

Las Cucarachas in Transylvania: Trespassing and Identity in Guillermo Del Toro's

The Strain Trilogy

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*Con mi cara de Nahual
De nopal sin razurar,
Nariz de chile relleno
Estoy orgulloso que conste,
Yo soy la raza de bronce:
Si lo Mexicano es naco
Y lo Mexicano es chido
Entonces verdad de Dios
Todo lo naco es chido*

*With my Aztec-Mayan face
of unshaven cactus hair,
A nose shaped like a stuffed chile pepper
I'm really proud, don't you doubt it,
My race is bronze and I shout it:
If what's Mexican is funky
And what's Mexican is cool
Then God's honest truth,
Everything funky is cool¹*

Sergio Arau

Introduction

In this paper I want to look at the way that the vampire narrative, once an embodiment of anti-colonialist anxiety, has become not just an instrument of imperialist enterprise but is itself being trespassed upon by a subversive and reflexive minority identity to destabilize and reconfigure intended meanings. In particular, this paper will focus upon the almost Manichean narrative from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and the ways that it essentialises the positions of the vampire as a racialized “Other”, and the “Crew of Light”, or the crusaders against evil headed by Professor Van Helsing, as the white defenders of both the Empire and England. This, I will argue, is a view that is interrupted and destabilized by a contemporary Mexican interpretation of the narrative, by Guillermo Del Toro, which ultimately subverts its original meaning and subsequent colonial intent.

The Strain Trilogy series of novels by acclaimed writer and director Guillermo Del Toro utilizes a very particular form of self derogatory national identity that is particular to the Mexican sense of identity in terms of its relationship to larger more wealthy countries around it. This is a similar self-awareness of internal and external national identity which is extolled and articulated by the Mexican artist and performer Sergio Arau. He constructs the notion of

¹ Sergio Arau "Pinche Malinche." From *Mi Frida Sufrida*, Sony International, 1994. CD.

the “Naco,” a parochial, stereotypical and kitsch embodiment of all that is considered Mexican, who knowingly delights in the derogatory identification placed upon him by colonial rulers and subsequently builds a negatively positive identity that is uniquely his, and Mexico’s own, trespassing upon externally enforced categories through a mocking self-reflexivity which destabilizes its original identity. Arau takes a stereotypical image of Mexico and simultaneously focuses on its kitsch-ness whilst extolling its grandiosity. Yareli Arizmendi in his article on Arau describes it thus:

Arau asserts that all Mexicans are nacos: "Naco, in essence, is the constant repudiation of what one is; and it comes from the notion [and in colonial Mexico the fact] that privileges and rights are reserved only for those not like you [Indian vs. Mestizo, Mexican vs. Spanish, rural vs. urban]" (Arizmendi 108)

The generality of the base-image, which is a signifier of Mexico as a whole and imposed upon it from outside, then becomes a vehicle for national and individual identification. It is a process that is alchemical in nature for it takes what is base, or what imperialism categorizes as worthless and demeaning, and through the fires of embracing it and making it one's own to excess, it becomes the gold of a true and individual identity. Arau’s performances and songs, which revolve around such popular images of Mexico, or an imposed iconography of what is considered Mexican, utilises figures such as Frida Kahlo and La Malinche. He uses these stereotypical characters to glorify in racial generalities like his “Aztec-Mayan” face with a nose like a “stuffed chile pepper” to shout to the world that he is “really proud” and that “what’s Mexican is funky.” *The Strain Trilogy* and the first two parts in particular use this notion of Arau's to disrupt the traditional reading of the vampire narrative, not in the undead creatures evil intent but in the means and meanings of its final destruction.

Del Toro's series of novels are a re-interpretation of Stoker's original but set in New York, not London as in *Dracula*, and expanded to excess. However rather than adopting the usual approach of appropriating the narrative, the author infects it with trespassing and transgressive characters that re-orientate its intent, seeing the vampire as the embodiment of white capitalist consumer culture and the crew of light as a band of immigrant "cucarachas" that fight to save a world that vilifies them. This enacts a wilful inversion of narrative and cultural expectation where anti-heroes, such as gang members and Santo-esque ex-wrestlers, replace the "defenders of the faith" and are turned into heroes.² As a result, the individual identity of the Mexican characters is wrested away from the colonial powers that originally impose it, no longer a parody of uneducated indigenous peoples but representative of a singular and unique human spirit that trespasses and disrupts imperial stereotypes and takes national identity beyond nationalism.

