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Wendigos, Eye Killers, Skinwalkers: The Myth of the American Indian Vampire and American Indian “Vampire” Myths

ABSTRACT

We all know vampires. Count Dracula and Nosferatu, maybe Blade and Angel, or Stephenie Meyer’s sparkling beau, Edward Cullen. In fact, the Euro-American vampire myth has long become one of the most reliable and bestselling fun-rides the entertainment industries around the world have to offer. Quite recently, however, a new type of fanged villain has entered the mainstream stage: the American Indian vampire. Fully equipped with war bonnets, buckskin clothes, and sharp teeth, the vampires of recent U.S. film productions, such as *Blade, the Series* or the *Twilight Saga*, employ both the Euro-American vampire trope and denigrating discourses of race and savagery. It is also against this backdrop that American Indian authors and filmmakers have set out to renegotiate not only U.S. America’s myth of the racially overdrawn “savage Indian,” but also the vampire trope per se.

Drawing on American Indian myths and folklore that previous scholarship has placed into direct relationship to the Anglo-European vampire narrative, and on recent U.S. mainstream commodifications of these myths, my paper traces and contextualizes the two oppositional yet intimately linked narratives of American Indian vampirism ensuing today: the commodified image of the “Indian” vampire and the renegotiated vampire tropes created by American Indian authors and filmmakers.

“The Vampire is *not* universal by any means. Native Americans do not have vampires.”
(Dundes 161, emphasis in the original)

“I took that tradition—the vampire tradition—from where I was, and made it mine.
I stretched it and made it work for my own purpose.
And that was fun.”
(Carr, qtd. in Arrivé 11)

CULTURALLY ULTRA-ADAPTABLE FANGS

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Vampires are the ultimate cultural chameleons. Between their humble mythological roots as “little more than a shambling and mindless” (Punter and Byron 268) revenant, nosferatu or vrykolakas in eighteenth-century Eastern European folklore, and their triumphant and worldwide advance in literature, film, music, on stage and computer screens, as well as in subcultures and fetishes, the vampire has proven to be a culturally ultra-adaptable trope. Without a doubt, contemporary Euro-American instantiations of the trope—Angel, Blade, Stefan Salvatore, and Edward Cullen to name just four—have successfully added to the “domestication” (Gordon and Hollinger 2) of the vampire and concluded its transformation from blood-sucker to ascetic and “from monster to yuppie” (Tomc 96). If indeed “every age embraces the vampire it needs,” as Auerbach (145) argues, we are apparently living in an age in need of subjective narratives of humanized, exotically and pleasingly deviant semi-villains, who have long outlived the need to embody the monstrous epitome of the evils of aristocracy, Catholicism, industrialization, and sexual permissiveness; rather, today’s vampire “is composed in such a way that he embodies both monstrosity and normality within one endlessly struggling character” (Lenhardt 112).

Despite the vampire’s continuous domestication, one can easily trace consistencies in the modern and contemporary, non-scholarly receptions of the trope. As Hughes argues, it is hardly exaggerated to claim that we have conceptualized an archetypal vampire in primarily visual terms, i.e. more precisely, through the modern cinematic adaptations of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*:

The stylistic consistency of film portrayals of the vampire Count, by actors from Bela Lugosi to Christopher Lee, Frank Langella and Gary Oldman, has concretized a cultural image of the vampire as saturnine, noble, sophisticated, mesmeric and, above all, erotic. (252)

If we consider in this respect contemporary U.S. American film and television adaptations of the vampire trope, it becomes apparent that these archetypical characteristics based on visual markers are still in vogue. Modern vampirism (“post Bela Lugosi”) replaces monstrous villainy and deviance, conventionally depicted in the colour-coded colonialist imagery of the stereotypical Mediterranean and/or Savage with very visual racist underpinnings,¹ with an excitingly saturnine, seductive, and sophisticated semi-villain, whose deviance is still racially marked, but whitewashed to the utmost extent. In fact, by continuously shifting the narrative perspective from the object of the narrative to the subject, vampire protagonists and focalizers in contemporary U.S. American mainstream media function as the norm (regarding race, class, gender, and ethics) against which instantiations of deviant villainy (again regarding race, class, gender, and ethics) stand out and become opposable. In other words, the humanization of the contemporary Euro-American vampire does not result in a “post-race” vampire trope that would have outlasted depictions of “the colonized subject as the terrible and fearsome ‘other’ who symbolizes the literally dark self of the colonizer and assures him of his own moral integrity and identity” (Althans 69). Rather, recent bestsellers like Meyer’s *Twilight Saga* with its widely marketed central conflict between the pure white and rational vampire and his infantile, dark-skinned and semi-naked Indian² werewolf counterpart, make clear that race still informs the vampire trope. However, this should not induce us to dismiss the trope altogether.

