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## ARTICLE

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## Self-Made Monsters: Agency, Monstrosity, and Queerness in Poppy Z. Brite's Gothic Horror

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### ABSTRACT

Poppy Z. Brite's gothic horror fiction is chiefly populated by the odd, the excluded, the queer. This article explores the relationships between queerness, normativity, and the body in Brite's gothic fictions through Adrienne Rich's concept of "compulsory heterosexuality" and Robert McRure and Alison Kafer's extensions of this analysis into "compulsory ablebodiedness."<sup>1</sup> In Brite's gothic tales queerness is often aligned with physical anomaly - both naturally occurring such as albinism, and preternatural such as a vampires' fangs. Those most likely to come to harm, or cause harm, are those who seek to enforce their standards upon others, perhaps to normalize the abnormal body, or demand access to a queer space. Brite not only acknowledges the social dynamics identified by McRuer and Kafer, but also celebrates their potential. The monster is not a monster because of what they *are*, but because of what they do and how they do it, and often because of what has been done to them.

### KEYWORDS:

Monstrosity, vampire, community, normativity.

Poppy Z. Brite's Gothic fiction is chiefly populated by the odd, the excluded, the queer. In Brite's short stories, a pair of separated conjoined twins long to be 'whole' again through risky surgery ("Angels"), and a cursed singer achieves peace through maiming his own vocal chords ("Optional Music for Voice and Piano"). In Brite's 1992 novel *Lost Souls*, the albino Ghost acts as the sympathetic moral core of the story, anchoring the physically normative Steve among a world of vampires, ghosts, and inherently gifted practitioners of magic. The queerness of characters like Ghost, and Brite's homosocial and homosexual vampires, is often aligned with physical anomaly, whether naturally occurring, such as albinism, or preternatural, such as vampire fangs. As David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder note, physical anomaly is often read as a metaphor for many minority identities, or read through a lens such as queer theory; however, "within this common critical methodology, physical difference exemplifies the evidence of social deviance, even as the constructed nature of physicality *itself fades from view*"(5). To explore the alignment of queerness with bodily difference, rather than read queerness into and over physicality, I explore the relationship between the queer, the normative, and the body in Brite's Gothic fictions through Adrienne Rich's concept of *compulsory heterosexuality*, and Robert McRuer and Alison Kafer's extensions of this analysis into *compulsory*

*able-bodiedness*. These critical frameworks enable analysis of the judgements levelled against the actions and agency of those who live with non-normative bodies, as well as the representation of the body itself. Normativity and deviance are behavioural as well as physical judgements, and social expectations about what constitutes appropriate behaviours differ greatly for differently-embodied identities; as recognised by Mitchell and Snyder, a tautological link between the physical body and social identity underpins "disability's ambiguous relationship to morality"(15). Analysing Brite's exploration of moral agency through his representation of queerness and physical difference, as both an individual experience and a communally established social norm, demonstrates the complexity of the choices facing characters previously described by scholars working in vampire fiction, such as Joseph Crawford and Joan Gordon, as amoral.

Amorality, as distinct from immorality, suggests either a rejection of the idea of judgement or the absence of the ability to judge – the former would suggest that vampires have no need for the concept of moral choices, but the latter removes their agency. Brite himself accepted the judgement of amorality for his vampire characters, retrospectively, but his reasoning suggests a rather simple reading of the dichotomy between good and evil, whilst recognising that it often maps onto physical readings of beauty

<sup>1</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5.4 (1980): 631–660; Robert McRure "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence," in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, ed. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: Modern Language Association, 2002): pp.88–99; Alison Kafer, "Compulsory Bodies: Reflections on Heterosexuality and Able-bodiedness," *Journal of Women's History* 15.3 (2003) 77–89.

