Vampires and Desire: Blood, Sex, and Ritual in Paranormal Romance and Urban Fantasy Fiction

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Vampires remain an enduring icon. Over centuries, vampires have traversed literary genres, moving between liminal spaces of life and death, inhabiting cultural currents, and reflecting social anxieties. Using a literary framework, this chapter offers an analysis of the relationship between vampires and desire, as the latter remains central to vampiric representations in adult paranormal romance and urban fantasy fiction. In the paranormal romance genre, the codes and conventions of the vampire character as a grotesque or monstrous creature are adapted and recast as part of constructing a popular romantic lead. While these novels still recall the well-known characteristics of the vampire as a predatory figure, they also often display the undead as tender-hearted, or at times even love-sick, protagonists. Urban fantasy genres, however, remain generally unconstrained by notions of romance or an expectation of a "happily ever after." Even with attempts to sanitize or popularize vampires within these literary genres, this chapter demonstrates that these iconic figures have not forsaken their murderous appeal, nor have they relinquished their transgressions in favor of being depicted as "good" over "evil." It is the intention of this chapter, therefore, to analyze how the vampire's uncontrollable desires are still continuously made manifest through notions of blood, lust, sexual cravings, and ritualized kinship.

Introduction: Reading Between the (Blood)lines

An ambiguously coded figure, a source of both erotic anxiety and corrupt desire, the literary vampire is one of the most powerful archetypes bequeathed to us from the imagination of the nineteenth century. (Gordon and Hollinger 1997: 1)

Vampires remain an enduring icon. Over decades, vampires have traversed literary genres, moving between liminal spaces of life and death, inhabiting cultural currents, and reflecting social anxieties. Vampires are not so much the monster du jour, but have penetrated society's collective consciousness. Wayne Bartlett and Flavia Idriceanu maintain that the vampire figure is a rather "interesting mental construct", which unites myth, legend, and history; they go on to deem the vampire as a creature of immense adaptability (2006: ix). From the monster's literary genesis to its presence in film and television, to more recent iterations within themed advertising and merchandise, vampires have become profoundly connected to the broader cultural market. Indeed, there continues to be an astounding volume of vampire literature found in the Western market, ranging from sub-genres including paranormal romance to historical fiction, and more contemporary urban fantasy and thrillers. In their long-standing ability to arouse the hearts of readers, while also embodying a sense of eroticized violence,

vampires continue to channel notions of desire. Popular examples of the vampire conspicuously embody idea of "the sexy, the desirable, the coveted", as these irresistible undead "rule supreme in the literary world" (Piatti-Farnell 2013: 1). Numerous versions of popular individual novels, sagas, and series are rooted in distinctively vampiric plotlines, or at the very least, contain a range of vampiric characters. Today's twenty-first century literary vampire is an ambiguously coded figure, which at times has been recharacterized to convey a more humanized disposition. In spite of this, however, it is the intention of this chapter to also illustrate that vampires have not forsaken their bloodthirsty appeal, nor have they relinquished their murderous transgressions in favor of being depicted as "good" over "evil." Vampires remain a representational projection of latent and often uncontrollable desires made manifest through representations of blood, lust, sexual cravings, and ritualized kinship. By employing a literary framework, this chapter offers an analysis of the relationship between vampires and desire, as the latter remains central to vampiric representation in paranormal romance and urban fantasy fiction.

Staking a Claim on Genre

Vampire literature in the twenty-first century has unequivocally come to be a distinctly genre-bending category. The vampire figure, is as Deborah Mutch describes it, a dynamically "durable archetype"; refusing to be relegated to one area of popular fiction, vampires lay claim to a variety of genres (2012: 20). From comedy to thriller, from fantasy to paranormal romance, vampires can do it all. This melding of categories within vampire fiction is undeniably associated with the conceptual understanding of the vampire, as conceived and nurtured in the literary domain. The literary spectrum provides a fertile arena in which to dissect the multi-dimensional roles that desire plays in the vampire's existence. Is rituals paranormal romance urban fantasy. That the vampire makes a recurring appearance in paranormal romance and urban fantasy is somewhat unsurprising, given the dynamic and interconnected nature of these genres as part of evolving socio-cultural trends. Maria T. Ramos-Garcia (2020) argues that paranormal romance and urban fantasy are two genres that maintain core shared similarities, in terms of plot, iconographies, and characterization. As such commonalities exist, these genres also present a significant overlap in the specific trajectories of vampires as a the perennially Gothic "Other." Vampires themselves occupy an important position as a metaphorically monstrous figure, as part of Gothic projections of perceived often "Otherness (Jameson 2013; Piatti-Farnell 2013). Fred Botting contends that any forms of Otherness" can "be found reflected in the figure of the vampire – to the point that difference elides into sameness" (2007: 23). In the paranormal romance genre, this may be reflected in the codes and conventions of the vampire character as a grotesque or monstrous creature that is commonly recast into a popular romantic lead. These novels often couple the vampire's perceived predatory nature with that of a tender-hearted, or at times even love-sick protagonist.

Urban fantasy genres, on the other hand, remain generally unconstrained by notions of romance, and the vampire's iconic difference is thrown into sharp relief. Unsurprisingly, both genres, when placing vampires at the heart of storytelling, place a distinct focus on the element of blood, as through either its consumption or exchange, relationships between characters are forged and fortified. By selecting specific contemporary popular examples of blood, sex, and lust in paranormal romance and urban fantasy fiction, this chapter aims to provide a clearer understanding of the ways in which the vampire's existence is bound to notions of desire.

