

Bites from the Margins: Contemporary African American Women's Vampire Literature

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In the most famous line of one of the most canonical and influential texts by an African American woman, slave narrator Harriet Jacobs claims: "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women."¹ While the (historical) contextualization of this dictum has been at the heart of a large body of (black feminist) scholarship for several decades and is not the concern of the following study, the statement's implications for a specific tradition in black women's literature is. Within a single line, Jacobs manages to bespeak a number of the central tenets of black women's writing through several centuries. Referring to the danger of sexual abuse, the sentence points to the body as one of the central sites of Othering and marginalization, which makes black women the objects of both racism and sexism, marking their experience of oppression as fundamentally different from that of both white women and black men.² Jacobs's slave narrative in general and this sentence in particular thus constitute a crucial textual performance. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) is an act of claiming both physical and

¹ Jacobs, Harriet: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Nellie MacKay, Frances Smith Foster (eds.). New York 2001, p. 64.

² A subject position perhaps most fittingly characterized by the titles of two seminal texts which address it, Frances Beal's article *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female* and the anthology by Hull et. al. entitled *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave*.

narrative control over its author's body, as Jacobs asserts the right to narrate her own story in her own voice.

Although black women's fiction encompasses multiple variants of plotlines stretching across diverse literary genres and periods, the complexly interconnected concerns of body and voice are nevertheless at the heart of this rich and multifaceted textual body of African American women's literary voices. From slave narrators like Jacobs and Harriet Tubman to modernist authors like Zora Neale Hurston all the way to the much-lauded postmodern texts of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, the questions of who has both physical and discursive control over the black female body and its narration, of who gets to speak and who gets to be heard, are central.

While vampire literature has always been considered a part of popular culture, its most recent boom, perhaps most powerfully exemplified in both its popularity and its heterogeneity by the *Trueblood* franchise and the *Twilight* franchise, has proven especially productive. As scholars devote more attention than ever before to the popular culture phenomena of vampires and their fans, a subgenre of African American literature that has performed highly significant cultural work at least since the 1990s is also the subject of more prolific scholarly analysis: Testifying to the immense cultural potential of the figure of the vampire, African American Women's vampire fiction has served as a significant cultural site of resistance and empowerment for decades. The following study aims to serve as an introduction to the ways in which black female vampires can serve as figures of empowerment specifically within the context of the history of African American women's writing as they are situated at the crossroads of two very powerful, but highly distinct literary traditions.

In particular, drawing on the examples of Jewelle Gomez's *Louisiana 1850* (1991) and Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* (2005), this article will show how African American women writers have claimed the vampire in order to conceptualize imaginary spaces within which both white supremacist and patriarchal power dynamics can be reconfigured and formerly marginalized characters can claim control over their voices, their bodies, and their lives. Specifically, this paper argues that Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* (2005) – a novel set in contemporary times – focuses on its black female vampire protagonist's quest for self-determination as she not only negotiates a

complex web of power relations, but gains control over her life, her memory, and her voice – its strongest expression being the plot itself, a black vampiric *Bildungsroman* told from the vampire's perspective. Significantly, underneath this surface narrative of empowerment, the novel utilizes the vampire figure to construct newly conceptualized notions of community that discredit sexist and racist notions of belonging and hierarchy but that also investigate the highly problematic extent of the protagonist's hold over her human symbionts.

In a similar vein, Gomez uncovers the deeply intertwined nature of historical paradigms of race and gender in the U.S. – in this case, within the historical setting of slavery in the nineteenth-century American South. Furthermore, *Louisiana 1850* also imagines “plots of power”³, that is, plots in which these female characters “gain control over their lives and especially their bodies”⁴, as both a black and a Native American lesbian vampire not only dismantle the very racial and gendered hierarchies that have historically been utilized as ideological justifications for the system of slavery. They also heal their scars and claim discursive control as they textualize their voices, narrating a revised story of the past. Whereas Butler's novel portrays its protagonist's empowerment and the abuse of power by the newly empowered, Gomez's story imagines alternatives to dominant conceptualizations of power. Thus, these two fantastic texts, in fusing some of the core concerns of African American women's literature with the multiple metaphoric possibilities of one of the prime tropes of popular culture, the vampire, are able to construct “new discourses and knowledges [...] outside of patriarchal [and hegemonic] frameworks,”⁵ enabling their marginalized characters to find themselves and become whole.

