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VAMPIRE AND MONSTER NARRATIVES

AN INTERVIEW WITH SORCHA NÍ FHLAINN

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Sorcha Ní Fhlainn is a senior lecturer in film studies and American studies at Manchester Metropolitan University. She specializes in gothic studies, horror cinema, popular culture, and American studies indeed. Her work is focused in particular on vampire and monster narratives. She has published a long list of essays and several books, among which the collections *Our Monster Skin: Blurring the Boundaries Between Monsters and Humanity* (2010), *The Worlds of Back to the Future: Critical Essays on the Films* (2010), *Clive Barker: Dark Imaginer* (2017), and her monograph *Postmodern Vampires in Film, Fiction and Popular Culture* (2019).

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Anna Marta Marini: Given your body of work, I would like to start by asking you: how has the Gothic used bodies to express the crossing of boundaries, to express othering, abjection, fantasy, repulsion, mores, urges, and all sorts of anxieties related to corporal reality? Do you think there is an element of fascination as well, intrinsic to the Gothic exploitation of body-related topics?

Sorcha Ní Fhlainn: It's a really interesting question, I think that the body is a text to be negotiated in the Gothic on a macro level, in terms of gender, sexuality, identity, all of these things and then also at a micro level—whether it's a microscopic disease, the terror of the unknown, abjection and transformation—everything from the kind of violent sense of othering that we see in the Gothic, all the way through to the transformational aspects of it through fantasy, sexuality, things like that which we see in authors such as Barker for example... so we see this throughout the Gothic in a way that documents the body as text, and the transformation of the body. The body is never really complete especially in the sense of the Gothic because we find that transformations are occurring all the time, whether it's psychological,

psychosomatic, sexual... The body is something that is never fully finished and there's something always a little bit disturbing or a little bit abject about it, a little bit undone. I think because of that the text—the body as text—is always a site of fascination to which we return and that can be whether the body is very beautiful or other, or strange. It can be vampiric or zombie-like. You find it's always on this level of spectral where this arc of change, I suppose, and it just depends on how far-reaching and how horrifying this body presents itself. So, when we see this in terms of monsters, in particular, it's always about how we identify or find the limits of their bodies or how their bodies differ from what we imagine is the 'normal body', our own body, our own experience of the world. So you can see that the body is sort of the foundational text for us all - whether it's skin and surfaces, you know, or as I say sexual, sexual reproduction or asexual reproduction, we find the Gothic is lurking somewhere at the edges, to challenge us and our perceptions of it. The Gothic is always in dialogue with various other aspects of bodily expression—as I say—corporeality, sexuality, and indeed that idea that there's always this tension between the idea of evolutionary advancement, development or change, and how that is so psychologically challenging for us.

AMM: You have been working in the field of monster studies and monsters are often used as symbols of horror, interfering with concerns and issues related to science, technology, metamorphosis, and the impossibility to control oneself. So, why monsters? How does your interest in monsters raise?

SNF: I suppose it goes back a long time as all these things do... every Gothic scholar will tell you that something happened to them in their childhood, in some way they encountered a book or they came across a story that just changed their point of view and for me... I was not a child who loved all monsters. I was always interested in different points of view, I always loved the fact that there were different ways of looking and reading perspectives like the Rashomon effect. There were various ways to tell a story from different points of view (as is the case in the larger landscape of history) and so that was my "gateway experience" into gothic studies because there's an instability—a core instability—there; who is the true monster depends on who does the looking and who tells the story. So if you're looking at something classical you might have the band of vampire hunters who are seeking out to destroy the vampire because he's a vampire... we have to kill him, that kind of thing... but from the vampire's perspective, he's been persecuted and he might not see himself as a villain... we don't see ourselves as villains in our own stories, we see ourselves as heroes. When you switch that and the subjectivity changes, you get fascinating variations or different versions of the tale. So, who is the monster and who is the hero always depends on the position of the storyteller, or what subjective position is privileged in the tale. So, for me, when I was starting to read vampire fiction in particular as a teenager, what always struck me was that the "monster" was the storyteller... so that to me was immediately fascinating because they're always much more interesting than the human protagonists. The human protagonists are generally quite normal,

