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Megan E. Gianniny
Scripps College

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**“OTHER THAN DEAD”: QUEERING VAMPIRES IN *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE
SLAYER, INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE, AND THE GILDA STORIES***

by

MEGAN ELISE CLAMP GIANNINY

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Introduction

“Blood is *life*, lackbrain. Why do you think we eat it? It's what keeps you going. Makes you warm. Makes you hard. Makes you other than dead.”

- Spike, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 5.22 “The Gift”

Vampires and the various stories told about them have intrigued, terrorized, and entertained humans for centuries, ranging from folklore about the dead coming back to life, to more recent narratives in which the vampires are sympathetic heroes and love interests for mortal humans (often male vampires taking an interest in mortal women, but not always). Vampires today are a phenomenon, but their popularity began growing as far back as the 1970s and 80s. Long before *Twilight* and *True Blood*, there was Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, and *The Lost Boys*. These earlier texts are sometimes different in their portrayals of vampires than the most recent genre explosion, but works such as the 1994 *Interview with the Vampire* film adaptation, and Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series (1997-2003) were part of what helped build to our present-day phenomenon. Some of these earlier texts, however, remain lesser known to this day, such as Jewelle Gomez's 1991 black lesbian feminist vampire novel, *The Gilda Stories*¹. I want to examine how these vampire narratives explore the queer possibilities within categories such as gender, sexuality, relationships, and monstrosity, specifically in the figure of the vampire itself. For this project I will analyze three vampire narratives, all from the period directly prior to today's current vampire craze (which I date to the mid 2000s), and which I consider to be a particular moment in the history of vampire narratives. My texts range

¹ Possibly as a result of its direct engagement with issues of queerness and race

² That is, identifying with some sort of non-normative gender or sexuality.

from 1991-2003, and consist of a novel, a film, and a television series (*Gilda*, *Interview*, and *Buffy*).

There is a long history of the vampire as Other in literature and folklore, and that tradition carries on in various forms in *Interview with the Vampire*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *The Gilda Stories*. Vampires are liminal creatures, due to the fact that they live on the edge of both life and death. Anthropologist Victor Turner writes of “liminal personae” as being:

...necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (Turner 147)

Liminal beings question and challenge societal norms indirectly on account of their in-between status. Using Turner's understanding of the way that liminal beings challenge norms, it could then be argued that liminal beings have the potential, if not an inherent capability, to *queer* those norms. As vampires already blur the boundaries of one form of categorization (alive vs. dead), they are well positioned to blur the boundaries of other categories. Vampires *can* be queer in the identity-based understanding of the word², but certainly not all vampires are. On the other hand, all vampires, no matter how straight and cisgendered they are, still possess the possibility of queering other categories because of their liminal status as vampires. Ultimately it is up to the writers or creators of individual vampire narratives whether (and how much) they want to show vampires queering these

² That is, identifying with some sort of non-normative gender or sexuality.

other constructed boundaries. Vampires are liminal beings and thus have the inherent capability to queer other categories of identity and norms, including but not limited to relationships, gender, sexuality, and monstrosity. The three narratives I am examining all include vampires queering these categories (and more) in different ways, showing the range of queer possibilities within these categories.

This visible queering, however, may not appear in all vampiric figures, especially as mainstream portrayals are forced to appeal to wider audiences in order to generate revenue. I argue that secondary characters are where the greatest pushing of boundaries are allowed in mainstream texts, as opposed to non-mainstream texts where it can actively occur in the main character without issue. I hope to prove that even as mainstream vampire narratives seek to present ‘acceptable’ values around gender, sexuality, and other categories, they still contain queering possibilities, as shown to a greater extreme in non-mainstream texts like *The Gilda Stories*. I will examine *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Interview with the Vampire*, and *The Gilda Stories* individually in order to examine how this queering is articulated or disguised in each text.

The main historical context through which I am reading my primary sources is the idea that they are part of a build up from around the 1970s of interest in vampires that helped bring about the current vampire craze, most commonly associated with the *Twilight* series, but also including television shows such as *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries*. The “particular moment in history” that I am considering is from 1990 to the mid-2000s. I will not be actively comparing my texts to more recent texts, but they will be present in my mind as I consider how my three texts may have affected those that came after them. It feels important for me to acknowledge that while I am undertaking

this thesis as a scholarly project, I am also very much in the role of fan when it comes to works about vampires, as I have been reading and watching them for as long as I can remember, always curious to see the newest version of my favorite blood-sucking monster. Nickianne Moody's essay "Feminism and Popular Culture" argues for cultural studies analysis of popular culture because of how it reflects and effects cultural change. Moody writes: "Popular culture constitutes a space of exchange between dominant and subordinate cultures and provides a valuable area of study for those who hope to understand social change" (Moody, 172). This is a helpful justification for the importance of popular culture to feminism, but I would take her argument further and expand it to include more than just feminism, as both *queerness* and *queering* (among many other issues related to social change) are a part of those "subordinate cultures" that Moody references.

Theoretical Framework and Key Terms

As the focus of this project is on *queering* (the verb) rather than queer as an adjective, I will clarify how I am using each. Queer as an adjective is primarily a term used in relation to what one might call 'Identity Politics.' It has to do with individual (and group) identity, specifically in terms of non-normative gender and sexuality. The verb 'to queer' when used in queer theory, however, is much broader than just gender and sexuality. David Halperin argues: "Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal.... *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality *vis-à-vis* the normative..." (qtd. in Sullivan 43). As used and understood within queer theory,

“queer” is not a concept that can easily be defined. Halperin’s description of it as “positionality” that is “at odds with the normal” is perhaps the simplest way to describe how I am using it, even though he seems to blur the line between queerness and queering. The notion of a “positionality” maintains the active nature of the verb, but his argument for “an identity without an essence” seems unclear. For Michael Warner, “queer is not just a resistance to the norm, but more importantly, consists of protesting against ‘the idea[l] of normal behavior’” (qtd. in Sullivan 50). Warner’s queer resistance is even closer to my use of queering than Halperin’s unclear verb/noun usage, by its “protesting” of “normal behavior.” In my discussion of queering in these vampire narratives, I am primarily focusing on performances and constructions of gender, sexuality, and relationships within these three fictional worlds, and how they are queering what is considered “normal behavior” to a mainstream audience.

Another framework I have found useful to consider in my analysis is the construction of the vampire as monster. Judith Halberstam’s *Skin Shows* looks at the Gothic genre from the 19th century through to its present forms in thriller and horror movies such as *Silence of the Lambs*. While Halberstam does not directly consider more recent texts on vampires, the arguments made about monstrosity can be applied beyond the specific examples used. One issue Halberstam highlights is that monsters could be safe for Victorian audiences because of the fact that they were an Other and thus to enjoy reading about them was not necessarily a reflection of one’s *own* sins (Halberstam 13). As a part of that Othering, Halberstam explains: “Novels in a Gothic mode transform class and race, sexual and national relations into supernatural or monstrous features” (Halberstam 21). Fears about the Other in society are translated into something

“supernatural” through the Gothic genre and thus allow society a way to consider interactions with the Other without having to *actually* interact with the Other. Halberstam creates such a broad definition for the genre that it could almost even be applied to the texts I am considering as well. Halberstam also points out that “feminist and queer responses to these Gothic modalities are most certainly called for if we are to make a claim for the positivity of horror” because of the way monstrosity is so often linked to gender and sexuality above all other identity factors (Halberstam 26). As monstrosity is frequently linked to gender and sexuality, with vampires it must then also be linked to blood-drinking, which is a very intimate and often sexually-charged act. Thus blood-drinking becomes a monstrous act as well, because of how it is tied in with other monstrous identity factors.

Creatures that are considered monstrous are commonly also part or formerly human: werewolves, vampires, zombies, even ghosts. They are both different and similar to humans: an Other that remains Other, while still being close enough to humans for them to be unsettling. What is interesting in most more recent vampire narratives, however, is that even though vampires are monstrous, they can still be considered either good or evil. In some vampire narratives (*Buffy*, for example) a lack of a soul is used as part of the reason that they become "evil." Even those narratives, however, still tend to include some vampires who are considered “good,” at least in contrast to their more evil counterparts. Vampires can thus queer our understanding of good and evil, because while

monsters are generally considered “evil,” most vampire narratives (and certainly all of the three I am considering) include both “good” and “evil” vampires³.

I plan to base my analysis of gender performance using Judith Butler’s concept of performativity (covered in both *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*). In the introduction to *Bodies That Matter*, Butler explains “Performativity is thus not a singular ‘act,’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 12). Performativity suggests that many behaviors and aspects of identity are in fact learned and perpetuated through repetition. I view gender and sexuality both as performative aspects of these vampire characters’ identities, and thus influenced by the norms of the society they are a part of – norms that the characters I examine queer in very different ways. Candace Benefiel makes a very interesting suggestion in her writing on family in *Interview with the Vampire*: “A vampire figure that is simultaneously viewed as maternal and as a male homosexual seems contradictory [presumably to a mainstream audience]. Perhaps instead the vampire should be viewed as a pangendered construct in which traditional male and female genders are combined to form a new whole” (Benefiel 268). Benefiel is recognizing the queerness often found in vampires’ gender, and proposing an alternative way of considering gender and vampires. I do not think it is necessary to go as far as Benefiel suggests, by coming up with “a new pangendered construct,” but instead find it more productive to consider vampires within existing constructs, and examine some of the ways they queer those normative constructs.

³ I use good and evil loosely here: evil being equated with a desire to harm others, good with a desire to help others.

This thesis is necessarily situated within the context of academic writings on vampires, and writings on how the gender and sexuality of the vampire as a figure has been constructed over time. While I will not be directly analyzing other significant works such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, it is hard to write about vampires without some knowledge and reference to them. Louis Palmer's *Vampires In the New World* does an excellent job of examining the image of the vampire in American culture, as well as providing an overview of significant scholarly writings about vampires, both out of cultural studies and other disciplines, going back as far as the 1920s. His books and others like it, which examine the vampire as a figure in literature and on the screen, will provide an important background to my thesis. My approach however is looking at a very particular moment in time (1990s-mid 2000s), and focusing specifically on the queering of gender, sexuality, and relationships in three different vampires: a nineteenth-century simpering gentleman turned violent vampire, a girl-child trapped forever young in the eighteenth century, and a runaway slave given a second change at life by a vampire seeking a companion for her friend after she is gone. Each of these vampires contains a different matrix of identities, which affect how they take on the role of 'vampire' in the story. These particular narratives have also never been looked at in relation to each other, or through contrasting the mainstream with the lesser known.

Organization of Thesis

In "Love's Bitch" I will examine *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, with a focus on the character of Spike. I analyze how he performs his gender over the course of the seven seasons of *Buffy*, including an examination of his relationships with Drusilla and Buffy,

and the impact of both the chip put in his head by the Initiative and the re-acquiring of his soul. A key part of this analysis also addresses how other characters question Spike's masculinity, despite the fact that Spike does not actually display any effeminate behavior. While there are other characters in *Buffy* who are explicitly queer in identity (Willow, Tara, Kennedy), I chose to focus on Spike to examine a more subtle queering that could be included in a mainstream vampire narrative, especially since the explicitly queer characters in *Buffy* are not vampires. Spike may not be queer in his choice of romantic partners, or how he performs his masculinity, but there is something queer in the difference between his gender performance and how other characters see him, as well as how his character arc challenges the categories of "good" and "evil" as set out by the "Buffyverse."

For this chapter I will be focusing on literature that looks at gender (and to some extent sexuality), as well as scholarship that focuses on Spike in relation to gender and sexuality, such as Dee Amy-Chin's article "Queering the Bitch," which argues for Spike's queerness⁴. There are a lot of significant works in "Buffy studies" that include chapters focusing on gender or sexuality (e.g. Rhonda Wilcox's *Why Buffy Matters*), and Lorna Jowett's *Sex and the Slayer* even proclaims itself "A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan" in its subtitle and does indeed cover a variety of issues related to gender and sexuality in the series. I will be in many ways continuing this work, but looking at *Buffy* also in relation to how its role as a mainstream television production may have affected its ability to queer notions of gender and sexuality as thoroughly as it might have. Finally,

⁴ While this is not an argument I necessarily find convincing, Amy-Chin's argument and analysis is still very interesting.

as the Slayer is the main character and not the vampires, an analysis of the vampires in *Buffy* requires a focus on the secondary characters by default.

In “A Monster with Golden Curls” I will examine the character of Claudia in *Interview with the Vampire* and how she, as a female child vampire, is strangely stuck between child and adult, girl and woman. Her liminal status affects how other vampires treat her and is a defining aspect of how her character develops over the course of the movie. In order to frame my focus on Claudia herself, I will begin the chapter by analyzing the dynamic of the “Undead Family” that she and her two vampire fathers, Louis and Lestat, become. While many of my sources consider both the 1976 book and 1994 film, for the sake of this project I have tried to focus on the latter, although there is certainly much to be explored in both texts. The film is a part of the particular moment in history which I am trying to examine through these three texts, and though the source material is older, I believe the differences between the two make the film firmly a part of the 1990s-early 2000s vampire trend on which I am focusing. Much of the academic work on both *Buffy* and *Interview* sometimes relies on general terms such as male/female, masculine/feminine with the implied suggestion that they are working under traditional mainstream understandings of these terms. While this is certainly problematic at times, I chose not to footnote each and every one of these moments of general usage, and trust readers to understand when my secondary sources are speaking generally, and understand that I may not always agree with them, but it was too common an occurrence for me to question every time.