As was mentioned before, the vampire trope is culturally ultra-adaptable. It employs a fixed canon of narrative conventions (e.g., characters, props, settings, plot structures, filmic techniques) and, thus, reiterates a dominant discourse of otherness—potentially from the perspective of those who are denigrated as being “other” (in terms of race, class, and gender). This trope, therefore, can produce highly politically charged texts that not only envision a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse, but aim at changing this discourse altogether. Vampires trade and quote stereotypes but they offer the potential to quote with a twist, to “constitute transformations” (Hutcheon 150). This twist can either describe the new

¹ Scholarship refers to this writing strategy as “Imperial Gothic.” Brantlinger suggests confining the Imperial Gothic to the period between 1880 and 1914, which roughly represents the heyday of the British Empire and of a vampire fiction before its cinematic rebirth.

² A brief note on terminology: I use “American Indian” as an umbrella term for indigenous North American peoples when it is not feasible to use the name of a specific nation or tribe. “Indian” refers only to the stereotypical representation of American Indian peoples in contemporary U.S. mainstream media.

context/genre, etc. in which the narrative conventions are employed, or it can describe the discourse-altering reiteration the author undertakes. While some contemporary instantiations of the vampire trope indeed repeat old racialized stereotypes in new contexts, and therefore strengthen the underlying discriminating discourse, other vampires are constructed as opposing agents actively and critically engaging with their own conventional make-up in order to make visible and change the hateful discourse they have been subjected to. In the words of Jewelle Gomez, the author of *The Gilda Stories*, featuring the African American lesbian vampire, Gilda:

The challenge for me was to create a *new* mythology, to strip away the dogma that has shaped the vampire figure within the rather narrow Western, Caucasian expectation, and to recreate a heroic figure within a broader, more ancient cultural frame of reference. (87–88, original emphasis)

We are today in the fascinating position of witnessing a new instantiation of the vampire trope and getting a first-hand account of its cultural adaptability, arguably even “universality” (Brodman and Doan ix): the American Indian vampire. Fully equipped with war bonnets, buckskin clothes, and bared fangs, the American Indian vampires of recent U.S. (film) productions, such as *Blade: The Series* or the *Twilight Saga*, quote the vampire trope and denigrating discourses of race and savagery. It is also against this backdrop that American Indian authors and filmmakers have set out to renegotiate not only U.S. America’s myth of the racially overdrawn “savage Indian,” but also the vampire trope per se. Welcoming the American Indian vampire into the truly extended family of (Euro-)American vampires enables us in the following to reconsider the narrative techniques and strategies employed on both sides of the discursive arena in creating culturally adapted American Indian vampire trope(s).

THE MYTH OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN VAMPIRE

Our tour of (American) Indian vampires starts with an exemplary look at contemporary U.S. mainstream film productions, keeping in mind that cinematic adaptations, past and present, play an essential role in the construction and maintenance of the vampire’s cultural image. Two key strategies in the development of this new vampire can be traced.

First, the conflation of the Euro-American vampire trope with the racially denigrating discourse of “Indian savagery” (either of the Ignoble or Noble strain) has resulted in a U.S. American vampire fantasy dressed in

the well-known stereotypical attire of the “Indian” and acting according to the limited logic of ignoble/noble savagery. We can encounter this type of American Indian vampire in Spike TV’s 2006 television action series, *Blade: The Series* and among the ascetic vampires in the series conclusion of *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn—Part 2*.

Created by David S. Goyer and Geoff Johns, *Blade: The Series* premiered on Spike on 28 June 2006 (and was cancelled after the first season). Kirk Jones stars as human-vampire hybrid in the title role, supported by Jill Wagner as Krista Starr, Neil Jackson as antagonist Marcus Van Sciver, and Nelson Lee as Blade’s sidekick Shen. Loosely basing both on the Marvel Comics character and the film series (1998–2004), Goyer and Johns include several character types and settings into the story that have not been featured before—most notably an Indian vampire tribe.