Our Vampires, Ourselves

"And you, their best beloved one, are now to me, flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood, kin of my kin." Stoker 311

The title for Nina Auerbach's often quoted exposition on vampires in western culture is strangely prescient for describing how the vampire narrative, though originally perceived as subversive, has come to signify hegemonic and colonial rule. Whilst Auerbach sees every age as creating the vampire it needs or possibly deserves.³ It comes to reflect not so much the vehicle for political or social resistance but rather the expression of social regulation, echoing Robin Wood's observation that ultimately all horror is conservative.⁴ Auerbach then sees Stoker's Count Dracula as a "master, [an] impenetrable creature hungering for control" (Auerbach 69). This is in contrast to the vampires she identifies existing earlier in the nineteenth century which she views as "free & easy" (ibid), and more in touch with the self-

² Santo, was a hugely popular Lucha Libre wrestler from the 1960's and 70's and is still something of a cultural icon in Mexico.

³ Though seemingly similar in intent this difference changes the nature of our monsters from that of individual expression (the monsters it needs) to one of social regulation (the monsters it deserves).

⁴ Wood quote here

sufficient character of the Byronic vampire that revels in its solitude and human company, rather than yearning for world domination.⁵ Bram Stoker's vampire is not so happy with the romantic notion of someone who is "mad, bad, and dangerous to know," rather he embodies something in the nature of a virulent plague that strikes at the very heart of the modern, industrial, world. He attacks not only London but man's most prized possession – his masculinity.⁶ This embodiment as a plague from the past or the uncivilised and un-modern, specifically configured in Stoker's novel as the East of Europe, is identified by Stephen Arata and Matthew Gibson, whilst Gibson in *Dracula and the Eastern Question* views it as the differing natures of British and French colonial aspirations, or lack thereof, from those of the East, or Near East. Arata, in *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siecle*, more explicitly describes it as the fear of "reverse colonialism." Here the "vexed question of the East" with its historical and contemporary political instability threatens to spread to the Empire. The undead Count's decision to re-locate then takes on wider significance. Arata notes, "With vampirism marking the intersections of racial strife, political upheaval, and the fall of empire, Dracula's move to London indicates that Great Britain, rather than the Carpathians, is now the scene of these connected struggles" (Arata 166). In this more traditional reading of the novel it is inevitably the vampire that configures the centre around which the ideological intent of the narrative swirls and eddies; a centrifugal force whose field of attraction holds all other contributing forces in their respective places.

Dracula then, whilst a narrative about the instability of colonial intent and a vampire that is the focus of all the attendant anxiety, actually becomes a fight between the Count and Professor Van Helsing for who will occupy the ideological centre of the novel's universe.⁷ Ultimately, of course, the original patriarchal order is restored with Abraham Van Helsing asserting his position as the voice of reason, modernity and control, "I must be master here or

⁵ See also Frayling and Twitchell.

⁶ See Stevenson, *Craft Another Kind of Love* and Roth.

⁷ See Auerbach and Butler.

I can do nothing” (Auerbach 78). The Professor, as the child of Dutch colonialism, exemplifies the superiority of Imperialism over that of the usurper from Transylvania; there is here the feeling of an older civilisation that has been exploited by newer and more powerful nations and/or empires, and the vampire is depicted as an immigrant wanting to feed off or consume the wealth, or life-blood, of this new land.

This notion of the need to consume new lands is brought out in many of the filmic adaptations of the story, and none more clearly than the 1943 film *Son of Dracula* by Robert Siodmak. Here the vampire, named Count Alucard, comes to America specifically because his homeland can no longer support him. As the Van Helsing character in the story, Professor Lazlo, explains, the vampire preys on America because it is a “younger country, stronger and more virile... [as being to]...fasten on it and drain it dry.”⁸ However, writers such as Judith Halberstam and Jennifer Wicke point out a different kind of colonisation that is highlighted by the proliferation of new and “cutting edge” technologies that abound within the novel, and whilst Dracula himself is excluded from them because of what Van Helsing describes as his “child brain,” the actual means of dissemination of the text itself is inherently vampiric. Halberstam in *Monstrous Technologies: Bram Stoker’s “Dracula”* points to how “attempts to consume Dracula and vampirism within one interpretive model inevitably produce vampirism”(Halberstam 334). Wicke takes this further in *Vampiric Typewriting: Dracula and its Media* observing that the novel “stages the very act of its own consumption” (Wicke 491). Here the very act of consuming the text and partaking in the means of its reproduction and dissemination embody the ideological imperative of capitalism and consumerism – as we consume *Dracula* so we are in turn consumed by the technologies/ideologies that produce it. There occurs an inevitable and inescapable ideological intertwining between the narrative of the novel and its mean of production and dissemination, a double vampirism if you will.