While most scholarly writing on *Interview* focuses on the characters of Louis and Lestat, I have chosen instead to focus on the character of Claudia, in deliberate contrast to

existing scholarship. I believe that Claudia is just as rich for analysis as her vampire “fathers,” and so I chose to focus on her in part to contribute to the minimal writing about her done so far. I also chose to focus on Claudia so that my analysis of mainstream vampires would not be limited to white, adult, cisgender male vampires. In this chapter I use a definition of kinship from Judith Butler’s article “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” to position my examination of the familial relationship between Claudia, Louis and Lestat, but I consider how traditional markers of “family” have been shifted because of their vampirism. Because of my focus on the character of Claudia, who is a child-turned-vampire, I also briefly consider writings on children and queerness (Bruhm and Hurley, Stockton), which tend to focus on society’s discomfort with acknowledging child sexuality. It is unfortunate that so many scholars have overlooked Claudia’s richness, but through this project I hope to fill some of that gap.

My final chapter, “Blood Ties,” will examine my one lesser-known, non-mainstream text: Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories*. This chapter will examine the title character, Gilda, and how a woman of color, who is also a vampire, is portrayed, and understood in the time periods in which she is depicted (1850s into the future, generally in 10-30 year intervals). As community is also a significant theme of *The Gilda Stories*, I lend time as well to a discussion of the different communities Gilda strives to be a part of, and some of the struggles she faces with those (sometimes) conflicting parts of her identity. Jewelle Gomez’s construction of the vampire is intentionally a “recasting” of traditional vampire mythology, and that will be discussed and examined as well. This chapter will include the most comparison of the three texts together as I contrast Gomez’s

explicit queering, queerness, and intentional reconstruction of the mythology to the subtler queering I have examined in *Buffy* and *Interview*.

Secondary sources for *The Gilda Stories* focused on everything from the significance of the work as a whole to analyses of potential for radical community. Because *The Gilda Stories* is not a mainstream text, there were not nearly as many scholarly writings on it as on, say, *Buffy*, but there were more than I expected to find when I set out on this project. Kathy Patterson's article "Vampire Subjectivity in *The Gilda Stories*" argues for some of the ways Gomez's novel changes some traditional gendered imagery of vampire narratives, providing very helpful analysis of the novel's protagonist. Sabine Meyer's analysis focuses on the "Horrors of the Normative" in *The Gilda Stories*, and focuses on how Gilda's experiences of different communities highlights many negative aspects of the broader society that Gilda lives on the fringes of. Meyer also makes a clear distinction between older, more monstrous vampires (such as Dracula), and the newer vampire who serves as a sympathetic, desirable hero, which contributes to my framing this project within a particular time period.

Chapter One

Love's Bitch: A Vampire in Love on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

If a vampire is supposed to be a monstrous Other, feared and reviled, then how does a television show portray a vampire in love without taking away his monstrosity? Is such a thing even possible? And what if that vampire should then go on to queer or blur normative boundaries around gender and sex? This is the case found in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, in the character of Spike. From his earliest appearance, Spike is shown caring for another being, initially the vampire Drusilla, who sired him. In later seasons he falls in love with the Slayer herself, even going so far as to reacquire a soul to prove himself to her. While most vampires on *Buffy* appear only momentarily before Buffy stakes them in the heart, Spike is one of two vampires, Angel being the other, who actually plays a major part in the lives of the show's main characters, the "Scooby Gang" (Buffy and her friends). Also like Angel, Spike is one of the four men with whom Buffy becomes sexually involved over the course of the show's seven seasons. Angel and Spike are the two vampires in that group of four.

Spike performs a "tough-guy" persona, but many are able to see through it to the fact that Spike truly loves others: first Drusilla, and then Buffy. Even though the persona he performs is violent, aggressive, and tries to hide things such as pain or other "unmanly" feelings (pulling on many mainstream stereotypes of masculinity), Spike is capable of love. His masculinity, however, is legible as a performance to those around him, which is not to suggest that he is effeminate, merely that those around him seem to frequently question it. Numerous jokes are made about Spike being impotent – a fact that is only compounded when a secret government group known as The Initiative plant a

chip in his brain which prevents him from harming humans (4.07, “The Initiative”).

Lastly, his performance of sexuality queers traditional notions of ‘vanilla’ sex⁵ because Spike’s relationships are filled with (mostly) consensual violence⁶. As Buffy is a non-traditional female figure because of her strong, physically violent role as the Slayer, it would follow that Spike’s own gender is complicated by his relationship with her. In his article “Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies: How to Have Sex Without Women or Men,” queer theorist C. Jacob Hale argues: “Thinking in terms of multiple, context-specific, and purpose-specific gendered statuses allows us to make better sense of this cultural phenomenon than does thinking in terms of (two or more) unitary sex/gender statuses” (Hale 68). In looking at Spike’s gender and sexuality, we must move away from thinking only in terms of strict traditional constructions of male and female and masculine and feminine. The world of *Buffy* does not follow those strict constructions because from the outset Buffy herself plays with them. She looks like a very feminine, attractive young girl, but takes down demons twice her size with supernatural strength that most viewers would not expect from such a petite blond, thus challenging viewers from the outset to question their first impressions of characters based solely on appearance. Spike is able to perform this queered masculinity and sexuality more explicitly than Buffy, and differently from the other vampires in the Buffyverse, because of his placement as a secondary character. When Spike is made less monstrous through the repeated theme of his love for others, that queering also becomes less monstrous, and less frightening.

⁵ Generally understood to be heterosexual sex not involving any forms of BDSM or kink.

⁶ This is not to say that all non-vanilla sex is necessarily queer, but rather that representation of non-vanilla sex in a mainstream television production has the potential to queer mainstream understandings about what kinds of sex are considered acceptable.

In this chapter I will first show how Spike's performance of masculinity is mocked and suggests he is an impotent male in the eyes of those around him, even as he continues to display (mostly) traditional masculine behaviors. Second I will examine Spike's queering of sexuality, specifically through his relationships with Drusilla and Buffy, over the course of Spike's story arc from seasons two through seven. Lastly I will examine the ability to love as a humanizing character trait, and question how Spike's ability to love could potentially allow his queered masculinity and sexuality to become less monstrous for viewers of the show. This chapter will rely heavily on Judith Butler's ideas of gender performativity, as well as the great variety of scholarship on *Buffy* from writers in a variety of disciplines. Finally, I will draw on some queer theory around gender in BDSM communities to discuss some of the aspects of consensual violence presented in the show.

Background Information

Buffy the Vampire Slayer lasted for seven seasons, on two different television networks, and aired from 1997-2003. With the exception of the first season that only had 12 episodes, each season consisted of 22 episodes, for a total of 144 episodes. Each season had a larger arc focused on defeating a particular "Big Bad," as well as several standalone episodes. In her fight against evil (not just vampires), Buffy, the Slayer, is aided by a group of friends that changes only a little from season to season. Willow and Xander are Buffy's high school friends who stay with her through the whole series. Rupert Giles is Buffy's assigned "Watcher" who is supposed to help her train and battle evil, but he also serves as Buffy's father figure. Louis Palmer writes of the show's

monsters: “Vampires represent evil and the enemy, yes, and Buffy slaughters them by the thousands over the course of seven seasons; but the rules are never hard-and-fast, and boundaries are always blurring” (Palmer 104). *Buffy* frequently sets up rules of how to understand the world, only to then provide at least one exception to the rule. Vampires may be evil, but as I have already pointed out, two out of Buffy’s four love interests in the show are vampires. Angel, the first of those four love interests, and the one with whom Buffy loses her virginity, sets up the idea that only a vampire with a soul is capable of doing good, by providing a contrast to his soulless persona ‘Angelus.’ But in later seasons, Spike comes to challenge this by choosing to go on a quest to regain his soul, to prove how much he has changed – in direct contrast to how Angel was forcibly given a soul by a gypsy curse. “Buffy Studies” scholar Lorna Jowett writes: “He competes with Angel in a typical anxious tough-guy way, but he also becomes Angel, however unwillingly. Angel, the unique vampire with a soul and Buffy’s lover, is overtaken by Spike, another ensouled⁷ vampire who has a relationship with Buffy” (Jowett, *Sex and the Slayer* 165). Thus *Buffy* allows not only two exceptions to the “vampires are evil” rule, but also shows one vampire who becomes an exception to it by choice, proving you don’t need a soul to do good in the ‘Buffyverse.’ By constantly setting up rules and then providing exceptions to them, *Buffy* as a cultural text seems to be well aware of how boundaries can be blurred or queered (and for that, credit certainly goes to its creator, Joss Whedon, and his fellow writers).

⁷ In accordance with many other writings on *Buffy*, this is the term I will be using to refer to vampires with a soul.

Spike as an Impotent Male

In order to understand Spike the vampire, it is useful to understand the story of how he became that way – the story of Spike’s human life. In 1880 London, Spike was still human, and his name was William. Mocked for writing sappy poetry about love, he was given the nickname “William the Bloody” for his “bloody awful poetry” (5.7, “Fool for Love”). One man even says, within earshot of William, that he’d “rather have a railroad spike driven into my head than listen to that awful stuff” (5.7, “Fool for Love”). William is embarrassed, but seeks out Cecily, the girl he is in love with, but she too rejects him for being “beneath” her. The distraught William is found wandering the streets by the vampire Drusilla, who makes him an offer he can’t refuse. Thus is Spike the vampire born. As Spike himself says about his transformation, “Becoming a vampire is a profound and powerful experience....It made me feel alive for the very first time. I was through living by society's rules. I decided to make a few of my own” (5.7, “Fool for Love”). The nickname “William the Bloody” manages to follow Spike for a while, and Rupert Giles, Buffy’s Watcher, even comments at one point that there are stories about his torturing people with railroad spikes. Clearly the embarrassing comments made to William while he was alive stuck with him even in his undead life. Jowett argues in her book *Sex and the Slayer*: “Spike is a persona of powerful masculinity adopted by the dithering poet William after his rejection in love by the human Cecily and his transformation into a vampire by Drusilla...Spike is everything William was not” (Jowett 158-9). Spike’s masculine “persona” is something actively performed by him, and it is a reaction to how he was treated while alive. Spike does not want to be mocked as effeminate any more, and so he rejects as much of himself that used to be perceived as

effeminate – except for his ability to love, because that love becomes transferred from Cecily to Drusilla.

Spike’s masculine tough-guy persona becomes a very noticeable performance for the viewer upon reaching season 5 because of how it contrasts with the flashback images of William. While all the vampires in *Buffy* generally lose their morality with the loss of their soul, only Spike specifically changes his accent (to a rougher, more working-class vocabulary⁸). This is a choice made by Spike, which suggests that he may be making other active choices in how he presents himself to others. Jowett explains that in most literature:

Although vampires, being nonhuman, need not take on socially constructed gender, they usually do: female vampires are generally masculinized, while male vampires are almost always feminized.... but because *Buffy* is about a vampire slayer the monsters (vampires) in the show are also the victims, and thus doubly feminized. Spike may be the most obvious example, but all the male vampires discussed here can be read as feminized. (Jowett, *Sex and the Slayer* 144)

Even though Angel is the first vampire with a soul, doing ‘good,’ that the viewers encounter, Spike somehow becomes the one most feminized (or at least most obviously feminized). By Jowett’s logic, Spike shouldn’t need to perform any specific gender, because he is “nonhuman.” But the vampire Other in the Buffyverse is precisely so threatening because of how he (or she) can pass as human until the last moment, when seducing a victim. Vampires were all humans once, so although Jowett may see no “need” for them to take on “socially constructed gender,” it does seem to remain for them

⁸ This includes, but is not limited to, Spike noticeably swearing, in contrast to his human self, William, who is much more “proper” in his language.

after they have transformed from living to undead. Spike's masculine persona is a part of the way he can seduce possible victims, and thus it is an important part of who his vampire self is, and just because the vampires of the Buffyverse are feminized does not mean they are effeminate. Dee Amy-Chinn, a scholar on Media and Culture, asserts: "[Spike] shares the prejudice that effeminate men are somehow less than men, and on becoming a vampire adopts a working-class persona in keeping with the romanticized notion that working-class men are the most masculine" (Amy-Chinn 316). Spike believes this masculinity will attract women – presumably both his vampire paramour Drusilla, as well as potential human victims. Spike's masculinity is significant to him, and that's why he goes through the effort of his performance, even if Jowett sees it as unneeded.

Despite this determined and conscious performance of masculinity, Spike doesn't necessarily convince those around him of that identity. Judith Butler cites legibility as an important part of the gender binary – feminine must be defined in contrast to masculine (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 17). But when you create a world of "masculinized" women (female vampires and vampire slayers) and "feminized" men (male vampires, as well as sensitive 'new' men like Giles and Xander), how can a tough-guy persona be allowed⁹? The consequence is that others around him are constantly mocking Spike, and challenging the persona he puts forth, even if he does not provide behavioral traits that prompt this mocking. Jowett notes:

...while Spike performs tough-guy masculinity, he is never directly presented as powerful or particularly evil. Despite fearsome descriptions of Spike as a killer, his own comments, and his threats to key characters

⁹ I am borrowing some of Jowett's language here.

like Joyce [Buffy's mother] and Willow, Spike's reputation often seems to exceed his actions... (Jowett, *Sex and the Slayer* 160)

Spike's reputation is far more menacing than any acts of violence the viewer actually witnesses him committing. In season two, Spike and Drusilla appear to be on track to become the Big Bad of the season, but are pushed aside when Spike becomes injured and Angel loses his soul and becomes Angelus once more. In fact, perhaps foreshadowing his future work with the Scooby Gang in later seasons, Spike even teams up with Buffy to take down Angel and get out of Sunnydale safely with Drusilla, who he feels Angelus is trying to take away from him. These instances show some of the ways Spike's reputation for evil seems to be greater than what his actions actually show. This gap between reputation and action is one area that other characters, such as Willow and Xander, use as justification for their questioning of Spike's masculinity.

