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Contagious Becoming: Nonhuman Agency and the Deconstruction of Victorian Dualism in
Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire*

Florence Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897), if read from a 21st-century posthuman lens, reveals a crack in the Victorian Humanism that was an offspring of the Renaissance. My presentation takes back the Vampire metaphor in the novel to its core: the bat. The bat's genes, which had infected the protagonist's grandmother, become a defining, destructive life force not just for Harriet, but also for her "near" ones, both physically and emotionally. In my paper, I explain how this flow of nonhuman life force breaks the carefully curated binaries between the animal and the human, the "savage" and the "civil", and the self and the Other. My focus here is on the otherizing of Harriet Brandt for her racial identity as well as her genetic connection to an actual nonhuman animal that has, in a way, been co-existing with her for three generations, and which now threatens and contaminates the racially superior clan too. Moreover, drawing on New Materialism, I'll also be demonstrating how the agency of the Other-human makes not just a contact but also a contract with the nonhuman in their shared alienation from the "civilized" English society. This material entanglement ultimately puts a challenge to the Victorians' carefully curated sense of performative existence. This analysis of literary non-dualism shows why a true Posthuman Renaissance, or a radical re-nasci, must begin by acknowledging the transformative, vibrant matter of the Other, instead of trying to exclude it.

As a "sensational" novel of its time, Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire* exposes the fin-de-siècle anxieties of the Victorian upper and middle classes regarding the presence of and proximity to a racial, gendered, and contaminated other, characterized here in the persona of Miss Harriet Brandt. Even before her vampiric tendency came to light, the matter of Miss Brandt's mixed-race, mysterious identity was already being treated with doubt and disgust by the elite family of the Pullens. And finally, when they discovered that Harriet's physical and emotional proximity to people can push them towards fits of dizziness and ultimately, demise, the prime source of it led them once again to Miss Brandt's racial lineage, as well as her spatial association with Jamaica. Despite multiple focus on the racial, postcolonial, and gothic aspects of the story, a posthuman existentialist reading of Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897) reveals to us the contingent nature of shared agencies between the human and the nonhuman, the subject and the object, the mind and the matter and their collective becoming.

The vampire motif, despite being central to the title as well as the plot of the book, has been mostly overlooked by critics, except for the times when it has been examined for its figurative or psychological significance. However, scholars like Susan Zieger, Brenda Hammack, and Sian Macfie have affirmed that a careful reading of the novel makes it evident that, in comparison with other contemporary vampire fiction (eg., Bram Stoker's *Dracula*), Marryat wanted her vampire to stand out by introducing medical and hereditary complications to her protagonist's background. This fact is elaborated in the novel by a certain Doctor Phillips who, having claimed to have previously known Harriet's parents, tells Margaret Pullen about

[Harriet's] mother. She was not a woman she was a fiend, a fitting match for Henry Brandt! [...] a revolting creature. A fat, flabby half caste who hardly ever moved out of her chair but sat eating all day long until the power to move had almost left her! I can see her now with her sensual mouth, her greedy eyes, her low forehead and half-formed brain, and her lust for blood. [T]he only thing which made her laugh was to watch the dying agonies of the poor creatures her brutal protector slaughtered. [S]he thirsted for blood, she loved the sight and smell of it, she would taste it on the tip of her finger when it came in her way. Her servants had some story amongst themselves to account for this lust. They declared that when her slave mother was pregnant with her she was bitten by a Vampire bat, which are formidable creatures in the West Indies and are said to fan their victims to sleep with their enormous wings whilst they suck their blood. Anyway the slave woman did not survive her delivery and her fellows prophecied that the child would grow up to be a murderess. Which doubtless she was in heart, if not in deed! [sic] (Marryat 144)

Looking at this crucial passage from the novel as a 21st-century scholar, it appears not only attainable but also unavoidable to consider the agency of the bat that had bitten the pregnant grandmother of Marryat's titular vampire, and has been staying and evolving since as a "vibrant matter", to borrow the phrase from Jane Bennett, and threatens to infect Harriet's future generations, or anyone who gets emotionally or physically associated with her. In the novel, in an ironic turn of events, the White English neighbours who initially looked down upon Harriet for her racial origin, ultimately succumbs to the vampire in her. In this regard, it is possible to say that the genetic co-reaction between the chiropteran matter and the sapiens mind makes Harriet capable of striking back at the colonizer, even if executed unconsciously.

