

The Symbolic Potential of the Hybrid: Anita Blake and Horror and Vampire Literature by Virginia Fusco, Peter Lang, 2021, 212pp.

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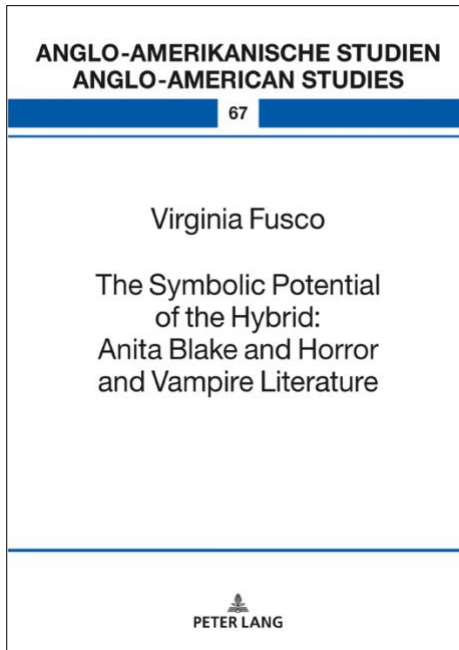
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BOOK REVIEW

The Symbolic Potential of the Hybrid: Anita Blake and Horror and Vampire Literature

By Virginia Fusco
Peter Lang
2021

212pp.

Virginia Fusco's new book, *The Symbolic Potential of the Hybrid: Anita Blake and Horror and Vampire Literature*, studies the neo-gothic monster through its genealogical and etymological origins to uncover the figure's racial and sexual symbolics. Fundamentally, she argues, "monsters" (*monstrum: to warn and to show*) are omens that foretell a breach in norms or represent the manifestation of boundaries horrifically broken (31). With this framing, Fusco specifically analyzes the vampire and zombie across several key narratives—namely, *Dracula*, *The Magic Island*, *White Zombie*, and *The Gilda Stories*—as these figures factor prominently in her culminating case study, Laurell K. Hamilton's long-running series, *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* (1991-present). As Fusco posits, vampires and zombies also share a legacy as the imagined physical *topoi* of imperialist Anglo-American male anxieties regarding white women's racial and sexual "contamination" (24, 95). By placing Hamilton's series in conversation with these narrative histories, Fusco positions *Anita* as a modern, queer remediation of the monstrous feminine. For Fusco, the titular Anita embraces traits previously constructed as horrifically embodied cultural breaches, such as racial hybridity and women's sexual pleasure (23), in a neo-gothic, feminist reclamation of the monster.

Fusco's discussion is divided by seven chapters, which are further organized into three thematic groupings: *Genealogy*, *Cartography*, and *Cross Roads*. In the introduction, Fusco positions her analysis as methodologically interdisciplinary, variously employing critical perspectives from anthropology, cultural studies, feminist theory, and critical race theory to answer two central questions: What does the monster do? And what does it represent? (16).

In *Genealogy*, Fusco examines contemporary monstrosity (as exemplified with *Anita*) as a reformation of nineteenth and twentieth-century monster tropes. With the first chapter, “Navigating Gothic Monstrosity,” Fusco contrasts two modes of interpretation: the *bio-political*, as informed by Michel Foucault’s construction of power/knowledge as normativity, and *liminality*, adapted from Victor Turner’s theoretical model of conventional rites of passage (31). Here, Fusco suggests that monstrous figurations reveal the limitations of normativity, as their physical and behavioural ambiguities and contradictions inherently oppose socially accepted norms and hegemonic discourses; in other words, monsters are bodies in resistance. Depicted as frightening in nineteenth and early twentieth-century narratives, Fusco later repositions the resistant monstrous body as emancipatory in *Anita*.

In “Genealogy of Desire,” Fusco utilizes Edward Said’s foundational work on Orientalism to analyze *Dracula* as an allegory for Britain’s dying empire, focusing on Jonathan Harker’s colonialist travelogues and Lucy Westenra as the vulnerable West (Westenra) corrupted by the racialized Other, Dracula. Fusco offers a compelling reading of Lucy and Mina Murray’s friendship, suggesting that its homoeroticism deepens Lucy’s characterization as Fallen Woman and Mina’s as a dangerously independent New Woman (a proto-feminist archetype), who is ultimately “saved” by avoiding lesbianism and accepting heteronormative rites (becoming a dutiful wife and mother) (74).

The focus shifts from vampires to zombies in “Genealogy of Fear,” in which Fusco explains that the figures share a cultural gene in Anglo-American imperialism. Fusco insightfully stresses the zombie’s origins in slavery and white patriarchal imaginings, influences seen in William Seabrook’s novel, *The Magic Island* (1929), and the United Artists film, *White Zombie* (1932). As articulated in this chapter, zombie narratives generate and reinforce white supremacist treatments of Black cultures and bodies as Othered vessels to be seduced, consumed, conquered, and feared—but never understood or humanized (93).