The language around Spike's (supposed) failed performance of masculinity takes a much more blunt and obvious turn when, in season 4, a chip is planted in his head by The Initiative, that forces him to control his violent vampiric urges through pain. Whenever Spike tries to harm a human being in any way – even something such as pointing a gun at someone with the possible intention of shooting it – the chip in his head fires and causes him splitting pain. It's a strong deterrent from what one can imagine is Spike's "usual" lifestyle. In the seventh episode of season 4, "The Initiative," Spike discovers something is "wrong" with him when he tries to bite Willow and instead finds himself in great pain. The whole scene is written as though Spike is having sexual 'performance' issues – only in this case, it has to do with his ability to bite a young woman. "Maybe you were nervous," Willow suggests, to which Spike replies "I felt all

right when I started. Let's try again" (4.07, "The Initiative"). Willow, still getting over a recent break-up, starts to believe the problem is with her, but Spike assures her "I'd bite you in a heartbeat," if he was able. In a later episode, Giles assures a captured Spike they "have no intention of killing a harmless creature," and Buffy jokingly refers to Spike as "flaccid" (4.09, "Something Blue"). This language of impotence used around Spike remains a running joke for several seasons, and just like the difference between reputation and action discussed before, is another way these characters justify their questioning of Spike's masculinity. In reality it seems that much of their questioning of his masculinity has to do with an expectation of monstrosity (and thus violence and a desire to harm others) that is not being met, and thus being charged to a failed masculinity because the masculine persona which Spike performs suggests that he would live up to the evil monster stereotype.

Spike's ability to bite people is, quite obviously in several scenes, equated with his sexual ability. In her article "Sex and the Single Vampire," author Diane DeKelb-Rittenhouse points to this as a trend in the vampires of *Buffy*: "[*Buffy* vampires] occupy a middle ground, taking sensual pleasure in both [sex and drinking blood]. In this much, at least, they have returned to the innate sexuality of the vampire myth, which is present in folklore and can be seen in the early literary works" (DeKelb-Rittenhouse 145). For vampires in the *Buffy*verse, sexual pleasure and the drinking of blood (often with some sort of violence against the human whose blood is being taken), are frequently linked. When Spike loses his ability to drink blood directly from humans, and participate in violence against them, his masculinity becomes even more of a parody, because with the equating of sex and blood-drinking, if he loses one, he loses the other. Spike initially

despairs over this limitation, going so far as to attempt to stake himself (4.11, “Doomed”), but he grows somewhat more comfortable with it over time.

Without the ability to run about being ‘evil’ and hurting people, Spike becomes, at times, a reluctant ally of the Scooby Gang. Spike is remarkably perceptive of others’ emotions, a trait often gendered in popular culture and media as traditionally feminine. He frequently notices when one of the Scoobies is unhappy or struggling with some internal conflict, even when the others remain oblivious. Dee Amy-Chinn claims: “Spike complicates his biological maleness with a performance of gender that switches between the testosterone-fuelled masculinity and an extreme form of femininity.... it is the confidence that he gains from his excessive masculinity that opens up the space in which he can enact his femininity” (Amy-Chinn 316). Dawn, Buffy’s supernaturally created sister who first appears in season 5, finds Spike particularly pleasant to be around because he treats her more as an equal (5.14, “Crush”). In season 6, when Buffy has been brought back to life by her friends, Spike is the first one she confides in, admitting she may have been in some sort of heaven before they brought her back, but this is only after he notices that something seems wrong, and offers to help (6.03, “After Life”). Spike’s perceptiveness and empathy could be seen as a side effect of his existence as an outsider and a vampire. It is easier to be accepted by others (or even to lure in possible victims) when you can find ways to make them comfortable around you. But this perceptiveness should not mean Spike is any less masculine – simply more caring (and less monstrous).

Spike and Sexuality

In season 5 Spike's role as a comedic figure (discussed in greater depth by Jowett) reaches new levels when he realizes he is in love with Buffy and starts pitifully lurking around her house. He behaves in ways that typically would be considered much more sinister, but to many viewers, because of how Spike's tough-guy persona has been broken down by repeated mocking, it does not come across as menacing. Amy-Chinn explains that season 5 is:

...the season in which he obsessed over Buffy, stole photographs, clothes, and underwear to create a robotic life-size Buffy sex toy programmed to act out his fantasies. Clearly, the narrative here is trying to show that Spike's sexual interest in Buffy is both unhealthy and deviant, so that nothing good can possibly come from its actualization. (Amy-Chinn, 321)

The problem with this analysis is that initially when Spike is stealing those photographs and clothes, the 'Buffybot' (as she is most frequently known) is not in his mind. He only gets that idea after encountering Warren's robot girlfriend April (5.15, "I Was Made to Love You"), more than halfway through the season and after he realized he loved Buffy. While the Buffybot does seem to be Spike crossing some sort of unspoken line, Amy-Chinn's positioning of it is incorrect. Spike is confident that Buffy will eventually want to be with him because of her previous attraction to Angel, and he informs her current boyfriend, Riley, that he's not "the long haul guy" because Buffy "needs some monster in her man" (5.10, "Into the Woods"). He is certain that Buffy will eventually give in and be with him because he sees himself as a changed vampire due to the chip in his head, and

the positive influence she has had on him (5.14, “Crush”). Only after being repeatedly rejected does Spike turn to the creation of the Buffybot.

In season 6, Spike and Buffy’s relationship actually takes place, despite many protests by Buffy that it’s not anything special, and that she doesn’t truly care about Spike. It starts with a kiss at the end of “Once More, With Feeling” (6.07), and is over by “Seeing Red” (6.19) after Spike attempts to rape an injured Buffy and leaves town, horrified by what he has done. One of the biggest tensions in the Buffy/Spike relationship is Buffy’s fear about what her friends would think of her if they knew she was involved with him. Whatever her own feelings may be, and despite whatever she may have shared with Angel in the past, it is clear to Buffy that she is not “supposed” to be having feelings for a vampire, especially one with as much a penchant for violence as Spike has. Literary critic Mary Hallab explains “...however witty and sexy and even nice Spike may be, as a vampire without a soul, he is a disgusting ‘thing’ that must be destroyed” (Hallab 106). And “disgusting” is just one of many words Buffy herself uses to describe Spike in the build-up to the relationship she insists will never happen (and then does).

The moment when Spike discovers that because of some loophole from the spell that brought Buffy back to life, he can hit her without causing his chip to go off, is a turning point. Buffy Studies scholar Rhonda Wilcox points out “It is also worth noting that Buffy and Spike do not make love until they discover that he *can* physically harm her – and though they do engage in their usual violent ‘dance’ (‘that’s all we’ve ever done,’ he tells her in ‘Fool for Love’), he does not really hurt her” (Wilcox 89). The scene (in episode 6.09, “Smashed”) begins with the two of them fighting, and Buffy taunts him:

“Poor Spikey. Can’t be a human, can’t be a vampire. Where the hell do you fit in?” Spike responds that he’s in love with her, and Buffy continues mocking him:

Buffy: You’re in love with pain. Admit it, you like me because you enjoy getting beat down. So really, who’s screwed up?

Spike: Hello. Vampire. I’m supposed to be treading on the dark side. What’s your excuse?

Eventually they stop fighting when Buffy kisses him, and as they have sex, the house falls down around them. Although she is referring to other scenes in the show, mostly involving Angel, Allison McCracken’s quip feels quite apt for this moment: “While these scenes are heterosexual, they are not heteronormative” (McCracken 127). Buffy and Spike are not having normative vanilla sex – in fact it is so violent (throwing each other against or through one wall or another) that it knocks down a building which, albeit, had already been somewhat damaged from their fighting.

When they awake the morning after the consummation of their relationship, at the start of the next episode, both have visible bruises and marks on their bodies and faces. C. Jacob Hale discusses how SM practice can be useful in “transcommunity discourse” because of the way it allows for a “retooling” of the body away from being defined by genitalia (Hale 65). I would argue that this is also a useful concept for considering Buffy and Spike’s sexual relationship, as Hale points out “SM practices that decouple genital sexuality from bodily pleasures provide the backdrop for such phenomena of remapping” (Hale 66). It is made clear in Spike and Buffy’s interactions in the ‘morning after’ scene that not all of the bruises are from the fight and later, in the episode, Buffy refers to the previous night as “the most perverse, degrading experience of [her] life” (6.10,

“Wrecked”). Their sex was not anything like the sex Buffy is shown having with other male characters in earlier seasons, but this Buffy is also not the same Buffy. This Buffy died and was dragged back from a place she believes to have been heaven, because her friends couldn’t figure out how to cope without her. Her relationship with Spike is partly a result of the alienation she feels from her friends, but she doesn’t want to admit that she might be able to develop real feelings for him. With these violent “bodily pleasures” in which Buffy is partaking with Spike, she is (perhaps subconsciously) attempting to separate sex from the traditional gender roles that frequently go along with it, but is conflicted about it. Buffy is incredibly unhappy about being back in Sunnydale, but she is trying to figure out how to keep going, now that she has been dragged back. Buffy is trying to relearn how to be herself. As she and Spike talk later in the episode, she insists to him “That might be how you get off, but it's not my style.” Spike replies: “No, it's your calling. Gave me a run for my money, Slayer” (6.10, “Wrecked”). Buffy is learning to remap her desires, queerly, through violent, kinky sex with Spike, because it is part of her process of coping with her return to life. For Spike, however, it is continuing his own connections between (consensual) violence, sex, and love. While violence and sex may be associated with vampires normally, the fact that Spike’s relationships have consensual violence, as well as love, is beginning to present queered possibilities for love and sex.

Violence in the Buffyverse

As we saw earlier with Spike’s inability to bite being linked to his virility, Laura Shepherd argues in “Policing the Boundaries of Desire in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*” that in the Buffyverse, sex and violence are inextricably linked. This linking of violence and

desire is an occurrence that the characters themselves comment upon within the show. Buffy admits in season 4 to Willow that she wonders if pain is “where the fire come from” and asks “Can a nice, safe relationship be that intense? I know it’s nuts but part of me believes that real love and passion have to go hand in hand with pain and fighting” (4.09, “Something Blue”). This conversation could even be seen as foreshadowing Buffy’s later kinky, violent relationship with Spike¹⁰, as this was also the episode where a spell gone awry causes Spike and Buffy to be temporarily in love and engaged to be married. Author and scholar Justine Larbalestier argues that this episode was one of a few that specifically attempt to address online fan discussions about the show, and while the episode itself was comical, “Season 5 has turned ‘Something Blue’ into a perverse glimpse of the future as Spike falls in love with the Slayer” (Larbalestier 232). Larbalestier was writing before the show had finished, however, so her analysis does not take into account the actual relationship that occurred in season 6. While Spike and Buffy’s relationship may indeed be considered “perverse” by certain moral standards for multiple reasons – Buffy is not in love with Spike, they have violent sex (sometimes even in public, as in 6.13, “Dead Things”) – that is not how Larbalestier seems to using the word. The “perverse”-ness of their relationship has to do with the violent (essentially BDSM) elements, which are not considered “appropriate” by most of society.

The truly final end to the Buffy/Spike relationship occurs in the nineteenth episode of season 6, entitled “Seeing Red.” Prior to this episode, Buffy had already broken things off with Spike because of the realization that she did not love him and

¹⁰ Buffy also has several erotic training scenes with Angel and Riley, but especially with the latter, she is not in pain because of how great her supernatural strength is, and it’s doubtful Angel would keep training with her if he actually thought she was in serious pain as a result.

should not simply be using him. By the time “Seeing Red” takes place, Spike has become desperate to win Buffy back. As Wilcox explains, “He wants to believe that if they have sex again, she will recognize within herself not just the ‘feelings’ she admits to in this scene, but also real love” (Wilcox 35). According to an interview with James Marsters (the actor who portrays Spike), this scenario was based on an experience one of the show’s writers had had, except in her case, the roles had been reversed (it was a woman forcing herself on a man). In Marsters’ opinion, the episode was a “mistake.... It worked out and everything but I’m not really sure it expressed what the author was intending and on that score it was not successful” (Marsters 41 *Mania* interview). The scene was violent, and although not entirely out of character for Spike, it was certainly not something an audience would expect from the softer, ‘impotent’ Spike they had seen from season 4 on. Gregory Erickson and Jennifer Lemberg expand, in reference to *Seeing Red*:

Accustomed to years of jokes about ‘Mr. Pointy,’ viewers of the show are likely to be astonished by these elaborate attempts at penetration and their clear bodily consequences – not dust but wounds left in their wake. In these scenes, the repeated language of desperation, vengeance, and desire – for power, for sex, for revenge or restitution – signals... an in-between space of good and bad, human and not-human. (Erickson and Lemberg 122)

If the liminal identity of both-dead-and-alive as a vampire was not enough for Spike, here he is also in between “good and bad, human and not-human.” Buffy herself suggested this in her mocking of Spike before they had sex for the first time in “Smashed.” His actions in this episode, however, defy the underlying element of consent that is so

important in their sexual relationship. Suddenly the audience is forced to face a violent encounter that ends with neither dust (a dead vampire) nor pleasure (as when Buffy and Spike have consensual violent sex). Spike's impotence no longer seems to be a factor, because he has become a monstrous creature, to be feared once more.