⁸ Alucard is of course Dracula spelt backwards, a conceit that the film takes great pains to make obvious. This was used earlier in Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*. Herein, we recognise each new incarnation of the vampress through her name as it can only contain the same letters as Carmilla, and so we also see her called Mircalla and Millarca.

This begins to configure a way in which a narrative of subversion then becomes a tool of ideological normativity where Stoker's novel becomes a vampire that spreads across the world, enacting the Count's desire to "be in the midst of the whirl and rush of humanity, to share its life, its change, its death, and all that makes it what it is" (Stoker 22). As the narrative itself has traversed the world it takes with it its own ideological vampirism of consumption and control and that, even when over-written, it contains what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls a "narrative of imperialism" (Spivak 2197). Though seemingly "palimpsestic," it in fact subjugates the cultures that attempt to appropriate it. Here, the voice, whether Hispanic, Asian, or African, in taking on the narrative of the Transylvanian Count actually invites in the Imperialist vampire. That this is so is shown in the novel where Abraham Van Helsing, as the voice of European Imperialism, ultimately controls the interpretations and subsequent meaning of the narrative, so much so that the Count never speaks for himself. All his words are recorded and interpreted by Van Helsing or other members of the colonial defenders, or "Crew of Light."⁹ As such, though seemingly speaking for themselves, as Dracula before them, in the face of colonial intent their voice and minds become no more than part of the hierarchy of "subjugated knowledge" that Spivak further talks of. As a consequence, the vampire remains forever the embodiment of an Old World order where white Europeans enforce or promote a self-imposed and willing adherence and adoption of colonial ideologies.¹⁰ The argument in this paper specifically sites this within works that appropriate the text but actually then reinforce the narrative's imperial intent. The vampire, no matter how hybrid, different and other still consumes beyond control as did the system that created it. The vampire here, though offering the illusion of difference, actually embodies more of the same, except its monstrosity is on show for all to see and gains

⁹ As named by Craft in "Kiss Me with Those Red Lips."

¹⁰ The most obvious example of this can be seen in the Blacksploitation films *Blackula* and *Scream Blackula* where by appropriation of the *Dracula* narrative actually ultimately reinforces the domination of African-American individuality by the dominant white imperialism.

acceptance not in spite of but because of the monstrosity that marks him out. I would argue that other and earlier Mexican or latino texts such as Fernando Mendez's film *El Vampiro* (1957)¹¹ and Carlos Fuentes' novel *Vlad*, (2010), and even *Isabel* (2000) by Carmen Boullosa, by situating the vampire at their heart become the appropriated rather than the appropriators; and that whilst seemingly un-colonising the narrative they actually become colonised. As such, trespassing here is not an illegal entry onto prohibited territory but rather a willing invitation for the colonial narrative to enter and populate the homeland of the dominated. As such, this paper will further show that the only way to "bite back" at the vampire narrative is not to conquer it but to trespass upon it or infect it. However, it is not through the figure of the vampire, which as noted above, is never allowed to talk for itself, but through the "crew of light" that a truly transgressive and meaningful trespass can be accomplished.

The New "Old-World"

Nora said, "This is something new." "Or – something very, very old." Del Toro and Hogan 164.

The Strain Trilogy of novels, and soon to be films by Mexican director/author Guillermo Del Toro tell the story of an ancient breed of vampires, or fallen angels, that walk the earth. One of their number, the Master, wishes to destroy the others and enslave humanity to become a huge "delicatessen" for his, and his vampiric entourages, epicurean proclivities. To begin this endeavour he enlists the help of a terminally ill multi-millionaire and head of the Multinational conglomerate, and appropriately named, Stoneheart group, to "invite" him into the New World, specifically New York. From here he will leave behind the Old World of Europe and start his onslaught upon the modern world. Only a small band of unsung heroes, led by Holocaust survivor Abraham Setrakian, stand in his way. The narrative unfolds as we see civilisation as we know it crumbling in the face of the undead minions of the master

¹¹ *El Vampiro* is actually the first time on film that the fangs of Dracula are seen.

