representations. The canonization of what queer vampirism looks like in films illuminates the discourses that shape their production and reception.

The impetus for choosing *The Addiction* over other queer vampire films that have been established within the canon is my intention to argue for the expansion of the relationship between representation and becoming as a symptomatic process. Close reading and analysis of texts involves the examination of artifacts, and the incorporation of lenses from a variety of disciplines to better understand the ways the text functions, both in the text itself and in its cultural application. Scholarly discourse of queer vampire films has centered around white lesbian (and bisexual) vampires since the 1960s and 70s, excluding many films with queer sensibilities that demonstrate the social functions of the queer vampire. Abel Ferrera's 1995 film *The Addiction* is one such film overlooked as a queer vampire film despite the main character's relationship to sex, gender, and race evolving as she accepts her vampirism. I am employing a close reading through the lens of queer theories and application of Deleuzio-Guattarian philosophy to the film to better understand the ways *The Addiction* conforms to established canon representations of queer vampires in film, as well as illuminating the ways manifestations of queer vampirism in films relate to the application of Deleuzio-Guattarian thought to these representations through becoming-animal transformation within the film.

The combination of critical discourse, representation, and semiotic analysis allows for an analysis that can extend close readings of specific texts to their cultural meaning and the ways they relate to broader discourses. These methods complement one another by offering a macro analysis of

the figure of the queer vampire and then applying this discourse through a specific lens to one film that illuminates the functionality of these arguments. These methods also demonstrate an application of Deleuzio-Guattarian philosophy that can illuminate the figure of the vampire and its relationship to queer identity formation in the 21st century. While cultural discourses shape representation, so too does media shape discourses by forming concrete representations of malleable fears and beliefs in specific times and spaces that position queerness as a threat to white hegemonic family structures.

### **Transforming the Pack: Deleuze and Becoming Vampire**

To foreground the queer vampire as it is manifested in modernity and postmodernity, one must first contend with the construction of race and normative family structures in the US and Europe that produce the threat of the vampire. I have already touched on the construction of the vampire in fiction through its relationship to phallic whiteness à la Jacques Lacan, but extrapolating on this point serves the purpose of expanding to a mode of analysis where the vampire defines themselves. In Lacan's theory on subject formation, he expounds on what he calls the Mirror Stage, where the culturally dominant subject (necessarily a white man) looks in the mirror for the first time and can't comprehend the separation between himself and his reflection. This event creates internal conflict against "the Otherness of his own embodiment," and a need to "clearly identify the rigid boundaries between himself and others, including the Other reflected back to it in the image of the mirror" in order to maintain a body-in-control.<sup>32</sup> The mirror stage of subject development frames the body and ego in opposition to the other, creating an unstable ego that must be maintained through a

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<sup>32</sup> Winnubst, "Vampires, Anxieties and Dreams..." 4.



simultaneous fascination and horror toward the Other. While this process is posited to be universal, later critics argue this process solidifies the nominal Other interpersonally and through dominant systems of power, most notably in the ability to be made socially legible through maintaining a white male body-in-control, which is necessarily denied to racialized, sexed, and gendered 'messy' bodies.

Despite feminist and queer theorists' refutation of Lacan's emphasis on the phallus (which confers both masculinist and racial power in the naturalization of whiteness) it continues to be a touchstone for the reading of queer, specifically lesbian, vampires because of fangs' supposedly phallic nature (female penetration) and vampires' lack of mirror reflection, which troubles Lacan's theory of subject formation. The cultural construction of the vampire as Other precludes them from formulating a subject position outside that of threat to dominant positions through cultural, political, and social enforcement of normativity. Furthermore, focusing on vampires' construction as monsters rather than the experience of inhabiting monstrous identity further signifies the inability for a form of subject construction wherein vampires cannot name themselves.

The position of the Other threatens dominant power structures, and in the case of queerness has been seen as a process of infecting straight culture through sterile reproduction and 'recruitment' The propagation of vampirism through contagion (demonstrated in the vampire's relationship to pestilence and disease carried through blood) inherently names perpetrators and victims through the establishment of 'pure' race narratives that are threatened by blood as contagion in the form of miscegenation and literal blood infection as manifested in the AIDs crisis.

History forces one to remember that the vampire is the figure of the Jew accused of the blood crime of polluting the wellsprings of European germ plasm and bringing both bodily plague and national decay, or that it is the figure of the diseased prostitute, or the gender pervert, or

the aliens and the travelers of all sorts who cast doubt on the certainties of the self-identical and well-rooted ones who have natural rights and stable homes. The vampires are the immigrants, the dislocated ones, accused of sucking the blood of the rightful possessors of the land and of raping the virgin who must embody the purity of race and culture.<sup>33</sup>

Reading this threat through Lacan's theory of subject formation privileges the lens of the body-in-control in creating and naming the realities of racialized and sexed people. The establishment of myths around the vampire signify dominant discourses of Othering, but for Deleuze and Guattari, these myths "have nothing to do with signifying, [they have] everything to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come"<sup>34</sup> While these myths are established as a means of inscribing race and sex on the figure of the monster, the adoption of monstrous imagery by those labeled as monstrous enables them to participate in becoming-minoritarian. This becoming encompasses the range of becoming-woman, becoming-animal, becoming-imperceptible, etc, but in the case of vampires, revolves around the impulse to hybridity in becoming-animal, and as Patricia MacCormack argues, the feminist impulse in reading becoming subjectivities lends itself to a hybrid becoming-monster, forgoing Deleuze and Guattari's masculinized projection of becoming-woman. For those who are already in minoritized subject positions, be that female, queer, or racialized bodies, the practice of embracing the transformative and relational potential of furthering progress by becoming-animal becomes a practice of liberation.