bland, usually patriarchal, usually upholding particular sort of privileges and points of view, but the monster didn't—s/he was transgressive and alluring. The monster had that violation of power, so that's what captured my imagination pretty much from the get-go. We see this in post-modern literature, essentially, and we find that there's so much more depth and so much more breadth in the perspective of the vampire, the zombie, and so on. It is much more interesting than rooting for Van Helsing, you know, as we know what Van Helsing's up to anyway. I've always been tied to that concern around subjectivity, because again we have, at some time in our lives, all experienced the sense of being outsiders. Whether that's in primary school, whether that's in cliques or communities, or whether it's because we feel it's to do with our politics or our accents or our skin color or whatever it might be. We've all understood that sense of othering—it's a very human feeling so we all can identify with the feelings of the monster at some capacity, and then we can all—especially with the way it's constructed in cinema and literature—empathize with the monster. There's a pathway for many readers and viewers. I think that that's very seductive and very inviting in the Gothic, as we are all both heroes and monsters in our minds one way or another and we all can understand and have that empathy.

AMM: Could you maybe illustrate a few examples of fictional monsters, either your favorite or the ones that you think are more relevant or archetypical.

SNF: The one I would always go to—my go-to one—would always be vampires because I think that when you're looking at a case like *Dracula's*, a really good example of a monster that's hunted down, and is never fully understood. He's always represented in the novel at least as something that is monstrous and stands in for so much of the anxieties and the fantasies of the *fin de siècle*. But when we're looking at revisions of *Dracula* that come later, in the 20th century, or indeed even concerning other vampires... I'm thinking of the Anne Rice vampires for instance, and various other iterations, we see that we are positioned to align ourselves with the monster. The monster is much cooler, much more interesting, usually much sexier, and definitely—as we get to the end of the 20th century—sympathetic in a way that monster hunters tend to be represented as zealots in comparison. These vampires are not necessarily purely evil, but rather complex characters who are in some way gothically informed whether they're immortal or they drink blood or whatever it might be. I'm not saying they're free from guilt or free from their own sense of transgression. But there's definitely a sympathetic edge and that's a powerful transformation at work. Vampire cinema overtly sympathizes with the vampire. It overtly shows that vampires can be monstrous, but they indeed can be damned and in that damnation, we can empathize with that sense of guilt and the horror of having to live through pain and self-afflicted pain. Similarly, the zombie's gone through that same transformation—even though purely sort of as a cinematic trope or cinematic character—where we initially see them as the abject horde. We initially reject them for that reason but then when we start to see what they represent about our own sense of our lives—whether it's that we're

all living under varying degrees of capitalistic enslavement—then we start to see that we are in actuality the zombies. We are the drones, we’re the ones who are forced to work, and the true horror of it is that even death doesn’t release us. We’re going to be working even after death. So, there are these ways as I said, subjectivity really helps us kind of identify through that sort of monstrous nature. Teratology makes you feel like you are always looking out for the person who’s most subject to the machinations of capitalism or the machinations of those in power.

AMM: And what about a monster like Frankenstein’s?

SNF: Absolutely! The creature, in particular, I think, has been so sympathetically recouped. Particularly in the novel when you see sort of the horror with which Dr Frankenstein treats him, but then we see that it’s the innocence of the creature, the lack of understanding of the consequences of what he does, but also the fact that he is just left abandoned entirely, we get this sense that how we are perceived by others can make us monstrous, even though we do not see ourselves in that capacity. He is a creature completely of sympathy and I think usually—particularly in terms of queer and sexuality studies—a lot of people identify with Frankenstein’s creature because he is not necessarily deemed acceptable by others even though he knows no different. So, he challenges concepts of the boundaries of ‘normality’ or the boundaries of an ‘acceptable’ existence. The novel and films also address anxieties about science, about how can you be a “god” or what’s your position as a human who dares to steal the Promethean spark. When you give life to something, of course, it’s always scary, isn’t it? And I think the fact that it’s done irresponsibly— for the sake of being able to experiment on it — is highly unethical and to abandon it when your progeny needs you the most, there’s something unspeakable about that. All of our monsters are very much extensions of our psychological understanding of the world because we’ve all gone through variations of these very deep-seated and often cathartic emotions.

