# Sins of the Blood: Rewriting the Family in Two Postmodern Vampire Novels

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## Summary

Postmodern vampire novels often concern themselves with issues surrounding Western family life. In this article I will compare the presentation of family violence in Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls* (1992) and Kristine Kathryn Rusch's *Sins of the Blood* (1995). Brite's radical subversion contrasts interestingly with Rusch's appeal to less radically reinscribed, liberal values. These novels position their characters in suburban locales, where traditional family dynamics and upbringings are the accepted norm and where the inequalities of these structures are perpetuated. This traditional milieu, with its veneer of order, is often shown to be the breeding place of psychoses and antisocial behaviour, and of cycles of inherited violence. Whereas Rusch's liberal critique stops here, a key example of the genre's radical potential is Brite's exploration of self-chosen and unorthodox family structures as a subversive option to the violence of the hegemonic norm. The inherently subversive, proximate, queer figure of the vampire acts as a catalyst for this interrogation, playing the role, in its chameleonic fashion, of any family member, from abusive father to alluring sister, or standing on the margins of human society and subtly making us compare it to ourselves.

## Opsomming

Postmoderne vampierromans gaan dikwels oor kwessies wat op die Westerse gesinslewe betrekking het. In hierdie artikel vergelyk ek die voorstelling van gesinsgeweld in Poppy Z. Brite se *Lost Souls* (1992) met Kristine Kathryn Rusch se *Sins of the Blood* (1995). Brite se radikale omverwerping kontrasteer op interessante wyse met Rusch se pleidooi vir minder radikaal heringeskrewe, liberale waardes. Hierdie romans speel af in voorstedelike gebiede, waar tradisionele gesinsdinamiek en opvoeding die aanvaarde norm is en waar die ongelykhede van hierdie strukture bly voortbestaan. Dié tradisionele milieu, met sy dun lagie orde, word dikwels uitgebeeld as die bakermat van psigoses en antisosiale gedrag en van siklusse oorgeërfde geweld. Rusch se liberale kritiek eindig hier, maar Brite se verkenning van selfverkose en onortodokse gesinstrukture as 'n ondermynende opsie vir die geweld van die hegemoniese norm is 'n sleutelvoorbeeld van die genre se radikale potensiaal. Die inherent ondermynende figuur van die vampier dien as katalisator vir hierdie verkenning, en soos 'n verkleurmannetjie speel dit die rol van enige gesinslid, van

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afbrekende vader tot verleidelike suster, of staan dit op die grense van die menslike samelewing wat ons subtiel dwing om dit met onsself te vergelyk.

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In fiction written before Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, from Victorian Gothic horror through to the pulp period of the 1950s and 60s, the vampire was presented as a monster to be destroyed with little thought, ultimately passive and ineffectual. Dracula's threat, for example, like that of most pre-Rice vampires, was certainly grave on a physical level for the characters concerned, but he could not successfully challenge them where it really mattered: their ideology, their sense of moral-religious-ethnic superiority, their faith in civilisation remained intact, and won out eventually. Dracula was a foreign presence and his threat to the hegemony was easily neutralised by marginalisation. Seen simplistically, all it took was trust in England or America, an easy trust learned from babyhood, to defeat the abject and marginal creature.

Postmodern vampire fiction can be dated from 1976, with the publication of Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*. This was the first vampire novel to be written in the first person from the point of view of a vampire with whom the reader sympathises and the first work in which we are presented with the vampire's internal struggles with humanity and morality (Gordon 1988). Since then, Ken Gelder suggests, the contemporary vampire novel, presenting the vampire in its queerness and abjection, has often worked "by shifting from a conventional view of the vampire as culturally marginal (of little social significance ...) to a recognition that the vampire is not only central to culture but may even be (re)constructing it in its own image" (Gelder 1994: 142).

But rather than upturning a binary opposition of cultural marginalisation versus centrality, I argue that the vampire confuses the two. The idea that the marginal can have a profound impact on the central, the Other on the Same, is where the monster's force lies. *Interview with the Vampire*, with its acceptance of the vampire's significant potential to subvert dominant, centralised cultures, whether by fitting seamlessly into society or revelling in its position exiled from humanity, is a major milestone in horror fiction. For the first time we are led to ask how the vampire, or the monster, is like us, and how we are like monsters.