There is an impulse to view the process of becoming-minoritarian/becoming-monster as an individual transcendence of subjectivity, as Deleuze and Guattari stress that "becoming-animal always involves a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity."<sup>35</sup> The "pack" of queer

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<sup>33</sup> Haraway, *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium...*, 215.

<sup>34</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

communities, both virtual and actual, have the ability to transform symbiotically in their becoming vampire. Both the queer and the vampire propagate “by epidemic, by contagion, [having] nothing to do with filiation by heredity...the vampire does not ciliate, it infects,” emphasizing the fluid construction of queer kinship and the dominant position of anxiety around this infection and family structured around heredity; the mutual (blood) sharing in becoming-animal is essential to a uniquely queer transformation.<sup>36</sup> The assemblages of politics in becoming-animal “are neither those of the family nor of religion nor of the State. Instead, they express minoritarian groups, or groups that are oppressed, prohibited, in revolt, or always on the fringe of recognized institutions,” and therefore demonstrate unique opportunities for these groups to transcend taxonomy that has been constructed for them in favor of creating new modes of being and kinship.<sup>37</sup>

This process of becoming requires the adoption of technologies and tactics of breaking from traditional forms of being and interacting in community. MacCormack argues a line of flight in becoming-monster is using perversion as a tactic for “reading a different way, comprehending a different way, and also, rendering the subject as different with each affect.”<sup>38</sup> The perverse subject is typically rendered in binaries of hetero/homosexuality and through the proscription of sexuality as normal or abnormal along these lines. The adoption of perversion as a queer mode of becoming shifts boundaries of definitions of pleasure and perversion away from bodies themselves and toward becoming as a “different form/kind/articulation and species of subject... in becoming there is no death,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>38</sup> MacCormack, “Perversion...,” 3.

it is 'life on the edge', but with the emphasis on life, not edge."<sup>39</sup> While seeing becoming as a process of reinscribing the body as a fluid and experiential rather than static (and experiencing) subject, queer discourses on the body reflect expansive understandings of fluid self and family dynamics. This reflects Donna Haraway's conceptualization of posthumanism that leaves behind the natural/unnatural dichotomy that shapes dominant discourses while encouraging "a technology for producing the material and semiotic effect of natural relationship, of shared kind."<sup>40</sup> One contender for this type of technology is becoming vampire: adopting the vampire's affinity to lurk in thresholds and share blood between created families. The vampire's immortality acts as a framework for the continual, mutual transformation of yourself and those around you that ends not in death, but in ceasing to become, reflecting Deleuze and Guattari's suggestion of eschewing mortality as a signifier of completeness.

This transformation is manifest not in solidifying identity but in fascination with the fluidity of relationships and sustenance that represent the vampire. Becoming-animal does not orient one toward speciation as a goal, but toward an experience in accordance with the becoming object: one does not become a vampire, but emulates the vampire as a process of becoming. As queer adoptions of the vampire produce a subject that centers the life-giving exchange of blood and the reformation of family-ties through queer ontologies, the pack comes to transform along with it. Deleuze and Guattari delineate this through the role of the exceptional individual at the head of the pack in becoming-animal:

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>40</sup> Haraway, *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium*, 53.

The anomalous, the preferential element in the pack, has nothing to do with the preferred, the domestic, the psychoanalytic individual. Nor is the anomalous the bearer of a species presenting specific or generic characteristics in their purest state; nor is it a model or unique specimen; nor is it the perfection of a type incarnate; nor is it the eminent term of a series; nor is it the basis of an absolutely harmonious correspondence. The anomalous is neither an individual nor a species; it has only affects, it has neither familiar or subjectified feelings, nor specific or significant characteristics... It is a phenomenon, but a phenomenon of bordering.<sup>41</sup>

The anomalous is manifest in representations of queer vampires in media that both transform and are transformed by queer discourses on the vampire. In other words, the representation of the queer vampire acts in this role by manufacturing the effect of vampirism among the queer pack reading the anomalous through a camp lens. This is demonstrated in camp spectatorship's impulse to "self-referential role play" that deifies icons from media that are then reproduced in their viewership.<sup>42</sup>

Vampire exploitation films represented the figure of the queer vampire for the purpose of objectifying and vilifying queer people as monstrous- a "hunting with the camera" that demonstrated dominant cultural discourses of the queer as a socio-sexual threat- the anomalous queer vampire in film provides a framework of the possibilities of queer vampire becoming, typified by the frame of the film as a reflection that cannot contain the vampire's fluidity in time and space.<sup>43</sup>

Despite these representations that can be seen as disparaging, film does not exist solely in its production but the way it's interpreted and signifies meaning. In Gille Deleuze's *Cinema I*, the classification of images is not empirical, rather "the categories of cinema are the categories of a body emerging from a plane of immanence."<sup>44</sup> Film offers an opportunity to challenge the taxonomies of

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<sup>41</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 270.

<sup>42</sup> Darren Elliott-Smith, "Pride and Shame: Queer Horror Appropriation" *Queer Horror Film and Television: Sexuality and Masculinity at the Margins*. (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.), 166.

<sup>43</sup> Haraway, *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium*, 236.