AMM: Your work has delved in particular into vampires in the American imagination and popular culture. How would you explain the topics related to the representation of the vampire through history in American culture?

SNF: I must say from the outset that when I was conducting my study, my research on vampires, the most plentiful source of Anglophone vampires originated in the United States. When I started to undertake the study a long time ago I noticed that most of the vampires—once they started to speak, once they had that subjectivity—what they said and stood for mapped on very closely to a shift in American cultural understanding of and suspicion on the president of the United States. One thing I discovered was that the second vampirism started to go global (through a British-American production, *The Fearless Vampire Killers*, directed by Roman Polanski), it started to flourish outward and spread across nations; it broadened our understanding of vampires being everywhere as opposed to just being in the castle in

Romania. You have Hammer in the UK, which started drawing to a close because it was still stuck in replaying that older sort of adaptations of the Gothic texts, Polanski's film reimagines those trends by satirizing those tropes and conventions. The American vampires of the 60s and especially the 1970s contemporize the vampire, so you get these new vampires that come out as vampirism spreads and becomes popular. You have Rice—her 'articulate vampire' cohort—then you have George Romero's classic film *Martin*, and you have other reinterpretations of *Dracula*, and they all deal with anxieties around American political discourse... whether it's stagnation in the economy, whether it's the president and the lies of Watergate and uncovering Nixon as this sort of arch enemy of the people.

Other times, it's the idea that sexual liberation, drugs, and rock and roll are great now and it might lead to a viable and promising future for women and minorities... and you have all these new vampire texts that kind of negotiate this terrain: again *Blacula* does this during the Blaxploitation period, through to the comedy *Love at First Bite* in the disco era. So, we see the vampires then start to embody and take on anxieties of the age and do this in a way whereby we can see it etching itself onto their more frail and often mortal bodies. Vampires start to look sick, they start to die, especially in the 1980s... they get younger because again the financial impulse in the 1880s is of course through MTV and youthful audiences. So, you know, we get rock star vampires like Timmy Valentine and Lestat who articulate the economic edges of 1980s culture. Overall, it's a very bad time to be a vampire under Reagan; a lot of vampires tend to die off or explode or are punished and must go to ground... no vampire survives the 80s unscathed. By the 1990s, they start to split apart and multiply, so it finds purchase in the two-faced nature on display in 1990s American culture, with Clinton's public disgrace (among many others), we literally see this... and then this doubling in *Buffy* through Spike and Angel, and Louis and Lestat in the film version of *Interview with the Vampire*. It starts to take on this cultural echo and it works its way through the vampire narrative, whether they speak it or whether they embody it. Vampires also display more openness towards LGBTQ+ rights and radically move beyond embodying an AIDS narrative in the 1990s. They are very accurate cultural barometers.

AMM: And I guess, the vampire—as you were saying for example the 80s vampires—there is an underlying theme of corruption as well.

SNF: Yes, the vampire starts to die because their body corrupts, they are frailer than before. I'm thinking in particular of *Fright Night* and in *The Lost Boys*, we see this sort of explosiveness and fragility in some capacity. With *Near Dark*, it's more of a tragedy, that they're a lost tribe that cannot be sustained in contemporary America, whereas I think with the nuclear family structures that you see in *Fright Night* and *The Lost Boys* there is this rule that if you transgress—whether it's sexually or morally—the sin is etched into your body or taints your soul. So, it functions as a warning, and has very serious consequences in terms of declaring “you

will not be worthy of inclusion in any kind of hopeful future for the country.” 1980s vampires bear the brunt of Republican political policies.

AMM: How does the vampire connect specifically with sexuality and themes that are related to sexual anxieties?