The 1990s were a rich period of vampire production, a period in the middle of a shift in US and Western political culture from the radical subversions of the 1970s to a period of corporate normatisation in the first decade of the new millennium. Brite's and Rusch's constrasting novels serve as a good illustration of this ideological transition. In *Lost Souls*, vampires are radical agents of change. Rather than just reflecting on life from the margins, these vampires take it over and alter it. Human characters in her novel are willing accomplices to change, rather than victims of it; they welcome the transgressive relief the vampires bring to suffocating rules. In *Sins of the Blood*, the equation between human evils and analogous vampire evils is part of what I would term liberal social critique. It is not radical, seeking to replace family structures with profoundly different lifestyles, neither is it conservative. It certainly does not seek to entrench the dominance of the father, and it does investigate maladies inherent in patriarchal structures, such as child abuse and rape. It presents, however, a search for a healing within families rather than a radical revamping of current systems. But it is as if the very centralisation of the vampire in Rusch's work disallows such a simple conclusion. Despite her intentions, it seems, the vampires in her novel blur the polar categories of order and chaos, good and evil, life and death; they ultimately make closure in her novel impossible.

## Suburbia, the Traditional Family and Domestic Violence

Michel Foucault argues that the traditional family is designed to be the place where the "truth of sex" is confessed, aberrance monitored and dissuaded, and sexual normality taught, fostered and perpetuated. The family, asserts Foucault, is a unique and important locus of power in society. He writes that "the family organization, precisely to the extent that it was insular and heteromorphous with respect to the other power mechanisms, was used to support the great 'maneuvers' employed ... for the medicalization of sex and the psychiatrization of its nongenital forms" (Foucault 1990: 100). Because it is basic and nuclear, and gives the impression of being apolitical, the traditional Western family is invested with an insidious power to shape new

generations and support the values of dominant society. Foucault argues that the Western family, far from being an agent of repression of sexuality, actually "became one of the most valuable tactical components of the deployment [of sexuality]" (Foucault 1990: 111).

The patriarchal ideal of the "functional" nuclear family, the family with two heterosexual parents and a few children, is a fundamental unit for trans-ference of ideology. In its dominant patriarchal form, the father has complete decision-making power and control over the labour capacity of his wife and children. Needless to say, this model of the family with two children, an overbearing father and a pregnant mother doing the housework has become a bloated cliché, but it is based on the real experience of millions of Western households, to which Shere Hite's report on the family attests. Ideology and religious beliefs are most easily absorbed by children in this environment which often seems secure, intimate, sheltered and isolated. The comfort of the family may leave children with no thought of questioning their upbringing. Its intimacy and insularity – the modern Western family is the most socially isolated kinship structure ever – prevent children from being exposed to other styles of upbringing, or other world views and beliefs.

The most manifest danger of the patriarchal family is the fact that in it fathers feel justified in using violence to assert their position. Rape, sexual abuse, and emotional and psychological violence are the disastrous by-products of centuries of fathers' exclusive power. This family unit, writes Hite, has developed to the point where it keeps its members in terror: "Fathers in terror lest they not be 'manly' and able to support it all; mothers in terror lest they be beaten in their own bedrooms and ridiculed by their children; children in terror of being forced to do things against their own will and having absolutely no recourse" (Hite 1995: 346).

The settings of postmodern horror novels often serve as a reflection of the societal, sexual, moral and ideological norms in the community the monster affects. By locating their stories in a normal, contemporary US American setting, *Lost Souls* and *Sins of the Blood* attempt to expose the dysfunction beneath this veneer of stability.

At the start of her novel Kristine Kathryn Rusch describes a scene of domestic regularity: "The dining room looked the same. The new oak table was set for company – as it always was – with a lovely linen tablecloth protecting the surface. The collectibles hid in the matching china hutch, and the hardwood floor was bare" (Rusch 1995: 1). This seems like the dining room of a houseproud family, hospitable and ready for company. But the room is a front, a window-dressed display ready in case anyone enters un-expectedly. It is an illusion of order, painstakingly hiding chaotic violence. The collectibles hide, as does a little girl, who watches her father confront her mother, snatch the baby boy from her arms, beat her and kill her. And when it is over, the house can be tidied, the veneer made intact again. The

father knows that an orderly environment is safe, and should invite no investigation. A passer-by will see a neat house and presume that neat lives are played out behind the walls. Place here is a false reflection on the ethics and morals of the people who live there. The obsessive neatness of this vampire father – or by extension, of the abusive or violent human father – hides his pathology.