<sup>44</sup> Joe Hughes, "Pity the Meat?: Deleuze and the Body," *Deleuze and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 1.

discourses constructed around representation by manipulating time as mobile, and in camp “the reality is the pleasure of unreality,” where representation and consumption inscribe desire, rather than production.<sup>45</sup> Camp as an active tactic for spectatorship means that camp is imbued in the dissonance between earnestness in production and the product’s label as ‘gauche’ or ‘in bad taste’ that privilege camp as an experience of a sensibility rather than a productive goal. Camp acts as a tactic of becoming in reading culture and film in a radically different (and often fundamentally queer) way; celebrating the pastiche and the perverse, as liberatory. It is also a mode central to “the vampire-like queer [who] casts no reflection because the mirror of dominant representation cannot reflect the presence of same-sex eroticism.”<sup>46</sup> The movement to seeing camp as masquerade in postmodern and feminist circles is ahistorical and reductive in its disregard to its function as a tool of reinscribing representation in queer communities before the queer vampire could turn the camera on themselves. The queer vampire comes to survey the virtual possibilities of queer vampiric becoming in spectators, and acts as the mirror to their becoming.

### **The ‘lesbian’ vampire can be filmed but not reflected**

The canon of queer vampire films tends to be centered around lesbian vampire exploitation films of the 1960s and 70s, and while applying the term lesbian to these movies is reductive in many cases, the reason for the explosion of these films, particularly those by Hammer Studios, illuminates the function of queer vampires in film at this time and the reason for their popularity. David Baker contends, “*The Vampire Lovers*, which brought lesbian sexual display into low-budget horror, provided

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<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, “Post/modern: On the Gay Sensibility, or the Pervert’s Revenge on Authenticity,” *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 225.

<sup>46</sup> Cynthia Morrill, “Revamping the Gay Sensibility: Queer Camp and *dyke noir*,” In *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 96.

the commercial impetus for filmmakers to develop this particular combination in the early 1970s,” which often emphasized the aristocratic lesbian vampire as a tantalizing threat to a young woman who is often engaged or married to a man.<sup>47</sup> Many early lesbian vampire films followed the model of Carmilla or the Countess Bathory, (*The Vampire Lovers* (1970), *Lust for a Vampire* (1971), and *Twins of Evil* (1971) being just some of many examples) and relied on the lesbian as an insatiable sexual threat to white womanhood and a monster of queerness to be slayed. Many of these films relied on Gothick aesthetics in line with the trends of vampire and horror films at the time, but more experimental filmmakers like Jean Rollins introduced the lesbian vampire in a BDSM framework that further emphasized the draw of queer female vampires as a pornographic spectacle for straight male audiences.

Despite their dubious foundations and at times harmful elements, these films provided representations of lesbians on screen that because of its fundamental queerness could transcend the boundaries that tried to contain it. The fluidity of film as a medium, as well as the camp elements that defined these films allowed for reception from queer spectators to shape the films themselves, as well as the sheer volume of films having the ability to expand notions of queerness beyond the predatory lesbian vampire. As counterculture adopted the figure of the vampire as the outsider-rebel, and placed them squarely in countercultural aesthetic and discourse (specifically punk and goth sensibilities that were growing at this time and reinterpreting Gothick aesthetics), the queer vampire became a sympathetic and attractive figure within these scenes and wider culture. The production and reception of these films within queer and goth/punk communities reinforced the attractiveness of the transgressive queer vampire; people who had been labeled as the monstrous queer against their will

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<sup>47</sup> David Baker, “Seduced and abandoned: Lesbian vampires on screen 1968-74,” *Continuum* 26, (2012): 555.

now saw icons to identify with and emulate the vampires and freaks that lived on the movie screens as part of transformations of self and of queerness. By the 1980s films like *The Hunger* (1981) and *The Lost Boys* (1987) represented a shift in the characterization of the queer (coded) vampire into explicitly countercultural aesthetic sensibilities, adopting the music and fashion of these emerging subcultures.

With this adoption of queer vampirism, the metaphor of the vampire expanded outside of this seemingly naturalized category: vampirism quickly became a metaphor for addiction and AIDs, issues that disproportionately impacted the queer community and rhetorically linked to the ongoing subjugation of queer subjectivities. This evolution repositioned the threat of queerness as the nominal queer became naturalized in American culture with gay liberation movements and marginal assimilation while those without access to that assimilation remained monstrous. As MacCormack posits in relation to the rhetorically inhuman (monstrous) feminist and queer: “in order for old monsters to be replaced with new monsters there will always be a form of monstrosity devalued beyond all others. This makes the demand for ‘advantage’ impossible: for those advantaged others must be disadvantaged through alterity.”<sup>48</sup> When the straight passing white lesbian no longer presented the most salient representation of threat to dominant culture, she needed to evolve to represent the nightmare that queerness continued to embody while simultaneously appealing to audiences. This is manifested in films focused on the vampire themselves rather than centering their victims: the vampire’s transformation characterizes the film rather than the way they threatened those around them, the vampire becomes subject through its relationship to the camera. Through this shift from employing camp as a production and spectator tactic to recognizing the becoming of the vampire,

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<sup>48</sup> MacCormack, “Perversion...” 8.



audiences were witness to the vampire in their own words, providing a framework for queer understandings of self that transcend taxonomies that restrict transformation. “The vampire infects his blood, his spirit and—damned most of all—exceeds his concepts,” expanding the definition of a queer vampire film to not just vampire films that showcase queer sexual displays, but reading the act of biting through its transformational rather than its infecting or sexualizing potential frees the representation from the binary of hetero/homosexual desire and to a fluid and transformative queer desire.<sup>49</sup>