SNF: The vampire occupies this lovely duality between sexual desire and abjection. They bring forth or indeed act out or upon repressed sexual desires within the culture—whether that is any kind of LGBTQ+ expression, or forbidden trysts outside of marriage or patriarchal control—it’s always about offering that gothic encounter with something or someone seductive yet dangerous and transgressive. If you transgress beyond the realm of fantasy and you cannot be recuperated either morally physically or whatever, then this damnation will happen to you. If you fully transgress over to the “dark side” — whatever that might be, such as drinking blood or same-sex relations— once you transgress too far, you’re lost to a Gothic and dangerous existence in these texts. This is a conservative reading, of course, and that’s not to say that characters do not or should not relish in their Gothic desires. Contemporary vampires are more beautiful than anyone could compete with, that’s the point. The point is they offer the realm of fantasy and escape, they are in some ways beyond the limits of sexuality. I’m thinking in particular of shows like *True Blood* for example, that definitely foregrounded this position. Vampire sex in *True Blood* can be read (as is often presented) as both monstrous and magical, as dangerous and fulfilling. They can offer you everything and this is the point - but do you really want the fantasy of the eternal immortal boyfriend who is also incredibly beautiful looking and just has that nasty little habit of not being able to go outside in the daylight? The point is that it’s a fantasy but it’s dependent upon what desire is being served. It’s a balancing act. I think that vampire sexuality onscreen has become a lot more explicit and is becoming more inclusive in terms of LGBTQ+ relationships and representations on screen, and long may that continue! Vampires now have to find another way to express their transgression. they’ll have to find another way to represent that gothic intrusion because we recognize that inclusivity is just and right so that can’t be a marker of excess anymore because it’s normal. However, it’s likely that vampire bodies will still engage in horrifying modes of dying and disintegration.

AMM: Thinking of the presence of vampires in popular culture in recent years—and let’s say maybe from the turn of the century up to the present—how have the vampire archetypes and tropes been adapted to the current times?

SNF: We’ve had a continuation of adaptations and texts coming in from the 20th century into the 21st century, with interpretations of *Dracula* for example. We have vampires who mourn their position in the world or wish to be accepted and integrated especially if you’re looking at something like *True Blood*. The most interesting vampire texts I can think of in the last 20 years or so look at vampires overtaking the world ... I’m thinking for example of *Daybreakers*,

which was a really interesting film because it looked at the vampire as a completely capitalist body draining the global economy to the brink. The fact that the vampires are running out of blood is well situated as a commentary on our petro-future, of running out of oil, and natural resources. So, it has that ecological anxiety that we naturally would expect in the 21st century, which isn't new but it is something that is done in a very interesting and timely articulation, nearing an end state that we can no longer survive. So, all of us are vampiric in our consumption practices in the contemporary world. Vampires are always up to date. In some recent examples then we find there's no catharsis, that there's something quite banal about being immortal for 500 years. So we're getting closer to the vampire but we understand that their allure is a mirage, so I think that's very interesting to see how the next turn in the vampire narrative will occur. That said, I'm enjoying the fact that there are so many sorts of "interviews with vampires," today like *What We Do in the Shadows*; that film and TV series in particular is very savvy and aware of vampire history and at the same time they represent the fact that they're showing different types of vampires across film and literary history. They are updating representations of vampire women too, which deserves more scrutiny. In *What We Do in the Shadows*, I think Nadja is one of the most interesting characters I've seen on screen for years in terms of female vampirism. There are lots of ways that they can bring together all these gothic tropes and make them exciting in contemporary culture.

AMM: Often vampires have been coupled with werewolves. In recent years there have been examples in which vampires crossover with zombies, as it happens in the TV series *Van Helsing*. So, how does the vampire stand next to other monsters that are so present in popular culture, you think?

SNF: The vampire will always stand on its own. I think this is the case because the vampire is foundational in gothic fiction going back to Polidori and oral traditions before that. And that goes back to oral history, goes back to the narratives around the wandering Jew who disappears and reappears, the terror of the stranger in the village, or the undead revenant who returns after death. There are loads of different ways we can articulate vampires as they've remade themselves across the centuries. It's interesting that you bring up zombies because I think contemporary vampires and zombies owe an enormous debt to Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* from 1954. The text is about a vampire plague and is superb, an absolutely incredible and very influential novel, but then gets adapted into a zombie text under George Romero... and that brings us those images that we're so used to, of zombies acting as a terrifying, all-consuming horde. Vampires very rarely act in large groups, they don't tend to like each other, they tend to be quite self-centred and full of their own opinion... so the fact that Matheson's vampire hordes are transformed into all-consuming zombie hordes works much better as a metaphor for the masses. Again, this is not only because of that capitalistic impulse they voraciously feed, but also because they're not subjective—at least not at that point in their visual history—they are consumers and they are there to literally force back any sort of sense