The abodes of the clever, self-protecting vampires in *Sins of the Blood* are conscientiously normal and middle-class. They allow no shows of poverty, no open displays of opulence, no overt decadence or vice, all of which invite attention. Many careless vampires stay in "cow bars", seedy clubs where they can drink the blood of willing victims, and wallow in lazy squalor. These vampires are most often discovered and destroyed within a few years. Ben, a central vampire character, learns to be sensible from his mentor, Mikos. It is important to learn to control the overpowering sexual urge of blood-drinking and learn restraint and sense. Mikos is extremely wealthy but hides his opulent home on an upper floor of a nondescript building in Seattle, laundering his operation in a Mafia-like way behind the front of a small Italian restaurant. Ben, who plans to start a family and have a powerful hereditary vampire as a son, moves into an unremarkable suburb of new houses and quiet streets. He seduces an estate agent, Glenda, into moving in with him to bear his son. Steve, Ben's friend, who frequents the cow bars, says about the house and about Glenda: "[H]ow fucking subur-ban" (Rusch 1995: 288). When the vampiric lifestyle offers such previously impossible opportunities for hedonism, Steve is amazed that Ben can continue to try to live as a normal human. But Ben knows that this bland suburban scene is the perfect front behind which he can commit whatever crimes he wishes. His assimilation into mainstream middle-class society ensures that he is not marginal and thus not noticed.

It is Cammie Timms's job to eradicate vampires when they are found. Special training is needed to discover where vampires hide. She knows that the biggest danger of vampirism is in normal-seeming environments which are described in detail: "The condos had been built in mock-colonial style – columned doorways and wide arched windows – and they had a look of understated elegance" (Rusch 1995: 9) and "the neighbourhood was silent, except for the blaring television coming from the house near her car, and had the illusion of safety" (Rusch 1995: 198). Indeed, the most ordinary, safe- and pleasant-seeming places are vampire country. In this novel, scenes of apparent wholesomeness disguise ugliness. This paradox is captured by the narrator: "The sunshine was bright, making the green lawn vibrant against the blue sky. Such a pretty place. She had wanted to believe that there were no vampires here, that she had finally discovered a place that was safe. The smell that first night should have clued her" (Rusch 1995: 227). Vampires hide in these unremarkable places, using the ordinariness of their surroundings to remain undetected. Cammie knows that it is necessary to

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look below the illusion of safety to see what is really there. As will be seen, Cammie's search for truth below a surface closely parallels her therapeutic search for a deeper truth about her identity.

Vampirism and suburbanism are ostensibly incompatible but actually symbiotic. This relationship can be closely tied to other similar tensions. The attitude in Ben's foster-parents' household when they begin to suspect he is turning from a human to a vampire is much like that of some parents facing up to the idea that their son is gay or takes drugs. He has been brought up in a caring family, in a good upper-middle-class neighbourhood and he is studying law. The question is posed by Cammie, "[W]hy would someone whose life seemed so good go through the changes Ben had?" (Rusch 1995: 197). The presupposition is that a materially good suburb equals a morally good life, the very supposition that keeps Ben safe in the suburbs. Many deeper influences on their son's development are ignored.

The presentation of the suburban milieu in Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls* functions differently from that in *Sins of the Blood*. The suburbs are seen less as a veneer than as a passionless presence, where children are neglected and misunderstood, causing them to become directionless nihilists. Nothing, a 15-year-old boy, considers his environment:

> He looked toward the window. Outside, he could see a few lights: other windows in other houses, more houses beyond; houses with well-kept lawns and shade trees, like the one he lived in; houses with swing sets and poured concrete driveways and half-baths and redwood sundecks; streets travelled by Volvos and Toyotas picking the kids up from day care, going to the supermarket, the health club, the mall, or, if they were bored enough, the liquor store. Suburbs, stretching forever or until the end of Maryland, whichever came first. Nothing shivered, then swigged from the White Horse bottle next to his bed.
>
> (Brite 1994: 62)

The bland monotony of the suburban surroundings here is what distresses Nothing. The suburbs stretch "forever or until the end of Maryland, whichever came first". There simply seems to be no viable opportunity for change, so children like Nothing turn to drugs and alcohol and sexual experience to attempt some psychic escape. These surroundings are not portrayed as a place where violence hides, although drunkenness and the potential danger of drunk fathers are hinted at. Middle-class and depressed children with bourgeois parents seem to seek passion and pain to give their lives uniqueness and meaning. As we see, these types of children have been wasting away for decades: "*I've got to get out of this place*, [Nothing] thought just before dawn, and the ghosts of all the decades of middle-class American children afraid of complacency and stagnation and comfortable death drifted before his face, whispering their agreement" (Brite 1994: 29). Here, "comfortable death" is a great and most feasible horror, and even a

violent environment seems to some youths to be a much more attractive option. This explains in part their fascination with uncomfortable death, Gothic subcultures and vampirism.