The sheer quantity of vampire fiction produced in our twenty-first century does not allow for every text to be analyzed and considered in detail, and as such a comprehensive dissection of contemporary vampire literature is out of scope for this chapter. Rather, the selection of texts included in this chapter are to be considered as evocations of the vampire, and not an exclusive or definitive list. Therefore, choices have been made to both simplify the exhaustive list, while also exemplifying the integral role desire plays in vampire narratives. In the greater scope of the vampire imagination, an analysis of desire hopes to uncover thematic patterns that are often representative of overarching cultural frameworks, as connected to the popularization of specific carnal and corporeal pursuits. The literary vampire has evolved to into a figure representative of illicit desires. Although a large body of vampire fiction exists ripe for the picking, the focus here is to narrow the field to survey in more specific detail the parameters of desire pertaining to how the vampire functions within paranormal romance and urban fantasy as these distinct, yet intertwined, literary genres, commonly aimed at an adult readership. As a result, this chapter will leave the adolescent and young adult (YA) literary market for another occasion. In terms of geo-political focus, the chosen texts here belong primarily to the US context of vampire literature while also keeping in mind a broader view of other national and Western contexts. Particular emphasis will be placed on exploring the relationship between the channels of vampiric desire through blood and the body, both in ritualized consumption and sexual performance. This chapter also aims to draw upon the concept of corporeality and kinship as wider themes within contemporary popular paranormal romance and urban fantasy literature.

As a barometer for bloodlust, the vampire has come to embody a range of desire-driven (re)incarnations. Following a thematic organization that is in keeping with the various "facets" of the vampire in contemporary popular literature, this chapter will be divided into three sections that highlight how desire remains the cornerstone in twenty-first century paranormal romance and urban fantasy texts. Section 1 highlights how the vampire's consumption of blood immediately relegates this creature into the domain of "Otherness." Section 2 identifies the role that the vampire's body plays in its sexual affairs, and Section 3 delves into the transactional nature of blood-exchange and draws on vampire marriage rituals as connected to the preservation of "bloodlines". All three

sections can be seen as a continuation of the topics of blood, desire, and ritual, in ways indivisible from each other. As matters of genetics, embodiment, and corporeality come to the foreground, the first two sections are intentionally tethered. The last and final section on ritual works adjacent to blood and sex as it uncovers the concept and importance of vampire rituals and kinship. By choosing to focus on paranormal romance and urban fantasy fiction, this chapter unravels the vampire as a literary trope identifying how its position within multiple fantasy realms reflects the "turning" of our own desires.

Blood: The Fabric of Vampire Desire

To vampires, blood *is* desire. This section aims to address this interconnected relationship between vampire's blood cravings and the creature's material "Otherness." As Botting reminds us, "the intoxicating world of desiring promised by vampirism is undone by the very thing allowing desire's flight: death. Without death, desire roams, doomed to dissatisfied repetition" (2007: 21). Here the vampire's form as an immortal creature signifies just how crucial desire is in keeping it "alive." In order to critically examine the pathways of vampiric desire, it is first important to acknowledge the vampire's genetic and biological materiality – and its both undead and undying form – in order to understand the broader connections and dichotomies of craving and repulsion. Indeed, how vampires are "made" is an important starting point that permeates virtually all examples of vampire fiction, from Charlaine Harris' *Southern Vampire Mysteries* and J.R. Ward's *Black Dagger Brotherhood*, to post-2015 examples like Jeaniene Frost's *Night Huntress* and *Night Rebel* series to Helen Hardt's *Blood Bond Saga*, well as post-2020 urban fantasy novels such as Nicole Arend's *VAMPS* trilogy. This section proposes that the "vampire's make-up" in contemporary vampire literature can be viewed as the "intricate re-elaboration of human genetic discourses," particularly those concerned with culture, disease, and, at times, even genetic, engineering (Piatti-Farnell 2013: 15). Such ontological and epistemological emphasis on the vampire "make-up" rely heavily on conceptual discussions over the meaning of "genetic material" (Piatti-Farnell 2013, 15), as distinct genes tell a wider story about the biological structures that reflect how vampiric organisms function (meta)physically.

In recent years, the distinction between vampire and humans have been further amplified in the fiction through a focus on biological and physiological characteristics. While writers of vampire fiction generally show a reluctance to provide scrupulous scientific details of the vampires genetic composition, narratives still maintain a level of description that often bears a resemblance to the transitional and liminal phases of human adolescence and adulthood. However, vampire narratives also commonly place an emphasis on forms of genetic "Othering" that in inevitably distinguishes vampires as suggestively "better than human." While singular ontological definitions of the vampire remain outside the scope of this chapter, contemporary narratives are filled

with similar approaches to describing vampiric genetics as biologically superior to humans'. As part of this wider framework, there are identifiable characteristics that appear prominently across the fiction, especially in regards to the genetic make-up of the undead and the undying: on the one hand, one can find vampires who have been traditionally "turned" from their human form; on the other, one can distinctly identify vampires who have been born into their vampiric state through blood lineage. In instances where vampires are born into their seemingly immortal state, their behaviours are perceived as "natural", and an expected outcome of their biological and genetic composition. This includes, of course, enhanced physicalities and the requirement to drink blood to survive. Such characteristic traits are the a result of inherited genetic configurations after centuries of breeding, rather than the rapid, quasi-magical and suggestively supernatural mutations of those humans being "turned" into vampires. Salient examples of vampires "being born" can be found in Laura Adrian's *Midnight Breed*, Nicole Arend's *VAMPS*, and J.R. Ward's *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series. These vampires are part of co-existing "bloodline", and experience the juvenile-to-adult "transitional" periods, when their bodies undergo changes, just like a human body would, from adolescence to adulthood.

