

## Las Cucaraches in Transylvania: Trespassing Identity in Guillermo Del Toro's *The Strain Trilogy*

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Con mi cara de Nahuatl  
De nopal sin rasurar,  
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 cool<sup>1</sup>

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 essentializes 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 contemporary text I shall look at is *The Strain Trilogy* series of novels by acclaimed writer and director Guillermo Del Toro that utilizes a very particular self-awareness of internal and external national identity which is extolled and articulated by the Mexican artist and performer Sergio Arau. Arau constructs the notion of the "Naco," a parochial, stereotypical and kitsch embodiment of all that is considered Mexican and who knowingly delights in the derogatory identification placed upon him by colonial rulers. Subsequently the "naco" 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. Furthermore this can be seen to correlate

to the popular national identification that Mexico has with the cockroach, or “Cucarache,” that is often seen at sporting events for instance, which configures something or someone that is universally loathed but is an inveterate survivor.

The three novels that make up the trilogy by Del Toro are a re-interpretation of Stoker’s 1897 original work but are largely set in New York, not London as in *Dracula*, but its scope in terms of location and psychological and sheer numbers involved are 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 “cucaraches” that fight to save a world that normally vilifies them. This purposeful changing of the expected make-up of the vampire slayers 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<sup>2</sup>. Resultantly, the individual identity of the Mexican characters is wrested away from the colonial powers that originally impose it, no longer being a parody of uneducated indigenous peoples but representatives of a singular and unique human spirit that trespasses and disrupts imperial stereotypes and takes national identity beyond more restrictive categories as regularly imposed by ideas of 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, it is very much configured around the desires or anxieties of dominant discourse.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, rather than reflecting the vehicle for political or social resistance it then becomes the expression of social regulation, echoing Robin Wood’s observation that ultimately all horror is conservative.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently Auerbach 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). This difference has more to do with the self-sufficient character of the Byronic vampire that revels in its solitude whilst craving human company rather than spending all its time yearning for world domination.<sup>5</sup> Bram Stoker’s vampire does not correlate with the romantic notion of someone who is “mad, bad, and dangerous to know” (Castle 1)<sup>6</sup>, rather he embodies something in the nature of a virulent plague that strikes at the very heart of the modern, industrial world. In *Dracula* he strikes not only at London but at man’s most prized possession – his masculinity.<sup>7</sup> This embodiment of the vampire as a plague from history or the manifestation of an uncivilised and un-modern past that is specifically configured in Stoker’s novel as the East of Europe is also identified in the work of Stephen Arata and Matthew Gibson. Whilst Gibson in *Dracula and the Eastern Question* (2006) views as the differing natures of British and French colonial aspirations, or lack thereof, to the East, or Near East, Arata, in *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siecle*, (1996) more explicitly describes 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 Counts decision to re-locate then takes on wider significance. As 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 the other forces in play and firmly in their respective places.

Whilst *Dracula* can be interpreted as a narrative about the instability of colonial intent, with the vampire itself being the focus of all the attendant anxiety, it also becomes a fight between the Count and Professor Van Helsing for who will occupy the ideological centre of the novels universe.<sup>8</sup> 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 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. Implicit within this is the feeling of an older civilisation that has been exploited by newer and more powerful nations and/or empires and that the vampire is an immigrant wanting to feed off or consume the wealth and “life-blood” of this new land. This notion of the need to consume new lands is further illustrated in many of the filmic adaptations of the story, and none more clearly than the 1943 film *Son of Dracula* by Robert Siodmak. In a narrative that finds echoes in Del Toro’s later novels the vampire, named Count Alucard comes to America specifically because his homeland can no longer support him. Just as the vampire does in *The Strain* (2009), Alucard has engineered himself an invitation into the New World. The need to emigrate to the New world for the Old is explained by the Van Helsing-like character in the story, Professor Lazlo, who observes that 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” (*Son of Dracula*, 1943).<sup>9</sup> This obvious form of reverse colonialism is also accompanied by more insidious ones and writers such as Judith Halberstam and Jennifer Wicke point out a different forms of colonisation that also take place within and even beyond the novel itself. Stoker’s novel is unusual for the proliferation of new and “cutting edge” technologies that abound within the novel but which Dracula himself is excluded from them because of, what Van Helsing describes as his “child brain”. But Halberstam and Wickes also identify ideological and actual technologies which Dracula is very much part of namely the means of dissemination which consequently identifies the text itself as 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” (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.