There is a glaring absence of parents in this novel. Even the parental cars – dull, safe Volvos and Toyotas – seem to cruise the streets in a disembodied way without drivers, following boring parental routes. We are, however, introduced to Nothing's parents, who call him Jason. They are not his biological parents. He was left on their doorstep as a baby, and they took him in. Despite their presence, they are impotent and meaningless to Nothing. Father, Rodger, fumes in powerless and diluted rage at Nothing's habits: "[H]e is fifteen and runs with a gang of punkers who give him a liquor habit and God knows what else. He dyes his hair that phony black that ... stains my good shirts .... He smokes cigarettes .... Things are going to CHANGE" (Brite 1994: 28-29). Before he can suggest any changes, unnamed "Mother", who, it is sarcastically written, "radiated benevolence, spiritual wholeness" (Brite 1994: 28) after she has come from meditating with rose crystals, tells him he is not in trouble and allows him to have his ear pierced because, she says, "I don't want to keep you from fulfilling yourself. I certainly don't want to decrease your potential" (p. 28). His mother is a parody of an ex-hippie parent, and she and her husband are bewildered by their son's rebellion, which is caused in part by their very liberal, uncoordinated and uninvolved parenting.

Nothing's adoptive parents, despite their lack of effect and the fact that they barely appear beyond this scene, are the most present of the parents in the novel. Another central character, Ghost, was brought up by his mystical grandmother, who has been dead for some time. He now lives with Steve, who seems to have no dealings with his family at all. We are not told when he left home or why, but he does seem to have had another normal-seeming childhood. His mother and father played "Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and an eccentric creature apparently designed just for him, the Haircut Fairy" (Brite 1994: 48), and his aunt and cousins took him to church, but it meant little to him. What he seemed to lack in his family was "magic" (pp. 46-47), perhaps a sort of real spirituality, which he found in his friend, Ghost. This is one in a series of relationships, in this and the other books, where family and developmental roles are played by chosen nonfamily members to fulfil the needs of the characters involved. This surrogacy will be discussed in greater depth below. Ann's father, Simon Bransby, is the only evidently abusive human father in the novel. (Wallace Creech sleeps with his daughter, Jessy, but we accept, in his telling of the event, that she was responsible for seducing him.) When Simon and Ann talk, they exchange tense pleasantries, but one evening, when Ann was sixteen, she came home drunk. Simon, who had also been drinking, "trussed her to her own bedposts with rope and kept her tied there for seven hours, until she pissed herself and begged him to forgive her stupidity" (Brite 1994: 262).

On top of his abuse, he seems to be the embodiment of a damagingly neglectful father. Ann's mother died mysteriously years before, and Simon spends most of his time at home in his laboratory engaged in a crazed experiment with LSD and live animals.

The nameless suburban wasteland in Maryland where Nothing is brought up can be compared with the small town of Missing Mile, North Carolina, where much of the activity of the novel is played out. As evidenced by the name, the town is a characterless limbo, where young people wish for escape and old people play checkers all day. Some of the inhabitants, however, add life and personality to the forbidding village. These two settings are sharply contrasted with New Orleans, a third setting of *Lost Souls*. The French Quarter of New Orleans is the veritable homeland of American vampires. New Orleans is depicted by Brite (and Anne Rice) as a city which is more welcoming and homely for vampires than anywhere else in the United States. It is where the old European culture of Paris in its eighteenth-century heyday mixes with the culture of the New World, and with the ancient magic of Africa with all its mystical spirituality. Fought over by the French, British, Spanish and Americans in the eighteenth century, an important harbour and slaving centre, its heady cultural mix made it like no other place in the United States, perhaps in the world. Mardi Gras seems to go on all year, the "liquor flows like milk" (Brite 1994: 3), the town is the motherland of transgression. Gender is blurred in drag at carnival time; a large district of sex shops and shows skirts the edge of the law. The very boundary between life and death and between cultures of Africa and Europe is shaken and their intimate relationship demonstrated by the voodoo religion, a combination of African chthonic religion and French Catholicism. New Orleans is often seen as a place where the social norms of Western civilisation are eroded. The transgressive city parallels the lifestyle of the ambiguous vampire.