By expanding this definition, many films (like *The Addiction*) have fallen outside of the purview of scholarship on queer vampires that present opportunities to reinterpret the figure in heterodox ways. Reading vampire films whose narratives center transformation and desire rather than queerness through explicit sexuality changes the canon’s relationship to acting as through becoming potential for those who identify with queer vampirism. Abel Ferrara’s vampire film, *The Addiction* (1995), follows Kathleen (Lili Taylor), a philosophy graduate student in New York City finishing her dissertation when she is bitten in a subway entrance by a mysterious woman in an evening dress (Annabella Sciorria). As the grates above them cast interlocking shadows on the scene, the woman tells Kathleen to “Look at me and tell me to go away. Don’t ask, tell me.” When she can only whisper “please...” in response, the woman bites her neck.<sup>50</sup> The camera stays steadily on Kathleen’s face as her eyes widen in a mix of horror and ecstasy, framed by the shadows from above.

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<sup>49</sup> Winnubst, “Vampires, Anxieties and Dreams...” 9.

<sup>50</sup>*The Addiction*, Directed by Abel Ferrara (New York City, NY: Fast Films, 1995.)



Figure 1: still of Kathleen being bitten in *The Addiction*

As the film goes on and Kathleen adopts the role of the vampire, the command, “tell me to go away,” becomes a refrain, but only to her female victims who never tell her to go: “the prey want to become addicted even when they know the risks.”<sup>51</sup> While the film itself is an allegory for Ferrara’s own heroin addiction, the themes emphasize Kathleen’s evolving perception of her will and relationship to violence in her addiction and fascination with blood and heroin use. Ferrara uses mise-en-scene to emphasize the liminality of Kathleen’s transformation throughout the film: the use of shadows, mirrors, and settings like alleyways and bathrooms throughout the film characterize her evolving relationship to the culture and structures she once felt at home in but now reviles. Both the slow movement of shots from the college classrooms that start the film to hallways and alleys distance the audience and Kathleen from them: the academy’s stasis has become antithetical to her transformation so she must use the liminal spaces (not the classroom but the bathroom, not the street but the alley) to enact her will. Kathleen’s dissertation defense centers on the philosopher’s relationship to others’ egos, “the

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<sup>51</sup>David Carter, “Born Again Vampires: Abel Ferrara’s *The Addiction*,” *Indiana University Cinema*. (Indiana: Indiana University 2017).

philosopher's words, his ideas, his actions cannot be separated from his value, his meaning."<sup>52</sup> As she succumbs to her own addiction, she builds a family of those who (to her) have also made this choice, men who use (or are perceived to use) heroin and in most cases are racialized and female students who won't tell her no.

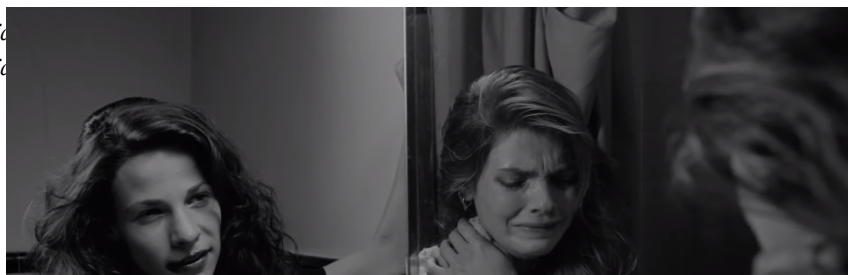
To this end, the composition of scenes targeting men focus on their arms, especially after they're bitten (vampiric track marks) but the women get the same treatment as Kathleen, a bite on the neck that for all of its coercive violence they are allegedly consenting to. In the aftermath of Kathleen feeding on white women, the audience sees Kathleen's deadpan reaction to her victim reflected in front of her (Figure 2). Through the framing of the shot, with her victim visible only through her crying reflection and Kathleen able to speak directly to the audience, she defends herself to both the audience and her victim: "my difference is not the concern here, it's your astonishment that needs studying."<sup>53</sup> Kathleen's praxis involves showing those who she feels are left out of the academy's treatment of philosophy a new will to power through violence, but the way she enacts her praxis is distorted through her addiction and often reinforces dynamics of power, particularly in her treatment of Black men, who she can bite in the middle of the street and leave rather than staying to argue her convictions.

Figure 2: Kathleen and her grad school victim in *The Addiction*

Despite Kathleen's newfound praxis as justification for her addiction, she is berated by Peina (Christopher Walken), a vampire she finds on the street who claims he hasn't fed in 40 years because his will is stronger than Kathleen's. For the character of Peina, "whiteness and maleness can come together in white male heterosexuality to engage the struggle between spirit and body with the assurance of

<sup>52</sup> *The Addiction*

<sup>53</sup> *The Addiction*



ultimately transcending the body and conquering the struggle.”<sup>54</sup> Peina’s whiteness and maleness place him in a different position to vampirism than Kathleen as she contends with and responds to her treatment from her professors and men harassing her on the street as aspects of her transformation, yet he asserts she is weak for engaging with and feeding on those feelings. Eventually, Peina feeds on Kathleen, a shot panning from Peina in front of a mirror in a bathroom to Kathleen passed out on a bed, her arm and neck covered in her own blood. While Peina’s transcendence came at the cost of Kathleen’s autonomy, “you’re nothing... I’ll show you...” rather than “tell me to leave you alone,” it reorients her praxis to those who have ‘fed’ on her in her life before she became a vampire. She immediately feeds on a white man on the street when she stumbles outside, and soon after, begins setting up her grand finale, a party to celebrate her PhD.