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and ugliness. Complicating this, however, is Brite's concern that imposing conventional morality onto the vampire "is to deny his erotic decadence, or to imply that erotic decadence is somehow without morals" (*Love in Vein* ix). To allow for the potential of an erotic decadence with a moral sense or purpose, then, we must allow the practitioners their agency. Choice is inherently moral, tied as it is to the enactment of judgement, and it is the exercising of choice and agency and the limitations of those by social circumstance and physical embodiment that this reading through a queer and disability studies perspective seeks to draw out in Brite's depiction of monstrosity.

It is no more or less dangerous to be queer or normative in Brite's Gothic worlds; those most at risk of harm are those who seek to enforce a form of normativity, to deny others' choice and agency. Whether they try to forcibly incorporate the queer, to interpolate themselves into a queer space, or to normalize the abnormal body, the danger develops when individuals attempt to meddle with the communal distinctions that have developed to create the much maligned "safe spaces" of contemporary activist discourse. Those who suffer include heterosexual human women who court the queer vampire and an ancient vampire who gives a baby of his own kind to a human couple to raise; their deaths occur as the inevitable repercussions of their attempts to normalize the abnormal. I argue that the fear generated in these horror stories is not so much fear of encountering the other, but the fear of failing in that inevitable encounter. Brite wants the reader to be wary not of difference, but of the consequences of disrespecting and underestimating the different, a disrespect that often takes the form of negating the agency of the disabled and/or fetishizing the different in narratives that explore the tragic consequences of discourses of social normativity.

### DEFINING THE VAMPIRE AS DISABLED AND/OR QUEER

Compulsory able-bodiedness means

the cultural presumption of able-bodiedness. Unless someone identifies herself as disabled, or is visually marked as disabled (for example, using a wheelchair or other mobility aid; carrying a white cane or accompanied by a service dog; or missing a limb or other body part), she is assumed not to be disabled. This assumption [...] has a particular effect on those with non-apparent disabilities, in that their (incorrectly) assumed able-bodiedness often blocks their access to needed services, denies them the support of friends and family, and hinders their inclusion within disability communities. (Kafer 80)

Compulsory heterosexuality, likewise, is the assumption of heterosexuality until queerness is communicated through socially-coded dress or behaviour, or performed outright through romantic

or sexual interactions. These are assumptions that isolate queer and disabled individuals, hinder their formation of communities of shared experience, and hide the extent of queer identification and disability within wider society. McRuer notes that these binaristic constructions depend on a discourse of normativity that marks the disabled and the queer as abnormal, and thus less desirable; "to be able-bodied is to be 'free from physical disability', just as to be heterosexual is to be 'the opposite of homosexual,'" and thus "the most successful heterosexual subject is the one whose sexuality is not compromised by disability, (metaphorized as queerness)... not compromised by queerness (metaphorized as disability)" (91, 94). However, Kafer argues that reading queerness and disability as metaphors, rather than embodied experiences, can fall into the practice noted by Mitchell and Snyder of eliding physical difference and social identity and leads to an implication that queerness and disability cannot be discussed simultaneously, as linked but separate (Kafer 82).

Kafer explores compulsory able-bodiedness as a social dynamic that intersects with, rather than simply echoes experiences of, compulsory heterosexuality:

under the logic of compulsory heterosexuality, lesbianism is not recognized as a valid choice for women [...] For women with disabilities, this lack of recognition often takes other forms: because of their disabilities, they are perceived as being incapable of finding male partners and thus must have turned to lesbianism as a last resort; their same-sex desires are cast as signs of disability-related confusion; or their same-sex relationships are constructed as platonic due to their perceived asexuality (83)

Thus, Kafer demonstrates that compulsory heterosexuality functions differently for differently embodied individuals, and that queerness of desire, constructed as a socially deviant trait, is culturally aligned with physical deviance from the putative norm. This recognition of the social alignment of queerness and physical anomaly echoes previous analyses of vampire literature, in which the physical abnormality of the monstrous aligns with their non-normative behaviour as judged by gender or sexuality, such as in Christopher Craft's well-known essay "'Kiss Me with those Red Lips': Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*." It is, however, vital to note the distinction between being "critically queer/disabled" and being "virtually queer/disabled" (McRuer 95): deviation from the normative does not necessarily disrupt a dominant position that requires a definitional opposite. As Craft notes of Stoker's text, *Dracula* is ultimately destroyed, so that "Stoker's fable, however hyperbolic, reflects its age... [which] could not imagine such desire without repeating within their metaphor of inversion the basic structure of the heterosexual paradigm" (Craft