of progress beyond consumption and fleshy appetites. I think a lot of credit is owed to Matheson in that respect, and Romero's update of the zombie makes it feel very contemporaneous. Vampires are subjective, and, despite being deeply abject creatures, they still have the veneer of beauty; it is easy to identify why we may want to be vampires, rather than zombies - I don't want to have my abject state written all over my body announcing my decay, nor that I'm still working beyond death or that I'm enslaved in some capacity beyond death. Whereas with vampirism you kind of go "well they usually tend to be the more privileged of the Gothic monsters," they've access to time, wealth, power, influence. They can travel. There's a hell of a lot of good to be said about the vampire existence in comparison, I think.

AMM: And of course—as you were saying—there's this kind of vampire romance that it's already present in the gothic text of the past centuries but it has evolved in the past two decades, thanks to transmedia series such as *Twilight* and similar texts.

SNF: Vampire romance—especially in the vampire literature sense—goes back a lot earlier and in particular it underwent a huge renaissance in the 1970s... if the vampires are not romancing each other or in thrall to a specially chosen human—or quarrelling with each other in the case of Rice's sprawling Vampire Chronicles—you also have characters like Saint-Germain by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro in her *St Germain* series—and that again is a huge sprawling series whereby Saint-Germain is a traveller across human history, partaking in human affairs before he disappears again. Essentially, he's intervening and saving women and is a potent and fabulous lover, he's also a gemmologist, he's a specialist in diamonds... so really he had it down long before we got Edward Cullen on the scene. Edward Cullen just physically embodies it, in that he literally has got diamonds in the skin or at least the reflection of it as such, so he is the embodiment of that wealth... whereas Saint-Germain shares his wealth and knowledge. So, there's a very interesting romance around being provided for, being made safe, and then of course the sexual safety of that, while also enabling women to access their sexual desires both unabashedly and fantastically through vampire literature.

Open Q&A session

Laura Álvarez Trigo: My question really builds upon many things that you've already mentioned and I was thinking specifically about the ethics involved in watching these vampires, in terms of how we empathize with them. So, on the one hand, there's these things that you were mentioning—as the dichotomy between the Spike type and the Angel type, or Louis and Lestat, and this kind of the "good vegetarian vampire" type of character—but there's also *What We Do in the Shadows* that you've mentioned... these characters have zero empathy, zero interest in humans, but we still—as audiences—we like them. So my sense is that maybe we really are fooled by this sexual attractiveness and this richness, and we just completely overrun all kinds of morality as audiences... and is this something that specifically happens with

the vampire for some reason? Is this a monster that we tend to empathize and like more for these reasons?

SNF: I think that with something like *What We Do in the Shadows*, the one thing I should have mentioned earlier as well is that vampires tend to look like us [except for their teeth] and—unless they’ve transformed into something abject and horrifying by the end of the third act—they usually tend to look like us. So, they’re easier to empathize with on that level or to be seduced by. We’re not seeing tentacles or anything that’s too confrontational, certainly not early on anyway. There is that seductive element and I think that that makes it easier for us to either be seduced by it or indeed to empathize with it on some level—they are driven by very human emotions (love, lust, greed, fear, power, etc.). It depends of course on how far-reaching their transgression is because if you start killing children and puppies on screen no one’s going to empathize with you no matter what you look like. So, there is a certain element of the seductive charm and being able to draw you in as a viewer, but in terms of seeing what they’re like up close or, you know, in texts like *What We Do in the Shadows* we kind of still want to be like them. Maybe it’s not falling in love with them so much as we are led to consider, “that looks like tremendously good fun to have those kinds of powers, that kind of disregard for human nonsense that rules our lives, the proprietary boundaries of rules that govern our behavior,” and that limiting sense of having to give in to social expectations... they don’t have that and that’s a very freeing thing. We see this as a sort of a sense of gaining a new form of freedom, because what are the consequences, really, when you’re immortal? I think that’s the secret element we enjoy, and some monsters give it to us more than others or they represent those possibilities more than others.