Unlike vampires who are born, vampires who are "turned" generally come into their vampiric state in what can be seen as the old-fashioned way: Barb Karg, Arjean Spaite, and Rick Sutherland contend that "vampires are [commonly] created" simply by being bitten (2009: 146). This method of becoming a vampire is indeed the most recognizable way for a human (or other creature) to become a "member of the undead" (ibid). Of course, in conceptual terms, the notion of turning seems simple enough. A human is bitten by a vampire; this is, on several occasions, followed by the human being "fed" the vampire's blood. Such acts of turning highlight the desire for blood as a central conduit for this exchange. The biting and feeding ritual is often the essence of the vampire make-up: one cannot "be" a vampire without drinking blood. In such cases when vampires are "turned," changes to the body are portrayed as structurally significant and yet subtle, so much so that it is often impossible to discern vampires from humans at first glance. Similarly, hybridity reveals itself as part of the "turning" process. Some recent examples of vampire fiction have extended the turning of humans to non-human hybrids like Angels and Deities or Gods and Demons. Similarly, narrative instances where vampires are the result of interbreeding between humans and "Other" creatures, including vampires – as is the case in the *Black Dagger Brotherhood* and the *Midnight Breed* – become particularly effective in questioning whether it is at all possible to locate a true concept of humanity inside the fabric of biomedical and genetically evolved structures. As seen in Frost's (2018–2021) *Night Rebel* series, lead protagonist and quasi-mystical hybrid, Veritas, relays being a "mixed species vampire":

When I was in my mid-twenties, Tenoch, my beloved sire had turned me into a vampire, but I wasn't human before that [...] For over four thousand years, no one except Tenoch

had known what I really was, since being a mixed-species vampire was so illegal that it was punishable by death. I'd concealed my celestial side beneath my rigid vampire Law Guardian persona. Both disguises had allowed me to lead a safe, solitary life (15–16).

Vampire hybrids seemingly prevail in the fiction, regardless of genre, as the intersectional site for individual and collective cultural (ex)communication. Hybrids are often feared as a substantial threat to vampiric ecosystems, and as a force that could undo the binary oppositions on which the vampire's perceived superiority rests. The hybrid vampire's body becomes a site of disruption, which lacks clear boundaries, and acts as a liminal creature, aesthetically, culturally, socially, and genetically. As described in Frost's *Night Rebel*, the vampire-deity hybrid character Veritas ultimately confesses to a lifetime of living in disguise for fear of death, as her vampire blood and nature are inevitably seen as "not pure". Such fears of being exposed act as historically encoded themes and negotiations of Otherness that permeate contemporary vampire fiction.

The most noticeable connection between vampires and "Otherness" is perhaps to be found in the desire to consume blood. The most significant distinction between the vampire body and the human body is that the vampire almost exclusively, and by definition, consumes blood to live. Blood is a universal requirement for vampires and remains the primary source of nourishment across the fictional board. Upon having reached full vampiric maturation or perhaps having completed their "turning" (depending on the narrative's mythology), a vampire's bloodlust emerges shortly thereafter. From here on in, they will have to consume (some form of) blood to survive and thrive in their bodies. As Sue Golding claims, "the symbolic importance of blood empowers the vampire as a threatening figure from the margins (geographically and historically)" (2002: 119). This symbolic importance highlights the multi-faceted intersections of physiological hunger, desire, craving, and Otherness. When it comes to discourses of desire, hunger, and Otherness, the vampire figure can, in a way, be deemed as lacking impulse control. The often over-powering need for blood that defines vampires also implies a failure to exercise restraint, and acts as the hallmark of a creature driven by want. When vampires are able to resist the desire for blood, they inevitably stand out. Richard Godfrey, Gavin Jack, and Campbell Jones attribute the disruption of feeding habits as being the main reason as to why vampires can be dubbed "masters of self-control" (2004: 30). Although it can be argued that concepts of control – or lack-thereof – and desire are incongruently made manifest through the vampire figure, blood remains the truest form of sustenance, even if it is synthetically produced. This occurrence is clearly presented in Harris' *Sookie Stackhouse* series, where vampires are able to survive on lab-made substitutes for blood. As chronicled by Harris in the story, a Japanese company is able to manufacture a synthetic blood substitute, which presents the same chemical composition and properties as real human blood, while also being almost as nutritious and as dense. The product,

marketed via numerous branded names, including the famous Tru-Blood, is perfectly capable of sustaining vampires and allows them to integrate into human society without being perceived as a threat. Yet, it is made clear by Harris that vampires do not necessarily wish to sustain themselves on synthetic blood alone, as drinking the life-giving liquid from a bottle inevitably eliminates the sexual exchanges that often come with drinking blood from a human partner. Desire clearly emerges at the centre of blood drinking, proving that sustenance and pleasure are often not synonymous, as far as the vampire's feeding habits are concerned. In the same vein, Nicole Arend's 2022 urban fantasy trilogy *Fresh Blood* describes a "Starbucks for vampires," a "blood bar" where vampire-human hybrid protagonist Dillon is seen to study the menu with amusement:

A strange sickly-sweet, slightly synthetic smell invaded his nostrils, [...] It came from a huge machine on the bar which appeared to be a sophisticated 'coffee' machine for artificial blood. He realised that the blood bar was literally a 'Starbucks' for vampires – except that – he grinned to himself should be called 'Starbloods'. A menu on the back wall offered: Foaming Blood, Silky Blood, Blood Shots, Blood Bubbles, and Iced Blood. He forced down a wave of revulsion as he realised they came in different flavours like O Positive or AB Negative (85).