Contemporary Black Women's Vampire Literature

The vampire, as numerous scholars have pointed out, always already crosses multiple borders and boundaries—between life/death, male/female, and self/Other. By so doing, this figure is “forever haunting because [s/he] is

³ Koenen, Anne: *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power. The Fantastic in Anglo-American Women's Literature*. Frankfurt a.M. 1999, p. 227-25, see p. 229.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁵ Grosz, Elizabeth A: *Volatile Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington 1994, p. 188.

forever beyond the grasps of straight white male subjectivity.”⁶ Thus, this trope has presented a highly subversive literary metaphor for the destabilization of societal mores and norms, not least since the 1970s and early 1980s – a conception that has become of utmost importance in terms of the reconfiguration of traditional gender roles and sexual norms.⁷ Not surprisingly then, a large number of women writers have reclaimed and remodeled this traditionally white male genre – and with it the vampire’s signifying functions of sexual and gender fluidity – depicting openly sensual female vampires as a literary motif to rebel against restrictive societal scripts that continue to circumscribe women’s sexuality.⁸

These early (feminist) negotiations of issues centering around gender-based oppression and resistance were pushed even further by black women writers beginning in the early 1990s, who turned to the vampire in order to explore the intricate complexities of the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality within a fantastic realm. Indeed, vampires present prime figures for such an endeavor, as they not only unsettle clear gender boundaries, but have always been located at the crossroads of gendered, sexual, *and* racialized discourses.⁹ This is especially prominent in the trope of the feeding vampire, which not only causes gender confusion, but – in the intermingling of bodily fluids – also destabilizes any clearly demarcated racial boundaries, polluting “all systems of race and sex and desire that must be straight.”¹⁰

While this notion has traditionally conjured up a number of racist, sexist, and homophobic anxieties that have been projected onto the figure of the

⁶ Winnubst, Shannon: Vampires, Anxieties, and Dreams. Race and Sex in the Contemporary United States, in: *Hypathia* 18 (Fall 2003), H.3, p. 1-20, see p. 8.

⁷ As Gina Wisker notes, contemporary fictional vampires hold the potential to “undermine and disempower western logical tendencies to construct divisive, hierarchical, oppositional structures” (168). See Wisker, Gina: Love Bites. Contemporary Women’s Vampire Fictions, in: David Punter (ed.): *A Companion to the Gothic*. Oxford 2000, p. 167-179.

⁸ For further discussions of (contemporary) feminist vampire fiction, see Johnson, Judith E.: Women and Vampires. Nightmare or Utopia?, in: *The Kenyon Review* 15 (Winter 1993), H. 1, p. 72-80.; Koenen, Visions of Doom, Plots of Power, p. 227-257; and Palmer, Paulina: The Lesbian Vampire. Transgressive Sexuality, in: Ruth Bienstock Anolik (ed.): *Horri-fying Sex: Essays on Sexual Difference in Gothic Literature*. Jefferson 2007, p. 203-232.

⁹ There is a wealth of scholarship on the sexual as well as racial undertones in traditional vampire literature. See, for example, Anolik, Ruth Bienstock, Douglas L. Howard: Introduction. The Dark Unknown, in: Ruth Bienstock Anolik, Douglas L. Howard (eds.): *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination*. Jefferson 2004, p. 1-14.; and Halberstam, Judith: Technologies of Monstrosity. Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. *Victorian Studies* 36 (Spring 1993), H. 3, p. 333-352.

¹⁰ Winnubst, Vampires, p. 8.

vampire,¹¹ the vampire's potential as "the crosser of boundaries extraordinaire"¹² has been claimed and re-signified as a site of subversion within contemporary African American women's vampire fiction. Their depiction of black female vampires has inherently reconfigured portrayals of traditional vampire protagonists – who previously had ranged from landowners to Southern plantation masters¹³ – by inscribing the genre with new meaning "from a location outside, on the margins."¹⁴ Deliberately shunning the laws of probability and verisimilitude, these African American women authors do more than seize the trope of the vampire to actively give voice to a previously silenced historical past: They inject the entire genre with a specific political and social agenda.¹⁵ In focusing on black female perspectives, these vampiric works both constitute a powerful critique of the historically enforced silencing of black voices and fatally pierce white, hegemonic constructions of reality.¹⁶