As well as interrogating the idea of superficially normal domestic environments, the novels also concern themselves with conventional family roles. *Lost Souls* offers some interesting perspectives on family relationships and roles. The family dynamics of the vampire characters are very different from the abusive and negligent fatherhood of Simon Bransby and the indifferent parenting by Nothing's foster parents. It is interesting to note that even the amoral and inhuman vampires in Brite's novel do sometimes betray aspects of typical human patriarchal intrafamily relations. Nothing and Zillah are, at first, lovers, then it is discovered that Zillah is Nothing's father. That they continue as lovers is not unusual to them (although of great shock value to the reader), as the vampires here are a separate race from humans and not subject to human taboos. Zillah is the embodiment of Nothing's wishes for home, identity and meaning in life, and their relationship, in many ways, seems to be a romantic ideal. At times, however, Zillah behaves just like the worst sort of human father. Nothing needs to feel

identity and acceptance and expresses a close empathy with Ghost, who he feels understands him. Zillah perceives this need as a weakness, and responds, "I know who you are too. You're a pretty little boy who hasn't learned his place yet. You're a pest who is going to have his throat ripped out in about two minutes" (Brite 1994: 183). This threat could be uttered by a drunk, violent human father. There comes a time when Nothing feels that Zillah should behave more like a good human parent: "You don't treat me like your son – you treat me like I'm half sex slave and half lapdog. When I'm good, you pat me on the head, and when I fuck up you yell at me and hurt me. But you never explain anything to me. What kind of a father are you, anyway?" (p. 288). Nothing, raised for fifteen years as a human, cannot be unaffected by his upbringing. Although he was always uncomfortable in his suburban surroundings, he carries many human ideas about families with him into his new life. This makes him uneasy when trying to discard it all and quickly take on the alien lifestyle of a vampire.

The treatment of mothers in the book is fascinating. Mothers are generally absent in *Lost Souls*, and part of the widespread surrogacy is a compensation for lost mothers. As is characteristic of Brite's work, there are very few female characters, and only one of these is a biological mother. This is Jessy, who was a human girl of around sixteen when Zillah seduced her and they conceived Nothing. Jessy, like all women who give birth to vampire babies, dies in childbirth, as the baby eats its way out of the womb:

> Jessy screamed until she could scream no more, and her eyes showed only the whites with their silvery rims, and great gouts of blood poured from her. When the baby slipped out of Jessy, its head turned and its eyes met Christian's: confused, intelligent, innocent. A shred of deep pink tissue was caught in the tiny mouth, softening between the working gums.
>
> (Brite 1994: 9-10)

This is a rich image, almost a creation myth explaining and justifying violence and misogyny among the vampire race. Vampirism here descends along patrilineal lines and the mother is little more than an incubator to vampires. There is no female vampire in this book, and if there were, a conceptual difficulty in the context, she would be less powerful, unable to create a further vampire in the line. This can perhaps be seen as reference to the vampiric nature of inherited power structures in an ideal patriarchy, with dominant powers perpetually feeding on those they subordinate. The image of the vampire baby emerging bloody-teethed from the womb also points toward embedded psychosexual horror imagery like the vagina dentata, and alludes to the hereditary nature of violence. The male baby emerges after destroying his mother, the first archetype of power and life in his existence, and looks to the male influence of Christian for guidance. At the same time he also bears the teeth in her vagina dentata. For an uncanny moment he is

an innocent killer, and the embodiment simultaneously of a glorious male victory and of a primal male nightmare.

The inheritance of violence through blood relationships is a primary concern of *Sins of the Blood*. Rusch's vampire society, like Brite's, is also male dominated and misogynist. In this case, there is a clearer allegorical moral correlation between vampire and human misogynist violence. Opening with the vicious confrontation between Cammie's mother and father, Rusch demonstrates the bloody nature of a vampire father. Their argument is about their son, Ben, whom the father feels he owns. "My son is wearing his travelling clothes," he shouts. "You were going to take my son" (Rusch 1995: 2). Then he makes explicit his views on the power relations within their marriage: "You are my wife, Laura. You go nowhere without my permission and you go nowhere without me. Is that clear?" (Rusch 1995: 2). The only part of this scene which does not directly parallel an argument in an abusive human household is the father sucking his wife's blood until she is dead. For the next few years, Cammie and Ben are raised negligently and abusively by their father, who beats them regularly. He sleeps in the day and demands that they are silent while he does. When Ben has the TV on too loud one day, his father gags him and ties him up in the cellar. He rapes Cammie when she is eight years old. Cammie, by this stage, has completely taken on her mother's role of protecting Ben, and she soon feels forced to stake him to protect them both.