After Spike attacks Buffy in her bathroom, he returns to his crypt and realizes what he has just done. Although conflicted because he knows that his formerly more evil self (the potential "Big Bad" of season 2) would not have cared, Spike, inspired by a conversation with a demon, decides that it is time for a change. Wilcox explains his crisis: "This episode is the turning point in Spike's journey, because in it he finally recognizes his own wrongdoing, truly sees his own darkness. Spike's attack on Buffy represents his attacks on all his earlier victims: the horror is brought home. We are not allowed to distance the evil he has caused" (Wilcox 35-6). But in addition to being a turning point in Spike's journey, it also seems to be a moment when any potential queering effect he has had on gender or sexuality is gone. The Spike who attempts to rape Buffy is not queering anything at that moment, but instead following an all-too common narrative of violence against women. While we have heard of the terrible things Spike did in the past, in the course of the show, he hasn't quite lived up to his reputation, but his attempted rape of Buffy changes that contradiction. This time he has truly hurt someone the audience is invested in, and the first time the audience is forced to truly confront Spike as a monster.

As a result of what he has done, Spike decides to go through the Demon Trials¹¹, and he is granted his soul upon completion of them. Wilcox argues that “Whether the reader believes Spike chose to undergo horrendous trials from a conscious or subconscious desire for a soul, certainly it is significant that he is given the soul as a result of his own agency (as opposed to Angelus, who had his soul forced upon him)” (Wilcox 37). Spike has recognized “his own darkness” and decides to do something about it. Once more Spike stands in contrast to Angel, Buffy’s first love, but this time he is not only in contrast to Angel, but becoming more like him (in that he will have a soul), but by choice, simultaneously making him fundamentally different from Angel, who was forced to have a soul as punishment. Throughout their relationship, part of why Buffy could not love Spike is because she still believed him to be something “disgusting” because he lacked a soul. By regaining a soul, he is proving once and for all just how much his love of Buffy has changed him. Shepherd notes about Buffy and Spike’s teamwork in season 7: “...the violence has been excised from their relationship by that point, along with the sex.... *Because* there is no violence, I suggest, there is no sex either; in the Buffyverse, the two are co-constitutive” (Shepherd 36). There is a gap, however, in Shepherd’s theorizing of sex and violence in the Buffyverse: it does not account for love in these violent, sexual relationships, and how that can affect the dynamic. If beings that are monstrous and violent are supposed to be evil, how does an audience comprehend a character who is both of those things, and yet loves? Spike’s combination of seemingly conflicting values forces to audience to queer their understanding of violence and sex and love, and how they can all inter-relate.

¹¹ A series of tests arranged by a demon shaman in exchange for the granting of a difficult wish.

Spike and Love

The ability to love has been a trademark for Spike from his human days as William, all the way through to the end of the show, even if he doesn't always know how to show it. In the first few seasons where he appears, Spike is wholly focused on Drusilla. In recounting his very first appearances, Amy-Chinn discusses how initially we only see his vampire face, but "Not until the appearance of Drusilla do we see Spike's human guise. In the presence of femininity Spike immediately transforms from a macho posturing monster into a man of breathtaking beauty and erotic potential" (Amy-Chinn 317). The relationship between Spike and Drusilla is initially what defines both of them on the show. Drusilla has been weakened by some unknown events prior to their appearance on the show, and Spike has sworn to find a way to nurse her back to full health and murderous strength. Diane DeKelb-Rittenhouse, in another comparison to Angel(us), argues:

For if Angelus is, as Angel, a creature capable of redemption through love, Spike himself, the gleefully evil 'big bad' who seems to have no redeeming qualities, is not immune to the vulnerability imparted by this softer emotion. From the very first, we have seen Spike act selflessly with regard to one other creature, Drusilla. (DeKelb-Rittenhouse 151)

Angel is frequently seen as redeeming himself through fighting for good and his love for Buffy grows out of that partnership. However, the chip in Spike's head forces him to fight for the side of good, because other vampires and demons are the only ones he can hit without painful consequences¹². But he falls in love with Buffy and goes through the

¹² Until Buffy's resurrection at the beginning of season 6 turns her into a loophole.

Demon Trials to regain his soul. There is no reason he should not be seen as equal (or even above) Angel in his quest for redemption. Though I have illustrated many of Angel and Spike's similar qualities, it is important to recognize the differences between the two characters' early appearances. Angel is a mysterious stranger, who refuses to even identify himself at first. Meanwhile, Spike is almost immediately shown to be in a loving (albeit undead) relationship. Jowett acknowledges "Spike and Dru's relationship seems to be based on 'real' love, and this distinguished him early on from other dead boys" (Jowett, *Sex and the Slayer* 161). Despite the ways Spike becomes more like Angel over the course of the show, the way he becomes most like him is that they are both unique, and both the most human (and less monstrous) vampires in the Buffyverse.

Because of the way vampires are constructed in the world of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – undead creatures without souls, who are essentially possessed by demons that inherit the person's memories – things like morality and love would be presumed to be out of their vocabulary. Spike defies this first with his love for Drusilla, and again with his love for Buffy. In season 2, episode 13 ("Surprise"), a super-demon that Spike and Drusilla have resurrected, the Judge, complains that the two of them "stink of humanity" because they "share affection and jealousy." Spike and Drusilla seem unsurprised, and certainly not put-off by this assertion, even though they are both certifiably evil at this time (by Buffyverse standards of evil). Later on, after they leave Sunnydale, Drusilla leaves Spike for a chaos demon, stating that he "wasn't demon enough for her" (3.08, "Lover's Walk"). DeKelb-Rittenhouse wonders "Could it be that, in a mirror of Angel's situation, the one element that ensured Spike's damnation – his ability to love completely and selflessly – will ultimately pave the way for his redemption?" (DeKelb-Rittenhouse

151). Love between creatures of evil may be acceptable, but they still have to maintain a minimum level of evil, and that is what Spike seems to lose, the more he loves. But what he loses in ‘demon-ness’ he gains in humanity – that is, very human qualities that do not normally fall into the category of “monster” where vampires like Spike would normally be placed. Wilcox argues “Spike owns no human soul, yet repeatedly *does* good; if he can be seen as capable of change, capable of good, capable of *love*, then he can represent an existentialist definition of good” (Wilcox 87). Spike’s undergoing the Demon Trials alone could stand as proof that he is capable of change, and thus follow Wilcox’s “existentialist definition of good.” If vampires are mostly, by definition, evil, then for Spike to be considered good, he must also be considered less monstrous, continuing to queer our notion of what monstrous can be.

Conclusions and Connections

Buffy is the newest text I am examining chronologically, and thus had some of the most direct influence on more recent texts (there are even joking references to it in a show of the same period, *Charmed*, when vampire-like creatures appear). *Buffy* brought vampires to a mainstream audience in a way that movies and books prior to it may not have been able to. While the casual viewer can stumble on to a television show while flipping through the channels, it is less likely that someone would stumble upon a novel or a movie in the same way. Jowett also suggests in her analysis that “The inclusion of Angel (who has a soul and no longer feeds on humans) also allows the show to poke some fun at the Ricean ‘vampire with a conscience,’ and both Spike and Angel function to blur morality and the boundaries between human and monster” (Jowett, *Sex and the*

Slayer 144). Thus while Angel and Spike may be ‘poking fun’ at some of the other vampires of the era, they are also doing more important work. Spike was not supposed to be as long-lived a character as he ended up being, but Whedon kept him alive because of audience interest. Spike’s ability to queer notions of love and sex and violence seems to have captured viewers’ minds, thus granting the character longer life.

The blurred lines between human and monster are a key part of many modern vampire narratives, but that wasn’t always the case. Louis Palmer leaves his discussion of *Buffy* with several questions, rather than a clear conclusion: “In any case, whatever we call them, we see a spate of vampires who don’t kill humans. Is this an attempt to make them into a more acceptable life form, less dangerous, more like us? But isn’t the point of being a vampire to be a predator?” (Palmer 147). If the point of vampires is no longer to be a predator, then what have they become? This is not a question that I will attempt to answer, but instead leave for future writers to consider. If *Buffy* shows us compelling examples of vampires who blur the lines between vampire and human, we must consider how the arc of vampire narratives through history reached that point. How did those “Ricean vampires” begin to change our understanding of vampires, when brought to the silver screen in the mid 1990s? That is what I shall explore in my next chapter.

Chapter 2

A Monster with Golden Curls: Queer Family and the Eternal Child in the 1994

Interview with the Vampire film adaptation

A beautiful blond child sits up in a bed full of frilly, soft-looking pillows, suddenly well again. She smiles and turns to the man next to her, and informs him “I want some more.” Thus is the child Claudia given “the Dark Gift” by Lestat de Lioncourt, turning her into a vampire in the 1994 film adaptation of Anne Rice’s novel, *Interview with the Vampire*. *Interview with the Vampire* is not Claudia’s story, however. Rather, it is the anguished retelling by Louis de Pointe du Lac (to a young journalist) of how he was turned into a vampire in 1791 by Lestat, and what has happened in his undead life since then. Claudia figures significantly in the story, though, as the adopted undead child of both Lestat and Louis (the latter nearly drained her, and the former gave her his blood to bring her back). She is also the only major female character in the film (and in the book, for that matter)¹³. As scholar Lorna Jowett acknowledges: “In my own experience, female readers are interested in Claudia, though her character is generally ignored by critics and reviewers, who tend to concentrate solely on Louis and Lestat” (Jowett, “Mute and Beautiful”). Despite her significance in the relationship between Louis and Lestat, and her prominence in a large portion of both the film and novel, Claudia does seem to be often overlooked by critics. This chapter hopes to remedy some of that disparity in analysis, and to highlight how Claudia presents a uniquely queer and erotic vampire because of how her child-like appearance and adult maturity queer many

¹³ Later books in the *Vampire Chronicles* do include more female characters, but at the time when Anne Rice began the series, she was particularly interested in exploring gay male experience (Ramsland 18)

of her interactions with other vampires. Anne Rice may have consciously played with the homoerotic possibilities of all of her vampires, but Claudia is mostly left out of those pairings, leaving her free to queer other ideas around gender, sexuality, and age.

Interview with the Vampire begins with Louis (Brad Pitt) bringing an unnamed interviewer back to a sparse room, and offering to tell him his story, although fans of the *Vampire Chronicles* book series know this young man to be Daniel Molloy, who reappears multiple times throughout the series. Louis begins his story: who he was as a human (a wealthy plantation owner outside of New Orleans), and how he first meets his maker, Lestat (Tom Cruise). Lestat offers Louis the “choice” he “never had” (*Interview with the Vampire*), of whether he wants to become immortal or not. Once turned, however, Louis quickly becomes uncomfortable with questions about whether his soul is damned, and about feeling guilt for killing mortals to keep himself alive. Lestat creates Claudia (Kirsten Dunst) as their vampiric daughter in an attempt to keep Louis from leaving him, but his own clashes with her end up leading to Claudia’s multiple attempts on his life.

Louis and Claudia leave a weakened Lestat in their burning New Orleans apartments as they set sail for Europe, in hopes of learning more about the origins of vampires. They settle in Paris, where they encounter the Théâtre des Vampires, led by Armand (Antonio Banderas), who offers Louis the answers he has been seeking, but only if Louis will join him as his companion (and thus abandon Claudia). Claudia ends up being killed by the vampires of the Théâtre, for the crime of killing Lestat, but Armand rescues Louis in hopes that the loss of Claudia will now free Louis to join him. Louis kills off the Théâtre vampires in revenge, rejects Armand, and goes off on his own. The

film ends with a thrilled Daniel begging Louis to turn him, which Louis refuses, and as Daniel drives off, still excited about the story, Lestat appears in his car, offering him the “choice [he] never had,” echoing his words to Louis nearly two centuries earlier.

For my analysis of the character of Claudia, I will be considering three main elements of her story: the ‘Undead Family’ of Lestat, Louis, and Claudia as a form of queer kinship and family; Claudia herself as a sort of ‘Eternal Child’ who will never be able to grow into an adult woman; lastly the unusual relationship between Louis and Claudia as it seems to blur the line between ‘Father and Lover.’ The character of Claudia does not actively transgress norms around gender and sexuality so much as blur lines simply by her very existence and her relationships with other vampires. Claudia will not physically age, no matter how much she may grow emotionally and intellectually, and thus her character’s story provides interesting commentaries on family, childhood, and relationships. Claudia’s uniqueness in this respect¹⁴ is what makes her so compelling, while her placement as a secondary character – the third wheel of sorts to the homoerotic pairing of Lestat and Louis – also allows her to push more boundaries than her male counterparts.

Situating Interview with the Vampire

In transitioning from *Buffy* to *Interview With the Vampire*, a key shift is happening in the texts I am examining: the vampires are now the main characters of these narratives. As much as *Buffy* challenges some of the traditional tropes of vampire stories,

¹⁴ That is, as a child vampire. There are not many representations of child vampires in vampire fiction, although there are some, such as Danny Glick in Stephen King’s *Salem’s Lot* (published in 1975), and Eli in the 2008 film *Let the Right One In*.

it still (in title, and in narrative) places the emphasis on those hunting the monsters (and, through a shared mortality, the monsters' victims), rather than the monsters themselves. Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* began to change that classic narrative from the beginning of their publication in the mid 1970s, but the film adaptation of the first book, *Interview with the Vampire*, made in the early to mid 1990s, situated it clearly as part of the trend towards humanized vampires, until the mid 2000s when vampires seemed to become simply the love interest of many a tween girl thanks to texts like *Twilight* and *The Vampire Diaries*.