This begins to configure the ways in which a narrative of subversion then becomes a tool of ideological normativity; where Stoker's novel itself becomes a vampire that spreads across the world, enacting the Counts 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" (2197). Though seemingly "palimpsestic" it in fact subjugates the cultures that attempt to appropriate it. Consequently the "new world" whether Hispanic, Asian, or African, in taking on the narrative of the Transylvanian Count actually invites in the Imperialist vampire. The truth of this is shown in the novel where Abraham Van Helsing embodying the voice of European Imperialism ultimately controls the interpretations and subsequent meaning of the narrative. This all controlling voice of Imperialism is exemplified most obviously in the fact that the Count never speaks for himself and we only know his words from the recordings and interpretations provided by Van Helsing or other members of the colonial defenders, or "Crew of Light."<sup>10</sup> 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 identifies thus: "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (2197). That is people who cannot be allowed to speak for themselves.

Resultantly, 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.<sup>11</sup> As such this paper specifically argues that works that appropriate the vampire text but wrongly locate its imperialist imperative with the figure of Dracula actually then reinforce the narrative's colonialist intent. This means that no matter how hybrid, different and other the vampire in those texts are it still consumes beyond control as did the system that created it. Whilst offering the illusion of difference this undead manifestation of imperialism embodies more of the same with the only exception being that its monstrosity is on show for all to see and gains acceptance, not in spite of, but because of the monstrosity that marks him out. I would argue that many other Mexican or Latino texts, such as Fernando Mendez's film *El Vampiro* (1957)<sup>12</sup> and Carlos Fuentes' novel *Vlad*, (2010), and even *Isabel* (2000) by Carmen Boullosa, by situating the vampire at its heart in fact 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 territory that one is not allowed to enter 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 by Mexican director/author Guillermo Del Toro tell the story of an ancient breed of vampires, or fallen angels, that walk the earth at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. One of their number, the Master, wishes to destroy the others and enslave humanity to become a huge “delicatessen” for his, and his vampiric entourage’s, 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 vampire with only a few and sparse victories against such overwhelming odds.<sup>13</sup> Del Toro, along with his co-author Chuck Hogan, wrote the work with the intention of going back to what he sees as the folk-loric roots of the undead to create “a very scary vampire story, none of these romantic, languid young men sucking the necks of beautiful people.”<sup>14</sup> 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 seen not in the figure of the King Vampire, who actually in this narrative is allowed to speak 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 Quncey Morris as in Stoker’s novel, but by the Mexican cucaraches.<sup>15</sup> 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. The use of the name Silver Angel is an 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.<sup>16</sup> 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 stereo-typical 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 emphasise its underlying text; that of domination and consumption. 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 all 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. (Del Toro, *The Fall* 210)

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 19<sup>th</sup>-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 and will 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.<sup>17</sup> 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 and it is they that offer the only chance of individual expression beyond the all-devouring force of the vampire or, as manifest here, white-American-consumerism. And so we return to the true source of trespass, “the fearless chicano vampire killers”, to paraphrase Roman Polanski’s 1967 film<sup>18</sup>, or what we might call “the cucaraches in Transylvania.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Everything Funky is Cool.**

The use of the term “la cucaraches” here examples the positive use of a negative term in relation to individual and national identity and also forms the basis of the underlying intent of Sergio Araus's artistic interventions. “La cucaraches” then is used here not just in a (self)derogatory sense, which indeed it is in Del Toro’s hands, but also in a certain revelling in the abjection of self, or rather exalting in what others view as negatives. Del Toro’s Mexican characters within the trilogy conform very strongly to Mexican artist Sergi Arau’s use of the word “Naco.” Here, 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 the artist Frida Kahlo and historical figures such as 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." (Arizmendi 113-114)

Del Toro uses the figures of Gus and Angel in *The Strain* and achieves exactly the same effect, by being configured as what is seen as quintessentially Mexican in contemporary America, that is as a gang member and a washed-up luchador (fighter), they become the last, best hope of humanity against the forces that would destroy the world. We first see Gus three weeks after his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, after having been released from juvenile hall 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 in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, that is, until everyone starts turning into vampires. Then Gus becomes a vampire killer extraordinaire, and his experience and knowledge accrued from living on the streets enable him to put together a gang of slayers that destroy a huge number of vampires.<sup>20</sup> Gus' heroic qualities are further emphasized by his having to kill his own mother and brother when they too become infected by the deadly contagion. This mirrors a similar scene from Stoker's 1897 novel. In *Dracula* Arthur Holmwood, with the assistance of Van Helsing has to kill his fiancé Lucy when she becomes a vampire, Here Holmwood fulfils his duty with all the expected "stiff upper lip" of an officer of the British Empire. In contrast 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. This is exemplified 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 "cucarache". This is seen even more clearly in the figure of Angel.