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129). The queerness that Stoker codes into his monsters reflects back a twisted version of “normal” heterosexuality and is defined utterly by the codes and conventions of its own era and against the socially dominant normality of heterosexuality. This also holds true in reading some overtly queer vampires of the contemporary era, such as those depicted by Anne Rice; Rice’s monstrous queers fulfil cultural stereotypes of gay men as a predatory cultural elite, outside of social and familial relationships and norms. Her narratives punish queer characters who attempt to disrupt a binaristic division between heteronormative familial groupings and gay male isolation; the child vampire Claudia is burnt alive as a reprimand to her “fathers” Lestat and Louis. A critical stance requires “imagining bodies and desires otherwise” (McRuer 97), which is precisely what I argue that Brite does in his own vampiric and monstrous fictions. Working through the implications of the constructions of community norms, his narratives explore the impact of embodied experiences on his character’s conceptions of their identity and moral agency.

Having acknowledged the dangers of turning disability into a metaphor, which loses sight of the physical body and thus suggests that “the body” is inherently a surface with a meaning to be read rather than a constructed social category in and of itself, I would argue that the same process has occurred regarding the vampire in modern fiction. As William Hughes suggests, “the male vampire has progressively become associated both with the physicality of homosexual practices and with the expression of a specifically gay identity... it is a pointed assertion of identity, of difference” (142). The behaviors of the vampire – hunting alone at night, the promiscuous penetration of the body with associated non-reproductive sexual pleasure, the transmission of a blood-based infection – reflects a heterosexist view of modern gay culture. In such readings, the physical difference of this “monster” simply makes its behavioral, moral, and spiritual difference visible – returning to that dangerous tautological link between the body and identity through its penetrating fangs. Brite removes his vampiric creations from the expected trappings of the nineteenth-century vampire narrative, which carried over into other twentieth century iterations, such as Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles*; there are no crosses, no coffins, no castles. His vampires are not simply the “Other” of *Dracula*, to be destroyed with no compunction, or judged within a moral framework governed by a supernatural God admitting of demons and the damned, as with Rice. The absence of the traditional mythological and moral structures is parodied through the trappings of youthful Gothic culture that draw upon the imagery of Catholic traditions and beliefs, just as the absence of a religious

framework is obliquely referenced through the naming and relationships of the vampires.<sup>2</sup>

What makes a disability reading possible in Brite’s vampire fictions is the fact that his vampires are mortal, proximately human rather than supernatural; “of separate races, races that were close enough to mate but still as far away from each other as dusk and dawn” (*Lost Souls* 67). By inter-breeding with humans, the vampires have evolved over time; the younger ones “drank incessantly, even ate [...]. Their chemistry was subtly different; they were hardier, their organs perhaps more thick walled, less delicate” (*Lost Souls* 59). The latest generations have also lost their overt physical markers of difference. They no longer even have fangs. The eldest vampire’s lifestyle choices are markedly proscribed by physicality: unable to withstand direct sunlight without many layers of clothing, and reliant upon blood that results in regular, though infrequent, murders – his existence within the majority human world is presented as a series of accommodations. Thus, reading the vampire as a disabled body returns our focus to bodily difference and enables us to avoid the mythologizing aspects of the spiritual and moral metaphors that are layered over the anomalous body.