Anne Rice was closely involved with the writing of the script and production of the film adaptation of *Interview* and was particularly moved by Kirsten Dunst's portrayal of the child vampire (Ramsland 21). While the film is an adaptation and understandably had to cut certain characters and events for time and to translate from written text to a visual medium, it is considered a very faithful adaptation, praised by Anne Rice as "perfection," despite her initial concerns about the casting of Tom Cruise (Ramsland 21). As such I will be using some secondary sources about the novel to aid my analysis of the film, as much of the analysis about characters and larger plot elements remain accurate for the film, even if written originally about the book¹⁵. In terms of broader theory I will use an essay by Judith Butler on kinship and heterosexuality. I will also consider several sources on queer and erotic children (Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, James R. Kincaid, Kathryn Bond Stockton). Claudia's queerness and queering is my focus, but in order to consider her individually, I must first consider the context in which she is "born" to Louis and Lestat, because her relationships is where much of the queering takes place.

¹⁵ I will also do my best to clearly delineate when sources are focused solely on the book, since there are also several that consider both texts.

Undead Family

Louis, Lestat, and Claudia form a queer sort of family in *Interview with the Vampire*, a child made undead by two undead men, who take her from the side of her mother's plague-ridden corpse. Like the classic story of the couple that has a child in attempt to save a failing marriage, Lestat explicitly turns Claudia to keep Louis with him, explaining to the newly reborn Claudia:

Lestat: You're mine and Louis' daughter now. You see, Louis was going to leave us...he was going to go away...now he's not. Now he's going to stay, and make you happy.

Claudia: Louis! (Runs and hugs him, while he glares at Lestat over her shoulder)

Louis: You fiend.

Lestat: (smiling) One happy family.

However, Lestat and Claudia ultimately do not get along. Claudia, playing the role of the misbehaving child, frequently flouts Lestat's rules about killing in the home, in a series of scenes with a dressmaker and piano teacher killed by Claudia. Upon killing the dressmaker Lestat literally slaps her on the wrist and reminds her to have "a little practicality" (since now they need another dressmaker to finish her dress). While Claudia can match Lestat easily in her heartless killing, she also cares deeply for Louis. She does not appreciate Lestat's sometimes condescending treatment of her, as though she were a doll. As Louis describes her to Daniel, "To me she was a child, but to Lestat, a pupil, an infant prodigy with a lust for killing that matched his own." While Lestat mainly embraced her for her violent nature, Louis seemed to see Claudia more as a whole personality – perhaps like two parents with different visions for their children's

upbringing, but with a darker twist. Despite Lestat's pronouncement of "one happy family" upon Claudia's creation, that is not how their family stays.

Being dysfunctional, however, is not particularly queer, it is just a key element in the family of Lestat, Louis, and Claudia. What is queer, however, is how they are shown building their relationship as a family unit. In her essay "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" Judith Butler suggests:

If we understand kinship as a set of practices that institutes relationships of various kinds which negotiate the reproduction of life and the demands of death, then kinship practices will be those that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child-rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death (to name a few). (Butler, "Kinship" 14-15)

Butler names all sorts of practices that can help to constitute "kinship," and argues that kinship is more the performance of these practices than simply a blood bond. These kinship practices appear in the "undead family" of Lestat, Louis, and Claudia (as I have nicknamed them) in several ways, but often not in the traditional sense that a mortal family would experience them. Claudia's "birth" into the family requires her mortal death, and the "child-rearing" process which Lestat mainly takes charge of involves teaching Claudia to kill. This undead family is clearly experiencing and building a form of kinship bond with each other, but not through any traditional practices that we as viewers might expect of a family: in short, they bear the *form* of a family (albeit one headed by a same-sex couple), but the actual content of their interactions has changed.

The traditional kinship practices have all been queered into new practices more suitable for a family of vampires.

What ultimately shatters this queer undead family is Claudia's realization that she will never grow up, and her decision to primarily blame Lestat for that state of affairs. After thirty years of living together in New Orleans as a family, Claudia begins to ask questions about how she came to be the way she is, screaming: "Which one of you did it? Which one of you made me the way I am?" Claudia is aware that something about her is not normal – to use an earlier definition of the word, there is something "queer" about Claudia, in that she will never age beyond her prepubescent body. Louis takes Claudia back to the house where he found her with her mother's corpse, decades earlier, and tells her the truth of how she was made. Her first reaction is to say she hates them both, but she comes to Louis later than night and says she cannot hate him, but that the two of them need to leave Lestat. Lorna Jowett writes in "'Mute and Beautiful': The Representation of the Female in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*" that "...Claudia hates Lestat as the creator of all her burdens: her arrested physical development, her dependence on her two fathers... and her binding love for Louis.... Louis authors her problems as much as Lestat, ...but when she finds Lestat committed the act, he becomes the focus of her hate" (Jowett, "Mute and Beautiful"). Even though Louis is the one who found her and nearly killed her, Lestat's giving of his blood is the reason Claudia became a vampire, and thus he is, as Jowett puts it, the "focus of her hate." If Claudia were to turn on both Louis and Lestat, she would be alone in the world, and so by choosing to focus her hate on Lestat, she shifts Louis to being her primary (and only) companion. From the way Louis carries himself with intense guilt, and the way he explains the night of her creation, it seems that

he considers himself equally at fault for Claudia's vampiric transformation, even if she forgives him for his part in it. Claudia's love for Louis is a large part of what earns him this reprieve, but it is also part of what leads to her death in Paris later on.

While Judith Butler's essay on kinship and heterosexuality is largely dealing with contemporary discussions around gay marriage and how queer kinship can and should be defined by government and society, the undead family of *Interview with the Vampire* is limited mainly by vampire law, and moral and patriarchal law as they are carried over from human society. Vampires mainly govern themselves, and as evidenced by Louis and Claudia's drawn-out quest for the origin of vampires, there is not a lot for them to go on, because of the way vampires live such isolated existences. It is no surprise then that vampire society seems to borrow certain moral and patriarchal values from human society. Scholar Candace R. Benefiel writes in her article "Blood Relations: The Gothic Perversion of the Nuclear Family in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*": "No biological mother is necessary, and the vampire 'family,' isolated from human society by its extreme longevity and its essential otherness, becomes an intensely inwardly directed unit.... The vampire family, incestuous and blurred as it is, presents a subversive alternative model to the nuclear family" (Benefiel 263). The vampires are borrowing the ideas and ideals of family structure from humans but adapting them to their status as immortal, liminal, queer beings, and thus their queer family can then be accepted by a mainstream audience, as Benefiel argues, as a subversive alternative. While no biological mother is needed to create a vampire, all vampires started out as human, and did once have biological mothers. And because vampire families are created by a sharing of blood, the term "incestuous" is itself being queered in Benefiel's usage. Claudia and Louis are

no more related biologically than a blood donor and the patient who receives a transfusion, and yet, because of the form the undead family takes on, it feels like more. For vampires, after all, blood is life. Despite all of its problems, and its unhappy ending, the undead family of *Interview with the Vampire* does succeed for several decades – not a long time by vampire standards, but certainly as long (or longer) than some human families. This queered construction of family, thus, becomes a subversive suggestion within the film, showing a family structure coming about in a non-traditional way.

Blood is life for vampires, and without it they cannot truly survive and thrive. In her article “Women and Vampires: Nightmare or Utopia?” Judith E. Johnson writes of a sort of symmetrical justice in how Claudia poisons Lestat with the dead blood of two young boys, in contrast to his brutal torturing and killing of two prostitutes earlier on the night when he (and Louis) made her. There is one thing lacking in this symmetry, however, which Johnson misses: when Claudia (unknowingly) creates this mirror image, she is changing it from a heterosexual image to a homosexual one. It is no longer Lestat preying on two sensuous and fully-grown women, but him preying on two adolescent boys. The image is no longer one of acceptable (if somewhat looked down upon) heterosexuality, but instead a dangerous, pedophilic homosexuality¹⁶. Johnson describes this symmetrical justice as “essential rather than a decorative plot element,” and presents it as part of a “revolt subtext” in vampire fiction (Johnson 77). This “revolt subtext” Johnson writes about could then also be considered to have a queer element to it, even though Johnson largely frames it in a feminist context. In creating this queer and dangerous mirror to the earlier image with the prostitutes, Claudia is outing Lestat’s

¹⁶ This dangerous pedophilia is also echoed in the vagueness surrounding Claudia and Louis’ relationship.

desires for young attractive males – a queer desire which the film does not hide, but does its best to suppress by mostly showing him go after young males who still appear to be of consenting age by modern standards. The incident with the poisoning is the one time the film shows him feeding off of much younger boys, although Louis does state at another time that Lestat “for seconds, he preferred a gilded beautiful youth”. Claudia may be betraying her bloodline and setting up her family for its doom by her actions against Lestat, but there is a subversive queer element to it nonetheless. The film does not outright condemn Lestat’s predilection for “beautiful youths”

Eternal Child

Any discussion of Claudia as an “Eternal Child” must at least acknowledge the age disparity between her representation in the novel (five years old), and her portrayal in the film (Kirsten Dunst was twelve when they finished filming, although some filming tricks were used to make her appear a little younger). Citing an article by Rachel Abramowitz for *Premiere* magazine, scholar Diana Reep states “Director [Neil] Jordan wanted a professional child actress because he was afraid the part had so many dark implications, an amateur could be psychologically harmed” (Reep et al. 125). But this age difference – from five to twelve – is significant in how Claudia is viewed in the film, versus the novel. In the context of the novel it makes a little more sense when Nancy Schumann writes “For Claudia, the vampire child, vampirism enforces an eternal victim role upon her. No matter how experienced and strong-willed she becomes, she will always look like a doll and be treated as such” (Schumann 113). The Claudia of the film, however, does indeed shift how she presents herself to the world. While still child-like,

there is a noticeable shift in her appearance when she and Louis arrive in Paris: Claudia acquires more adult-looking dresses, and wears her golden curls up in intricate up-dos, as opposed to the loose curls of her time in New Orleans. In the film, Claudia is able to translate some of the internal “growing up” to her exterior, making her appear slightly less doll-like, and slightly more like a small version of a grown woman¹⁷.

Despite these small changes in appearance, however, Claudia does still appear as a child to society, and that is one of the reasons why the vampires of the Théâtre des Vampires take an immediate disliking to her. Because of her youthful form, it is assumed she can never be truly independent, but must rely on other vampires to stand in as pseudo-guardians in the eyes of society – if she were to try and go off on her own she would constantly have to hide the fact that she was alone from adult humans around her, who would assume no child could safely live on their own¹⁸. In the film, Claudia is often seen luring in victims by appearing to be a sad lost child, and while sometimes Lestat appears to be watching from a distance, she does seem fine hunting by herself. Claudia, in reality, seems to be quite capable of taking care of herself.

But Claudia also relies heavily on Louis for companionship, and for that reason she would always remain dependent on other vampires. While vampires with adult appearance can disappear into crowds more easily, Claudia would always stand out as a child among adults, and so she would always need someone with the appearance of an

¹⁷ She is also of an age when many women’s bodies start to become recognized as sexual objects, in a way that does not happen with children.

¹⁸ This could also be seen as a way that the narrative is playing with ideas around women being dependent on men and unable to live safely on their own without fathers/brothers/husbands to take care of them.

adult to accompany her. A child on its own is suspect in a way that a lone adult is not.

Queer theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton writes:

The silences surrounding the queerness of children happen to be broken – loquaciously broken and broken almost only – by fictional forms. Fictions literally offer the forms that certain broodings on children might take. And certain broodings on children are facilitated, generally, dramatically, by our encountering a still ghostly child (Stockton 2)

Stockton is well aware of the ways that fiction can challenge common fears around childhood – including the elusive figure of the queer child – and while her image of “a still ghostly child” is not in reference to Claudia, it could certainly be applied to her. Staying true to Rice’s original novel that repeatedly describes vampires as being unnaturally pale, it is not a stretch to say that the vampires in *Interview* also have a “ghostly” appearance when roaming the streets at night (due, no doubt, to extensive hours in the makeup chair). The stillness comes from the moment before Claudia attacks her victims – she deliberately lures them in close by giving the appearance of a lost innocent child, only to spring into action with unnatural speed and end their lives. The fiction of the vampiric eternal child allow us to consider queerness and erotic possibilities of children’s bodies in a new light. Claudia appears repeatedly as this “still ghostly child” and when concerned adults seek to help her, this doll-like monster with golden curls viciously attacks them instead.

One of the most striking sequences highlighting Claudia’s unhappiness with being stuck as a woman in a child’s body is not actually a scene from the novel, but does echo certain scenes from the book. Claudia spots a naked Creole woman bathing in a window,

and asks Louis if she can “be like her one day.” Later it is revealed that Claudia has killed the woman and hidden her under her pile of dolls on her bed, in what Diana Reep calls “a symbolic attempt to possess the woman’s age and beauty” (Reep et al. 129). Louis’ melancholy narration around this point of the film explains “Thirty years had passed yet her body remained that of an eternal child. Her eyes alone told the story of her age, staring from under her doll-like curls with a questioning that will one day need an answer.” Claudia had become aware of the fact that she used to be able to grow, but was now frozen in her current form – an eternal child, unable to follow the traditional narrative of growing up. She even tries cutting off her curls, to no avail, as they grow back again only moments later. This realization of an earlier point in time when she was human is what leads her to ask questions about how she came to be the way she is. As Reep explains, Claudia (in the film) “is physically just on the threshold of puberty but is unable to move into adulthood. However, as the years pass, her mind matures, and she becomes a woman emotionally” (Reep et al. 129). The confident self-assured Claudia we see in Paris takes time to reach that point, although due to the structure of the film, this internal growth is shown mainly in montage. Taking her revenge on Lestat for turning her into a vampire seems to be the key turning point for Claudia in becoming, at least for a time, somewhat comfortable with/resigned to her fate of appearing as an eternal child.