Though present in tension-building flashbacks from the pilot episodes onward, the American Indian vampire moves centre-stage in the series’ tenth episode, “Angels and Demons,” which Félix Enríquez Alcalá directed. In consecutive flashback visions into the sepia-tinted Detroit of 1899 the episode discloses when, how, and why antagonist Marcus was turned into a vampire. Upon his resistance to a local protection racket run by a vampire, Marcus has to consecutively endure being beaten up, witnessing his wife’s murder, and being nailed inside a coffin that is transported to the shores of the Detroit River and left with the nameless Indian vampire tribe residing there. To the constant beating drums off camera, vampires sporting tomahawks and clad in tanned buckskin and fur, adorned with beads, necklaces, hairbands and red feathers, snarl and growl in the same voice as an omnipresent black wolf (seemingly lacking the human power of speech); with the camera cutting in a shift in perspectives from a mid shot of the snarling black wolf to the mid shot of the tribe’s likewise snarling and gruesomely face-painted leader (played by Trevor Carroll), aptly wearing a black and red headdress resembling the shape of the wolf’s head, we finally witness the bite and the ensuing torture of Marcus at the stake.

Without a doubt, Alcalá’s staging of Indian vampires is not only consistent with, but also essentially limited to, the Ignoble Savage stereotype. More wolf than man, these speechless, inhuman “demons” (cf. episode title) function as the justification for the antagonists’ villainy. They also qualify Marcus’s vampirism as civilized, informed by human grief, and as “domesticated” in the above-mentioned sense.

While *Blade: The Series* and its ignoble savage-inspired vampires have thus far dodged scholarly attention, the *Twilight Saga*’s portrayal of an Indian werewolf tribe, problematically referred to as the Quileutes people (an American Indian people indeed living in Washington State), has

generated volumes of criticism as well as an engaging back-and-forth exchange between involved actors, communities, and scholarship.³ What has been overlooked thus far is the fact that *Twilight* not only stages Indian werewolf/human hybrids, but also an Indian vampire (Huilen, played by Lipan Apache/Mexican-American actress Marisa Quinn) and an Indian vampire/human hybrid (Nahuel, played by non-American-Indian actor Jorge Daniel Prado).

In director Bill Condon's *Breaking Dawn—Part 2*, the fifth and final instalment of the film series, Huilen and her nephew Nahuel are introduced as the last resort for peacefully resolving the escalated conflict between the Cullen family and the Volturi. Upon the climax of the battle vision, the camera establishes an extreme long shot, the soft background music stops, and against the backdrop of snowy whiteness and distant grey fir trees, we see two human shapes approaching the battle scene. While the characters are still hardly discernible, the focus switches to extreme close-up shots of bare feet walking in leather sandals, to a man's bare back, to black hair braids tied with leather strings, to regalia and adornment; synchronized sounds of walking on snow contextualize the shots as describing the approaching strangers. Now in close vicinity to the battle, an aerial shot quickly establishes the location of the newcomers as well as the other characters' reactions to them before smoothly ascending until we face Nahuel and Huilen at eye level and in a full shot. Called upon as witnesses to the innocence of the hybrid human/vampire child Renesmee and, thus, as pacifying force, Nahuel calmly narrates his story smiled upon by his aunt Huilen (Marisa Quinn), who has no speaking part. Despite the snowed-under scenery they are clad in universal Indian attire, i.e. highly sexualized costumes of "Indianness," somewhat reminiscent of nineteenth-century Plains Indians' clothing and adornment practices; they certainly echo Peter van Lent's observation that "Native heroes all have glistening, coppery skin and long, raven-black hair . . . and they usually wear little more than a breechclout" (214).

When Nahuel and Huilen are explained to be members of the Brazilian Ticuna tribe, this racialized depiction and commodification of American Indian peoples is taken to extremes. Employing the same basic narrative strategies as Alcalá in *Blade: The Series*, Condon (and Meyer in her respective novel) uses a readily available stereotype and recreates "for a whole new generation as 'cool' and sexier than ever" (Burke 208) an imagery of

³ For an overview of the debate and the key points of criticism put forward by scholars regarding racialization and exoticization as well as commodification of American Indian peoples and myths, cf. Burke.

the indigenous peoples encompassing the anachronistic and culturally frozen Indian. Reminding us of the visual underpinnings of today's cultural image of the vampire (cf. Hughes 252), Berkhofer argues that for "most whites throughout the past five centuries, the Indian of imagination and ideology has been as real, perhaps more real, than the Native Americans of actual existence and contact" (79); contemporary U.S. mainstream productions play a key part in this eclipsing of cultural diversity in favour of a commodified, marketable, and ready-made simulacrum of "Indianness."