Angel Guzman Hurtado used to be a famous luchador.<sup>21</sup> 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 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" (Del Toro, *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!” (Del Toro, *The Fall* 290)

This very succinctly represents the nature of the trespass that is enacted by the characters in the way that they transform the stereo-typical from the mundane into the epic. By exaggerating the cultural signifiers of what would ordinarily represent the kitsch and melodramatic unto excess, it turn's, what is ordinarily configured as grotesque, derogatory and shameful into a gesture of resistance and self-empowerment. As such trespassing on and de-empowering constructions of class and imperial and privilege by transforming symbols of denigration and anonymity into ones of self identity and pride.

### **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. (Del Toro, *The Fall* 292- 293)

The construction of Mexico and Mexicans as having a subjected identity, in the same way that Spivak talks of a “subjected knowledge” is with exploring further to understand just how much “la cucarachas” trespass on the colonial intent of the vampire narrative and the ways in which Mexican identity is shaped by others. 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. Women's bodies reduced to the status of sex objects for the delight of male viewers are no less stereotyped than the lazy Mexicans who serve as foils in countless westerns to flatter the intelligence and energy of the Anglo cowboy. (Williams 14)



What both Arau and Del Toro do in their respective works 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)

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. Del Toro 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.<sup>22</sup> As such, the luchador configures to how Olga Najera-Ramírez describes the Mexican charro, or cowboy, within the cinematic tradition<sup>23</sup>:

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 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 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" (Del Toro, *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. Interestingly Judith Halberstam in her work mentioned above observes how the construction of the monster inevitably affects the identities of its enemies, infecting them with its monstrosity:

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.<sup>24</sup> 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 civilisation 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"<sup>25</sup>**

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 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 subjects 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, and 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 do 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” (Del Toro, *The Strain* 343). As such, the only point of significant trespass is not the vampire but those who would destroy him. The Crew of Light in Stoker's text 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 itself, part of which is constituted by the Crew of Light. Resultantly, 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 cucaraches 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's emanates from it. Their work is not to destroy the ideological imperative of the narrative but to trespass into it and so enabling 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 monstrousness 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 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." (Del Toro, *The Fall*: 49- 50)

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## Notes

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> Robin Wood in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan—and Beyond*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, Print, discusses the conservative nature of what he calls "classical narrative [that] moves toward the restoration of an order," (220)

<sup>5</sup> See also Christopher Frayling, *Vampires: Lord Byron to Count Dracula*, London: Faber and Faber, 1991, Print. And James B. Twitchell, *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1981, Print.

<sup>6</sup> A phrase used by Lady Caroline Grey to describe Lord Byron. Here taken from an article by Terry Castle, 'Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know,' in *The New York Times*, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1997. [Available at:

[http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/04/13/reviews/970413.13castlet.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/04/13/reviews/970413.13castlet.html?_r=2)]

<sup>7</sup> See John Allen Stevenson, 'A Vampire in the Mirror: The Sexuality of Dracula,' in *PMLA*, Vol. 103, No. 2, 1988, 139-149, Print, Christopher Craft, 'Just Another Kiss: Inversion and Paranoia in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*,' in *Another Kind of Love: Male Homosexual Desire in English Discourse, 1850-1920*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, Print, and Phyllis A. Roth, 'Suddenly Sexual Women in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*,' *Literature and Psychology*, 27, 1977, 113-21, Print.

<sup>8</sup> See Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Chicago: The University Press of Chicago, 1995, Print, and Butler, Erik, *Metamorphoses of the Vampire in Literature and Film: Cultural Transformations in Europe, 1732-1933*, New York: Camden House, 2010, Print.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> As named by Christopher Craft in "'Kiss Me with Those Red Lips": Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *Representations* 8, 1984, 107-33, Print.

<sup>11</sup> The most obvious example of this can be seen in the Blacksploitation films *Blackula* and *Scream Blackula* where by appropriation of the narrative from *Dracula* actually ultimately reinforces the domination of African-American individuality by the dominant white imperialism.

<sup>12</sup> *El Vampiro* is actually the first time on film that the fangs of Dracula were seen.

<sup>13</sup> *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.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted from 'Guillermo del Toro: *The Strain Trilogy*', on *YouTube*, Available at [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-uVSGbQRIE>] accessed March 1<sup>st</sup> 2011, Web.

<sup>15</sup> Though seemingly very similar and both self-styled metaphysicians, Abraham Van Helsing and Abraham Setrakian can be seen as opposite representations of European colonialism

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with Van Helsing being the result of Dutch colonial intent, whereas Setrakian, as a Holocaust survivor, is the result of German colonial intent.

<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> La Cucaraches was originally a traditional Spanish folk corrido but became a 'mexican' song during the Mexican Revolution of the early 20<sup>th</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> 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*, New York: Scribner, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> The name given to a lucha libre wrestler.

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

<sup>23</sup> Arau has also utilised the charro in his work creating the idea of "Charrockero" with fashion and artworks.

<sup>24</sup> 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).

<sup>25</sup> Van Helsing in Tod Brownings film *Dracula* (1931)

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