From the moment Claudia forgives Louis for his part in turning her into a vampire, there is a clear difference in her physical carriage and interactions with other vampires. She has realized that she will never outgrow her doll-like appearance, and seems to have embraced a more mature air in defiance of that. After hugging him, Claudia states: “Louis, my love. I was mortal till you...gave me your immortal kiss.”

There is a definite change to her tone in speaking to him – more confident, and unwavering. When Louis warns her that Lestat will never allow them to leave him, Claudia responds with a determined “Oh...really?” that suggests she is not going to be bullied so easily anymore. This resolute and independent Claudia is when her queerness (and queering) becomes most apparent, because she no longer has her childlike tone and bearing. This is the moment when Claudia’s age and maturity becomes most evident. In the introduction to their anthology *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley argue:

People panic when that sexuality takes on a life outside the sanctioned scripts of child’s play. And nowhere is this panic more explosive than in the field of the *queer* child, the child whose play confirms neither the comfortable stories of child (a)sexuality nor the supposedly blissful promises of adult heteronormativity (Bruhm and Hurley ix)

Having acknowledged the fact that she will never be able to grow into a woman’s body, Claudia’s lack of access to full adult sexuality has become clear to her. She begins to embrace the doubling of her relationship to Louis as both father and lover, thus challenging the presumed asexuality of children’s’ bodies and desires, and incest taboos¹⁹. For Claudia, however, this is not about actively challenging societal norms – it is simply a desire to make the most of her situation. She is no normal child, and no normal vampire – but somehow both and neither, and altogether very unusual in a way that queers our understanding of both.

¹⁹ Although, again, they are not biologically related in the way that most incest taboos are understood.

Father and Lover

The relationship between Claudia and Louis starts out as a very straightforward father-daughter relationship, but shifts over time – most notably in that moment of forgiveness, as I have already discussed. By removing Louis from their undead family, the dynamic changes because they are now a duo instead of a trio, and Claudia has matured in the decades since she became a vampire. Louis and Claudia call each other beloved, and were it not for the difference in their physical ages, their depth of affection for each other would suggest something more than a familial bond. Lorna Jowett argues: “Physical though the vampire form may be, Louis and Claudia’s love is not a sexual love, however erotic it may seem. It may be for Louis almost intellectual, a love of the mind, which may be why he transfers it whenever he meets someone whose mind seems more like his. What it is for Claudia we never know” (Jowett, “Mute and Beautiful”). Jowett believes Claudia’s side of the relationship may never be known because Louis is the narrator, of both the book and the film. Louis is the one who is being interviewed, and thus it is his voice and perspective that is being elevated. But in the film, while Louis does narrate at some points, the viewer can watch for Louis and Claudia equally as they interact with one another. Jowett’s suggestion that their love is “intellectual” in Louis’ eyes is a supposition that would be just as valid as asserting that, for Claudia, it would be sexual were it not for her pre-pubescent body. Jowett has no textual evidence but her contention supports her larger argument about Claudia’s lack of voice.

If the love between Claudia and Louis were sexual, it would be breaking incest taboos (because he is one of her two “fathers”), and fears around sexualized children, and that is something that would be unacceptable in a mainstream text like *Interview*. Bruhm

and Hurley write: “A discussion of the narrative constraints of the queer child encourages us to take stock of the temporality of normative life narrative, to investigate and isolate our investments in a past and a future where the child is a placeholder for adult desire” (Bruhm and Hurley xxxiv). Society places importance on children because of the adults they will some day become, but just because, as a child vampire, Claudia will never grow up into that adult does not mean she will never grow into that adult desire, and that is where Jowett’s argument seems to be lacking. Claudia starts out very much as a *child* vampire, with a child’s mind and maturity, but over the course of the film (in which many decades pass), she grows to become more of a woman trapped in a child’s vampiric body. Thus her appearance queers viewers’ understanding of how to read her body visually, because they know she is no longer a child inside, even if she still appears that way (and is being portrayed by a very young actress). Anne Rice has said of Claudia that however the character may have started out²⁰, “She became a metaphor for a raging mind trapped in a powerless body” (qtd. in Ramsland 21). But Claudia is not strictly a metaphor for this once she is brought to life on screen – she becomes a very real image of a raging mind in a powerless body. She may be brought to life by an actress playing a part, but she is still very real in a way that she could not be while only on the printed page. It is one thing for to read of a woman trapped in a child’s body, but it is very different for viewers in a movie theater to be faced with the visual reality of a child actress expressing her love for an adult man, and that is why Claudia’s sexual desire, if we assume it is indeed there, must remain implied and not outright spoken.

²⁰ Some have speculated that the character of Claudia was partly inspired by the loss of Rice’s own young daughter not long before she began writing the book, and Rice has admitted that although that was not intentional, it may have happened unconsciously. (Ramsland 21)

Despite the fact that Claudia's desires and the possible "adult" nature of her love for Louis must remain in the subtext that does not mean that other characters remain oblivious to it. Armand calls Louis "innocent" for calling her his "daughter" and "beloved," insisting that she is his "lover." Armand sees the relationship perhaps more honestly than Louis himself, which is part of why he allowed Claudia to die, but saved Louis. With Claudia gone, he had hoped Louis would join him as a companion and (presumably) lover. Diana Reep explains:

In spite of their devotion to each other, Claudia can never quite be a full companion to Louis because her body cannot match her emotions, and she needs him to take care of her in a world that sees her as a child. When she realizes she will lose Louis to Armand and demands that Louis make Madeleine into a vampire so she will have a companion to help her, Dunst, as Claudia, projects the despair of the woman trapped in a child's body. (Reep, et al. 130)

Underlying Reep's statement is the assumption that Claudia's emotions somehow do not match up with her physical age – essentially that she has some sort of more adult desire than suits her physical form. But Reep doesn't deny a similar sort of desire on the side of Louis, framing it as "their devotion to each other." In his narration of the film, however, Louis never confirms this, primarily stressing Claudia's importance to him, and his love for her, and after her death stressing how important she was to him by demonstrating how much her death affected him, but never stating anything beyond that. Thus Louis is not shown actively desiring a character in a child's body, because that might make the character unsavory and uncomfortable for a mainstream audience. The contradiction

between Claudia's physical age and her emotional and mental age queers her relationship with Louis, making it both loving

Conclusions and Connections

When a popular novel is being adapted into a film, like with any other kind of adaptation, there are inevitably some changes that will be made, for better or for worse. In the case of a text like *Interview with the Vampire*, where the author was deliberately playing with controversial homoerotic themes, it is not surprising that a Hollywood version (especially made in the mid 1990s) would try to minimize some of those themes in its adaptation. Movies like *Interview* are part of a business that strives to make as many blockbusters as possible, and movies with themes that might cause concerns about morality don't tend to become blockbusters²¹. Diana Reep writes:

The reduction of homoerotic implications in both the characters of Louis and Lestat serves two purposes. It makes the film more acceptable and enjoyable to general audiences who may wish to ignore those implications, and it protects the leading-man status of Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise, both of whom have the responsibility of appealing to wide audiences in other expensive films. (Reep, et al. 128)

Any homoeroticism left in *Interview* had to be minimal, only the bare minimum of what was necessary to keep it true to Rice's original characters. Armand and Louis' desire, for example, is present as mainly intellectual, and part of Armand's desire to connect to the

²¹ This trend is shifting some with greater mainstream acceptance of queer themes and characters, leading to such award winners (although not necessarily "blockbusters") as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *The Kids Are All Right* (2010). But *Interview* was in theaters a decade before that.

changing times. In the novel, Lestat is actually a part of the reason Claudia is killed, when he shows up in Paris and tells the other vampires of her attempt to kill him. By removing that from the film, the character of Lestat is also made more redeemable, should the studio have decided to make another film based on Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* to follow-up on any success *Interview* may have had. The next film adaptation was not released until 2002, and was even less faithful to Rice's work, but when *Interview* was being made, they still needed to protect any future investments (films) from such issues as overt homoeroticism, or irredeemable heroes, thus making Claudia a more acceptable site of queering and queerness than the male main characters around her.

While *Interview* had to be made acceptable in order to become a film, some vampire texts are deliberately not "made acceptable," perhaps out of a desire to not oversimplify complicated themes around race and sexuality. In my next chapter I will be considering a vampire novel that has no qualms about making a deliberate political statement with its heroine: a black, lesbian, escaped slave-turned vampire. While *Interview* was different from *Buffy* in its framing of vampires as the sympathetic heroes, *The Gilda Stories* takes that even further, by having a character who was extremely marginalized in her human life survive to see a two-hundred year span of history and change around her. In considering the shift from vampires as monsters to be feared to vampires as heroes, Matt Kaplan questions: "Could a key reason why vampires are now viewed as sexually attractive heroes be that they are presented as lovers who know no pain and who will be eternally young? It seems plausible, but there might be another element at work" (Kaplan 162). I think part of that "element" which Kaplan is missing is actually hinted at in his question: "lovers who know no pain." Part of what makes

vampires engaging heroes and heroines is that, in fact, they often seem to be deeply pained by what they are seeing happen in the world around them, whether it is some sort of change for the worse in the society, or a lack of change for the better. Louis is a melancholy narrator, Claudia is a “raging mind” trapped in a child’s body (Ramsland 21), Spike is a monster turned good partly through love and Gilda is something else altogether. Though their immortality and eternal youth may be something people desire, most vampire narrators are not presented as living without pain.

Chapter Three

Blood Ties: Queer Bodies and Utopian Communities in *The Gilda Stories*

Jewelle Gomez's *Gilda Stories* was published in 1991 by Firebrand Books – a lesbian feminist publishing house based (at that time) in Ithaca, NY. *The Gilda Stories* tells the story of a runaway slave turned vampire over a two hundred year period, in a series of “stories” which detail short periods during Gilda's life, in a variety of locations around the Americas. Initially known only as “The Girl” after escaping from slavery, she is bequeathed the name, Gilda, some property, and her vampirism, by an older white female vampire, Gilda, who feels that it is time to end her long life. The original Gilda does not wish to leave her companion, a Native American woman named Bird, alone, and thus decides to turn the Girl into a vampire as Bird's new companion. Thus the Girl becomes known as Gilda, and begins her new, now much more extended, life. Gilda is a black lesbian²² vampire who remains acutely aware of each of those identities throughout the two hundred year span presented in this text. Jewelle Gomez uses humanized vampires to highlight the monstrous elements of oppression and violence in society, in contrast to the focus on loving, supportive community upheld by its protagonist, Gilda.

Of the texts I am considering in this thesis project, *The Gilda Stories* is notably different for a number of reasons. *The Gilda Stories* is the only explicitly queer text (in terms of character's identities), and it is also the only non-mainstream text I am examining. While being explicitly queer, and being non-mainstream are not always connected, in this case they probably are. Publishers want works they think will be

²² Although this label is not historically accurate for the era when Gilda is born and becomes a vampire, it is certainly a term Gilda would have encountered later on, and she does explicitly state that she “found her comfort with women [and not men]” (*The Gilda Stories* 174).

relatable to a large audience, and when the main character is not only queer, but also a woman of color, unfortunately that work is less likely to be published by one of the bigger, well-known (and therefore better funded) publishing houses. As Jewelle Gomez herself admits in her essay “Recasting the Mythology”: “Economics and politics shape both what gets considered for publication and what we write. Publishing is a business above everything else” (Gomez, “Recasting” 89-90). As much as writers, especially feminist and queer writers, may want to write texts with an agenda, and that project our personal politics, we are limited (if publication is the goal) by what we can actually get published – or rather, what will sell once published. Texts like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Interview with the Vampire* were influenced, at least on some level, by what would be economically and politically capable of making money for their producers. Although not accountable to the publishing industry, they were accountable to the television and film industries respectively. Because *The Gilda Stories* was published by a lesbian feminist publisher, it was (presumably) not policed in the same ways, thus making it an interesting counterpoint to the representations of vampires in my other two texts.

For this chapter I will be relying on a number of secondary sources about *The Gilda Stories* and that touch on *The Gilda Stories* even when it is not their primary focus. Theoretically, for my discussion of *The Gilda Stories*, I will continue to rely on Judith Butler’s understanding of performativity and performance. My discussion of race will rely more broadly on existing scholarship around vampires and my sources that closely analyze its role in *The Gilda Stories*. *The Gilda Stories* is a rich text created with great intentionality in its construction of race, gender, and vampirism, and that is what I seek to analyze in this chapter. Because the queerness in *The Gilda Stories* is explicit, I will not

need to argue in this chapter that there *is* queerness, but rather analyze how that queerness interacts with other intersectional identities, and how Gomez constructs it within the context of a vampire narrative. Even though queerness in *The Gilda Stories* does seem to be more normative, at least among the vampires, it is still contrasted to human society and the values of human society, and thus is still marked as Other.