Adding the Euro-American vampire trope to the Indian imagery does not only boost sales figures, but could very well entail the "most dangerous element" (Burke 216) of the commodification of American Indian peoples. By integrating the Indian into an epic of supernatural vampires and werewolves, and by connecting the fantastic personnel more or less subtly through pseudo-American Indian mythologies, *Blade: The Series* and the *Twilight Saga* create a visual and narrative network that effectively stages American Indians and their myths as being as fantastic—and fictional—as vampires.

Closely related to this "mythologization" of the American Indian (as) vampire is the second strategy employed in recent U.S. American film productions: the adaptation and commodification of American Indian mythological characters and narrative elements infused with, and structured by, the Euro-American vampire trope. *Ravenous*, a 1999 U.S. American horror film written by Ted Griffin and directed by Antonia Bird, can readily be considered a fitting case in point.

Set in the western United States during the Mexican–American War, *Ravenous* traces the journey of Captain John Boyd (Guy Pearce), recently both promoted for single-handedly defeating the enemy command and posted to a remote outpost when his commanding officer finds out about Boyd's cowardly playing dead among the bodies of his massacred comrades during the battle. Joining the seven peculiar inhabitants of Fort Spencer in the Sierra Nevada, Boyd's first duty is to accompany a rescue team's search for a lost party of settlers. Colquhoun (Robert Carlyle), a Scottish stranger, informs the soldiers about the party's whereabouts and admits that the starving members of the party had to revert to cannibalism to survive. Although George (Joseph Runningfox), the local American Indian scout, warns the rescue party about the cannibalistic stranger and relates him to the Wendigo myth (a man consuming the flesh of other men takes up their strengths but becomes a demon cursed by a never-ceasing hunger for human flesh), the party is lured into the trap, and slaughtered and eaten by the Wendigo. Once more the sole survivor of a massacre, Boyd finds himself badly injured and in the presence of a companion's corpse. Remembering

the Wendigo myth, Boyd eats the flesh of his dead comrade to stay alive and heal enough to make it back to Fort Spencer. When the Wendigo returns, too, wounded Boyd has to decide between eating enough human flesh to turn into a fully fledged Wendigo himself, and dying. He chooses to eat in order to face his antagonist and to end both their demonic existences in the final fight scene.

In the non-indigenous reception, the Wendigo myth, as defined by Margaret Atwood in *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, is a traditional story⁴ of the “Algonquian-speaking people such as the Woodland Cree and the Ojibway,” dealing with a creature’s “ravenous hunger for human flesh” (66) often narratively framed by “a time of scarcity, which gives rise to hunger, which gives rise to selfishness” (67). Drawing mainly on traditional narratives of the Canadian North, Atwood describes the Wendigo more closely as a physically superior “giant spirit-creature” (66), a creature that, aside from its ravenous hunger, can be defined *ex negativo* by its lacking human speech, warmth, and gender.

Without a doubt, *Ravenous* employs key aspects of the American Indian Wendigo myth, in fact communicates them directly and in Algonquin through the American Indian character George. However, Bird infuses mythological elements of American Indian origin with character traits and imagery foreign to the Wendigo: the saturnine, eloquent, sophisticated, and seductive antagonist, lusting for blood to such an extreme that he licks the blood-soaked bandages of a wounded soldier trembling with excitement, recalls with great clarity the Euro-American vampire. Consider in this respect also the two opening scenes (i.e. the promotion ceremony for Captain Boyd interspersed with brief battle-field flashbacks and, disconnected by means of the opening credit sequence, the introduction of Boyd to Fort Spencer now interspersed with prolonged flashbacks). Framed in a series of jump-cut close-up shots of red wine pouring, steaks dripping blood, lips chewing, and Boyd’s more and more disgusted face, Bird uses the opening scene to connect blood with blood and cuts a gruesome flashback sequence (the lead character’s live burial under a pile of corpses) right into the extreme close-up of the blood-soaked meat.