The vampire “community” in *Lost Souls* is much like the disabled “community,” as a term used to define a minority population within wider society; a collection of isolated individuals or small support groups sharing a cultural history of marginalization and some experience of living similar lifestyle restricted by physical difference to expected normativity. Three generations of vampires are introduced: Christian, a younger trio named Twig, Zillah and Molochai, and Nothing. Christian is four hundred years old and runs a down-at-heel New Orleans dive bar. The trio, whose average age is just under one hundred, hunt the highways in a battered old van with a blood-spattered mattress in its back. The novel opens with Nothing’s conception by a human girl, Jessy, and Zillah, and the narrative focuses on the year in which Nothing turns fifteen. The vampiric community norms reverse our expected dominant social dynamics: compulsory disability and compulsory homosexuality are dominant features of vampire existence. The former manifests in the younger vampires’ aping of the restrictions of their older kin’s physical characteristics; they file their teeth to points and prefer to live a nocturnal existence, though neither of these are necessary physical adjustments. These visible, sometimes performative, differences mark them as outsiders from mainstream culture and as “insiders” to the community.

The homosocial world of the vampires is presented as both a choice and a practical adaptation to their disabling re-

2 It is the vampire named Christian who reflects on the moral and ethical aspects of the actions within the narrative and acts as an observer of events in which the son of Zillah replaces his father at the head of an eternal triumvirate.

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productive biology that reduces the number of adult females and makes those women wary of traditional heterosexual modes of coupling. Just as the continuation of vampire life depends on death, so, too, does their creation: Richelle, the only female vampire mentioned in the book, explains that vampire babies “*chew their way out... they kill, always they kill. Just as I ripped my mother apart*” (*Lost Souls* 273). As female vampires are unwilling to sacrifice their lives – Richelle becomes pregnant only as a result of rape – the choice to interbreed is one of necessity. Vampires are, thus, depicted as most often being born of humans who don’t know that they will perish in the birth. Heterosexual desire for, and of, the vampire is queered by the death-wish, or lack of consent, that must accompany it. In fact, we might suggest with Hughes, that Zillah, as the only male vampire depicted choosing human female partners, “is, perversely, a closet heterosexual” (151). Brite, thus, acknowledges and explores in an extreme mode the social dynamic identified by Kafer that, for the body that is socially-defined as abnormal, desire is always-already somewhat queer; “the sexuality of people with disabilities is understood as always already deviant; when queer desires and practices are recognized as such, they merely magnify or exacerbate that deviance” (Kafer 82). In Brite’s construction of a vampire normativity set against a human normativity, we can see disability and queerness constructed as separate, and yet linked, embodied identities.

### THE VAMPIRE AS SOCIALLY EXCLUDED “OTHER”

Brite’s depiction of the tensions between personal choice and physical limitation in the extent to which the vampires of *Lost Souls* engage with human society demonstrates his engagement with complex ideas about the influence of bodily experience and social pressures in identity formation. The establishment of community norms and group identity based on embodied experience, as a changing set of historical and geographical standards, has been explored from a disabilities perspective by Jean-François Ravaud and Henri-Jacques Stiker, based on the sociological terminology of Émile Durkheim. Ravaud and Stiker’s analysis is predicated on the distinction between “mechanical” solidarity, in which the ties between individuals are those of material likeness or kinship, and “organic” solidarity, in which links are more often formed based on the division of labour or other social bonding mechanisms, which “assists us in seeing the difference between exclusion *from* a society and possible exclusion *within* society” (491). The vampire is traditionally excluded from society, as materially unlike the human it belongs nowhere within the community. However, as Ravaud and Stiker note, this is generally a social model only possible within small, homogenous populations; “one has one’s place, or one does not [...] these societies [...] assign each group and each

individual a place” (492). Thus, I suggest that one reason *Dracula* is continually reproduced, re-read and re-analysed for new metaphors of exclusion is that, though the novel’s structure attempts a narrative solution that places the monster beyond the human society, this division cannot hold: the vampire has walked in society, participated in the capitalist system, disrupted the social bonding rituals of courtship and marriage. The vampire is no longer simply an inhuman monster but is one of the “others” experiencing levels of exclusion within modernity’s heterogeneous, globalized, multi-cultural society. The vampire in the mold of *Dracula*, therefore, becomes an endlessly repurposed metaphor for any differential otherness. Brite’s decision to depict complex social engagement amongst vampires – as well as between human and vampire – that acknowledge embodied difference, limits the metaphorical interpretations available to his reader. However, this social complexity means that his horror narratives become studies in “making monstrous,” as he explores what it is in behavioural and/or bodily terms that makes a monster, that elicits moral judgement.