Yet, by reconfiguring generic conventions of vampire fiction, black women writers have also harnessed its highly subversive possibilities. Since vampires not only cross boundaries, but also hold a substantial amount of power as they present "character[s] of larger-than-life proportions,"¹⁷ they have also become prime figures for the negotiation and repositioning of racial and gendered hierarchies that constitute the very fabric of patriarchal and hegemonic societies. As black women writers have employed the figure

¹¹ Milly Williamson sums up traditional racialized and sexualized discourses surrounding the vampire as follows: "Some critics remind us that vampires can infect us with their otherness, beguile us with their depraved intimacy [...]. The vampire is a voraciously sexual woman, and a hyper-sexual African, a hypnotic Jewish invader, an effeminate or homosexual man. The vampires of the West exist to frighten us into acquiescence, to reassert patriarchy, racial superiority, family values and chaste heterosexuality" (1). See also Winnubst, *Vampires*, p. 7.

¹² Winnubst, *Vampires*, p. 8.

¹³ Jones, Miriam: *The Gilda Stories*. Revealing the Monsters at the Margins, in: Joan Gordon, Veronica Hollinger (eds.): *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture*. Philadelphia 1997. p. 151-168. see p. 157.

¹⁴ Jones, *The Gilda Stories*, p. 153.

¹⁵ As Miriam Jones notes, African American women writers of vampire fiction have undertaken "a series of negotiations: 1) from inside the genre itself, 2) in relation to contemporary reworkings of generic paradigms, and 3) within the broader context of political discourse and scholarship" (153). For further discussions, see also Fulton, DoVeanna S.: *Speaking Power. Black Feminist Orality in Women's Narratives of Slavery*. Albany 2006, p. 116-121. Rody, Caroline: *The Daughter's Return. African-American and Caribbean Women's Fiction of History*. New York 2001; and Spaulding, A. Timothy: *Re-forming the Past. History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*. Columbus 2005.

¹⁶ For an insightful discussion on the re-conceptualizations of (white) history in black women's fiction, with a particular focus on Toni Morrison's fantastic novel *Beloved* (1987), see Koenen, *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power*, p. 105-131.

¹⁷ Gomez, Jewelle: Black Women Heroes. Here's Reality, Where's the Fiction?, in: *Black Scholar* 17 (March/April 1986), H. 2, p. 8-18, see p. 8.

of the vampire to imagine a fantastic redistribution of power in the hands of a subject that has historically been repeatedly deprived of autonomy and authority – black women – this figure has thus entailed the construction of new discursive positions. Even more so, this very unusual figure, this “floating category of all things ‘alien’ to the normative forces of official cultural discourses”¹⁸ has generally opened up a realm in which black women writers have imagined highly revisionary worlds – worlds, to use Anne Koenen’s words, that hold the “possibility of alternative modes of being.”¹⁹

Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling*²⁰

In her 2005 novel *Fledgling*, Octavia Butler, the first black woman to be commercially successful as an author of speculative fiction, creates a particularly innovative contribution to the vampire genre: Shori is a young, female, genetically constructed vampire-human hybrid with black skin who needs to recover her memory in the face of violent xenophobic adversity. This postmodern vampire figure advances the conventional vampire into postmodern discourses of Critical Race Studies, genetic engineering, embodiment, and agency. Most importantly, by utilizing the mode of the fantastic to create such a strong protagonist, this text constitutes what Anne Koenen has called a “plot of power.”²¹

Fledgling is the first-person narration of the vampire girl Shori, who wakes up blind, naked and scarred in a cave in the woods without any knowledge of who she is. As her vampire body heals itself, she leaves the cave and, by following her bodily urges and through meeting other vampires, she learns about her identity. Shori, as she and the reader find out, is in fact a vampire with some human DNA, resulting from a genetic experiment. In *Fledgling*, vampires call themselves “Ina” and are a separate species which cannot interbreed with humans or turn humans into Ina. Shori has received human DNA from a black woman, and the additional melanin in her skin makes her much less vulnerable to sunlight than other Ina are. She hardly regains any concrete memories, even though at times she stumbles upon what appear to

¹⁸ Jones, *The Gilda Stories*, p. 154.

¹⁹ Koenen, *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power*, p. 307.