The marketability of synthetic blood here draws attention to the inevitably connection between pleasure, desire, and capital, as the vampire channels notions of possession and desire through metaphors of consumption. Pleasure, however is not the only concern accompanying the association of vampires with blood, especially within the generic bounds of urban fantasy. Drinking blood, or perhaps "spilling blood', is also inevitably connected to death and drying, as the liquid's life-giving properties also bring to the surface notions of disease, especially when ideas of sexual intercourse and the exchange of bodily fluids comes into mind. As Sue Golding contends, the consumption of blood is not simply a nourishment issue in vampire fiction: instead, it also acts as "virulent capital" (2002: 119) and has the ability to corrupt and destroy "the physical vigour and moral cleanliness of the [...]body" (Foucault 1981, 54 as cited in Golding 2002: 119). In essence, vampirism profoundly connects to metaphysical themes of blood, viruses, and the spreading of disease in the human world. While the twentieth century was eager to maintain a conceptual link between vampires, viruses, and sex, in the twenty-first century, this connection has "evolved" into a metaphorical representation of "vampirism as a virus". Through this, blood has also been transformed into an innately genetic concern. This intersectional relationship between genetic engineering, vampires, blood, and viruses is underpinned in examples such as Justin Cronin's *The Passage*, whereby a vampiric virus is described as turning the human into an "immortal" overwhelmed by blood hunger (2010: 157). This happens in the novel as part of a transgenetic experiment, which suggestively uncovers the darkest and most predatory aspect of human nature: "The teeth, the blood hunger, the immortal union

with darkness – what if these things weren't fantasy but recollection or even instinct, a feeling etched over eons into human DNA?" (Cronin 2010: ibid). The virulent creatures become known as "virals," placing into effect the connection between vampirism, immortality, and blood hunger. Transmitted through a bite, the virus quickly spreads through the body. As it reaches the genomic cells, the vampiric virus replaces the human DNA with vampiric genetic material, reordering the bio-molecular pathways of the host in rapid fashion. As the human "dies", the vampire is reborn. The liminalities of the vampire are then transported through the liminality of the virus, with the vampire acting as a ready metaphor for genetic reconstruction. As a "viral" , the vampire survives in the margins between the living and the dead. It is resurrected not through death, but (re)vamped through "unnatural" modes of genetic alteration. Even in its "unnatural" state, however, the vampire continues to uphold the mantle of "Otherness." Desire here is less about want, than it is about rendering biological alterations to physiological functions.

The vampiric experience of being "drained of vitality, of feeding the deadly hunger of another either willingly or unwillingly", as Elizabeth Nelson claims, exaggerates a biological truth into nightmarish proportions (2012, 2). The nightmarish experience can be read in Helen Hardt's *Unchained: Blood Bond Volume One*. Here, blood is deemed the liquid tonic, an "elixir of life"; vampiric hero Dante is shown as an unwilling captive, held against his will as a blood-slave (2018: 8). Upon his escape and starving of nourishment, a tormented Dante narrates his mission to find "red-gold," yet another allegory for blood. He accounts coming across some human prey: "They hung above me, their skin gray and pasty as the elixir of life flowed out of them. I inhaled, and the metallic scent of iron infused itself into my cells. It was the iron and other nutrients in blood that our bodies needed, but that wasn't the scent that drew us, the scent we craved. Humans don't realize they each possess their own scent beyond perspiration and pheromones, a fragrance that comes from their very life force – their blood. [...] The dream of sustenance pouring into me and giving me strength to break free..." (Hardt 2018: 8–9). Blood hunger operates on both practical and symbolic levels. When compared to humans, vampires are "glowingly superior" and yet without the life-force of human blood, they are rendered weak (Auerbach 1995: 85). In Hardt's novel, Dante himself is drained of vitality, as he simultaneously begins his escape searching for ways to secure the elixir of life to strengthen his ailing disposition. In Hardt's other novel, *Unchained* (2018), she further suffuses such allegorical themes of desire and exploitation through notions of appetite and hunger. As Piatti-Farnell elaborates, "the vampire's hunger is not a socially domesticated response": the "physiological stimuli of hunger" surpass "into the more culturally informed representation of appetite" (2013: 24). Regardless of the structural orders present within the vampiric world, blood must not only be consumed but indulged. As Hardt's narratives suggest, the bloody "elixir of life" transcends biological necessity into extreme gratification. In the same way that

blood can be seen as indicative of desire across vampire fiction, the physiological concept of "hunger" remains an unavoidable feature of vampire's genetic coding. The virulent capital from which the vampire sustains itself will forever prevent it from penetrating the human mold. And yet, while blood is above all else the vital life-force the creature needs to survive, its reliance on the fluid further relegates the vampire into the realm of Otherness.

Sex and Carnal Transgressions

This section will approach the vampire and its peripheral forays into sex, by charting the vampire's body more closely. As the vampire physique is thrown into sharp relief, vampires are represented as aesthetically alluring, highly sexualized specimens proving themselves irresistible to humans and vampires alike. Like blood, sex can also be observed as an "essential" activity in that it ensures the continuation of the species, either by procreation of by turning, as the latter often involves close proximity with a sexual human partner. As far as vampires are concerned in popular literary narratives, Blood and sex transcend simple notions of unrestrained, hedonistic pleasures. By further examining (quite literally) the sum of the vampire's physical parts, namely, the heart, its orifices, fangs, and its bodily fluids, this section should read as a continuation of section one. The relationship between blood consumption and sexual intercourse is unavoidable and remains a common feature in contemporary vampire narratives. Particular emphasis is placed on the paranormal romance genre as it often articulates modes of sexual desire that best capture the essence of vampiric experiences (Łuksza 2015: 429). While nineteenth-century vampire narratives offered a brief glimpse into illicit desires (Nakagawa 2011), any mention of sexual acts were thinly veiled through allegories of penetration, blood-sucking, and an exchange in bodily fluids. However, as far as sex and vampires are concerned, the twentieth century brought an undeniable shift in cultural conceptualizations that openly associated vampires with sex and desire. Here, one could find a lesser focus on taboo and a clearer emphasis on pleasure. The twenty-first century has maintained this association, and fictional narratives have made a virtue of representing vampires as the ultimate sexual beings, closely followed by creatures such as werewolves and (somewhat unexpectedly) angels. While sexual allegories are still techniques employed in contemporary popular novels, the bloody pleasures of sex are firmly encoded into vampire narratives, and especially those belonging to the paranormal romance genre. Today popular vampire fiction generally does not tend to covertly code bloodsucking as a metaphor for sex, as sexual intercourse is usually openly included as part of the vampire experience. Harris' *Southern Vampire Mysteries* is just one example where bloodsucking is part of sexual foreplay, as vampire Bill's virility seems amplified by the enactment of blood sharing with his lover Sookie, as they are both overtaken in waves of "dark delight" at the height of sexual climax (2001: 197). Vampiric desire sexual

desire is projected as profoundly connected to the carnal desires of the flesh, from sexual appetites to an insatiable thirst for blood.