Evident also from the same passage is the colonizer's gaze, exemplified by Dr Phillips, on the nonhuman animal and the "savage" human, that views those two entities as the shared aspects of certain monstrosity. However, as the novel progresses, the reader finds out that those very subjects of imperialist humiliation, cooperatively claim power over the colonizer clan by affecting them to the point of their ultimate demise.

Rosi Braidotti in her book *The Posthuman*, reiterates the Humanist nature of imperialism, and its techniques of introducing "the binary logic of identity and otherness as respectively the motor for and the cultural logic of universal Humanism" (Braidotti 15). It is, therefore, significant how the bat's genealogical fluid, traveling through three generations of women in

Harriet's family, breaks the Humanistic binaries between the animal and the human, the natural and the cultural, and the self and the other. As a Creole herself, when Harriet tried her best to fit into the Victorian standards by expressing her disgust for the Jamaican slaves, she was yet unaware of her true ancestry, as well as the genes of the "savage" nonhuman, the bat, that had been coexisting with her without her knowledge. Moreover, the contagious nature of Harriet's vampiric phenomenon threatens also the English elites around her, thereby drowning the dualisms of coloniser/colonized, White/nonWhite, male/female and so on. Here, a reversal of powerplay takes place as the breaking of binaries and dualisms are being caused, at first glance, by a racially inferior female, but originally, by a nonhuman matter, i.e., the genes of a bat. Thereby, the traits of a nonhuman succeeds to overthrow the established Victorian/Humanist dualisms.

The material entanglement between Marryat's vampire, Harriet Brandt, and the genes of the bat that had engendered the vampiric curse in Miss Brandt's genealogy is something from which the former cannot escape. It is an existential contract that she did not choose but is bound to embody. This point could be further analyzed by utilizing the insights from New Materialism(s). Theorists like Karen Barad, Elizabeth Grosz, Rosi Braidotti, and others have emphasized the weak foundations of the subject-object divide, and they argue that it is not empirically possible to make a clear-cut distinction between the two. In her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Karen Barad uses the example of how Niels Bohr, through his "quantum model of the atom" had rejected the "boundaries between properties", and also disregarded the Cartesian difference between subjects and objects (Barad 138). In acting from within Harriet Brandt's biological form, the chiropteran genes take up a positionality that neither actively dominates nor remains completely passive to Harriet's persona. And thus, the traditional binary between the subject and the object gets blurred to the point that the two seem to exchange agencies and exist simultaneously in this "naturecultural" becoming of Marryat's protagonist that rejects the nature/culture dualism.

In *Sexing the Body*, Anne Fausto-Sterling writes, "'Matter' derived from 'mater' and 'matrix', referring to the womb and problems of reproduction" (Fausto-Sterling 75). In case of Harriet Brandt in *The Blood of the Vampire*, by making the vampiric trait hereditary and associating it with hysteria, the author somewhat predates the New Materialist thinkers in making associations between the individual, the mother, as well as the matter that brings the bodily change and its subsequent becoming. Regarding this, Karen Barad has discussed about the process of constant production and/or generation of the agentic matter:

Matter is neither fixed and given nor the mere end result of different processes. Matter is produced and productive, generated and generative. Matter is agentic, not a fixed essence or property of things. (Barad 137)

Using physicist- thinker Karen Barad's agential realist approach of the matter, it can also be stated that the bat's genes and the half-caste human body in *The Blood of the Vampire* collectively created "the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting 'agencies'" (Barad 139). Because to Barad, "the agential realist elaboration of performativity allows matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming, in its ongoing intra-activity. And furthermore it provides an understanding of how discursive practices matter" (Barad 139). In their process of merging into a singular identity of the vampire, the bat's genome and Harriet's mind brings about a discursive threat to the dominant community that they start to fear the carrier instead of looking at the contagious phenomena as an expression of intra-action (different from "inter-action" between two separate entities, as clarified by Barad) within the biological being of the protagonist. But such ignorance does not eradicate the existence of the nonhuman "matter" or its agential entanglements with the mind.

To conclude, Harriet Brandt is not merely a gothic monster or a victim of Victorian prejudice; she is a site of naturecultural becoming. By shifting the focus from the vampire-as-metaphor to the bat-as-vibrant-matter, one could see how nonhuman agency actively deconstructs the dualisms that fueled the imperialist project. In order to move toward a true Posthuman Renaissance, it is necessary for us to undergo a radical re-nasci: a rebirth that does not seek to purge the "animal" or the "other", but instead acknowledges the agentic, vibrant matter that has always lived within and between us. Harriet Brandt's ultimate tragedy was her society's refusal to accept this entanglement; our task as scholars is to ensure that we do not repeat such exclusion.

Works Cited

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