At the party, Kathleen reappears with all of the people she has bitten, a professor, the girl from the library, her friend Jean, and a man who would catcall her on her street, as well as the woman who first bit her (Casanova). Kathleen weaponizes this newfound family, who she believes she has given power to transcend both the decay of academia and the banality of the city, against the academy itself—all of her professors and fellow students who don’t understand the suffering in which they live. At this culmination of her praxis, Kathleen overdoses, gorging herself on blood and ends up in a hospital bed, a cross hanging over her and blinds creating shadows on her face. Casanova tells Kathleen that she can’t escape from the reality that she has created by dying, and quotes R.C. Sproul, “we’re not sinners because we sin, but we sin because we are sinners. In more accessible terms, we’re not evil because of

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<sup>54</sup> Winnubst, “Vampires, Anxieties and Dreams...,” 5.

the evil we do, but we do evil because we *are* evil.”<sup>55</sup> Casanova and Peina’s static philosophy of vampirism, that they will always be evil, be nothing, despite justifying Kathleen remaining in her own addiction, prompts Kathleen to fake her death and receive Catholic last rights from a hospital priest. As she stands at her own grave, she transcends not her body like Peina, nor her will like Casanova, but her self: “To face what we are in the end, we stand before the light, and our true nature is revealed. Self-revelation is annihilation of self.”<sup>56</sup> While Kathleen’s initial becoming is oriented toward power rather than transformation, by the end of the film she has forgone the territorialization of her reliance on her addiction and reorients toward not the violence of her will but its transformative power. The initial structures of vampirism that are imposed on Kathleen—the ritual of consent and the hierarchy of vampires based on willpower that drains those who succumb to their addiction—keep her in a subjectivity that is legible as countercultural but fundamentally based in her own suffering and creating suffering for those around her. By shifting the ontological ground away from an academic philosophical landscape (not just emphasizing praxis but entirely ceasing to center ego as an impulse of change) means that Kathleen is able to kill her old self and start to radically transform.

The complex relationships of becoming in *The Addiction* signal not just the transformation of queer vampire films to not just center queer sex and monstrosity, but to invoke the radical change that embracing becoming vampire entails. Kathleen’s praxis in the film involves her will to change those around her, but until she can see the ways she’s reproducing the violence against her, she cannot disengage herself from the subject positions that have been forced onto her. This relates to the

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<sup>55</sup> *The Addiction*.

<sup>56</sup> *The Addiction*.

reterritorialization of becoming animal, and its co-option by systems of power seeking to reduce its transformative potential: despite her disavowal of systems of power, Kathleen continues to reproduce them despite herself because of the older vampires around her. Societies “have always appropriated these becomings in order to break them, reduce them to relations of totemic or symbolic correspondence.”<sup>57</sup> Kathleen’s continuing involvement with the academy despite her dissatisfaction with it (even her continual quoting philosophers whose philosophy she deems “already dead”) signals the ways even those within becoming-minoritarian packs are reterritorialized into dominant discourse as a means of maintaining power structures.

The mainstreaming of queer vampiric becoming both consumes and is consumed by the cultural (media) apparatus of production and co-optation. What is lost when the queer vampire presents no threat? Or when we’re all consenting to this transformation without a clear understanding of its outcome? Identifying with the vampire and its continual reproduction, remaking, and recapitulation bastardizes its transformative power through emphasis on consumption while simultaneously offering unique ways of living as the queer vampire through ones creative potential. The solidification of the vampire as a cultural figure from the 1960s through the 2010s has allowed for harmful recapitulations of the queer vampire, and an opportunity for independent filmmakers to utilize the figure in ways that reflect their experiences. The films *You Are a Lesbian Vampire* and *Lesbian Vampire Killers*, both made in 2009, typify this point.

*You Are A Lesbian Vampire* (2009), is a short film by TJ Cuthand that features two women kissing in black and white, while a voiceover laments on the expectations of vampires that the narrator

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<sup>57</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 273.

doesn't conform to, and the ways vampirism represent the ultimate 'U-haul'. "At first she might think it's one of those suave, sexy Anne Rice novels, but soon she's going to realize your relationship is a B-rated movie, the plot is corny, the dialogue 800 years old, your velvet capes are moth eaten, and you actually prefer to hunt at night in a tracksuit."<sup>58</sup> The naturalization of both the queer and the vampire culturally restrict the potential to enact novel forms of expression and becoming, and films that may have once acted as a camp display of queer love are labeled problematic for their portrayal of monstrous lesbians. This film however, presents the projection of queer vampirism into the mainstream not through its vilifying aspects but the ways that the lived experience of vampirism and queerness divert from spectator/producer expectations. By reinscribing queer (and in Cuthand's case, Indigenous lesbian) desire into the figure of the queer vampire, she becomes not an icon, but a new subject of transformation that emphasizes the intrinsic nature of queer selfhood.