vampire with few and sparse victories against such overwhelming odds.¹² Del Toro, along with his co-author Chuck Hogan, wrote the work with the intention of going back to what he sees as the folkloric roots of the undead to create “a very scary vampire story, none of these romantic, languid young men sucking the necks of beautiful people.”¹³ As such, rather than basing his story upon the current trend of romantic teenage vampires, typified by Edward Cullen who is, what J.M. Tyree calls, “the mall-friendly hero of the teen blockbuster *Twilight*” (Tyree 32), Del Toro wants to return to an older version of the ravenous revenant. This actually sees him tap directly into a Dracula-esque narrative that shows the terror from the East actively desiring and being willingly invited into the heart of the New Empire; America. Once again, as in Stoker’s text, the fate of civilisation, or what is explicitly shown as white-consumerist America, is in the hands of a small band of brothers, or “crew-of-light”, who stand between the vampiric menace and the collapse of the established, or seemingly natural, world order. It is here that the inherent imperialism of the vampiric narrative becomes subverted and trespassed upon, subsequently being infected with its own version of reverse colonialism. This is not embodied in the King Vampire who, unlike Stoker's Count, actually speaks with his own voice but more importantly in the constituent parts of the crew of light. Though still led by a Van Helsing-type character in the figure of Abraham Setrakian, its fighting heart is supplied not by English or New World mettle, Arthur Holmwood, Jonathan Harker, Dr. John Seward and Quincey Morris as in Stoker’s novel, but by the Mexican cucarachas.¹⁴ The term “la cucarchas” is used here not just in a (self-)derogatory sense, which indeed it is in Del Toro’s hands, but also in a certain reveling in the abjection of

¹² *The Strain Trilogy* by Guillermo Del Toro, and Chuck Hogan consists of, *The Strain*, London: Harper Collins, 2009. Print, *The Fall*, London: Harper Collins, 2010. Print, and *The Eternal Night*, London: Harper Collins, 2011. Print. Film adaptations of the books are currently in production.

¹³ Quoted from ‘Guillermo del Toro: *The Strain Trilogy*’, on *YouTube*, Available at [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-uVSGbQRIE>] accessed March 1st 2011, Web.

¹⁴ Though seemingly very similar and both self-styled metaphysicians, Abraham Van Helsing and Abraham Setrakian can be seen as opposite representations of European colonialism with Van Helsing being the result of Dutch colonial intent, whereas Setrakian, as a Holocaust survivor, is the result of German colonial intent.

self, or rather exalting in what others view as negatives.¹⁵ This is specifically seen in the figures of Augustin Elizalde (Gus), a gang member fresh out of juvenile hall, but also the ex-wrestler, Angel Guzman Hurtado, known as the Silver Angel; and obvious reference to the popular Mexican stereotype as propagated through the wrestlers of Lucha-Libre and the cult films of the Mexican wrestler and folk icon, El Santo, who, like Angel, also wore a silver mask.¹⁶ The trespassing nature of their impact on the text cannot be underestimated, and I shall examine it shortly, but is all the more emphasised by the stereotypical nature of the characterisation of the vampire within the work. For although the undead flesh-eaters are the most infectious element in the narrative, rather than changing the meaning of the text, they just reveal its underlying nature. This is particularly shown in the character of Eldritch Palmer, a multi-millionaire and corporate giant, who is responsible for “inviting” the vampire into New York. He, like the undead creature he aspires to emulate, must continually consume, which he makes clear in a speech to one of the “crew of light” towards the end of the second novel. When talking about the victims of the vampires he says:

“Customers” is the accepted term. But certainly. We, the over class, have taken those basic human drives and advanced our own selves through their exploitation. We have monetized human consumption, manipulated morals and laws to direct the masses by fear or hatred, and, in doing so, have managed to create a system of wealth and remuneration that has concentrated the vast majority of the world’s wealth in the hands of a select few...But ll good things must end. You saw, with the recent market crash, how we have been building to this impossible end. Money built upon money, built upon money. Two choices remain. Either utter collapse...or the richest push the pedal to the floor and take it all. (*The Fall* 210)

¹⁶ El Santo (the Saint) was actually Rodolfo Guzman Huerta and had a wrestling career that lasted almost five decades. He appeared in 52 films and also featured in many comic books and became a figure symbolising justice for the common man.