LAT: The fact that it plays morally with how we would actually like to just be able to kill someone because we are vampires and we have that type of freedom.

SNF: Yeah, it’s a frightening question to us. This has been answered to a certain extent already in horror cinema, when you think of something like *The Purge* films, for example. It delves into this idea that even if murder was legalized for 12 hours in a year... how many people would actually do it? I think a lot of people would if they thought they could get away with that. I think that’s quite frightening how far-reaching that desire may be.

Mónica Fernández Jiménez: I’m thinking of the European tradition of the vampire transplanted into the American hemisphere, as one of the most famous works about vampires, *Dracula*, has been analyzed under this idea of the return of the colonized. So, I was wondering if there’s something like this related to vampires or all the kinds of monsters in the context of the American hemisphere, related to this sense with the European entrance into the Americas. Are there any sort of anxieties in any American works dealing with the return of the repressed? Or the early colonization of the American hemisphere, anything of that sort that you can think about?

SNF: I think that there are two ways to look at it... one way is that, you know, looking at *Dracula* the novel for a moment and seeing it as it's written by an Irishman moving to England at a time when Ireland is under the rule of the British Empire. At the same time, the novel is published during a profound period of cultural change and innovation alongside a renewed push for Irish freedom, which is eventually secured. So, we have the Anglo-Irish context that you can definitely read into the novel *Dracula* because Stoker didn't go anywhere near Transylvania... so this novel is a superimposed reading onto another national context. Concerning the Americas, though, what's interesting is that *Dracula* as a text migrates to the United States through Stoker's play and film adaptations, so it's really through German expressionism, through *Nosferatu*. So, it goes in through the arts and this is something that happens with several artists escaping persecution in Europe, creative minds that brought their stories with them to the United States and informed the American cultural experience of the United States.

The return of the repressed often erupts in vampire stories as powerful vampires often originate elsewhere, and wreak havoc as immigrants in the American heartland—it enables the US to tackle ideas about having porous boundaries and borders while also addressing the fact that America is a nation founded on immigration. Films such as *Cronos* deal directly with Mexico's Spanish history and then contemporizes its *Dracula*/Frankenstein tale as a cross-border conflict with the United States while examining the supernatural origin of its vampirism as part of colonial expansions, first from Spain and then the neo-American colonialism expressed through corporate power. We have this tension going on in the American imaginary between the supernatural that shouldn't exist and then, at the same time, the rational doesn't go far enough to explain what's happening. This tension is there, but the vampire tends to wander in through cultural reproduction and film devices to articulate the unsayable and to address the horrors of anxiety about the past and its eruption in the present. So I see it as assimilation into the American melting pot, which includes the history of European culture and different European forms of art, stories and colonial history. But usually, the vampire stands in for something that does need to be addressed and excised from the national imaginary (representing that which is deemed unacceptable and must be abjected), then it slowly finds its way back in... then we start to sympathize with the vampires and start to hate the rules that we live under, again around the 1970s, because we realize those who rule us are corrupt. This is how we change that shift and we start to believe in the vampires' narrative and subjective account more than we believe in the American president.

Sara González: My question was more along the lines of what Laura asked before, sorry to make you switch topics back and forth like this. I was wondering, maybe not as much in a gothic line, but I was wondering what you thought about this shift that we've been seeing lately in these romance stories featuring monsters other than the vampire. So for example I was thinking about *The Shape of Water*, or also in some video games that you romance perhaps aliens or even zombies, other creatures like this. I was wondering what you thought about

that and if you think this also goes kind of along the lines of this sort of fantasy that you mentioned before, or if you think it works differently because the monster is also different?