²⁰ Parts of this analysis have, in their respective previous versions and with a different theoretical focus, appeared in Bast, Florian: “I Won’t Always Ask.” Complicating Agency in Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling*, in: *Current Objectives in Postgraduate American Studies* 11 (2010). http://www-copas.uni-regensburg.de/articles/issue_11/11_08_text_bast.php.

²¹ Koenen, *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power*, p. 229.

be sensory memories based on her body and its reaction to its surroundings. Shori finds out that she narrowly escaped when her entire female family was killed by another Ina family opposed to the mixing of human and Ina DNA. Shori has to defend herself against more attacks before she finds out who has been attacking her and why. Only then is she able to take steps to stop her enemies. Eventually, her attackers are tried and convicted by an Ina council. Throughout the novel the process of her acquiring knowledge of and control over herself is narrated as Shori grows into a competent member of the Ina species. This is most notable in her collection of a community of symbionts, humans who grow addicted to a substance in a specific Ina's saliva when bitten but who also have a romantic and sexual relationship with him or her.

As the novel begins with Shori waking up in a cave without knowledge of or control over herself and ends with her as a promising member of Ina society, the main plot itself, Shori's struggle, can be considered the most ubiquitous representation of empowerment. As such, it is a straightforward narration of empowerment, a black, vampiric *Bildungsroman*. Significantly, Shori's progress towards self-determination is linked to central concerns of African American women's literature. The first main obstacle in this process is xenophobia. As both Brox and Lacey have noted,²² the speciesism portrayed in *Fledgling* closely parallels racism, especially since Shori's human DNA came from an African American and visually marks her as different.²³ Hence, some of the obstacles in Shori's quest are representative of real-life racism. In a twist of the vampire genre, however, Shori's skin color is hugely beneficial to her, as it makes her able to stay awake and even walk outside during the day, which no other Ina can do. This fact alone makes her both a strong ally and a promising mate for other Ina.

After awakening in the cave, Shori's burned and scarred body heals, but her amnesia is permanent. The fantastic construction of a self-healing, vampiric body is used in an intertextual reference to a staple of African American literature, which frequently uses scars as tropes for the multifaceted traumas

²² Brox studies the text in terms of its postmodern construction of a vampire figure, whereas Lacey looks at *Fledgling* and two other novels by Butler in light of their portrayal of power and of strategies of responding to it.

²³ See Brox, Ali: "Every age has the vampire it needs." Octavia Butler's Vampiric Vision in *Fledgling*, in: *Utopian Studies* 19 (2008), H. 3, p. 391-409, for an elaborate analysis of the connections between racism and speciesism and the novel's treatment of miscegenation.

of victims of racially motivated violence. As Shori's father Josef puts it upon hearing that Shori has healed completely without any scars remaining: "Except for knowing herself and her people. [...] I would call that a large scar. Unfortunately, it's not one we know how to fix."²⁴ This conflation of the categories of body and memory is an insistence on the necessarily embodied character of any narration of a violent past. This instance constitutes, in its very overdetermination, a potent example of the ways in which African American women's vampire fiction is uniquely able to pick up and rework the themes of African American women's literature.

Another strong indication of the empowerment achieved throughout the progression of the plot lies in the text's voice, its choice of narrative perspective. Even allowing for the narratological differences between the narrating I and the experiencing I, *Fledgling* is a story which Shori tells of herself after it has happened. This necessitates a degree of discursive proficiency which makes her capable of narrating her own story, of having and using her own voice. Shori determines what to include in her (hi)story and how to include it. This voice, this inherently empowered stance of first-person narration, also constitutes an important intertextual reference to African American women's literature in both its founding texts and its postmodern expressions. Whereas the authors of slave narratives very consciously used the first person to write themselves into existence,²⁵ postmodern neo-slave narratives such as Butler's *Kindred* utilize the first person to combine their rewritings of the slave narrative with postmodern complications of subjectivity and history.

In a narrative construction that has deep roots in the African American literary tradition, this victim of racially motivated violence narrates her own search for the truth about the past, about the trauma that she has suffered, and about her attackers' identity as the central and successful quest for her identity and self-awareness. However, Butler's text is not fully appreciated if reduced to a simple reversal of power roles. It does much more than simply transfer control from white men to a black girl, from Lord Ruthven, Count Dracula, and Lestat to Shori. Typical of a perspective from the margins, the text uses its fantastic construction to interrogate power itself and to

²⁴ Butler, Octavia: *Fledgling*. New York 2007, p. 72.