*Lesbian Vampire Killers*, however, continues trends of sexualizing and vilifying the lesbian vampire in a 'comedy' horror that centers on two men (played by James Cordon and Mathew Horne) who meet a group of women while on vacation, and subsequently have to kill the lesbian vampires that terrorize their trip. The film is one of many (though maybe one of the most inflammatory) modern retellings of *Carmilla* that continue the Hammer Studios' early lesbian vampire exploitation tropes of the 1960s, not only sexualizing the lesbian vampire but framing her uncritically as a threat to white men's sexual ability and white women's safety. Beyond its sexist and homophobic portrayal of both lesbians and the straight women in the film, the film itself lacks compelling characters, plot, or themes

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<sup>58</sup> Vanessa Dion Fletcher, "Twisting Conventions: A Feminist Indigenous Perspective on the Horror Genre," *Offscreen*. 18, (2014): 1.

beyond the concept of lesbian vampires attacking young girls (who themselves act only as sexual objects for the enjoyment of male characters and viewers). *The Times* review of the film called it "profoundly awful" and an "appalling waste of a perfectly decent title," which is true, but the film's trajectory also exemplifies the ways that queer and lesbian vampirism has been co-opted as a cultural signifier.<sup>59</sup> The figure of the queer vampire has surpassed both vilifying and celebratory representations to be made a non-entity, endlessly reproduced without orientation toward meaning. Beyond the representation of the queer vampire that continues to emphasize straight spectatorship and fears, the continual production of queer vampire media that serves to undermine the creative production of queer expression and discourse as it relates to vampirism restricts its potential as a technology of becoming.

Queer vampire representations in film serve as a mirror for queer experience that cannot be reflected, but as *The Addiction* and *You Are a Lesbian Vampire* demonstrate, there are other ways to 'see' oneself, namely vampiric praxis and foregrounding queer desire over optics of queerness. The integration of queer vampire subjectivities that draw on films into identities and communities begs the question of the influence of these films and their power for personal transformation in the lives of the people who interact with them. While this representation foregrounds identification and the becoming potential of identifying with or as a queer vampire in what I will generally call Real Vampire subjectivities, these representations are only the outward product of the discourses that inform an impulse to Real Vampire identification.

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<sup>59</sup> James Christopher, "Lesbian Vampire Killers," *The Times*. March 19, 2009. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/lesbian-vampire-killers-jf0ttrd2k9d>



### Real Vampires: Beyond Representation

The evolution of the figure of the vampire from an unclean, murderous parasite in Gothic literature into one that represents the potentials of (a)human transformation and godhood can be traced through representation in popular vampire media. From *Dracula* to *Interview with a Vampire*, published in 1976, representations of vampirism cease to demonstrate revulsion toward the vampire in favor of sympathy and desire. The nameless “interviewer” in *Interview with a Vampire* begins the novel as an impartial observer to the narrative, but after being witness to the complexity of vampirism which garners both interviewer and reader sympathy, he wants to be a vampire himself. The novel demonstrates the paradox of vampirism between boundlessness and stifling immortality, godhood and monstrosity, and the ways these paradoxes live over time. Max Chia-Hung Lin and Paul Juinn Bing Tan argue that *Interview with a Vampire* has an “undeniable influence on the culture and aesthetics of the vampire community.”<sup>60</sup> The representation of vampirism in media like *Interview* informs a supernatural worldview that centers Gothick aesthetics, and at its core, orients transformational desire through the figure of the vampire.

In the decades after the release of Anne Rice’s *Interview*, as vampire aesthetics and sensibility came to the forefront of Goth “lifestyle subculture” that drew from vampire and gothic literature, films and inspired music in the 70s as well as S/M aesthetics and spaces, which spurred the formation of communities and houses around Real Vampire subjectivity.<sup>61</sup> As a reflection of Gothic laws of

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<sup>60</sup> Lin and Tan, “Vampirism...” 122.

<sup>61</sup> Nelson, *Gothicka*, 131.

attraction and spiritual aspects of Gothick representation, vampire representation and subsequent identification's pervasion in modernity's collective psyche, means becoming the monster represents

identifying with the dark and rejected aspects of the self that exist in every person, including the taboo primal energy around violence and sex... but it also means desiring to experience a reality beyond the material world, even if the need itself is not consciously acknowledged and even if the only vehicles available are the uniformly dark imaginary supernatural characters that pop culture presents outside of organized religion.<sup>62</sup>

In postmodernity, the personification of desire is conferred to representations of that desire in media, where becoming monster acts as a means of manifesting connection to transcendence, perversion, and violence through established identifiers. Various groups accomplish this in different ways, and beyond adopting Gothick aesthetics (oriented around Goth subcultures), members of Real Vampire groups inhabit this sensibility through group structure, ideology, and their relationship to dominant culture.

The establishment of Real Vampire communities originated in New York City nightlife covens and houses, with the figure of Father Sebastiaan at the head. Father Sebastiaan has been the public leader of Real Vampire/Vampyre community events since the early 1990s, publishing books, giving interviews, crafting plastic fangs, and holding annual Endless Night's Vampire Balls.<sup>63</sup> He maintains his system of vampiric spiritualism, Strigoi Vii, with fellow spiritualist and occult author Michelle Belanger, founder of House Kheperu, and is considered within scholarship to represent the occult and identity based adherents to vampire subjectivity. Groups like the Atlanta Vampire Alliance (AVA) define vampirism as an immutable medical condition of needing to harvest blood or psychic energy to live are often the most visible Real Vampire group because of their insistence that vampirism be