When it comes to blood and sex, the vampire's body is a dynamic concept. The creature's form is infinitely pliable and rarely functions independently from its peripheral "cultural milieu and value" (Grosz 1994: 190). Similarly, Carolyn Brown suggests the conceptualization of the "body" in vampire lore "serves as a mutating metaphor for the mobility of shape, substance, and desire" (2002: 114). Metaphorical mutations highlight the vampire as an advanced re-elaboration of the human form. These advancements remain integral to examining the vampire as a new and improved twenty-first century monster. Any (re)presentations of vampire bodies in contemporary literature "carry the legacy of hundreds of years of folklore and centuries of literary tradition," and in essence are "not just a result of biology" (Piatti-Farnell 2013: 54–55). The vampire body is a connected entity and an expression of the socially symbolic systems and structures in which it is culturally entangled. Acting as a figurative manifestation of the human body, the vampire form is attuned to the effects of social and cultural organization on numerous levels. Such inscriptions influence the vampire body, so that its rituals, its physical manifestations, its ways of operating – from consuming blood to sex and killing are inextricably enmeshed with societal expectations. The vampire body cannot be disentangled from the human body as its Other, and, to borrow a human-inclined concept employed by Chris Shilling, has become "moulded and constrained by the parameters of its social environment" (2004: 31). This becomes particularly pertinent when discussing notions of desire through wider themes of eroticization and fetishization of embodied entities. As Golding claims, the vampire serves as an ambiguously encoded figure "for the double displacement of his desires; having displaced 'sexuality' onto others" he seeks to reclaim those very desires by way of possession (2002: 119). This is especially relevant, as the act of sex, when it comes to bodies whether human or vampiric, "is not just an element for distinction, but a framework through which the ontological questions regarding the subject can be pursued" (Piatti-Farnell 2013: 55).

As one discusses the vampire's body, the heart is central to vampire mythology and also peripherally connected to notions of vampiric sexual desire. Across folklore, the heart played a critical role in the annihilation of "the vampire". Driving a sharpened object through the vampire's heart has since become the most iconically recognizable way to end its existence, most notably employing an iron spike or a wooden stake. The latter integration of a "wooden stake through the heart" comes to be a particularly effective way to kill vampires who have been "turned." Historically, the stabbing itself was said to drain the vampire's heart of blood, including those of its victims, removing any possibility that it may repeat its blood-sucking activities. In this light, the heart was understood as a vehicle of nourishment as opposed to a life-giving organ. The heart in the Western imagination is simply more than just an organ, however, and it remains an

agent of identity, moving beyond biology or medicine by shifting incarnations and having been ascribed cultural meanings. The beating heart communicates multiple emotions, from fear and excitement to nervousness and ecstasy. Schroer and Staubli (2001) contend that the heart is a "symbol of the inner person", an organ we so much as constantly feel; as such the beating heart becomes "synonymous" with life and love (ibid). However, in terms of the vampire, a creature that operates symbolically for human existence, a question is raised as to what extent does the image of the heart represent the vampiric experience of desire. In the vampire's case, the human heart remains a vessel for desire, its pulsating rhythms heard by the creature from a distance upon its heightened senses. A number of contemporary vampire narratives also call attention to the vampire's heart and how it is perceived, each one being distinct in its representation. Arend's *VAMPS* trilogy exemplifies this by claiming that the vampires' "metabolic and circulatory systems have become incredibly efficient" and that their "hearts beat so slowly" that they are not even aware of them (2022: 108). In contrast, the vampires in Harris' *Sookie Stackhouse* series are fully dead, so their hearts do not beat. In Ward's *Black Dagger Brotherhood* and *Midnight Breed* series, the vampires' "six chambered" hearts beat and pump blood into bodies that are physically superior. While in Kresley Cole's *Immortals After Dark* series, vampires who have been "turned" originally occupy a dead body; as a result their hearts are still. However, when the pulse returns because of a romantic interest in a human companion, their latent sexual urges are also reawakened.

Matters of desire and sex are deeply intertwined within the vampire's corporeal existence and, as outlined within contemporary vampire literature, manifest transgressive acts. The rhetoric of the modern vampire marks it, as Golding declares, a "creature of desire and transgression" (2002: 118), a claim that rings true across multiple networks. Georges Bataille claims the notion of transgression as the "crossing of borders", which signals toward a set of dynamics in which the everyday world, as we know it, is broken and fragmented (1986, as cited in Piatti-Farnell 2013: 72). The nature of corporeality, a condition that relies on explicit boundaries, is thrown into sharp relief by the transgressive nature of the vampire's bite. A distinct characteristic of adult vampire fiction, such as paranormal romance and urban fantasy, is that it places particular emphasis on "graphic depictions of sex", which often link "violence and erotic practices demarcated as 'kinky'" (Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska 2019: 230). Thus, the vampire's association with bodily pleasure, including feeding, drinking, and sex, is inextricably linked to its body. The act of all three, from eating to sex, cannot be accomplished without the vampire's fangs. The mentions of fangs abound in contemporary literature and unveils the vampiric bite as an abnormal, yet notable and irresistible transgression. The unavoidable use of fangs, in their penetrative form, is made manifest in Hardt's (2018) *Blood Bond Saga*, as lead vampiric protagonist Dante recounts his time as blood-slave to a female vampire:

"*She* would be hovering above me, gazing at me with her cold, evil eyes before she bent down and sank her fangs into my neck. *She* never drained me, only took enough so she could maintain her control over me and keep up her own strength. The worst days were when I had to feed. She forced me to drink from her. I had no other choice. I needed blood to survive, and hers was my only option…The dream of sustenance pouring into me and giving me the strength to break free recurred again and again, but escape was always only that – a dream" (9).