While the first opening scene lets us assume that we are witnessing a traumatized soldier, unable to eat rare meat that recalls the disfigured

⁴ According to the *OED*, a “myth” is a “traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or natural phenomenon.”

and blood-soaked comrades he betrayed on the battlefield, the second introductory sequence (Boyd at Fort Spencer) qualifies this first impression by infusing the vampire trope more clearly than the previous allusions to blood and consumption. Against the background of the snowed-under fort, extreme close-up shots on Boyd's head (hairline and the upper part of his forehead are cut off, thus highlighting Boyd's eyes, nose, and mouth) introduce prolonged flashbacks. Explaining himself to his commanding officer, Boyd comments in voiceover on his being buried alive under his dead comrades with their "blood running down [his] throat" until "something had changed" enabling him to escape the pile of blood and gore. What this changed something entails is narrated visually: forced to swallow his dead comrades' blood, Boyd bares his bloody teeth and pushes and tears his way out. Emerging from the dead, Bird cuts in a full shot, showing Boyd in a surprisingly clean uniform, his mouth smeared with dripping blood, and ready to kill his enemies with his bare hands.

Claiming that "the undead-cannibal movie" (Maslin), *Ravenous*, "avoids most of the clichés of the vampire movie by using cannibalism, and most of the clichés of the cannibal movie by using vampirism" (Ebert), some reviewers indeed put forward a vampire-based interpretation that "ignores the myth of the Wendigo as the driving force" and thus "necessarily strips it [the film] of its cultural specificity" (DiMarco 152). What Bird's adaptation (and commodification) of the Wendigo myth infused with Euro-American vampire imagery rather suggests is a product of "European imagination [that] meets and crosses with the Native indigenous one" (Atwood 64). The strength of *Ravenous* in this respect is not so much the creation of another gorily entertaining filmic character, but the self-reflexive stance with which the film adapts and translates the Wendigo myth into mainstream Euro-American cinematic traditions.

The Wendigo myth, as mentioned above, is narrated in Algonquin by George; it is also simultaneously translated into English by Colonel Hart. Consider Hart's interpretation of George's tale (the absent Ojibwa voice is indicated by ellipses):

[The Wendigo] in an old Indian myth from the North . . . a man eats another's flesh . . . it's usually an enemy . . . and he takes . . . steals . . . his strength . . . essence . . . his spirit . . . and his hunger becomes craven . . . insatiable . . . and the more he eats, the more he wants, too . . . and the more he eats the stronger he becomes. George, people don't still do this, do they? . . . like man eats the body of Jesus Christ every Sunday.
(*Ravenous*)

Just as the film (the narrative as well as the cinematic techniques) itself, Hart's translation fosters a resemblance between the Wendigo myth and the vampire trope. This self-reflexive elaboration of the act of translating one culture's myth into another culture's mythological vocabulary stages both the "move whereby one culture's story is adapted by another" (Di-Marco 144) and the process of infusing a Euro-American trope into an American Indian myth.

Note, however, the limits of this translation process enacted through the clear and unchanging role allocation. The American Indian characters (George, and his sister Martha played by Sheila Tousey) share their indigenous knowledge and warn about the endemic "Wendigoism" while staying unaffected by the demonic threat themselves. By explicitly limiting the "going Wendigo" (Atwood 62) threat derived from American Indian mythology and infused with a Euro-American vampire imagery to white, male U.S. American soldiers, the film offers a truly biting and multilayered critique of the U.S. American Manifest Destiny mindset, of colonialism, and boundless consumption informed by self-interest only.

AMERICAN INDIAN "VAMPIRE" MYTHS

In folklore, an American Indian vampire myth does not exist. Falling into the fallacies of Eurocentrism twice, Western scholarship, however, has a tradition of selecting and describing American Indian "myths bear[ing] a resemblance to the Euro-American vampire" (Doan 138; cf. also Keyworth; Bell; Nutini and Roberts) within old ethnographic records of fellow Western scholars⁵ and, thus, of subsuming highly culture-specific and diverse mythological key figures—such as the Corn Mother of the Hopi, the Nahuatl people's Tlahuelpuchi, the "Grandmother of Tharonhiaougon"⁶ of the Huron creation story, and the Wendigo myth encountered above—under the Euro-American umbrella term "vampire." And yet, we encounter both fully fledged American Indian "vampires" and poetically rendered allusions to the vampire trope in contemporary American Indian cultural (print, film, and web) productions. Indeed, today a diverse, culture-specific, and highly hybrid trope is emerging from the continuous reiteration and transcultural

⁵ James E. Doan, for example, bases his argument on Henry Reichert Voth's 1905 depiction of the Hopi's "corn goddess" myth (Doan 139), and on James Terrell's 1892 interpretation of the Cherokee's "demonic ogre who ate human lungs and liver and resided in a cave in Tusquittee Mountain" (Doan 137), meaning the U'tlunta or Spear-Finger myth.