As such, this human vampire allies himself totally with the actual vampire that would consume the whole world. This is The Master, one of seven original vampires, a disembodied presence that moves from host to host, and presently resides within the body of Josef Sardu, a 19th-century Polish nobleman. Both he and Eldritch conform totally to how Franco Moretti sees the vampire in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. In *Signs Taken for Wonders* he notes the integral capitalist/consumerist qualities of the vampire king: "Like capital, Dracula is impelled towards a continuous growth, an unlimited expansion of his domain: accumulation is inherent in his nature" (Moretti 91). Consumerism here is both undead and disembodied; it can make anywhere its home and can never be killed. As such, evil becomes both anonymous and arbitrary, a point forced home by the vampires created by infected humans that all become the same and lose any residue of individual thought or identity.¹⁷ Within this framework the vampire becomes the stable element of the narrative whose signification never changes regardless of the external characteristics of its host. Subsequently, it is the crew of light that becomes the only variable element and the focus of destabilisation within the text. Within the trilogy of books that comprise the text it is they that offer the only chance of individual expression beyond the all-devouring force of white-American-consumerism, that is configured in this latest manifestation of the vampire. And so we return to the true source of trespass, "the fearless chicano vampire killers", to paraphrase Roman Polanski's 1967 film,¹⁸ or what we might call "the cucarachas in Transylvania".¹⁹

The figures of Gus and Angel in *The Strain* achieve the "naco" or "cucaracha" effect by being configured as quintessentially Mexican in that they are configured as losers and

¹⁷ This point links the series to Richard Matheson's 1957 novel *I Am Legend* where an unknown virus turns everyone into vampires, and possibly even more strongly to the 1971 cinematic interpretation by Boris Segal *Omega Man*. Here, the infected all become "Brothers," forming part of a Luddite-esque religious cult who subsequently become white or albino connecting them to a white-homogenisation of America and the World.

¹⁸ Roman Polanski's film, *The Fearless Vampire Killers*, is the first obvious spoof within the genre, if one does not count the 'knowingness' of the Hammer productions of the late 1950's and early 60's.

¹⁹ La Cucarachas was originally a traditional Spanish folk corrido but became a 'mexican' song during the Mexican Revolution of the early 20th century, where its often changing verses were given a strongly political slant, becoming a rallying cry for the people. As such, though coming from a colonial background it is now essentially Mexican with its 'naco' status being affirmed by the fact it is commonly played on car horns.

undesirables but inveterate survivors. Gus and Angel, though shown as a gang member and a washed-up luchador (fighter) respectively become the last, best hope of humanity against the forces that would destroy the world. We first see Gus three weeks after his 18th birthday, after having been released from detention where he was being kept for suspected manslaughter. He is a member of a gang and lives at home with his mother and his drug-addict brother, Crispin. In many ways this is a typical view of a Mexican family living in New York, that is, until everyone starts turning into vampires. Then Gus becomes a vampire killer extraordinaire, and his experience and knowledge from, and of, the streets enable him to put together a gang of slayers that destroy a huge number of vampires.²⁰ Gus' qualities are further emphasized by his having to kill his own mother and brother when they too become infected by the deadly contagion. Whereas in Stoker's novel *Arthur Holmwood*, with the assistance of Van Helsing and other members of the original crew of light, had to kill his beloved Lucy when she became undead, Gus undertakes this grisly ordeal alone, all the while utilizing the derogatory or stereotypical aspects of what is seen as Mexican to his advantage in the war against the all consuming forces of consumption arrayed against him. We see this in his knowledge of firearms, the locations of various gangs and gang members across New York, and his ability as an inveterate survivor, very much exemplifying him as a "cucaracha". This is seen even more clearly in the figure of Angel.

Angel Guzman Hurtado used to be a famous luchador.²¹ As mentioned above, he is directly equated to El Santo – their names are even strikingly similar sharing Guzman as a middle name – the silver masked wrestler that starred in many Mexican cult *lucha-libra* films. El Santo, as a figure of justice and the common man, was often pictured fighting against the forces of evil, which included werewolves, vampires and other supernatural beings. Angel

²⁰ Chuck Hogan, the professional novelist of the two writers, uses this as a common theme in his other works, where combat situations are transposed onto familiar and domestic situations, and the skills, which once alienated characters, now becomes vitally important for survival, in particular see *Devils in Exile* (2010).

²¹ The name given to a *lucha libre* wrestler.

too, formerly known as “The Silver Angel,” made many films, and as the narrative knowingly observes, “But it was with vampires that he discovered his true niche. The silver-masked marvel battled every form of vampire, male, female, thin, fat--and, occasionally, even nude, for alternative versions exhibited only overseas” (*The Fall* 138). This is a direct nod to El Santo, not least as one of his most popular films outside Mexico was *Santo vs. las Mujeres Vampiro* (*Santo vs. the Vampire Women*) made in 1962. However, Angel has now fallen from grace and all the vast amounts of money and investments he accrued earlier have been spent on operations to try and fix the knee injury that prematurely ended his career. Now he lives in a building, not unlike the ones he used to own, and washes dishes for the Tandoori Palace next door. As with Gus, the appearance of the vampires means that the characteristics that marked him out as less and an outsider now become essential to both his and humanity's survival. This is shown most dramatically towards the end of the second novel, *The Fall*, where Angel dons his old wrestling mask to fight the Master vampire, allowing his friends to escape. In true moment of matinee melodrama, and “naco-ness,” Gus addresses Angel at his moment of self-sacrifice:

Gus smiled at the mad Mexican's bravery. And he recognised Angel for the very first time He understood everything--the strength, the courage of this old man. As a child, he had seen all of the wrestler's films on TV. On weekends, they played on an endless loop. And now he was standing next to his hero. “This world is a motherfucker, isn't it?” Angel nodded and said, “But it's the only one we have.” Gus felt a surge of love for this fucked-up fellow countryman. His matinee idol His eyes welled up as he clapped his hands against the big mans shoulders. He said. “Que viva el Angel de Plata, culeros!” Angel nodded, “Que viva!” (*The Fall* 290)

This very succinctly represents the nature of the trespass that is enacted by the characters, for in its excessive and overtly melodramatic nature, it turns the grotesquely stereo-typical into a gesture of resistance and self-empowerment.

The “Angel Kiss”

He turned fast and came round with his free hand, catching the Master on the chin with an open-palm blow. The “Angel Kiss”... Inside the mask, Angel smiled excitedly. “You would like me to reveal myself, wouldn’t you?” he said. “The mystery dies with me. My face must remain hidden.” These words were the catchphrase from every one of the Silver Angel movies, dubbed into many languages, all over the world--words the wrestler had been waiting for decades to say for real. (*The Fall* 292- 293)

In her essay “Type and Stereotype: Chicano Images in Film”, Linda Williams speaks of the objectification of the chicano by the white Americans:, "I share with Chicanos, and any stereotyped minority, an abhorrence of a representational system that sees my reality as "other," my truth as grotesque caricature." (Williams 14) This is something that Del Toro does in his vampire novel, that is to take these “grotesqueries”, those masks of nationhood and belonging that others force them to wear, and exaggerate them to excess so that they grow beyond the control of those that impose them. This use of excess as a form of self-mimicry or reverse objectification is also described by Ana Lopez. In her essay “Are all Latins in Manhattan? Hollywood, Ethnography, and Cultural Colonialism”, although talking specifically about the popular Latino actress from the 1930’s and 40’s, Carmen Miranda, she intimates ways that it becomes, not just transgressive, but a form of agency:

Transforming, mixing, ridiculing, and redefining her own difference against the expected standards, Miranda's speaking voice, songs, and accents create another text that is the counterpoint to the principal textual operations. She

does not burst the illusory bubble of the Good Neighbor, but by inflating it beyond recognition, she highlights its status as a discursive construct-as myth. (Lopez 420)

Del Toro, like Arau, takes the everyday icons of the “naco”, “the uneducated” or “tacky,” and excessively commercial (Ragland 343), and inflates them to the scale of the mythic through parody. In *The Strain Trilogy* he utilizes a similar alchemical process, turning base-metal into gold, by taking the stereotype and making it the very characteristic that saves humanity, glorifying the human in the face of an all consuming inhumanity. Angel in particular embodies a stereotype which is especially kitsch, tacky and excessively commercial; the prime example of a globally recognised example of Mexican manhood and yet an object of ridicule and denigration because of that.²² As such, the luchador configures to how Olga Najera-Ramírez describes the Mexican charro, or cowboy, within the cinematic tradition:²³

As a figure of courage, power, and national identity, the charro continues to play an important role for *mejicanos*, especially those within the United States who have struggled for a position of power in the larger world. Yet... the issue of authority over the representation of Mexican culture remains a hotly contested terrain involving issues of class, gender, and community that straddle political boundaries. (Najera-Ramirez 12)

That Angel fulfils such a positioning is seen in Gus’ admiration for him and his childhood reminiscences, and yet it is one over which the aging wrestler himself has no control. Whilst being a figure of identification for Gus, a fellow Mexican, it is one that imposes identity rather than liberating it. It is only through his excessive actions that he lifts himself out of the stereotype and into his own hands, trespassing into and yet out of the

²² See the universally slated film *Nacho Libre* starring Jack Black which largely ridicules the Lucha Libre wrestlers.