SNF: We can kind of push vampires to one side for a second because I think they have their own internal rules and logic, and they do tend to look a bit like us. I think in terms of other creatures it's more about empathy, isn't it? It's more to do with the idea of emotionally connecting with the character, I mean, certainly in *The Shape of Water* it's about empathy and suffering and being silenced. In the case of the creature, it's the fact that it's something to be captured and studied and to be treated with cruelty rather than to be empathized with... something that's human and lost so, again, the human impulse on the audience is to empathize with that. To me, it's about finding a shared or a kindred spirit, even if that necessarily is not of the same species as you. There is a sort of love and I suppose the love is more of a found and shared understanding. Only a couple of weeks ago I was teaching *Aliens* and you know, the alien queen to me is the most incredible, beautiful, gorgeous creature on the screen. I mean it just because she represents a sort of a matriarchal power that, in your most fiery feminist self, want to see on screen. In that sense, she is considered archaic and monstrous, but to me onscreen she is beautiful because I want to understand and promote that sense of feminist power. So, that's more aligned with the idea of the ideological drive. Again, like all cultural readings, it shifts from text to text, but I can see what you mean..., I always think zombies are a bit troubling because they are us rendered nightmarishly abject, whereas the alien queen never looks like anything other than what she is—she's the queen of the species! The vampire is very clean and closed off, they don't tend to putrefy or anything, they tend to heal immediately (or die quickly and horribly). But zombies once they start to putrefy and fall apart and we get beyond the comedic point at which they fall apart, there is something troubling about it because we are confronted with the image of abject death. Was there an example you had in mind?

SG: Maybe—when I mentioned the zombie—I was thinking about *Warm Bodies*.

SNF: Yeah, it was kind of like a *Twilight* sort of a thing but it featured a zombie instead of a vampire, he is so beautiful, he does not change throughout the movie at all. There was a chewing gum commercial, I don't know if this came out in Europe but I remember it was huge in Ireland and in the UK in which the gothic aesthetics of the vampire and the zombie were mixed up—you'd kiss the zombie guy/girl after they have had a breath-freshening chewing gum because they are still gorgeous—so undead is aestheticized as something that can linger on and be infused with capitalist and sexualised impulses quite openly. But then that shifts again when you think of *Walking Dead*, it's very abject and very cruel in some respects... but I think something like *Warm Bodies* and *Twilight*, they render undead it a lot safer than a lot of the texts do.

Mónica García Morgado: I remember that when I was 16 and I was watching *Twilight* or read the books and then *The Vampire Diaries*, I always felt a disgendered side of the narrative, seeing female vampires being concerned with motherhood instead of men. Is that changing at present or do you feel it's still maintained? I'm thinking of *The Vampire Diaries* for example, when Caroline is transformed into a vampire she thinks about motherhood, something she desires and she thinks she will never attain and at the end of the story, well, she becomes pregnant but it's not really a biological pregnancy. Is that still something present in contemporary narratives, this is concerned with motherhood or is it changing?

SNF: That's really interesting. I'm thinking again of *What We Do in the Shadows* where we have a baby vampire but not the idea of caring for it. It's more just that you're spreading the influence or spreading the vampiric power to somebody else, but you're not necessarily taking on the role of motherhood so you're creating but not caring for your progeny. The other problem as well—and this is something I have to say—is that I noticed a lot of vampire texts are associated with and focus predominantly on male voices and male experiences. It was only after I had completed the study did I fully realize there weren't that many female vampires that articulated any overt political thrust in this study I did. Female vampires and reproduction depend entirely on where they source their power. If you look at something like *The Hunger* it's about the idea of outliving your spouse or your sexual partner and continuing on your lineage without them. High-society vampires are typically very solitary, and they're not looking to necessarily make more of anything because that threatens their sense of wealth and security. They like to have their own sense of using up someone else and moving on, especially in the case of *The Hunger*. I don't think making vampires, making babies, and the reproductive cycle of vampires is always consistent... a lot of them seem to mourn the loss of being able to make a child when they're turned as the process of being transformed into a vampire is largely concerned with death and fearing one's own end. I haven't seen much in the way of vampire women longing for babies outside of a particular text or two. I know, for instance, if you forgive me as it's not a direct source for vampire progeny, but I remember the thing that kind of struck me the most was if you got to the very end of *True Blood*. The very last shot of *True Blood* in the TV series was when Sookie is seen with an unknown person whom we never know and she is heavily pregnant. So, the idea is that all this sex with undead bodies that she thoroughly enjoys for the seven seasons of the show, it's ultimately a dead end and reproductively null and void. There's no human life, no vitality in those relationships (beyond her own sexual awakening), so for her to have some sort of human future, the show positions it so that she has to be with what we assume is a human man. Vampire reproduction can be seen as a perpetuation of a more capitalism, more need, more procreation and hunger. Is there another example you have in mind or are there any other examples you can share with me?