⁶ The descriptive name for Ata-entsic, "Grandmother of Tharonhiaougon," was introduced in Joseph-François Lafitau's encounters with the Huron and Iroquois in the early eighteenth century (ca. 1720); cf. Wonderley 62.

hybridization of Euro-American vampirism and American Indian literary and mythological conventions.

Often referred to as the first fully fledged American Indian vampire novel, Aaron Albert Carr's *Eye Killers* (1995) constitutes a good starting point for conceptualizing the American Indian variety of "vampirism." Carefully blending the Euro-American vampire plot with Navajo/Laguna Pueblo myth, Carr constructs the novel's antagonist explicitly not as a vampire, but as an Eye Killer shimmering between the nineteenth-century European vampire with colonial American underpinnings and the Eye Killer myth that is part of the Navajo creation story. *Eye Killers*, Carr points out, are almost "holy beings," they reign "above us, so they are both good and evil" while still showing "totally human" characteristics (Arrivé 13). Thus, suspended and fluctuating between good and evil, powerful and weak, American and European, Navajo and white, the Eye Killer reconciles all those dichotomies the Euro-American vampire trope premises as essentially irreconcilable. Aware of the significant shift of control and power—and the fun involved in commodifying a Euro-American trope for the profit of American Indian peoples, Carr summarizes:

I am now on the other side, I was the one with control. I think that is something that Indian people appreciate, when we do take control of our own imagery. And so, in a sense, I took that tradition—the vampire tradition—from where I was, and made it mine. I stretched it and made it work for my own purpose. And that was fun. Murnau's [*Nosferatu's*] imagery was mine too. I could use it. In the same sense Curtis is saying these people are mine and I can manipulate them and I can make them be what I want them to be And that is what I did with the vampires, with the European images. One of the comments I get from Indian people is "I didn't know we could do that kind of thing," "I didn't know we could write about that kind of stuff." And I think it is because we need to get to the point when we can say: "this is mine too," "this film we see, I can take this and mess around with it too." (Arrivé 11)

Contemporary American Indian cinematic productions indeed have reached the point that Carr envisions. They creatively claim the Euro-American vampire trope, make use of it strategically as a means to reiterate critically and in a discourse-altering way the underlying racial stereotypes, and, at the same time, they write themselves, their cultural backgrounds, and political interests into North America's cultural consciousness. As in my discussion of the U.S. American invention of an Indian vampire, I focus my following discussion of the adaptation of the vampire in American Indian films on two key strategies: the adaptive infusion

of the Euro-American vampire trope into American Indian film (thus picking up where we left *Ravenous*) and the construction of fully fledged American Indian “vampires” as a result of a discourse-changing reiteration of the racially denigrating Euro-American vampire trope from the perspective of those who have been made the object of this denigration (thus adding a counter-strategy to the Indian vampires of *Blade: The Series* and *Twilight’s Breaking Dawn—Part 2*).

As if directly reacting to Bird’s *Ravenous*, the 2002 television film *Skinwalkers* (directed by Chris Eyre as part of the PBS *Mystery!* series) infuses the Navajo/Diné legend and trope of the *yee naaldlooshii*, or Skinwalker, with an adaptation of the Euro-American vampire trope. The film is loosely based on Toni Hillermans’s 1986 novel and focuses on Navajo tribal police officer Jim Chee (Adam Beach) and Lt. Joe Leaphorn (Wes Studi). True to the conventions of supernatural mystery fiction, Chee, a cop training to be a medicine man, connects the serial killer at large in the Navajo Nation to ancient folklore, while his pragmatic partner Leaphorn trusts hard facts only. Confronted with the mutilated bodies of three dead medicine men, ancient symbols drawn in blood, footprints that turn into paw prints, a desecrated grave, arrow tips made of human bone and a shotgun attack with human bone beads, Chee and Leaphorn disagree on whether they are facing a real Skinwalker or a person mimicking the legend, but finally succeed in tracking down the killer: Dr. Stone (also known as William Yazzie, played by Michael Greyeyes), the Diné tribal medical centre’s chief physician.

For a non-Navajo scholar researching the Skinwalker legend, the most likely result is frustration. Understanding that the lack of Navajo accounts on the Skinwalker is tied to it being considered a taboo subject, which is “seldom discussed with members outside the tribe, and rarely even inside it” (Jones),⁷ I limit my description of the Skinwalker to what seems to be the core narrative: the Skinwalker is usually a medicine man who has obtained the supernatural power to shapeshift into animals at will “through breaking a cultural taboo, including murder, seduction, or the corrupting of a family member” (Jones). In *Skinwalkers*, as the plural suggests, two intertwined renderings of the legendary creatures advance the plot—and both integrate visual and narrative allusions to the Euro-American vampire trope.