In this example, the deployment of fangs renders the association between corporeal dimensions within the wider context of control. The association between fangs, feeding, and sex in vampire fiction reveals the assessment of corporeal involvement as an inevitably sensorial experience. Re-thinking the vampire through the entangled dimensions of sex and food is especially compelling because it repositions the focus on the interconnectedness of corporeal dimensions. Such descriptions of sex and consumption can be examined as channels that lead into other areas of conceptual experience, amplifying how the social context shapes the paradox of subjugation and control.

In the wider context of vampiric sexual desire is the vampire's obsession with orifices. An orifice, including the mouth, represents transactional points of entry and exit, exchange convergence, mergence, and mingling. In terms of the vampire, two substances remain at the center of the orifice debate: blood and semen. In Adrian's *Midnight Breed*, the vampire's human lover can only become pregnant if, during the sexual act, the vampire ejaculates at the same time as he drinks her blood. The dynamics of the act encircle the transactional exchange: as she gives him life with her blood, he returns that "life" back to her through his semen: "He couldn't stop his hips from moving, couldn't stop his seed from its want to boil over. […] One nick of his fangs against her skin. That's all it would take. She'd be pregnant with his child by the end of the night" (2012: 110). While the emphasis on the exchange of blood and semen in the *Midnight Breed* novels is inherently sexual, the gender socio-politics of the act are not kept hidden under the surface. Indeed, a number of contemporary narratives have subverted the idea that vampires cannot procreate by enabling them to function as warm-blooded and alive entities. In these contexts, attention is paid to bodily openings, as they take on metaphorical meanings. In Adrian's *Midnight Breed* series, the mixing of blood and semen is quite literally a comingling of vital fluids, a critical step toward the procreation between vampires and humans, with the resulting baby always carrying vampire properties. Humans therefore come to be known as "breedmates", whereby genetically augmented human females are "gifted with unique blood and DNA properties that complement" those of vampires (Adrian 2009: 44). The transactional nature of blood being exchanged between the vampire and the "breedmate" during intercourse is critical to the act, "destined to bond in blood and bear the seed of a new vampire generation" (Adrian 2012: 110). A mutually strong bond is quite literally formed

between blood and semen, as the fluids that fulfil the cradle of life. Blood and semen function on similar levels in the construction of not only vampire identity, but also the reproduction of the species. Helen Bailie (2011) re-affirms that in these novels the archetypal predatory vampire, well as the taking of blood or blood exchange between the protagonists, "become the very elements that enhance, consolidate, and secure the couple's romantic relationship" (2011: 141).

Sexual intercourse, or rather blood intercourse, is detailed by the regulatory structures that ensure the transactional power between vampire and mate, a bond that is both established and strengthened over time. Bodily orifices sit at the center of those regulatory systems, even in the case of ones, such as fang puncture wounds. Traditionally created on the neck, fang puncture wounds, acting as new orifices, remain both a literal and a metaphorical site for the vampire's entry point, and act as a means for the vampire to exert political and physical dominance over his mate. Through puncturing her body during intercourse and drawing her blood out into his own mouth, the vampire lays claim on his lover's body by creating a site of exchange over which he has complete mastery. As far as orifices and points of entry go, the role and performance of the vampire's fangs is impossible to ignore. Referred to across an extensive array of contemporary fictions as "pearly whites," the animal-like presentation serves a functional purpose. Commonly vampire fangs are represented as razor-sharp, largely elongated canine teeth, which when revealed are an intimately gruesome channel to achieving sustenance (Karg et al. 2009). While fangs were not always referenced or described as such in texts pre-dating the 1900s (including Bram Stoker's Dracula), they have since become a prominent feature in contemporary narratives. Fangs have become a worthy vampiric attribute in the popular imagination. The physical presentation of fangs, their use in penetrating flesh, and the unmistakable presence of sex that often goes with the act, remain complicit in perpetuating the mythology of the vampire's fangs as an erotic symbol. In Harris' *Sookie Stackhouse* series, humans who become enamoured with vampires are comically labelled "fangbangers" and willingly offer themselves and their blood up completely in a bid for thrill and excitement. The humans are portrayed as wonton, yet impatient, and at the complete mercy of the vampire's commands.

Even when there is no striking sexual connection between two characters, the overarching provocation of the ritualistic use of fangs is deemed insatiably sensual. As illustrated in Arend's *Fresh Blood*, acts of penetration are done through the ritualized exchange of blood-drawing. This acts takes place through the guise of a vampiric headmistress empowering students through the act of bloodsucking, and is still laden with sexual innuendo and erotic flair: "Looking into the headmistress' eyes, she hesitated and then… her lips parted, exposing glistening pearly fangs. Her eyelashes fanned over her cheeks, and she began drinking with almost the same abandon" (2022: 48). The depiction of lips parting reveals more than a point of entry, but the allegorical

power of the orifice as a site of constant negotiation. The parting of lips here functions as another symbolic nod to the figurative expression of the vulva. The fluid exchange described in the narrative as "the most erotic thing" results in the vampire experiencing the dichotomies of relishing in desire, while also equally taming encoded impulses and urges to sucking their "host" until the thirst is quenched. Here, the exchange between student and headmistress is enacted upon the need for control, and melds with feelings of fascination as well as desire. As the "orifice" that will let the blood flow failed to exist before the bite, the puncture wounds also become representative of superiority, control, and domination. The distinctiveness of the bite across numerous contemporary vampire fiction examples is reliant on fantasies of incorporation and of filling orifices, with both blood and semen.