To explore Brite’s depiction of the complex relationship between the individual and society, I explore different models of inclusion and exclusion dynamics outlined by Ravaud and Stiker, in particular three categories identified as “exclusion through abandonment,” “exclusion through segregation or differentiated inclusion,” and “inclusion through normalisation” (503-506). Brite does not directly engage with the overt “exclusion through discrimination” in which individuals are kept from achieving equality of access to society through legal and systemic means (Ravaud and Stiker 507). This model has been depicted in fictions, such as the television series *True Blood* (2008-2014), in which vampirism stands as a metaphor for minority rights and the physical and social implications of embodied difference are often ignored. In *True Blood*, access and engagement restrictions are often utilized as plotting motifs, rather than explored in terms of intersections of discrimination; rich vampires with specially adapted cars and office spaces are the focus of the narrative, rather than poor vampires who remain excluded from the corridors of power without access to expensive accommodation aids. Brite, however, focusses not upon power exerted through political and juridical structures, but the negotiation of individual power within smaller communities to effect or deflect social marginalization, for vampire and human characters alike.

Christian is the most inherently disabled character in terms of his physicality, and yet he is, arguably, the most integrated into normative society; he repeatedly references the rent he must pay on his bar or his trailer park home, and he always has a job. Christian essentially achieves differentiated inclusion, experiencing social isolation because his physical difference requires

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limiting accommodations. His vampirism is presented as socially disabling, rather than as a barrier to a mechanical integration to society, as the novel opens in his vampire-owned business in the heart of New Orleans. Brite recognises the personal effects of such precarious social dynamics; when Christian is taunted as “Count Dracula” while working he experiences a moment of anxiety, perceiving this to be what is often termed a “microaggression” that might escalate the tensions between himself and normative customers (*Lost Souls* 207).<sup>3</sup> Brite develops sympathy for the ancient vampire in describing the most ordinary aspects of Christian’s abnormal life. Having introduced all vampire characters with descriptions of handsome facial features, physical strength, and sexual desire, he shifts to an image of Christian walking his house alone for fifteen years: “in black leather boots, in slippers, with his bare, long-toed, knobbly feet” (*Lost Souls* 54). Despite Christian’s great age and strength, through the association of physical ugliness, and repetitious boredom, with undesirability, Brite evokes a measure of vulnerability. Christian’s defining characteristic is loneliness, as he attempts to develop emotional connections with humans – “moments of love” – only at the moment of their death: “Christian picked him up and held him like a baby, gazing into the face [...] for several minutes he held the boy” (*Lost Souls* 330,67). Longer human attachments are challenged by his loyalty to other vampires, though they are rarely in social contact. The resulting conflict in Christian between his emotional instincts to protect an innocent life, and his reluctance to alienate the only members of his own species he seems to know, comes to the fore when the human Ann becomes pregnant with Zillah’s child:

he hated [the other vampires] insouciance. Their cheerful cruelty. They didn’t care about the girl [...] he could tell her the truth [...] she might tell someone else. She might convince someone [...] No. He could not betray them [...] he could not let the others leave him a second time [...] Perhaps there would be some way to keep her from giving birth to another of Zillah’s beautiful, deadly children. (*Lost Souls* 241-243)

Christian is caught between his desire to experience understanding for his embodied difference and his fear that revealing this difference will endanger the physical safety of those like him and, thus, his access to the community of difference. Christian’s lifestyle is entirely governed by fear – fear of discovery, of retribution, and of abandonment. Ironically, it is this fear of abandonment that leads Christian to isolate Nothing within normative human society. Hoping to protect Nothing from the lonely vampire lifestyle,

he leaves him on the doorstep of a human couple, who adopt him and name him Jason. This integration into normative society is possible because of Nothing’s physical beauty; “a baby with enormous dark blue eyes and golden brown hair. Someone would love him. Someone human [...] Nothing might escape the hunger for blood, might be happy, might be whole” (*Lost Souls* 10). The equivalence made between happiness, wholeness, beauty, and physical normativity by Christian is contradictorily essentialist; it suggests that vampirism is almost entirely a learned social behaviour, even as it celebrates the child’s lack of physical markers of anomaly.