⁷ *Skinwalkers* depicts the taboo in two respects: on the level of the narrative, Leaphorn (after searching for information online) asks medicine man Sam Wilson about Skinwalkers and is instantaneously walked out on. On the level of Eyre’s direction, the legend of the Skinwalker as well as specific aspects of Navajo/Diné culture, ceremony and mythology connected to the legend are evoked, visually touched upon, but never disclosed or explained.

The vampire trope is called upon to visualize and to re-mythologize the film's core concern: "a biligaana sickness that needed biligaana medicine" ("a white man's sickness that needed a white man's cure", both *Skinwalkers*). The biligaana sickness is contextualized as lead poisoning and connected to the Dinétah Paints "factory in the middle of the community (Dinétah translates to "among the people/Navajo") and its polluting of the water. An invisible threat making the people "sick in the stomach, sick in the head" (*Skinwalkers*), the biligaana sickness—and with it the biligaana vampire trope—is closely tied to the Skinwalkers.

The first unmasked Skinwalker is Ruben Maze (Noah Watts), the leader of a local gang residing in the abandoned Dinétah Paints factory. Showing clear symptoms of lead poisoning, Ruben intentionally mimics the legend by leaving bloody symbols and shooting up Chee's trailer with human bone beads in the dark in order "to scare Officer Chee" (*Skinwalkers*). The mimicking Skinwalker, however, should not be mistaken as a mere red herring in the crime mystery. Though intending to play pretence, the human bone beads fired at Chee bring him "a curse" by getting "under [his] skin" (*Skinwalkers*); Chee begins to have visions when looking into his mirror and gets more and more aggressive up to the point of physically abusing a suspect. Interestingly, the human bone beads hit Chee in the side of his neck, leaving him with a bleeding wound that closely resembles the wound caused by a vampire's bite. Already plagued by visions, Chee treats the wound traditionally with yarrow root and puts a band-aid on it. The white band-aid covering a wound infected by white beads from now on functions as a stigma, a visual marker reminding us of the incident, the curse, and the biligaana sickness. Chee's wound eventually heals with the help of Dr. Stone's white man's cure, Bacitracin, but the stigma is simultaneously replaced and carried on by the identically, though fatally, wounded neck of Wilson Sam.

The second Skinwalker is Dr. Stone, who is "not your typical Navajo" (*Skinwalkers*) but the serial killer of medicine men. Blaming traditional medicine and the Navajo "stick wavers" (*Skinwalkers*) for not preventing the bloodbath with which his sick, lead-poisoned father erased his biological family, William Yazzie returns from his white adoptive family (the Stones) to the Navajo Nation to seek revenge. When Chee confronts the culturally alienated and morally deprived Stone at Big Rock creek, he is attacked and nearly drowned by the Skinwalker. Looking up from under the water surface, the camera cuts in a close-up of Stone's face, his mouth wide open in an inaudible scream, his face immobile but for the distortions the movement of the water surface causes. Without losing this focus, Eyre cuts in an image of a second face, overlapping the first but moving with the

water surface and blurry: Stone is morphed into the Skinwalker. The overlapping face (still immobile, mouth open) has very white skin, blacked-out eyes and black streaks running down the face from the eyes. While Chee sees the Skinwalker's face for the first time, the viewer has already encountered it briefly during Leaphorn's research on depictions of the Skinwalker legend and most likely also as part of the Euro-American vampire imagery (the wide-open mouth suspended over the victim, the blacked-out eyes, the extremely pale skin). The conflation of the Skinwalker and the vampire images in the climatic depiction of the antagonist gives a bleak and predatory face to environmental racism, to the white man's sickness and its immediate and long-term results on the Navajo community.

While the strategic conflation of American Indian tropes with the vampire in order to visualize and subvert the harmful influences of racism and (ongoing) colonization on American Indian peoples today can be traced in a number of contemporary American Indian films,⁸ fully fledged American Indian film "vampires" are rare indeed. By now, this should not come as a surprise. The vampire trope and its Euro-American literary and cultural history cannot be translated directly into an American Indian context. The reiteration and re-mythologizing of the trope, the transcultural adaptation of it, necessarily changes the vampire and charges it with new culture-specific meanings and contexts. In other words, if speaking of "the vampire" in contemporary American Indian media to highlight the strategic infusion of the Euro-American trope, we essentially require the quotation marks.