Cartography is foregrounded in Rosi Braidotti’s definition of the term as “a way of embedding critical practice in a specific situated perspective, avoiding universalistic generalisations and grounding it so as to make it accountable” (qtd. in Fusco 103). Fusco situates her critical perspective in “Playing in the Dark,” studying Jewelle Gomez’s 1991 novel, *The Gilda Stories*, as a pivotal departure from *Dracula*’s legacy of subaltern racial Others and “corruptive” homoeroticism. In a revealing contrast, Fusco positions Gilda as the inverse Dracula; for Fusco, she is a vampire with a narrative voice and humanity whose Black lesbianism radically rejects the Gothic canon’s historical perpetuation of patriarchal white supremacy. Instead, *Gilda* reclaims the monster-lesbian as an

emancipatory figure of community and affection, subverting the genre's earlier depiction of vampiric queerness as socially destructive (107).

In the final section, *Cross Roads*, Fusco studies Hamilton's *Anita* series as another feminist disruption of monstrous narrative tropes, particularly racial hybridity and "deviant" female sexuality. *Anita*'s titular protagonist is a vampire hunter and necromancer who, through her adventures (sexual and otherwise) gains supernatural powers from vampires, werewolves, wereleopards, and myriad other creatures (125). Fusco's reading suggests that Anita, who is *mestiza* (she has Mexican and German heritage), embodies the blending of physical and cultural boundaries that have generically signified monstrosity, like metaphorical miscegenation (131-32). However, Fusco notes that Hamilton still perpetuates colonialist anxieties; some characters, like the dark-skinned, Voodoo-practicing, Spanish-speaking Dominga, are vilified by their racialization, while Anita, who is Christian, light-skinned, and Anglophone, is the model assimilated minority (134). Thus, *mestiza* Anita demonstrates that the metaphorical hybrid figure is acceptable, so long as they are predominantly characterized by the normative (i.e., white) side of their identity. Notably, though Anita is socially Othered, she is a human who polices monsters; further discussion is needed to situate Anita within Fusco's core analysis of literal monsters, like vampires and zombies.

Fusco discusses the series' engagement with gender performance in her sixth chapter, "The Remake of the Beastly Boys," in which she applies Élisabeth Badinter's framework of the Hard Man/Soft Man/Androgyne masculine archetypes to Anita's primary love interests: werewolf Richard and vampire Jean Claude (135-36). For Fusco, Richard is the Hard Man, strong, decisive, yet controlling and violent (153). Conversely, Jean Claude—the androgyne—is an ambiguous figure who embodies the positive masculine traits of the Hard Man (wealthy, a satisfying lover) while rejecting the negative (masculinity based on the subjugation of the feminine). Fusco uses Jean Claude to exemplify the vampire's ability to fluidly embody masculinity and femininity, ultimately transcending heteronormative boundaries (158). Further, Fusco intriguingly questions whether the popularity of Hamilton's series with female readers is due to its alternative vision of an ideal partner—one who exists outside rigid gender constructs (162).

With "Let's Talk About Sex, Baby," Fusco contextualizes her analysis of the series' sexual politics through Andrea Dworkin and Patrick Califia's contrasting views in the 1970s and 1980s feminist sex wars, ultimately aligning *Anita* with Califia's sex-positivity. In *Intercourse* (1987), notes Fusco, Dworkin reads *Dracula* as another representation of rape as the only possible physical interaction between men and women, specifically drawing parallels between

vampirism’s oral-centricity and the 1972 pornographic film *Deep Throat* (1972). Contrastingly, Califia’s short story, “*The Vampire*,”—from his collection, *Macho Sluts* (1988)—explicitly links *experiencing* the vampiric bite with consensual BDSM, highlighting their transgressive connection of pain blended with pleasure (175). Within this anti-sex vs. sex-positive framework, Fusco argues that Hamilton recognizes the sexual excess inherent to vampire literature by making it an explicit plot element and aspect of Anita’s character. From her sexual experiences with monsters, Anita gains the power of *Ardeur*, a supernatural force sustained with intercourse every twelve hours. Rather than consider this a curse, Fusco suggests that Anita’s *Ardeur*—sex made monstrous because it is unmarried, non-procreative, and polyamorous—is a feminist reclamation of women’s sexual autonomy, subverting earlier generic depictions of women’s sexuality as deviant, like *Dracula*’s Lucy and Mina (179).

Fusco’s *Symbolic Potential* is a fascinating genealogy of the monster (particularly vampires) as a metaphoric omen for trespassed cultural boundaries. Her book is a helpful guide for scholars interested in studying vampires and zombies with an interdisciplinary approach, specifically the figures’ racial and sexual trajectories. By retracing this lineage, Fusco engagingly reveals the monster as a marker of feminist thought, demonstrating its challenges to cultural and literary notions of what is truly monstrous.

— Ian Clark

Ian Clark is a PhD student in the Department of English Literature at Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario. His research focuses on the intersection of queerness and medicine in the monstrous or transformational body, particularly in nineteenth-century British Gothic literature. Other interests include Victorian queer culture, the supernatural, and depictions of the metaphoric Other in contemporary film and television. His current work centres on the literary and historical genealogy of homoerotic vampirism.

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