Normal-seeming places and traditional families, then, are presented in these novels as the places where abuse and trauma hide, most often undetected. Children are neglected and misunderstood. Men beat and rape their wives and children, repress them, control them economically, and manipulate them emotionally and psychologically. Vampire malignity in conventional family and abode is often aimed to compare to similar human evil, and misogyny is presented as a mirror to reflect and condemn human domestic brutality.

## Rewriting the Traditional Family

It is in this repressive milieu that the contemporary vampire can make the most radical difference. Its protean, boundary-straddling nature serves as an example to those humans who would escape the tyranny of classification and normatisation. Sue-Ellen Case, Barbara Creed and Jonathan Dollimore present readings of this liminal condition which can fruitfully be applied to the relationship between vampires and humans.

The Queer, as described by Sue-Ellen Case, is "the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny" (Case 1991: 3). Queerness can be seen as a militant and practical defiance of social norms. Dominant society constructs polarities between acceptable and unacceptable sexualities, between male

and female roles; the queer challenges these distinctions, breaks sexual and societal taboos. S/he exists in the space between these polarities, in an indefinable limbo state, the state of the monstrous and uncanny. These liminal states are psychically and ontologically destabilising, and are terrifying to fundamentalists who would normalise sexuality. The queer is, in part for this reason, marginalised and defined as Other. Case explains, however, that the queer may purposely seek out this Otherisation, because, formulated as unnatural, s/he can find this to be a liberation from norms. Because s/he is defined as abnormal, the queer is in a position to revel in "imagining sexual objects and sexual practices within the realm of the other-than-natural, and the consequent other-than-living .... Striking at its very core, queer desire punctures the life/death and generative/destructive bipolarities that enclose the heterosexist notion of being" (Case 1991: 4).

This challenge even to the fundamental polarity between life and death is profoundly destabilising, and is of course central to vampire mythology. The vampire shares and reflects queer desire and identity. Vampires are in a state between states, in a "wild zone", away from normative influence. They are outsiders, yet have an immense power to frighten and to challenge. Their sexual desire is not restrained by societal norms. The vampire, in the exact words Case uses to describe the queer, is "the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny". The queer-as-monster and the monster-as-queer can be seen as symbols of liberating transgression for any number of traditionally suppressed groups, among them women, gays and lesbians. Both queer and feminist theory's conceptions of the wild zone are in many ways supported by Freud's suggestion that sexuality originates in a pre-Oedipal, unenculturated space. Queer theorists and psychoanalytical feminists concerned with ideas like *jouissance* look to this space as a subversive locus away from dominant influence where alternative discourses and systems of power can be produced and introduced into mainstream society with subversive effect.

Jonathan Dollimore similarly asserts the existence of subversive potential within marginalised groups. He works within a framework of opposition between dominant and subordinate cultures, particularly between heterosexuals and homosexuals in patriarchal society. He presents the notion of "sexual dissidence" – a political and deliberately subversive sort of resistance to dominant culture. Sexual dissidence, like Case's Queerness, "operating in terms of gender, repeatedly unsettles the very opposition between the dominant and the subordinate" (Dollimore 1991: 21). Dollimore attributes this blurring in part to a postmodern loss of faith in essentialism and an autonomous self. He writes that "as the autonomous self disappears, so the dialectic between law and desire, dominant and deviant, becomes much more complex" (Dollimore 1991: 26). To simplify Dollimore's argument, the "proximate" is the figure which cannot be classified into polarities and places itself in the dangerous indefinable area between them, and threatens to show up the false simplicity of the binary oppositions on which dominant

society bases itself. Queers, vampires and women are all proximate figures, embodying the dangerously subversive "perverse dynamic" which "signifies that fearful interconnectedness whereby the antithetical inheres within, and is partly produced by, what it opposes" (Dollimore 1991: 33).

The proximate, argues Dollimore, functions in two different ways. Because it lies between the Same and the Other, it is often made Other so that it can be displaced. It can also, however, enable "a tracking-back of the 'other' into the 'same'. I call this transgressive reinscription .... If the perverse dynamic generates internal instabilities within repressive norms, reinscription denotes an anti-essentialist, transgressive agency which might intensify those instabilities, turning them against the norms" (Dollimore 1991: 33).

Dollimore's notion of the proximate can be related closely to the transgressive vampire figure. His use of the term "transgressive reinscription" is particularly interesting, because taken to its roots, "writing back in" is a process with which subversive contemporary vampire fiction is most often concerned. The authors write vampires into a central place in their novels, back from a marginalised place, and the result is profound and subversive instability.