Gomez' Vampires

Gomez reveals in her essay “Recasting the Mythology: Writing Vampire Fiction” that *The Gilda Stories* was not her first attempt to construct a form of vampirism more in line with her positionality as a lesbian and a feminist. While this earlier work, entitled *A Dream of Angels* will probably “never see the light of day,” it worked “as a catalyst” for Gomez’s thinking about this existing mythology. In *The Gilda Stories* Gomez is not simply telling another vampire story like the ones that came before, but explicitly seeking to “re-cast the mythology of vampirism” (Gomez, “Recasting” 86). This means that Gomez’s vampires are different from some of the other vampires we have previously encountered, in how they think about their consumption of blood, how they react to sun/running water, and how their other identities (racial, sexual, etc.) continue to play a part in their conception of themselves. While many writers of vampire stories put their own spin on the classic story, Gomez does so not just to make her vampires stand out from the many other examples of vampire literature, but also to make them better suit her own politics.

The most obvious change Gomez makes with her vampires is what many critics refer to as the ‘blood exchange.’ Unlike most vampires who take blood violently

(although not always from unwilling donors), Gomez's vampires, at least the ones held up as 'good' vampires, leave something for their unsuspecting donors when they drink their blood. As Bird teaches the newly christened Gilda after turning her into a vampire:

...as you take from them you must reach inside. Feel what they are needing, not what you are hungering for. You leave them with something new and fresh, something wanted. Let their joy fill you. This is the only way to share and not to rob. It will also keep you on your guard so you don't drain life away (*The Gilda Stories* 50).

When Gilda and those she considers to be a part of her vampire family drink blood, they try to give something in return, whether it is a pleasant dream, a hopeful thought, or just generally a good feeling. Kathy Davis Patterson, in her analysis of vampire subjectivity in *The Gilda Stories*, explains that in this context, "blood loses the primary association with violence, pollution, and corruption so typical in the bulk of existing vampire fiction.... From the perspective of Gilda and most of the other vampires she encounters, blood represents communion and exchange" (Patterson). Gomez's vampires generally do not bite their victims, opting instead to often open a small slit in the skin with a nail, which they then heal with their saliva after they have finished feeding. Often the "victims" are asleep the whole time, and are left more relaxed than when the encounter began. Just in this change alone, Gomez has already taken one of the most violent aspects of vampire nature and found a way to make it her own. No longer are these vampires cornering helpless victims in dark alleys or luring them to their death upon sumptuous couches like we saw Lestat do so many times in *Interview with the Vampire*. Gomez's vampires might go wandering through dark streets to find their "victims" but they are

more apt to sneak in through a window, coming and going without leaving so much as a single puncture wound and a happy dream, rather than a corpse in a ditch.

Another change Gomez makes in the mythology of her vampires is taking out the religious aspect of vampire weaknesses, opting instead for weaknesses drawn mainly from nature. As she describes it in her own words: “The symbols that I’ve retained for my vampire mythology are connected to physical elements such as the danger of running water and the sun or the protective nature of native soil” (Gomez, “Recasting” 88). Gomez’s vampires do not cower from crucifixes or burn at the touch of holy water, but they do learn to walk mainly in indirect sunlight, and sew handfuls of their native soil into the hems of their clothing. By removing the religious aspects of the vampire mythology, Gomez is able to make it more universal, and less constricted by particular Christian theology. As not everyone in the world is Christian, and vampires are not strictly of Christian origin, it would make sense for them not to be singularly impacted by Christian icons, and somehow unaffected by other holy images and symbols. The danger of running water is one often left out of more contemporary vampire narratives, but Gomez maintains it, even featuring it in the final death of the original Gilda: “[Bird] felt Gilda lying naked in the water, marveling at its coolness and silence. Then [Gilda] dove into the darkness of the tide. Without the power of her native soil woven into her breeches, she surrendered easily. The air was squeezed from her lungs and she eagerly embraced her rest” (*The Gilda Stories* 48). The language used around the original Gilda’s suicide is also significant to note here – it is completely framed in terms of rest, and surrender, something she “eagerly embraced.” She is not ending her life out of misery or depression so much as a desire for the responsibilities of life to end. She has been around

some unspecified amount of years, and is ready to leave, at long last. The parts of nature that have been her weakness for untold centuries are what are able to set her free when she is willing.

As I have discussed in previous chapters, homosexuality and queerness have a long history of being attached to the figure of the vampire, but when Gomez makes this association in *The Gilda Stories*, it is framed differently. The fact that most of her vampires are somehow queer in their romantic relationships is not presented as a challenge to the mainstream society they are passing through, nor is it presented as a problem or requirement within their own community. As Kathy Patterson sees it: “Her vampires do not pollute the dominant society; rather, they expose the broader spectrum of possibilities for human existence that already exists within it” (Patterson). Gilda and the other vampires she interacts with almost all experience or express some sort of queer desire, but the narrative does not treat this as an issue – merely as fact. By not turning their queerness into any sort of problem for the narrative to deal with, Gomez is challenging traditional narratives around queer characters, which tend to be centered on them dealing with the issues they face surrounding their queer identity. Sabine Meyer argues in her article “Passing Perverts”:

[Gomez’s] vampires remind us that they have always already been (re)present(ed), within and beyond dominant normative discourse, whether we altogether deny their visibility, greet them with fear and force them into the margins, or recognize and celebrate them for their efforts to disrupt normative categories or destroy conventional boundaries. (Meyer)

These vampires present an unashamed image of the Other, refusing to go away, just as the vampire myth itself seems to endure for centuries, ever-changing and morphing, to reflect different contemporary issues. Gomez's vampires embrace queerness as simply another "possibility for human existence" (as Patterson said), thus validating their existence as a (supposedly) monstrous Other. If they are an equally acceptable "possibility" within Gomez's constructed world then their queerness no longer maintains a negative association and connotation.

Gilda's Communities

Just as vampires in *Buffy* and *Interview* sought to form relationships with their fellow vampires (for better or for worse, and for a variety of different motivations), Gilda and her fellow immortals in Gomez's world seem to be no different. As much-acclaimed vampire critic Nina Auerbach wrote in her seminal text *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, "...the emphasis of *Gilda* falls on her virtuous extended family, whose primary antagonists are bad vampires, not the corrupted human world. As in Rice's *Chronicles*, vampirism in *Gilda* is a select club, but Gilda's club is purged of conflict and confrontation" (Auerbach 185). Auerbach seems to feel that Gomez's vampires are far too tame, and have been "purged of aggression" (Auerbach 185). I would argue instead that Gomez seems to be presenting the radical possibility of a peaceful vampire community that does not need to act as vicious predators to still be immortal, and interact with mortals. She accurately highlights the fact that the antagonists faced by most vampires in *The Gilda Stories* are in fact other, "bad," vampires. However the protagonist/antagonist relationship is not the focus of *The Gilda Stories* – if it were, there would probably be greater continuity of

characters across all of the individual stories shared from this two hundred year span of Gilda's life. Instead, the reader is granted individual glimpses, which sometimes reference figures events from the past, but at other times seem far more self-contained, with the only connection being Gilda herself. By making the vampire community and mythology itself less aggressive and violent, Gomez is making room to critique the "corrupted human world" Auerbach mentions.

The vampire community of *The Gilda Stories*, a few bad vampires aside, is held up as a more positive alternative to the human communities that Gilda lives on the fringes of. As Elyce Rae Helford explains in her essay on "The Future of Political Community": "The community of vampires offers [Gilda] a love and safety that spans centuries, an eternal and true sanctuary in an oppressive human world" (Helford 133). As a woman of color who also at times actively challenges gender norms in how she dresses, Gilda is clearly marked as Other in human society, a status that often brings painful discrimination with it. In Gomez's vampire community, however, no one seems to question transgressions of gender, or non-normative sexuality. In fact, members of the vampire community who would be considered more privileged (white, male) in human society can help to protect less privileged members of their community from some of that discrimination, as when Sorel publicly claims Gilda as "family" in front of all the customers in his bar (*The Gilda Stories* 59). After his statement, Gilda was no longer given as many uncomfortable looks, because of the weight of Sorel's word and opinion with his clientele. Even the ones who remained unhappy with Gilda's presence still chose to remain silent, because of their respect for Sorel (although all the vampires could still sense the truth from the five who remained unhappy). This scene takes places after Gilda

has known Sorel and Anthony for only a short time, but because she is a vampire, they welcome her with open arms, regardless of what humans may think. The vampire community (including the evil ones) tends to focus on what positive things they have in common, rather than seeking to exclude based on difference.

The vampire community is not just a positive alternative to human communities, however, it also is represented in more maternal terms. Just as Gomez's vampires are transformed into vampires in language signifying motherhood, so too is the community they create also considered maternal. When Gilda (still The Girl at the time), is transformed into a vampire, the original Gilda holds her in her arms "like a child safe in her mother's arms (*The Gilda Stories* 46). Echoing these more literal images of motherhood, Gina Wisker considers *The Gilda Stories* in the context of women's horror writing:

[Gilda's story] is a testimony to racial hatred and male abuse of women. Against the backdrop of these horrors and the growing crises in the 1980s, of homosexual witch-hunting during the early discoveries of AIDS, and the defilement of the planet by pollution, the nurturing vampiric community appears as an alternative maternal force, not one of horror. (Wisker)

In contrast to the violent and patriarchal human society depicted in Gomez's world (which is based on US history, up until the parts set in the future), the vampire community is much more feminine and nurturing: thus, the image of motherhood is conjured up. Through this use of maternal imagery and maternal community, Gomez is providing a queer alternative to a painful hetero-patriarchal reality.

Unlike the vampire communities of *Interview* and *Buffy*, which seemed to be full of backstabbing and endless rivalries, Gomez is constructing a more positive, almost utopian alternative. I have already discussed some of the ways Gomez explicitly recast vampire mythology to make the exchange of blood and transformation from human to vampire less violent. The images of nurturing motherhood, and open arms of the vampire community are also a part of that recasting. In her article “Black Girls Are from the Future: Afrofuturist Feminism in Octavia E. Butler’s *Fledgling*,” Susana Morris also briefly considers *The Gilda Stories* as another “afrofuturist” text. Morris writes: “Although Gilda and her vampire family have the power to kill (and sometimes do), life for them is largely about learning and reciprocity, not power and privilege, especially as they traverse hostile dystopian and eventually apocalyptic landscapes from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century” (Morris). Morris is summarizing in fewer words what I have argued, however she frames the human world around Gomez’s vampires as “dystopian” – going a step further than my own argument. The problem with the use of that word, however, is that much of *The Gilda Stories* takes place in the past. Most definitions of dystopia²³ include some sort of caveat about it being an ‘imagined’ or ‘imaginary’ place, and unfortunately many of the painful parts of Gilda’s experiences (though certainly not all), have to do with elements of human society that were and are very real: racism, sexism, and heteronormativity.

While Morris is correct in her analysis of Gilda’s vampire family, her analysis of the world they live in – and what Gomez is trying to say through it, seems unrealistic. Elyce Helford’s interpretation, with its focus on history and community seems much

²³ As found in a brief comparison of several dictionaries, including Merriam-Webster.

more accurate: “As I read it, *The Gilda Stories* argues that communities are most important for interpersonal bonding and sharing of an alternative history” (Helford 135). Helford’s conclusion fits in much more with my own supposition that Gomez is creating her vampire community as a utopian ideal and alternative to human society. Helford’s conclusion also leaves space for Gilda’s own connections to humans (mostly fellow African-American women) as equally being a part of Gomez’s positive utopia. Although Gilda is forced to leave most of these human companions after a time to protect her hidden identity as a vampire, these connections are still a significant part of her experiences, as told in *The Gilda Stories*. As Helford says earlier in her article: “Each stage of Gilda’s personal voyage is also a study of life as part of multiple communities, all at the margins of mainstream white middle-class America” (Helford 133). The vampire community is a key part of Gomez’s utopian goals, but she is also using Gilda as a set of eyes to experiences American communities (in their varying forms, both good and bad) over a two hundred year span²⁴. Again, Helford’s phrase “alternative history” leaves an opening for the full range of marginalized communities and people that Gilda meets and interacts with during her travels. Although Helford’s analysis is explicitly examining community, the openness she leaves in her language allows for the utopian possibilities I have (briefly) examined in Gomez’s work.

Despite the painful realities of the human society she lives on the fringes of, Gilda is never content to be truly cut off from human connection. Unlike some of her vampire friends, such as Sorel and Anthony, who participate in human society without seeming to really build deep, meaningful relationships with the mortals around them, Gilda really

²⁴Some of which do fit the “dystopian” or “apocalyptic landscape” Morris suggested, as Gilda goes on to the years 2020 and 2050.

seems to immerse herself in human connection. Helford writes “Gilda’s desire to hold on to her heritage as an African American and formerly enslaved woman determines that she will seek ties with mortals, particularly black women, and look for places to put down roots – much against the advice of other vampires” (Helford 133). Gilda maintains a strong connection to the identities that shaped her human life – her identities as an escaped slave, and as an African American woman – and also later her growing awareness of her lesbian. This connection to identity which some vampire narratives might push aside and ignore as part of mortal life, and irrelevant to immortal beings, are instead highlighted for Gomez’s Gilda. As Helford explains: “For Gomez’s Gilda, life is more complex, as there are diverse and overlapping spaces/communities within which she must live as, simultaneously, a vampire, a woman, a lesbian, and an African American” (Helford 132). Gilda chooses to embrace all of these different facets of her identity, keeping only the vampire part a secret for most of the novel. These overlapping spaces, along with her complex matrix of identities, are, however, part of what makes Gilda such a valuable focus for Gomez’s narrative. Through Gilda, Gomez is able to explore a number of different communities, time periods, and marginalized perspectives, and while the first two are not all that unusual for vampire narratives, it is Gomez’s privileging of the last that makes *The Gilda Stories* so remarkable.