MGM: *The Vampire Diaries* case I find it quite interesting because motherhood is constantly appearing for the female characters. Besides Caroline, there is Hayley, she's a vampire and she only becomes pregnant because she's also half a werewolf, so she can be a biological

mother. I know there's a new series now called *Legacies* about the baby that is now grown up I was just wondering that because when I was 16 I was always getting these messages somehow about how women have to be upset about not having the option of becoming mothers. That was mainly the root of my question if it is changing or not.

SNF: You've made me think of it differently—some male vampires are desperate to have progeny, but they can't find a way for it to work. And there are loads of examples of this but one of the ones that I think is very interesting is Poppy Brite's *Lost Souls* novel where sex with a vampire and a human woman results in just the most horrific destruction of the female body. So, there is this sense of vampire progeny cannot be borne by humans because it destroys them. And again we saw that in *Twilight* didn't we? So, we have that kind of sense of monstrous pregnancy, monstrous reproduction. But then also going back to the vampire romance for a moment, in the 1970s we have this reclamation of the female body and reproductive rights... we have the pill of course in the 1960s and of course, its use being normalized... and then we have *Roe vs Wade* in the early 1970s in the United States, you tend to find that it is more focused on bodily and sexual autonomy. You can just have sex and enjoy yourself. There's this idea of liberation from the role of motherhood and that becomes a choice rather than a potential trap for some people. So, it does enable female liberation too.

MGM: The impression is that male vampires want a legacy, right? They want a continuation of their power but in these teenage-focused narratives, I feel like women are not as concerned about legacy or the continuation of their names, but rather the private individual motherhood.

Taryn Tavener-Smith: Would you mind providing your insight into the move towards metaphoric vampires who do not drink blood, for example, but who are parasitic in other ways? I'm thinking in particular about David Mitchell's *Slade House* vampires, who drank victims' souls to maintain immortality.

SNF: I confess I have not read *Slade House* yet, and it has been on my list for some time! Some vampires do consume other things other than blood. One of the most interesting metaphorical ones I have come across in recent years—and there was a good film adaptation of it actually—was the sequel to *The Shining*. The book, *Doctor Sleep*, looks at the idea of evaporated souls that you are consuming the souls of children in pain. This idea of being able to torture the soul out of a small child and then this older group of people can literally inhale this life force... and this is how they live, it's a really interesting update on it. It's most certainly back to that vampiric narrative and it kind of combines elements of *The Shining*, the previous novel, but at the same time you have little elements of *Salem's Lot* coming out from King's other work. So, it brings it together in a way where you eat souls and consume things other than blood to maintain your immortality. That is something that I think is quite exciting, especially when we think of drinking blood as something central to vampirism. It's nice when you see a little bit of difference, I have to say, and I like the idea of metaphorical vampires in the sense that

you have energy vampires—Colin Robinson for instance and *What We Do in the Shadows*—who leave you depleted or robbing your vitality from you, and we have all met people like that, haven't we? So, you know, there are lovely ways that it works itself out beyond the literalization of blood-drinking; for example, there are other vampires that drink tears in African lore, or that drink away sickness in Asian culture. So, we have the sense of vampires exist and morph and change with the cultures they inhabit, but they do move beyond drinking blood alone. There is repeated anxiety around blood and bodily fluids (whether they are consumed or are considered scarce and dry up) when it comes to vampires—your bodily fluids are integral to your existence as a human and yet, in our gothic folklore, it can also sustain something else in an immortal fashion. It's a deliciously abject note to end on!

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