The vampire is an expression of the functionality, the sexual assertiveness, the allure and the liberation of the "wild zone". It, like persecuted humans, inhabits a liminal space, effective both in and outside culture, where even the rules of life and death hold no sway. The vampire is the creature best suited of all the monsters to reflect the transgressive and subversive aspects of monstrosity. What makes the vampire so dangerous and alluring is that it cannot simply be written off as a subhuman creature with no relevance to humans. Zombies, werewolves and ghouls can simply be reviled and exterminated like vermin. The destruction of a vampire is a religious matter. All of these monsters are partially human, but the vampire seems most human of all. It fits most comfortably into society and is civilised, often to the extent of being far more urbane than the humans it comes across. At the same time, however, it is animal, wild and unenculturated. The vampire is seductive and sensual and offers pleasure and knowledge humans have difficulty in rejecting. It represents the return of the repressed in a form so inviting that it makes us wonder why we needed to repress our pre-Oedipal desires in the first place. The vampire insinuates its way into society and once there shakes its laws and norms.

The vampire exists in that space between polarities, where simple definition cannot exist: "It gains its effect by continually *collapsing* the conventional polarity of 'life' and 'death', normality and the unnatural ... what is familiar and what is unfamiliar" (Gelder 1994: 61-62). It is dead, but very much more alive than many humans. It challenges the distinction between good and evil, sometimes adding to the complexity by making us sympathise with its evil. It is simultaneously frightening and alluring. It

cannot completely be rejected, nor can it be accepted fully. Like other manifestations of the abject, the vampire "fascinates desire but ... must be repelled for fear of self-annihilation" (Creed 1993: 10) but on the other hand must "be tolerated for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life" (Creed 1993: 9). The vampire is manifest ambiguity. This very liminality is central to the subversive potential of postmodern vampire fiction to question conventional notions of family.

*Lost Souls* is an example of the subversive rewriting of traditional family structures. This is a key area where Poppy Z. Brite's approach to family dysfunction differs from Rusch's. While both present and critique the oppression and violence of suburban domesticity, Brite proposes self-chosen, alternative family structures as an option, an empowering move which allows her characters to escape from the tyranny of the hegemonic order.

Being born into the adversities of a violent or negligent family often leads to characters questioning notions of home, name and identity. As discussed, in *Lost Souls*, Nothing's idea of home is closely tied to his developing sense of identity. He does not see Maryland as his home, and yearns for New Orleans, to which he has never travelled, where he feels he might really be at home. Nothing's name is also important to him, as if name is almost directly equated to being. When his foster parents find him on their door-step, there is a note attached to his blanket reading, "His name is Nothing. Care for him and he will bring you luck" (Brite 1994: 72). They rename him Jason and take him in, as Nothing observes, receiving bad luck for their trouble, possibly for the presumption of changing his name and trying to make him "one of their kind" (Brite 1994: 72). When teenaged Nothing finds the note stashed in his foster parents' drawer,

> he ceased to be Jason. He became Nothing, for that was what the note named him. He still answered to Jason, but the name was like an echo of a half-forgotten life. *I am Nothing*, his mind whispered. *I am Nothing*. He liked the name. It did not make him feel worthless; on the contrary, he began to think of himself as a blank slate upon which anything could be written. The words he inscribed on his soul were up to him.
> He grew taller, and some of the flesh of childhood melted from his bones.
> (Brite 1994: 73)

To Nothing, his name is a mystical path. If name is seen to predestine and define identity, Nothing's frees him to create his own. The note is like a scripture, written Truth, and he accepts the tidings, "for that is what the note named him". Losing the bland mantle of Jason, he now knows he does not belong in this suburban society and is not "one of their kind". He revels even in the act of signing his name "the point of his *t* a dagger, the tail of his *g* an extravagant loop. This, was the name Christian had given him, that undeniably belonged to him now. He would write it every chance he got. He

signed the note again, then a third time, making the letters sprawl wildly across the page: *Nothing, Nothing, Nothing*" (Brite 1994: 281-282). Having a new name liberates him to choose his own path, and his parents' plans for him are no longer valid. This knowledge makes him grow more mature – taller – and he revels in the responsibility of seeking his own destiny, in a quasi-religious quest. This is an extended and eclectic spiritual metaphor starting from his baptism in his mother's blood, watched over by Christian. Clearly, knowing who he is not frees Nothing to search, on his own terms, for who he is. Nothing undertakes his own Zen road-trip, in a divine state of not-knowing, on the way to New Orleans, his spiritual nirvana. Once he reaches it, he feels assimilated to his real identity. He is no longer ashamed of his name or nature. When Wallace Creech challenges him and asks him who he is, "something rebelled at denying his name. It was truly his now, and he would claim it, 'My name is Nothing', he said" (Brite 1994: 285). Knowing his name and his home gives Nothing a serene confidence. Once he has arrived in New Orleans, in ownership of his name, he sets out to stake his claim on the city of his birth: "Now he would go out and discover the streets that were his home" (p. 282).