²⁵ The opening line of many slave narratives is literally "I was born," such as, most famously, Jacobs, *Incidents*, p. 9

reimagine alternative models of hierarchical communities without ever losing sight of the pervasiveness of oppressions and the problematics of power even in the hands of those who seek to fight oppression.

While its main plot depicts a success story of gaining agency by overcoming xenophobia, the novel's investigation of empowerment does not stop with Shori's successful quest. On the contrary, *Fledgling* uses its subplots, its minor characters, and its strictly biological construction of the Ina species to continually complicate the construction put forth in the telling of Shori's progress. In fact, it is Shori herself who very consciously takes power and the possibility of self-determination away from other characters: her symbionts.

Human symbionts in *Fledgling* become chemically addicted, both physically and psychologically, to the saliva of 'their' Ina after several bites. Physically, the addiction is so strong that they often die if their Ina does. The equally powerful psychological addiction gives their Ina such influence that symbionts can be compelled to carry out any command. Conversely, the Ina are not only dependent on their symbionts' blood for nourishment, but have emotional cravings for regular physical contact with 'their' humans. Thus, *Fledgling's* conventional narrative of empowerment, attained against socially constructed threats, becomes complicated by the multifaceted and ethically problematic relationships between Ina and their symbionts.

This process begins with Shori's first symbiont, Wright, who is also the first sentient being with whom she consciously communicates in the novel. While the main plotline describes the direct conflict between Shori, a lone black girl, and a family of white, male Ina attempting to assassinate her, the novel simultaneously develops a relationship between Shori and Wright that is far more complex. A white man in his twenties, Wright first encounters someone, whom he takes to be a black girl, about ten years old, in the woods. She accepts his offer of help, but when he tries to take her to a hospital, she struggles against him. In the process, Shori bites Wright, discovering her ability to, through her bite, influence him and bestow intense physical pleasure upon them both. Shori then convinces Wright to take her to his house, where she still fails to recall details of who or what she is. However, a picture of what kind of relationship she should have with Wright begins to come into focus for her: "I'm old enough to have sex with you, if you want to.

[...] I think you're supposed to [...] No, that's not right. I mean, I think you're supposed to be free to, if you want to."²⁶

Thus, early in the development of the novel's first relationship, *Fledgling* exposes and rejects simplified notions of oppression and self-determination. While the scene is, on the surface, intensely disturbing – and adult white man has sex with what seems to be a black child—later revelations show it to epitomize the novel's reversal of power relations. Not only has Shori assented in advance, but she is older than Wright – Ina age much more slowly than humans – and she possesses greater speed and strength. Equally importantly, her biological hold on Wright, while not yet an unbreakable addiction, is nearly impossible to resist. This serves as a consummate example of the novel's deconstruction of simplified binary views of oppression and agency through the figure of the black female vampire. Indeed, as Lacey points out, in all of Butler's later novels, "power fields become so tangled that they discourage simplistic categorizations of dominant or subordinate, yet they do not deny the existence of such positions."²⁷ The continued development of Shori's family of symbionts reinforces this further. While Shori and Wright's relationship is diametrically opposed to standard notions of oppression, Shori chooses both men and women of different ethnic backgrounds for her further symbionts.

Fledgling introduces numerous aspects of biology, including the determining possibility of genes, which is prevalent throughout the novel, most notably to clarify the addictive relationship between Ina and humans. Both the addiction and the potentially fatal effects of withdrawal are explained on a biological level. The Ina are explained to be not supernatural beings, but simply a different species. Both their greater physical prowess and their social structure are the result of biological influences based on Darwinian principles. In point of fact, biological forces clearly influence both specific behavior and social constructions. The novel may never go as far as suggesting that genes are the sole determiners of behavior. Yet biology does present the strongest factor capable of infringing upon one's power of self-determination. While this move is not unusual for science fiction, it is certainly exceptional within the context of African American women's

²⁶ Butler, *Fledgling*, p. 21.