In the fiction, sexually instigated, blood-drawing rituals between vampires and humans consist of not only the mingling of vital fluids, but also of the enactment of power relations that are steeped in desire. Sexual experiences are rendered deficient in the absence of the vampire's bite. Experiencing the penetrative power of the vampire's bite, the sensation of blood-drawing as a gratifying and pleasurable act of indulgence can be read as a "hyper-state of corporeality" (Piatti-Farnell 2013: 73). "Hyper" is a state of pushing boundaries, which reveals itself as that distinctly abnormal as far as the human body is concerned, yet regular and required for the vampire body to exist and thrive. The fangs that penetrate act as a vehicle for transgression as they transport the receiver of the bite, from beyond the subtleties of the everyday into the domain of fantasy. The vampire body is therefore a perfect contradiction of human possibilities, and in a curious turn of events, such notions of human desire are found transcended into a corporeal space deemed not human at all. As a site of sexual negotiations, the symbolic nature of the vampire's body renders its abilities into a sum of its parts, in this instance, its blood, fangs, semen, and orifices. The vampire has come to be in equal parts paradoxically grotesque and desirable, and as such its rituals and transgressive behaviours make it all the more sexually alluring in the process.

Ritual: Exchange and Kinship

This section uncovers the importance of ritualized tradition and kinship in contemporary vampire literature, with a focus on paranormal romance and urban fantasy examples. It will chart and decipher the distinctions between the concept of vampiric ritual and how it differs from vampiric customs. As such, this section unravels the implications connected to familial issues and cultural affiliation. Emphasis is placed on the vampire marriage ritual as it is profoundly connected to notions of sexual desire and bloodlines. As such this analysis brings attention to the problematic issue of "blood ties" and incorporates discussions of vampire families within literary cultures and how they are understood through a wider lens of desire in paranormal romance and urban fantasy. Notions of desire, in this section, are metaphorically tied to that of

protection and of preservation, as symbolic expressions of exchange and familial transactions. If the vampire was ever *not* a dynamic metaphorical re-elaboration of the human world, then through its ritualized projection of marriage the creature can be viewed as more humanized than ever before. This re-positioning of the vampire subject within regulatory systems reveals the "inevitable presence of culture" as a critical and "deeply re-discovered part of the twenty-first century condition" (Piatti-Farnell 2013: 125). Veritably, a lot of vampire groups seemingly depend on customs and traditions in contemporary narratives, which operate in their existence as autonomous entities outside of the human world. A network of these practices highlights these distinct vampiric groups not as a uniform or universal collective, but as separate working societies, making each customs, traditions, and rituals distinct, in their own right. As such this section will discuss vampiric rituals surrounding marital courtship, and preservation of bloodlines as a ceremonial layer of kinship within broader vampiric society.

Behavioral customs in the vampire world vary, taking on different forms that are dependent on social context and expectation. In Harris' *Sookie Stackhouse* series, for example, a stringent vampire custom is based on vampires not shaking hands. A commonly acknowledged gesture like a simple handshake in the Western word is erased within the vampire's world. In a similar vein, in D.B. Reynolds' *Vampire's in America* series it is uncustomary to ask for a vampire's age. Moreover, the request results in outrage in the vampire as human character Cynthia swiftly realizes this question "is an unforgivable breach of etiquette" (2009: 61). Such reproaches on etiquette are further demonstrated in Scott G. Mariani's *Vampire Federation* series, whereby "you never ask anyone how they are turned" (2010: 44). In Ward's *Black Dagger Brotherhood*, it is customary to bow down to an individual of a higher rank within the vampiric social hierarchy. Such behavioral customs and rules reflect vampiric society as a distinct civilization. However, amplified more symbolically and more prominently than custom within contemporary vampire fiction is the presence of ritual. Rituals are culturally inscribed within vampire societies. Unlike custom, vampire rituals remain separate from customary behaviors. Vampire rituals are, by and large, ceremonial in nature and rely on preordained councils to gain some form of value. By distinguishing "ritual" from "customs," the term, in this essence, can be taken to represent "the practical performance of systematic structures", sited in the belief and control that underpin "the vampire's interpersonal structures" as a separate organization (Piatti-Farnell 2013: 126). Indeed, rituals defining vampiric marriage unions are familiar examples within paranormal romance novels such as Feehan's *Carpathians*, Cole's *Immortals After Dark* series, Adrian's *Midnight Breed,* and Ward's *Black Dagger Brotherhood*, where desire, devotion, and love are central arcs to the narrative plot. In this framework, the ritualistic nature of the vampire domain converges at the intersection between debates of culture and society. Here, "ritual" possesses the role of

channeling the organization of the social dynamics and hierarchies that exist inside of the vampire/human sphere. Equally, and notably, the ceremonial nature of rituals acts as an agent of cultural transference in order to transmit and transform the overall sense of the vampire's reality. As Harris claims in *Dead Ever After* (a novel from the Sookie Stackhouse series) vampires have a "ritual for everything" and these rituals almost always include blood (2009: 166). This claim is further enhanced when conveying the initiation of the vampiric marriage ritual: as far as ceremonial arrangements go, protagonist Sookie reminds us, "a vampire ceremony would include a blood exchange" (2007: 166).

The presence of blood in vampire wedding rituals generally conforms as essential into this conceptual structure. The marital union in Adrian's *Midnight Breed* series is incomplete until the two "mates," Lucan and Gabrielle, drink each other's blood: "[He] pressed his scarlet lips to her lips … Richer than wine, instantly intoxicating, his blood flowed over her tongue like an elixir crafted for the gods. She felt all of Lucan's love pouring into her, all of his power and strength" (2009: 358). By sealing this blood exchange, Lucan forges a dual bond that, for all intents and purposes, acts as a blood-consummation as well as a symbol of unity. Gabrielle incorporates his identity "into her," and by feeding each other their blood, they are effectively wedded as one symbolizing the power in union. The marriage ritual and exchange is described in similar terms in the *Sookie Stackhouse* series, as blood from both spouses is collected into a chalice, and consumed by both: "Russell took a sip from the chalice, and then handed it to Bart, who drained it dry. Then they kissed" (ibid: 167). As a symbolic representation of life itself, here the exchange conveys the couple's entanglement in devotion and love. For blood to truly flow, the skin must be scored by instrument of choice, although this is usually done by way of a knife. The use of knives, or knife-like objects, in this context, acts as a thinly veiled allegory for the sexual nature of the union itself. As the phallic shape of the knife is called into question, the impression of sexual connection becomes more apparent and is made manifest through the couple's desire to "consummate" the ritual by way of drinking each other's blood. Sexual desire is, unsurprisingly, one of the most common results of the wedding ritual in contemporary vampire literature. And Adrian ventures to convey such blood-exchange in *Kiss of Midnight* as a way to inspire a sense of desire: "She [the bride] felt desire … more intense than it had ever been" (2009: 358).