²³ Arau has also utilised the charro in his work creating the idea of “Charrockero” with fashion and artworks.

ideological structure of the narrative that would otherwise contain him. This, then, becomes a two-tier form of agency for it prioritizes self-determination not just as a form of Mexican-ness, as a process of re-appropriation of national identity, but also individuality and self-empowerment. Arau, in his performance work, describes this becoming manifest in the “Multi-Individual Struggle” (Arizmendi 116). Peruvian ethnographer, Diana Taylor, in her study on Jose Maria Arguedas, sees it in a more knowing or reflexive way:

Rather than merely revalorizing the undervalorized (indigenous), Arguedas took the colonizer's discourse (again verbal and symbolic) and used it against them. This amounted to appropriating the signs and symbols of the other to express the worldview of the now defining self. (Taylor 93)

Here, the identity that is imposed upon the Mexican, the signs and symbols of the other, are re-appropriated and used against those that imposed them. In terms of Del Toro's novel, the image of the Mexican “gang-banger” or lucha libre wrestler which is imposed upon modern day immigrants by imperialist powers, as seen in the white all-consuming vampires, is turned against them and becomes the means of resistance and ultimate destruction of that domination. The “defining self”, then becomes the core means of trespass so that rather than conforming to the expectations established by the earlier vampire novel by Stoker, where the crew of light are a Lord, a Doctor, a Solicitor and a wealthy American, here they are “three Mexican gangbangers and an old ex-wrestler with hands the size of thick steaks” (*The Fall* 210). As such, they not only trespass on the ideological intent of the narrative in being poor, immigrants and disempowered, but also through defining themselves as separate and individual Mexicans. This disrupts the original, and continuing, imperialist intent within the novel for it no longer embodies the struggle of the individual vampire that transgresses against the group but the “Multi-Individual,” the cucarachas, that triumph over the nameless and faceless hordes of white capitalist domination.

Judith Halberstam adroitly notes how the monster reveals, and carries, the marks of its maker:

The monster, in its otherworldly form, its supernatural shape, wears the traces of its own construction. Like the bolt through the neck of Frankenstein's monster in the modern horror film, the technology of monstrosity is written upon the body. And the artificiality of the monster denaturalizes in turn the humanness of his enemies. (Halberstam 349)

Indeed, the monsters here are not just the Master Vampire, but the monstrosity of all the ordinary Americans, turned revenant, around him.²⁴ For as the society around him created the Master, so too does the Master reveal the inherent vampirism of the society of domination that he inhabits – their respective bodies write each other. However, in contrast to Halberstam's comment, monstrosity does not denaturalize the humanness of its enemies but rather highlights it. For the excess exhibited by Gus and Angel make them not only different and other to the monster, but Mexican and exceedingly themselves – not one of many but the one and only. In this way their trespass becomes not only transgressive but is of vital importance for civilization itself. Their continuing and excessive definition of self through re-appropriation of their stereotypical identities means that they are the only “human” beings left, and their humanity is the only chance left for a non-human world intent on consuming itself.

Conclusion

“I must be Master here or I can do nothing”²⁵

The new Dark Gift is the passing on of the newly transformed vampire gaze, the visual knowledge which makes the machineries of subjectivity visible and

²⁴ This enacts a similar form of monstrosity of the “average American/consumer” as posited by George Romero in his series of Zombie Films: *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and *Day of the Dead* (1985).

²⁵ Van Helsing in Tod Brownings film *Dracula* (1931)

the nuts and bolts that hold the surface of reality together stand out from the background. (Stone 182)

Allucquere Rosanne Stone, in her seminal study on posthuman subjectivity, sees the vampire as offering a unique perspective on ways to view potential subject positions and our relationship to them. In particular, she sees this configured in what she calls the “Vampire Gaze”. This is specifically seen in relation to the newly turned vampire in its change from human to un-human, or non-human. Herein, the newly turned vampire suddenly sees the world anew, changing the subject’s position to all that has gone before and all that will happen henceforward: “these new vampires then also acquire the dangerous knowledge of the partiality of the mortal gaze” (Stone 182). In many ways this re-enforces the conclusions made by Halberstam where the monster reveals not only the monstrosity of the system that created him but also has fundamental implications on how we may see ourselves in the future. Her conclusion, like Stone's, sees the future in terms of hybridity and difference, but always in and through the body of the vampire. Ultimately, this views the primacy of the vampire to the narrative, and the ideological imperative it contains. I would argue that this continues what Spivak postulated at the start of this article that although seemingly “palimpsest-like” it, in fact, continues the subjugation of those utilizing the narrative, and that its imperialist, colonialist intent, though hidden, still guides and underpins all that happens in, and as a result of, the story. This configures directly to Nina Auerbach’s interpretation of Stoker’s earlier novel where she reads the author's working notes for *Dracula*, “the heart of *Dracula* was not blood, but an assertion of ownership” (Auerbach 71). The vampire at the heart of this narrative is created by the all-consuming domination and exploitation that imperialism is founded upon, and, as such, carries that within it no matter what form it subsequently takes. As mentioned above, its monstrosity is anonymous and can take whatever form it wants. The vampire of folklore, as graphically shown in Francis Ford Coppola’s film