²⁷ Lacey, Lauren J.: Octavia Butler on Coping with Power in *Parable of the Sower*, *Parable of the Talents*, and *Fledgling*, in: *Critique* 49 (2008), H. 4, p. 379-394, see p. 382.

literature, particularly given the earlier discussion of race as a social construction. The novel refrains from presenting any notions of race and gender in essentialist terms, nor does it ever discredit its protagonist's success. It does, however, circle around a number of biological dependencies so strong that they stand in stark contrast to the quest for agency in the main plot. In the ethical tension inherent in a relationship that is both mutually beneficial and clearly hierarchical, there is even a critical question as to the very desirability of self-determination.²⁸

This short survey can only give a glimpse of the multiple layers of the theme of empowerment, given the sheer hierarchical complexity of Butler's unusual vampire novel. Its revisionary construction of an immensely powerful young black girl entails a highly subversive re-conceptualization of a typically white, male genre. By so doing, the text is able to both re-imagine one of the stock figures of American literature, the vampire, and to critically engage with some of the central concerns of African American women's literature.

Jewelle Gomez's *Louisiana 1850*²⁹

In contrast to Octavia Butler's plot centered around a black female vampire protagonist within a contemporary setting, Jewelle Gomez's *Louisiana 1850* turns to the past, as the short story takes place in the nineteenth-century plantation South. It is within this historical setting – a place and time that was characterized by starkly demarcated racial and gendered hierarchies – that the short story follows a black child protagonist simply called 'the Girl,' who, after having escaped from slavery, is rescued by a lesbian Lakota vampire, Bird, and her white vampire companion Gilda. The beginning of the short story graphically illustrates the relegation of the black child and the Native American woman to the very periphery of a white supremacist society, and draws extensive attention to the physical and psychological wounds that both characters have had inflicted on their bodies. However, the dynamic of the text alters drastically in its later parts, as Gomez transcends the limits of verisimilitude by infusing the story with the fantastic trope of the vampire.

²⁸ For a detailed analysis of the complications of agency, specifically as regards the desirability of agency and its possibility in light of the book's troublingly biological undertones, see Bast, "I won't".

²⁹ Parts of this analysis, in their respective alternate version and with a different theoretical focus, particularly in respect to the construction of interracial bonds within 'maternal borderlands,' will appear in Löffler, Marie-Luise: "Why white people feel they got to mark us?" Bodily Inscriptions, Healing, and Maternal "Plots of Power" in Jewelle Gomez's "Louisiana 1850," in: Sandra Jackson (ed.): *The Black Imagination and Science Fiction*. New York. Forthcoming.

Louisiana 1850 opens with an attempted rape of the Girl by a white overseer, bespeaking the utterly vulnerable status of her body within the system of slavery:

“She looked up at the beast from this other land, as he dragged her by her leg from the concealing straw. His face lost the laugh that had split it and became creased with lust. He untied the length of rope holding his pants, and his smile returned as he became thick with anticipation of her submission to him, his head swelling with power at the thought of invading her [...].”³⁰

With this scene, then, Gomez not only emphasizes the marks of slavery inflicted upon the bodies of black women, but exemplifies how the black female body was *read* within the system of slavery as “a territory to be vanquished and forced into surrender.”³¹ While not being faced with rape, Bird is similarly characterized by her marginalized status because of her racial exclusion as a Native American within a white hegemonic society. Her marginality is literally ‘written’ onto her body, as her skin is marred by uncountable scars and lesions left on her body by a small pox epidemic – a disease, which, as Bird points out, was inflicted on her by white men who “breathed [it] into my people and sold it to us in their cloth.”³² Thus, the short story, in its very beginning, not only graphically illuminates the marginalization that these two characters face within the historical setting of the white-supremacist nineteenth-century South, but seems to set up the reader’s expectation for a plot dynamic revolving around clearly demarcated positions based on white (male) control and black/Native American oppression/subordination.

However, these initial ramifications are soon eroded as Gomez progressively moves *Louisiana 1850* into a fantastic realm. In this respect, her revelation of the vampiric undertones of the text are closely tied to a re-codification of

³⁰ Gomez, Jewelle: *Louisiana 1850*, in: Glorian Naylor (ed.): *Children of the Night. The Best Short Stories by Black Writers, 1967 to Present*. Boston 1997, p. 109-151, see p. 111.