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>63</sup> Throughout this section, I will continue using the spelling "vampire," but it should be noted that various groups (particularly spiritually oriented vampire communities) use the spelling "Vampyre" that denotes a condition of the spirit rather than an identity that draws on mainstream understandings of vampirism.

naturalized as a medical condition, and hold surveys about Real Vampires as they define it through sets of standards and literature that are used by researchers on the topic. Hypervisible groups like Strigoi Vii and the AVA maintain prominence within dominant culture by defining Real Vampirism in scholarship and journalism, and although Strigoi Vii claim an occult framework, the publications and public-facing nature of their events and marketing ensures their wider reach to proselytize those who identify with popular representations of the vampire. Other occultist vampire groups, who operate entirely through the internet and forum spaces like the Order of Aset Ka, exist largely outside of journalism and scholarship and value their hidden mystic position. All of these groups operate within established sets of ethics and practices that are outlined from leaders and messianic figures to the groups, but ultimately rely on the figure of the vampire as it exists in popular culture to designate what vampirism looks like.

The relationship between the adoption of aesthetics of vampirism in Goth subcultures (and wider culture as Goth moves into the mainstream by the 1990s) inform a set of ethics that mirror Gothic laws of attraction and supernaturalism that are considered taboo in dominant culture, but are reflected in Occult movements in the early 20th century and New Religious Movements (NRM) by the 1960s. While these groups emerged largely in the 1990s and the occult strains loosely follow tenets of occulture that emerged in the 1960s, it is worth noting that both Strigoi Vii and Aset Ka trace their occult strains to an (unproven) Egyptian tradition of vampirism that has been transmitted secretly through the ages. This sensibility is tied to Gothick aesthetic production and its lineage of occult and spiritual traditions that draw on these aesthetics (particularly The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and Aleister Crowley's Order Templis Orientis), resulting in vampire groups that emphasize the

alchemizing power of vampirism as a transformative religion.<sup>64</sup> Occult vampirism draws from Egyptian imagery and mythology that mirror 19th century Gothick orientalism that displaced supernaturalism outside of the rational Western spaces, yet allowed for fetishism of other cultures as holding innate spiritual power. Aleistar Crowley, the most infamous occultist of the 20th century, was particularly taken with Egypt as a mystical space that held occult knowledge that he transmitted through his Hermetic societies, and was filtered into larger occulture by the 1960s as NRMs adopted ideology from various sources to construct new religions, like the different strains of vampirism.

After the 20th century, the exchange between race, gender, and species is inherently tied to machines as a technology for producing and reproducing identity in the ability to reconstruct identity around internet personas and novel tactics of meaning making and community.<sup>65</sup> With the advent of the internet as a spiritual resource, there was both a syncretism in NRMs and a disappearance of authoritative texts that created unique communities on forums regardless of space and physical constraints. The transition from vampire aesthetics as a mode of personal identification within physical Goth communities and spaces into detailed metaphysics of transformation demonstrates the deep integration of the vampire into the cultural psyche and the lives of those who identify as vampires. Through this, the figure of the vampire has created not only an interconnected online community, but a system of ethics that utilizes the vampire as a framework for spiritual transformation.

Those within occult vampire communities (specifically Strigoi Vii and Aset Ka) see themselves as chosen and initiated, and adhere to a vampiric metaphysic that emphasizes spiritual alchemy and

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<sup>64</sup> Nelson, *Gothicka*, 133.

<sup>65</sup> Haraway, *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium*, 214.

transformation. The emphasis on inner alchemy, a process of transforming oneself to a place of transcendence through a practice, highlights both the relationship and reception of representation that placed vampires as superior to humans, and the ways that vampirism spoke to those who felt stuck in “the abyss of human impotentiality” that the figure of the vampire could transcend.<sup>66</sup> The difference between Real Vampires who see their vampirism as spiritual and Real Vampires attempting to be treated for their bloodlust by medical professionals as a physical condition highlights the internet as a space where Real Vampires can enact unique meaning-making systems around the vampire, and transcend the popular imagination of the vampire by embracing vampirism as an immutable aspect of self or framework for spiritual transformation, and transmit that through online identity markers.

Adopting vampirism into one’s life is a fundamentally queer mode of being, by eschewing humanity in favor of vampiric identity and communities and houses bound by bloodlust rather than blood. By emphasizing the figure of the vampire as a symptom of cultural context, “vampires teach us [that] blood is not what we, trapped in a metaphysics of solids, might like to think it is. No longer can we draw neat boundaries between what is organic and not organic, what is natural and unnatural, what resembles us and what does not resemble us.”<sup>67</sup> Like Sue-Ellen Case’s definition of queerness, vampirism shifts the ontological ground of being itself, through the adoption of posthuman identities. However, as these communities develop, members become not just a figure of a vampire, but adopt parameters according to their specific community ethics and standards. Real Vampires who belong to communities (virtual or in real life) identify with not just representations of the vampire, but with the

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<sup>66</sup> Lin and Tan, “Vampirism...” 124.

<sup>67</sup> Winnubst, “Vampires, Anxieties and Dreams...” 14.

tenets and doctrine of their figureheads like Father Sebastiaan and other leaders of houses/groups that establish liturgical and ideological parameters around Real Vampirism. Although most groups within the larger vampire community tout themselves as non-dogmatic and egalitarian, there is intense infighting within the community as to what vampirism means, which spiritual texts and rituals are correct, and how to present vampirism to the world. This, as well as the reduction of figure of the vampire into a mode that can be easily inhabited through pure identification without fundamental transformation, signals the ways the vampire has become territorialized through sympathetic representations (like the mainstreaming of the vampire in *Interview*) and the aesthetic and representational claiming of the vampire by groups who reduce it to their own dogma and ideology.