And yet, as I write this essay, the "Navajo Vampire film [that] could be the next *Twilight*" (*Native News Online* Staff) is being shot and directed by Joanelle Romero in New Mexico, possibly as a franchise starter. An adaptation of David and Aimée Thurlo's novel of the same name, *Second Sunrise* (scheduled for release in 2016 by Red Nation Films) will revolve around "a case of plutonium [that] brings a Navajo nightwalker (vampire) and a no-nonsense FBI agent together. While deadly shapeshifters stalk them, Lee Nez and his beautiful partner must stop the power-mad Nazi who created him" ("*Second Sunrise*—the Movie").

Emphasizing repeatedly the filmmakers' policy of a ninety-five percent American Indian cast and crew, the production has cast actors such as Eddie Spears as Lee Nez, Sage Galesi as Diane Lopez, Balthazar Getty as

⁸ To add just two examples: Alex Smith and Andrew J. Smith's 2013 film, *Winter in the Blood* (produced by Sherman Alexie), as well as Chris Eyre's *Skins* (2002) focus on alcoholism haunting American Indian reservations and visualize it in terms of vampirism (bottled blood, unquenchable thirst) and colonialism in the above-mentioned way.

Wolfgang Muller, and A. Martinez as Bowlegs. The film, Martinez states in a Red Nation Media press release (19 August 2014), “takes the legends that have come out of Europe and puts them up against the stories of skinwalkers/ shapeshifters that have arisen in Native American culture . . .” (“*Second Sunrise—the Movie*”).

Most significantly, *Second Sunrise* has been marketed as “the next *Twilight*” from the start. Taping directly into the debate of the depiction and involvement of American Indians in the *Twilight Saga*, co-producer Rosemary Marks states in an interview with *Native News Online*, “It [*Second Sunrise*] has all the elements—exotic locations, death-defying thrills, and hot Native stars—to be as successful as the *Twilight Saga*” (*Native News Online* Staff). To top it all off, the official homepage of the project copies one of the *Twilight* franchise’s marketing pillars and invites its visitors in the “Fan” section to become part of “Team Shapeshifters,” “Team Lee Nez—Navajo Vampire,” or “Team Wolfgang Muller—German Vampire” (“*Second Sunrise—the Movie*”). While it is difficult to qualify this strategy in relation to the unfinished film, it certainly has created visibility and is supporting Romero’s explicit goal: to create “an American Indian feature film that has the opportunity to break through at the box office” (“*Second Sunrise—the Movie*”). Using the vampire trope’s bestselling success story as a means to access the American mainstream marketplace with an American Indian film production, too, is a creative and politically charged strategy of countering colonialism and marginalization by reinventing the “vampire.”

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Understanding the vampire as a culturally and medially ultra-adaptable trope that trades and quotes stereotypes but also offers the potential to quote with a twist, to “constitute transformations” (Hutcheon 150), I have exemplarily analyzed and conceptualized the two opposed yet intimately linked narratives of (American) Indian vampirism ensuing today: the commodified myth of the (pseudo-)American Indian vampire of U.S. mainstream film productions, and the renegotiated “vampire” tropes created by American Indian authors and filmmakers.

Some contemporary U.S. film productions, e.g., *Blade: The Series* and the *Twilight Saga*, depict and enact persistently, appealingly, and in a highly marketable way the racialized vampire of the Euro-American Imperial Gothic tradition. Interchangeably dressing “the Indian” up as vampire or equipping the vampire with the ever-present war bonnet, these films re-enact racism for worldwide audiences in utterly appealing and easily digestible images.

Due to the vampire's ultra-adaptable (or should we say "shapeshifting") nature, we can also encounter renegotiated and re-mythologized "vampire" narratives by American Indian writers and filmmakers who loudly oppose the appropriated and racialized imagery of "Indianness." By hybridization and inversion of the Euro-American vampire trope, American Indian filmmakers and authors such as Eyre, Alexie and Carr create a powerful postcolonial message in colonial times. Seen in connection to the uncompromising will fuelling *Second Sunrise* to turn the American Indian "vampire" into the next global box office sensation and to include American Indian film into Euro-American mainstream consciousness, American Indian "vampire" myths and the myth of the American Indian vampire are destined for a head-on collision.

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