³¹ Hall, Lynda: *Passion(ate) Plays “Wherever We Found Space”*: Lorde and Gomez Queer(y)ing Boundaries and Acting In, in: *Callaloo* 23 (Winter 2000), H. 2, p. 394-421, see p. 409. For further discussions of this scene, particularly in respect to the Girl’s memories of her slave mother, see also Brinks and Talley, *Unfamiliar*, S. 159-161; Patterson, Kathy Davis: “Haunting Back”: Vampire Subjectivity in *The Gilda Stories*, in: *Femspec* 6 (June 2005), H. 1, p. 35-45, see p. 36; and Spaulding, *Re-forming*, p. 106-107.

³² Gomez, *Louisiana 1850*, p. 122. Brinks and Talley refer to Bird’s suffering from small pox as the “slavery of the reservation” (161).

societal scripts based on hegemonic racial and gendered hierarchies. While, as Anne Koenen has noted, instances of corporeal transformations in men's literature often encompass traumatic experiences for their male characters that are linked to loss of control and powerlessness, women's narratives of metamorphosis follow an entirely different dynamic. Besides portraying bodily transformations of female characters as deliberate acts, which highlights their role as agents, not as victims, metamorphoses in women's narratives present a significant source of power.³³ In this respect, bodily changes hold a particular significance in terms of protecting and (re)claiming agency over the female body.

Indeed, while Bird has experienced brutal instances of racism in the past, the short story leaves no doubt that her metamorphosis into a vampire unlocks a realm of autonomy and self-determination previously unfathomable to her. As a vampire, the Lakota woman is not only in charge of a thriving brothel, carrying a significant amount of monetary influence and power. She also frequently roams the countryside at night, traveling "so quickly she was invisible."³⁴ This very velocity constitutes a potent means of resistance and autonomy, as she is literally able to put distance between herself and white hegemonic control.

Furthermore, Bird's vampiric identity bestows a certain pedagogical privilege and authority on her: Radically subverting the prerequisites of a system which outlawed and brutally sanctioned the acquisition of literacy by slaves, she teaches the Girl in complete peace. As Bird not only encourages the Girl to read, but also to put into writing her own recollections,³⁵ she transfers an ability to the slave child that has been a cornerstone of black women's literature overall: the recovery of the past not only through telling, but also writing. By "writing [...] the self into being,"³⁶ then, both Bird and the Girl textualize a powerful site of agency over the discursive construction of their identity and their history: they not only disrupt the omnipresence of white power structures, but, in their creation of a counter-narrative, they actively

³³ Koenen, *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power*, p. 228-232.

³⁴ Gomez, *Louisiana 1850*, p. 133.

³⁵ Brinks and Talley, *Unfamiliar*, p. 161.

³⁶ Kawash, Samira: *Dislocating the Color Line. Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Literature*. Stanford 1997, p. 30.

overcome their marginal status as silenced and invisible.³⁷

However, the subversive potential of the vampire within *Louisiana 1850* is best illustrated in the slave child's change from human being to vampire. This metamorphosis features yet another typical feature of a fantastic 'plot of power,' as it presents "a scenario where women gain power – power over their own lives [and] power over men."³⁸ Indeed, the Girl's transformation creates a black woman of exceptional potential with considerable strengths. Besides gaining the ability to fight and defend herself,³⁹ the Girl now effortlessly discredits assumptions of white male dominance and objectification of her whenever she feeds on a white man.⁴⁰ Turning the victim into the hunter, the text empowers the previously Othered black female body.⁴¹ Furthermore, this innovative depiction also reverses the very basis of the system of chattel slavery, as a black woman sustains herself by 'feeding on' and thus penetrating and marking white, male bodies, an act that further bespeaks her transition to a powerful fantastic being.⁴² Moreover, her metamorphosis into a vampire not only underscores her mobility in a system based on holding blacks captive, but emphasizes that for a vampire, boundaries are meaningless, there being nothing but "open space, no barriers."⁴³ Thus, the Girl is now able to transgress *any* spatial boundaries which frame racist and sexist ideology. In fact, the short story closes with the Girl "speed[ing] into darkness [...] moving so quickly that the farmhouse was all but invisible,"⁴⁴ impressively depicting her very uncontainability – a powerful stance of autonomy based on a bodily ability.