Returning to the notion of the Memory of the Sorcerer and the process of becoming-animal through transformation in a pack in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the adoption of Real Vampire sensibility as a process of personal transformation maps onto the ways Deleuze and Guattari theorize becoming animal processes by transcending boundaries through lines of flight (representation), but also demonstrate how this establishment of naturalized vampirism and vampire identification restrict becoming. While identifying as a Real Vampire in these spaces in some ways creates an opportunity for understanding and community around shared experience, Joshua Delphesh-Ramey (after Deleuze and Guattari) entreats us to remember that “what is important is not that the sorcerer identifies with a snake or a crow, but that in the process of relating to those animals, the sorcerer is able to activate powers in herself that would otherwise be blocked by the fixations of the self upon the self.”<sup>68</sup> The goal is not to *be* the vampire, but to unlock the transformational power of the vampire that is present in the

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<sup>68</sup> Joshua Delpech-Ramey, "Deleuze, Guattari, and the "Politics of Sorcery," *Substance* 39, 1 (2010): 14.

representations that endear us to them in the first place. By orienting becoming vampire in this way, vampirism has the ability for the creative rehabilitation of kinship, identity, and political institutions. Refusing to cease inhabiting a fluid ontology by delineating naturalized vampirism or queerness is what gives the queer vampire its power. The representation of the queer vampire on film is powerful precisely because their transformation exists beyond the limits of what is shown to the viewer, and for Real Vampires to transcend the bounds of the lens like the icons that inform their becoming, vampirism must remain intensely creative, rather than territorial or dogmatic like Real Vampire communities that establish boundaries around their conceptualization of Real Vampirism. As groups became established within contesting communities, conversation on forums and publicly reflected only a desire to argue what ideology represented real vampirism as specific doctrines saw it, rather than as an expression of a mutual identification with a cultural figure. This discourse stifled the opportunity for the multiplicity of Real Vampire experience, as scholarship and communities themselves became restricted by the ideologies of official, public groups while failing to contend with the basic identification demonstrated in Goth tropes, the use of vampire aesthetics and usernames on the internet, and the enduring importance of personal, acephalous vampire identification on the internet.

This vampiric becoming, however, exists within a real experience of a body, and restricted by boundaries like space, race, politics, and media. While I can advocate for identification with the queer vampire, it is not an opportunity available to everyone, particularly those who are disproportionately targeted by anti-queer and trans legislation, and who are racialized in ways that may restrict expression of vampiric sensibilities. For those who have always been associated with the vampire against their will, the process of adopting vampiric becoming may be impossible or painful, and are only liberatory when

they are a choice of becoming, rather than a proscription. While the transformation and kinship patterns that mirror the queer vampire may feel inherent to queer experience, receptions of queerness that deny humanity are simultaneously epistemically violent and further emphasize the need for a posthuman ethics in queer spaces. Every week in America, more legislation is being produced and passed to systemically restrict access to social and medical gender affirmation for trans people (like restricting access to changing gender markers on identification until after completing gender reassignment surgeries, trans bathroom bills, “Don’t Say Gay” Laws, etc), in combination with incendiary rhetoric that dehumanizes queer and trans people.<sup>69</sup> These laws and violent rhetoric emphasize queer monstrosity, predation, and infection over the dominant liberal understandings of queerness as an innate and neutral trait. The ever evolving monstrous queer acts as a continual source of anxiety despite recognition of queerness by institutions and this discourse emphasizes the ways queerness is made rhetorically natural for the comfort of dominant society who continue to call us monsters regardless. We are expected to shirk our monstrosity, assume a human form, to be considered worthy of life and love. By leading with ‘perverse’ desire and an orientation toward becoming a human, perhaps more-than-human, both Real Vampirism and queerness as subjectivities can continue to transmute what it means to form identities both within and beyond bodies.

The impulse to generate power and visibility for LGBTQ folks as a means of simply changing the boundaries of dominant society to allow for queer and trans bodies that cease to present a threat further harms those who cannot shed their perceived monstrosity, be that through racialization,

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<sup>69</sup> Katelyn Burns, “Trans Visibility Exploded in the 2010s. But What Did Trans People Actually Gain?” *Vice*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/9kee5z/trans-visibility-rights-2010s-review>.



expectations of ‘passing’ and medicalized discourses on gender, or discourses that posit a correct way to be queer or trans. The hypervisibility of both the vampire and the nominal queer serve to naturalize a version of a figure who by definition lives in the margins and transcends taxonomy. There is an impulse within discourses to frame queerness and identity as a static mode of being that no longer presents an opportunity for becoming outside of established boundaries of what it means to be queer or trans because of the naturalization of queerness in culture. The erasure of monsters– the gender hackers and pirates, the ahuman activists and artists, and those who refuse to fit into expectations of what it means to create oneself in their own image– stifles the possibilities of becoming more-than-human through reworking systems of kinship, desire, and identity. In becoming vampire, orienting toward the transformational power of following representational desire to real transformative potential beyond representation and identity presents an opportunity to imagine a world with “no phallus, no purity, no death--strange kinships, strange loves. Strange fruit,” a purely creative mode of existence, that while centering the figure of the vampire, provides a space for becoming something entirely new.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Winnubst, “Vampires, Anxieties and Dreams...” 13.

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