Gilda’s Matrix of Identities

As previously mentioned, *The Gilda Stories* is notable for having an African American, lesbian (feminist) vampire as its heroine, made possible in part because of the novel’s positioning outside of the mainstream publishing industry. Unlike Spike, who

held a great amount of privilege, and Claudia, who held a modicum of privilege, Gilda is generally marginalized by almost every aspect of her identity. Similar to the burgeoning understanding of Claudia who slowly realizes that there is something different about her from other people²⁵, Gilda is aware of the fact that not only is she different in other people's eyes, and as a result also maintains a sort of emotional distance from others. Gilda is never quite able to fit into any of her communities completely, as important to her as they all may be. As Patterson writes:

Vampirism, then, represents merely one element of an inextricably intertwined set of identity signifiers that set her apart from the mainstream and place her outside the existing power structure. Indeed, of all these signifiers, Gilda's vampirism draws the least attention from Western society as Gomez constructs both the character and the world in which she moves. (Patterson)

While the vampire community is the most open and welcoming (utopian, even) of all of the communities which Gilda interacts with, that connection, her vampirism, is also what prevents her from fully being a part of her human communities. It is an invisible difference, in some ways comparable to her lesbian identity because of how it is not immediately visible (unlike her dark skin²⁶). Gilda's identity is allowed to be so complex because it is not constricted by mainstream standards of easy consumption – Gomez presumably did not want to simplify the complex themes she was discussing enough for it to be publishable by a major publishing house, but instead chose to publish it through a feminist publisher. By not being a part of the mainstream vampire narratives, *The Gilda*

²⁵ Most significant for Claudia being the fact that she will not age, as the blood-drinking and nocturnal habits did not seem to bother her.

²⁶ Gilda's gender is a little more complicated due to the times she actively chooses to pass as a man, primarily while traveling, or while out at night in search of blood.

Stories is given greater freedom in creating complex, non-normative characters like Gilda, and, going even further by allowing them to be the driving force behind and throughout the narrative.

Gilda's repeated otherness and outsider status is an ongoing struggle in (and thus becomes a theme of) the various vignettes shared in *The Gilda Stories*. As Miriam puts it quite directly, however: "She is black; she cross-dresses; and, by deliberately not 'passing' – by putting herself at risk by drawing attention to markers of race and sexual identity – Gilda perversely camouflages her real secret: her vampirism" (Jones 159). Gilda is repeatedly warned by Bird and Sorel never to disclose her vampirism to mortals for fear of their response, but because of the bonds she sometimes builds with other African American women, Gilda does not always listen to this warning. This is the case in particular at the end of her time in Rosebud, Missouri, in the early 1920s. Before she leaves, she writes a letter to Aurelia, her dear friend and companion, "spilling the legends that become reality across the page" (*The Gilda Stories* 128). This sharing even brings a feeling of lightness to Gilda upon her departure – the sharing is somehow healing for her, as well as serving a way to prove to Aurelia just how true her promise was to come whenever Aurelia might need her. Sabine Meyer writes:

As her social activist 'warrior' sensibility grows more complex over time, the boundaries between Gilda's worlds become blurry. She tries to work out ways to let her various realities intersect despite vampire ethics' stress on the primacy of the vampire community as source of identification.... She struggles with the hybrid, in-between status that her vampirism ties her to, and the (generic)

proscription to uphold her guard against disclosure prevents her from feeling fully safe and anchored in her mortal communities. (Meyer)

Given Gilda's desire to blend all of her identities, it might make sense for Gomez to try and create a utopian space where Gilda could live her full sum of identities fully, but Gomez seems to find more richness (and realism) in the tension and struggle between Gilda's various identities, even as she presents the loving vampiric community as a sort of ideal. While the vampire community in *The Gilda Stories* would seem to present the most positive environment for Gilda, it still has its own problems, from the stress on the "primacy" of vampire identity that Meyer points out, to troublesome "bad" vampires like Eleanor and Samuel. Despite Gilda's desire to bring her different communities together, it is never entirely possible.

For Gomez's Gilda (as for many people of color living in oppressive societies), race never stops being a factor of how she considers herself, and how she interacts with the world. It is partly for this reason (as well as out of some necessity, in earlier time periods) that Gilda repeatedly seeks out African American communities. Although she is a vampire, Gilda still has a modicum of shared experience with the members of these communities, especially her fellow African American women. Through that shared experience and shared community, Gomez is able to depict a variety of African American communities over the course of more than a century. Kathy Patterson writes:

In addition to decentralizing the heterosexual male, *The Gilda Stories* decentralizes whiteness and European culture by focusing on the Girl/Gilda, who is Black. The Girl/Gilda possesses a strong awareness of racial and cultural differences from the earliest pages of the novel, often evinced through persistent

memories of her childhood as a slave, her mother, and her mother's stories of Africa. As an escaped slave living in the nineteenth-century south, she comprehends the role of race in determining social status. (Patterson)

Gilda's race, and the importance of it in her experiences and narrative, should not be underestimated. The vast majority of popular, mainstream vampire narratives certainly do not feature African American women as their heroines. In fact in many recent popular vampire narratives, mortal women (generally white) often fall in love with male vampires (also usually white), who are ultimately convinced to transform them into vampires as well, so they may live together in love eternally. *The Gilda Stories* tells a very different narrative, full of awareness of "racial and cultural differences," as Patterson puts it. That awareness surely comes out (in part, at least) from Gomez's own experiences in her lifetime, but it is shared through the compelling voice of her heroine, Gilda.

Gilda's experiences in the African American community are not all positive, however. She lives through the end of slavery, through the Civil Rights Movement, and remains painfully aware of how the state of things have and have not changed over the years. During her time working off-Broadway in the early 1970s, Gilda thinks to herself at one point:

Life was indeed interminable. The inattention of her contemporaries to some mortal questions, like race, didn't suit her. She didn't believe a past could, or should, be so easily discarded.... The memories of her master's lash as well as her mother's face, legends of the Middle Passage, lynchings she had not been able to prevent, images of black women bent over scouring brushes – all fueled her ambition (*The Gilda Stories* 180)

Because of all of the history Gilda has lived through, she has a unique perspective – a perspective many vampire narratives make use of, but rarely for viewing the lives of marginalized and oppressed peoples, like Gomez does. Elyce Helford admits that “In addition to the limitations of the vampire community, Gilda must also confront the failures of the black community to effect significant cultural change over time” (Helford 134). While both the vampire and African American communities play key roles in supporting Gilda through the two-century narrative shared in *The Gilda Stories*, neither is perfect. That pain of repeated failures within her communities is yet another aspect Gilda carries with her through her two hundred year journey.

Gilda’s experience of her gender and sexuality don’t seem to be grappled with in the same deep way as her vampirism and race. When it comes to her gender, and how Gilda performs her version of femininity, she tends to find where she is comfortable and stick with it, regardless of what others think²⁷. Gilda is in part not afraid to take on masculine dress and behavior because, thanks to her vampiric strength, she is able to defend herself when treated violently for these transgressions. In a way, her status as a vampire grants her a certain amount of bodily privilege because she is able to defend herself. William Patrick Day writes in his book *Vampire Legends In Contemporary American Culture*: “To be a vampire is to adopt an appearance, a way of dressing, a way of acting that expresses one’s distance from the conventional world” (Day 58). Just as Spike actively chose to take on a more working-class, aggressively masculine persona after becoming a vampire to distinguish himself from his human self, so the vampire

²⁷ This is in some ways similar to how she chooses to ignore other vampires’ warnings and maintain a close relationship to mortal communities. Gilda is not afraid to do what she wants when she feels it is better/more comfortable/more necessary than what she is being told to do.

Gilda changes from her initial persona as The Girl – uneducated, scared, and a runaway slave – to a being unafraid of walking alone at night, requiring blood to sustain herself, and blurring the lines between masculine and feminine in how she presents herself to the world. While traveling disguised as a boy from Louisiana to Yerba Buena (San Francisco), Gilda is amused to encounter “at least four” others like her: women, disguised as boys, to grant them greater freedom of movement, as she tells Anthony when he is accompanying her on an evening search for blood (*The Gilda Stories* 66). Kathy Patterson explains:

Cross-dressing enables Gilda to subvert existing codes of gender behavior and sets the stage for subsequent public assertions of her individuality by compelling others – specifically men – to recognize her as an equal.... Her open defiance of these categories that the dominant society has assigned to her race and her sex (a defiance bolstered by her vampirism) has a powerful effect, silencing the men around her. (Patterson)

The challenging of codified gendered behavior is one of the first ways that Gilda begins to assert her own identity after becoming a vampire, although it is partly encouraged beforehand by the examples of Bird and the original Gilda. As Patterson correctly points out, this initial “assertion of individuality” contributes to Gilda’s growing self-confidence over her long life, allowing her be more defiant over time.

Unlike Gilda’s challenges to gender roles, her questioning of her own sexuality and desire seems to take a little more time. It is not until she encounters the seductive

vampiress²⁸ Eleanor in Yerba Buena that Gilda's own desire seems to awaken for her. In their first encounter in Sorel's bar, Eleanor is presented in sensuous and very descriptive language:

She strode toward their table with a lanky walk as if she were strolling in breeches on a country road, yet the lift of her chin and the deliberateness of each step were elegant. Beneath unfashionably full brows were deep-green eyes sparkling in unnatural competition with the champagne on their table. Her full, wide mouth was painted a shade of red that perfectly matched her hair. (*The Gilda Stories* 63)

Gilda watches Eleanor's entrance carefully and agrees to meet her the next day for Eleanor to "dress her," albeit having something of a loss for words during their first meeting (*The Gilda Stories* 64). Although her relationship with Eleanor does not end well due to complicated circumstances²⁹, it does seem to be the moment of awakening and recognition for Gilda that she "found her comfort with women" (*The Gilda Stories* 174). Gilda's sexuality becomes yet another part of her complex matrix of identities which influence how she sees the world around her, and how the world sees her.

Although her sexuality is not necessarily an immediately visible part of her identity, it also does not seem to carry any more weight than any of her other identities. Despite many twenty-first century confluences of gender expression and sexuality, most human characters in *The Gilda Stories* do not seem to make assumptions about Gilda's sexuality based on her gender expression, especially as gender-neutral dress (read: masculine)

²⁸ I use this feminized term here only because it seems to suit Eleanor so well. Generally I consider "vampire" to be equally appropriate for all genders of the undead.

²⁹ In short, Eleanor made an ill-advised new vampire, Samuel, who becomes obsessed with her, and may have also killed his wife to be with her. Both are seriously unwell, and Eleanor ultimately chooses the true death after Gilda leaves Yerba Buena.

becomes more common over the passage of time. Gilda's sexuality is a mostly invisible part of her identity, just like her vampirism.

Concluding Thoughts

The Gilda Stories might seem to be an unusual foil to consider against such texts as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Interview with the Vampire*, but I chose it partly for that reason. Gilda is such a stark contrast to the likes of Spike and Claudia that she truly seems to be in a different category – and yet, they are all vampires, and these works were all created in approximately the same decade. That all of these vampires could be created within the same time period is important because it shows just how differently the queering of issues such as gender, sexuality, and relationships can be shown. Ellen Brinks and Lee Talley write in their essay “Unfamiliar Ties: Lesbians Constructions of Home and Family in Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories*”: “As Gilda lives in different African American social worlds or homelands, her identity as a queer vampire intersects with, but is never identical to, these communities of which she is a part...” (Brinks and Talley 167). That intersecting identity is true of all of these vampires in some way or another. Vampires do not (in most forms of their narratives) exist in a vacuum. They are influenced by and very much still a part of human society, because of their dependence on blood for life, even if they may be relegated to the fringes and shadows.

While *The Gilda Stories* is an explicitly queer text that also remains very aware of racial implications in a way that *Buffy* and *Interview* have both been critiqued for ignoring, all three are part of a vampire heritage that includes a certain inherent level of

queerness in how these undead beings are constructed, and queering of social norms in how they interact with gender, sexuality, and relationships. Thus an analysis that considers all three as different forms of that heritage, within a certain time period (1990 to the early 2000s), is important in light of the most recent surge of popularity for vampire narratives, especially one that seems so focused on presenting white heterosexual romance as a major plot point. Gina Wisker writes in her analysis of women's horror:

The female vampire terrifies because of her ability to transgress the norms and behaviors associated with the different genders: her actions resemble those of penetration. Most transgressive of all is the lesbian vampire. Not only does her existence as a vampire challenge male power, but her sexual choice is perceived as a threat to normal behavior, as disgusting, and titillating. (Wisker)

While the female vampire may be inherently transgressive, and the lesbian vampire even more so, Wisker does not fully consider the deeply transgressive nature of all vampires. All vampires take part in a liminal existence between life and death, controlled by some sort of requirements for blood to sustain that existence, as well as (mostly, and it is certainly true in my considered texts) maintaining memories of their human lives and personalities, for better or for worse. Because of their liminality that already queers notions of life and death, vampires are perfectly suited for queering other forms of categorization. The notable difference between lesser-known texts like *The Gilda Stories* and mainstream texts like *Buffy* and *Interview* is that the latter category tends to minimize the queerness of (and queering done by) those vampires, or put the most transgressive moments in secondary characters (like Claudia), rather than embracing that queerness

like Jewelle Gomez's work does. Despite these efforts on the part of mainstream texts, all of these vampires maintain a certain level of queerness either in their desires, how they view themselves, or how others view them. That is a fact unchanged throughout most vampire narratives³⁰, even to the present day.

³⁰ Exceptions include texts such as *The Twilight Saga*, which deliberately ignored existing vampire mythology.

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