It is important to note that with the inclusion of marital rituals, vampire fiction also conveys a common goal through blood oaths, embodied in a desire to protect family bloodlines. Blood connections are treated as hugely important, within both paranormal romance and urban fantasy genres. In contemporary fiction, vampire families maintain, for the most part, a strong patriarchal structure. Vampire families are generally headed by the father; his role acts as a continuation of the bloodline and forms the connection for his kin to lay claims within the vampiric realm. Nonetheless, in instances where

vampire families are configured by way of turning, the fantasy world becomes political as there is no "natural" or "physiological" connection between vampire parent and newly birthed "vampire child". The only physical and biological connection is made through the exchange of blood. Unlike other social and political clusters, the family signals the existence of a network dependent on structures of kinship to keep people together within conceptual (and often geographical) bounds. In Harris' *Dead in the Family*, for instance, Ocella continues to refer to his own sired vampire Eric Northman as his "son," and announces his other creation Alexei as Eric's "brother." The devotion that the two younger vampires are expected to have for Ocella leaves no doubt, culturally and socially speaking, to his authoritarian position of "father" in the exchange. In contemporary vampire narratives, the father figure often operates as the primary archetypal symbol for family in the canon.

In narratives when vampires are included into a family unit by way of ritual of blood, the incarnation of the vampire family acts, as Jes Battis argues, as a "social signifier to be enlarged, distended and ultimately exploded" (2005: 21). The concept of family within the vampire world is complicated by a "mixed notion of recognition and rejection" of the very concept of the family unit (Piatti-Farnell 2013: 140). In the *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series, the "Brothers" are not biologically connected at all, but rather linked through a blood-oath and a common goal. The series relies heavily on the basis that family remains the most important institution for the vampires. Ward even ventures as far as to claim that family is "everything to vampires" (Ward 2011: 46, as cited in Piatti-Farnell 2013: 135). As chronicled in Ward's *Lover Enshrined* novel the significant role of the father as symbolic representative is recounted through his presentation of a newborn to the world, as the vampire Zsadist introduces his baby daughter to the vampire group. While asking friends and extended family members to accept the infant, Zsadist does so by asking the Brotherhood members to recognise his own bloodlines: "In the Old Language, Zsadist said 'Wouldst both thou honor my birthed daughter with the color of thy lineages and the love of thy hearts?' […] Z Bowed deeply, offering the bow" (Ward 2011: 58). These narratives tend to portray vampire families as ancient and long-established institutions, more often connected to folkloristic understandings of the vampire trope. The nature of family, with its emphasis on blood-ties, has evolved a great deal in both social and cultural praxis, moving beyond the desire for protection into a need for control and ownership. As such, vampiric familial connections take for granted the preoccupation with fear and dominance, which can be read as deeply problematic but also in keeping with the regulatory structures that exist in the vampire's world. Familial connections are therefore continually repeated through ritualized ceremonies and through a passage of blood rites. Indeed, depending on the genre, these are molded to fit within the vampire's world accordingly. Blood remains the clearest expression of agency and desire in order to protect and maintain familial kinship.

Concluding Reflections

In tracing the different ontological manifestations of vampiric desire, through blood, sex, and ritual, this chapter has identified discernible commonalities and differences that thematically emerge in paranormal romance and urban fantasy contexts. It is evident, as Nina Auerbach reminds us, that vampires go where the power is, blending into "the cultures they inhabit" (1995: 6). In embracing the similarities, differences, and specificities within in the fictional examples, social, cultural, and bio-political anxieties are further exposed through multiple degrees of vampiric desire. Section one uncovered the role of vampiric desire through its primary channel of drinking blood, with particular emphasis placed on how blood can communicate the fabric of a vampire's existence, be it through birth or turning. The first section also discussed the encoded themes of blood and Otherness. Despite blood being synthetically manufactured in selected fictional contexts, it is indeed the vampire's craving of the vital substance that relegates its position deeper into territories of the "Other." Section two captured the significance of sex within vampire fiction. Another intrinsic theme is that sex, like blood, is essential to the vampire's existence. The section unravelled this concept by discussing the vampire's body and sexual existence as a sum of its parts, analyzing how orifices, fangs, and bodily fluids are profoundly rooted in how a vampire initiates and enacts sexual intercourse. The final section unearthed the ritualized nature of the vampire's existence, primarily by considering the importance of vampiric bonds and how marital rituals (in particular) feed into notions of sexual desire. It also focused on the integrity of familial connections and structures in the preservation of vampire bloodlines. While there is an argument for viewing love-stricken vampires as a reserved re-elaboration of the sexual ideal, as transgressive figures go, it is evident that vampires straddle the fringe of what remains undeniably non-human. Vampires, as positioned in this analysis, prove themselves creatures of control by not simply indulging their biological or physiological urges, but rather expressing an acute desire for order, and obeying the rules that exist in the context of their supernatural world. The vampire's ontologies of desire are made manifest through its nuanced transgressions in paranormal romance and urban fantasy fiction. And it is through desire, that the vampire renders itself as an enduring monstrous icon of the twenty-first century.

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