Just as an adolescent's home may be found outside the household of his birth or upbringing, so can identity be formed outside the traditional family. This call to free movement is prevalent throughout the novel. Characters who have not been sufficiently nurtured often take it upon themselves to define their own family and their own home, often through surrogacy, a conscious or unconscious search to fulfil their frustrated needs. A family of self-chosen surrogates often proves to be a liberation from stifling norms and traditional roles, and these new families often succeed, where dysfunctional biological families fail, in providing them with a sense of belonging and identity.

*Lost Souls* starts with Jessy conceiving Nothing, being cared for by Christian who hesitantly also has sex with her, and her inevitable death while giving birth to Nothing. The novel thus opens with a child-mother, a child fathered, a surrogate father-lover and an equation of sexuality, birth and death. Distorted notions of family pervade the book. Given the dearth of established family structures in the novel, it is not surprising that nearly every close relationship fulfils a need for something otherwise lacking, and can be understood in terms of surrogacy. Steve and Ghost similarly share a complex and passionately close friendship:

> Steve had thought of himself as Ghost's protector because he was a year older and because ... reality was often too much for Ghost; it could puzzle and hurt him.
>
> Sometimes it seemed that Ghost consented to live in the world only because Steve was there ....
>
> Ghost was so damned important, so valuable. When Ghost was along, ordinary surroundings ... became strange, maybe threatening, maybe wild

and beautiful …. Steve credited Ghost with saving his imagination from the death-in-life of adolescence ... fearless old Steve Finn .... The protector. Yeah, right.

(Brite 1994: 40-41)

When they first meet, boys of ten and eleven, Steve is captivated by Ghost's calm and the comfort he feels around him. Steve's feelings at the first meeting are described as "not quite déjà vu; it was not so unsettling, but it was somehow *familiar*. When he remembered it now, Steve thought that it was not so much like meeting a friend as like recognizing one" (Brite 1994: 52). Brite's italicisation of "familiar" highlights the point that here the boys found family. They are brothers after this moment. Steve is seen as the big-brother figure of the two, but as is explained, he needs Ghost just as much. Ghost, in turn, being raised by old and distant magic-using relatives, feels the need for a close familial bond, which he finds in Steve.

The need for belonging and acceptance expressed in surrogacy is also expressed by an urge to become part of a vampire family. In *Lost Souls*, children are lured toward vampirism because it is both a tolerant system and a system with rules and a hierarchy. It seems to embody the best of both a traditional and a nontraditional family. It imposes an order which may be lacking in negligent families but an order that is not too harsh, offering space for individual expression and experimentation. Nothing's vampire family of Zillah, Twig and Molochai are simply an ideal-seeming family, even with the occasional flaring of father-son tension between Zillah and Nothing. They are vice-ridden, most often indulgent, but still offer identity and belonging. Kinsey Hummingbird, in contrast, is a human with a social conscience. He opens the Sacred Yew as a place where the teenagers of Missing Mile can gather and feel at home, and have a cheap meal and some music to listen to. He makes sure that they only drink beer. The Yew is presented as the only centre of real humanity in the town.

The widespread thematisation of dysfunctional and violent family struc-tures illustrates the important place of social commentary in postmodern vampire fiction. In most cases, the abusive family is not a primary concern of the novel but rather part of a complex of contextual detail demonstrating the genre's unpreparedness simply to accept received and superficial notions of normality. Details often taken for granted as background in other genres, like heterosexual nuclear family structures and traditional settings, are foregrounded and complicated here. The radical subversion of *Lost Souls* and the liberal critique in *Sins of the Blood* illustrate two approaches to the theme. In both novels, however, the evils committed in the family behind the veneer of normality are often interchangeably human or vampire. No longer is the monster Other. By centralising the character of the vampire, writers elucidate its needs, its motivations, its desires, and make the monster one of us. The vampire is assimilated into our society, at home in our type of town, and our type of family.

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