Bram Stoker's Dracula (1992), can take the form of a wolf, a bat, a plague of rats or a swirling red mist. And so today it can just as easily don the garb of any nation that deems to invite it in and transform and transfix it with its vampire gaze and infect it with its ideological poison, as aptly noted in the first book of Del Toro's trilogy, "these vampires were viruses incarnate" (*The Strain* 343). As such, the only point of significant trespass is not the vampire but those who would destroy him.

In Bram Stoker's text the Crew of Light act as one under the authority of the good professor and, as such, represent the totalised patriarchal, and imperial body. As Christopher Crafts observes in his book, *Another Kind of Love*, "Dracula, isolated and disdainful of community, works alone; Van Helsing enters this little English community, immediately assumes authority, and then works through surrogates to cement communal—that is, patriarchal and homosocial—bonds" (Craft 87). This can be taken even further for the Crew of Light and Dracula can be seen to be working in one accord on the sustaining, but also the spread, of capitalism and colonialism. As Halberstam and Erik Butler both observe, the child born at the end of *Dracula* is the product of all that has gone before and it is not just English blood that flows in his veins:

The young Harker's birth coincides not only with Morris's death, but also with Dracula's...vampires disappear only to reappear later in another form. In the cyclical time of the calendar, the child's entry into the world overlaps with the vampire's vanishing from it. This convergence points towards the possibility that the monster has wormed its way into another body and lies dormant, waiting to strike when least expected. (Butler 123)

As such, it is not the vampire that infects the imperialist body but rather the infection produced by the imperialist body, part of which is constituted by the Crew of Light. As a result, the only way to change the ideological imperative of that body is to change the nature

of, or what constitutes that body, in the first place. The cucarachas in Del Toro's updating of the *Dracula* story then actively trespass into the borders that ordinarily contain the colonial body, disrupting its borders and changing the nature of the vampire vision that emanates from it. Their work is not to destroy the ideological imperative of the narrative but to trespass into it and so enable them to change it from within. It is useful here to use Yareli Arezmeni's interpretation of Dian Taylor's term "transculturation":

She proposes "transculturation" to describe the interaction of two cultures where a third is born, rather than using "assimilation" which assumes a weaker culture will convert to a dominant one, or "appropriation" where the colonized culture seizes the elements of the dominant culture and aims to take its place as the new hegemonic culture. (Arizmendi 114)

Here, the third culture that is born, is not so much a child, as in the case of Stoker's Quincey Harker, but a continual process of transformation that sees not just one act of trespass but many, and so Gus and Angel, though acting as Mexicans also act as uniquely themselves, enacting Arau's "Multi-Individualism." In this way, the narrative actually contradicts Halberstam's earlier observation, for it does not denaturalise the humanness of its enemies, but in the excessive figures of the luchador and the gangbanger, emphasises the humanity behind the stereotype. The anonymity of monstrosity accentuates and highlights their inherent individuality. So too the vampire gaze becomes one that has been trespassed upon. Stone sees that once this new vision is "achieved, [it] cannot be repudiated; it changes vision forever" (Stone 183). However, the vision of the cucaracha sees the future with the knowing eyes of the past, a past of oppression and domination. The power it brings is not of control over others but control over themselves and of who and what they are. The trespass here is one that finds the self in a foreign land and a future in all that has gone before. The vampire is no different from the colonial system that created it, reflecting and embodying the

undead nature of domination and exploitation, revealing yet recreating the monstrousness that infects all that it touches. It is only through excess and the excess of the self that identity is reformed and restored, in being more than can be contained or controlled. The last words here belong to the Crew of Light gangbanger, Gus, who overturns all the earlier expectations and presumptions of Stoker's narrative, revelling in his individuality, his Mexican-ness and his otherness in the face of the Monster and the colonial ideology that would seek to contain him:

“You think you're eating Mexican tonight? You wanna think twice about that...Well?” he said, addressing the expressionless eyes. “What you waiting for? You like to play with your food before you eat it?” He pulled his fists closer to his face. “Not this fucking *chalupa*, you undead piece of shit.” (*The Fall* 49- 50)

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