³⁷ For further discussions of the importance of reading and writing in Gomez's short story, see Brinks and Talley, *Unfamiliar*, p. 161-162; Fulton, *Speaking*, p. 119-120; Hall, *Passion(ate) Plays*, p. 395-97; Jones, *The Gilda Stories*, p. 155-156; Koenen, *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power*, p. 236-237; and Patterson, "Haunting," p. 37. This portrayal also reflects the centrality of storytelling in black women's (fantastic) literature in general. See Koenen, *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power*, p. 112-117.

³⁸ Koenen, *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power*, p. 227. See also Fulton, *Speaking*, p. 119.

³⁹ Hall, "Passionate," p. 396.

⁴⁰ Gomez's exceptional depiction of a Black female vampire both employs the "concept of predator/vampire" but also "strip[s] away the dogma that has shaped the vampire figure within the rather Western, Caucasian expectation" ("Recasting" 87-88). Besides featuring a Black woman (and not a male vampire) who desires (and has the ability to kill in self-defense), feeding is usually not a fatal act in the short story, but an exchange of dreams for blood.

⁴¹ For further analyses of the reconfiguration of the hunter/predator dynamic, see Jones, *The Gilda Stories*, p. 157-158; and Patterson, "Haunting," p. 44.

⁴² See also Koenen, *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power*, p. 236.

⁴³ Gomez, *Louisiana 1850*, p. 144.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

The Girl's shift from human to vampire, however, also signifies an initiation into (vampiric) immortality. As an immortal being, the Girl will not only physically survive her former abusers, but she will also live to bear witness to her own, her mother's, and black women's lives in general. As a result, as Miriam Jones has noted, the Girl is able to keep alive "historical events from the perspective of those marginalized by or made absent from standard accounts"⁴⁵ eternally. As a personified legacy of slavery, then, her presence will ensure that black lives and voices will never be written out of history,⁴⁶ sustaining the stories of "the lives of those women who might have been Poets, Novelists, Essayists, and Short Story Writers" themselves, but "who died with their real gifts stifled within them."⁴⁷

Thus, similarly to black women's vampire fiction in general, the Girl's metamorphosis constitutes a crucial source of identity – it ultimately signifies a (re)birth into the self. As a black female vampire, she can now lay claim to what Audre Lorde has so fittingly termed her 'me-ness,' reaching a new sense of "completion [...] and comfort with her new life" (Gomez 50) at the end of the short story. By so doing, she achieves what her slave mother was unable to attain: she survives whole.⁴⁸

As this analysis has exemplified by focusing on two very different texts, black women's fiction has created highly potent realizations of the vampire figure which powerfully bespeak the issues at the heart of black feminism. Butler's novel portrays its protagonist's empowerment through a number of topoi that hold crucial significance in African American women's literature. *Fledgling*, within a contemporary context, exemplifies a young black female vampire-human hybrid's quest for self-determination and self-awareness, going so far as to turn this plotline into a general negotiation of the ethical challenges of becoming empowered and having power over others. Gomez's *Louisiana 1850* goes in a different direction in that the text re-imagines a historical past instead of an alternate present or possible future. In setting the empowered

⁴⁵ Jones, *The Gilda Stories*, p. 154.

⁴⁶ For further analyses of the 'Girl' as an embodiment of history in Gomez's short story, see Fulton, *Speaking*, S. 119-122; Koenen, *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power*, p. 136-137; Palmer, *The Lesbian Vampire*, p. 221-228; Spaulding, *Reforming*, p. 108-110; and Rody, *The Daughter's*, p. 78-84.

⁴⁷ Walker, Alice: *'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. Womanist Prose*. New York 2004, p. 234.

⁴⁸ Koenen and Broeck have identified surviving whole as one of the central themes of African American women's writing, p. 167.

figure of the black female vampire within the very origin and epitome of the oppression of black women in the US, the short story questions and reconceptualizes white supremacist and sexist power hierarchies that were at the heart of the system of slavery. Thus, similarly to other contemporary black women's vampire fiction, both Butler and Gomez appropriate the traditionally white and male genre of vampire fiction to rewrite and renegotiate conceptions of power, Otherness, and hierarchy. African American women's imaginations of the vampire, and these two texts in particular, provide complex interrogations of oppression and power dynamics. They gain their depth by piercing the surface of these ideas with teeth sharpened at the margins.

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