The presentation of an essentialist reading of identity is repeatedly undermined in Brite’s vampire narrative. Nothing’s sense of distance from his human parents is first contrasted to the performative teenage rebellion of his school friends, suggesting an inherent and biological difference between vampire and human. However, Nothing feels an emotional and spiritual connection to the musician Ghost and other disenfranchised youth in *Missing Mile*; “he loved the way they all somehow looked like him, and he wished he could make friends with every one of them” (*Lost Souls* 208). The lyrics of the eponymous band *Lost Souls* that drew Nothing to the town where they live are informed by Ghost’s similar experiences of physical non-normativity and feelings of exclusion, reaffirming the links between bodily experience and community formation, whilst also undermining the idea of a simplistic division between vampire and human. Nothing ultimately does not reach out to Ghost for help, or join the misfits enacting differentiated inclusion by forming an alternative community in *Missing Mile*’s Yew Tree bar. Nothing’s experience of exclusion through abandonment leads him to privilege a biological rather than a spiritual or emotional connection.

The power of the desire to belong is demonstrated through the contrast between the supportive and inclusive community of *Missing Mile* that shows itself willing to support Ghost, Christian and Nothing, and the exclusive and dangerous gang formed by the trio who nevertheless manage to maintain a powerful social hold over the other vampires. With fewer physical limitations than Christian and less human social knowledge than Nothing, Zillah, Twig, and Molochai seemingly isolate themselves by choice; living a segregated existence in which Nothing realizes that “everyone else is just cocktails” (*Lost Souls* 186). Creating fear and carnage for enjoyment rather than simply killing for sustenance, the trio dream of “ripping soft bellyskin”, leaving behind them “a shredded mess” of a body in a New York bathtub (*Lost Souls* 35-36). The line between choice and physical limitation is

<sup>3</sup> This term describes casual verbal and non-verbal cues that ‘communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalised group membership’

(Sue 3).

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blurred again as, though physically beautiful and able to pass as human, Zillah, Twig and Molochai are described as smelling “as though they’d eaten roadkill for breakfast,” which, essentially, they have (*Lost Souls* 179). Likewise, Christian’s apartment in New Orleans is still available to rent after his absence because its unpleasant smell makes it uninhabitable for humans. How much integration is possible, or desirable, from the perspective of both human and vampire Brite leaves open to interpretation.

Though the sympathetic depiction of Christian contrasts sharply with the by turns glamorous and repellent depiction of Zillah and his two acolytes, Brite’s narrative refuses to elevate one character’s moral judgement above the others’: the perspective of the vampires is presented as being as valid as those of the humans. The most detailed explanation of vampire engagement with human society is outlined in the novel by a human, Arkady Raventon, a magic shop owner with an interest in and knowledge of the supernatural. Arkady’s language, referring to the vampires as “creatures,” demonstrates a clear distrust of and distaste for their otherness (*Lost Souls* 275). Arkady reiterates the traditional narrative of subversive assimilation, focused on the danger to normative humans: “some of them can live as human beings from day to day, from year to year. Of course they must move about like nomads, because after a point they do not age [...] So they move, and they live among us” (*Lost Souls* 271). The suggestion that a vampire like Christian lives “as a human” depicts his life as a bar owner as a performance masking monstrosity, rather than one aspect of a multi-faceted personality. If jobs are for humans, and permanent homes are for humans, then Arkady’s speech suggests that the Trio are in fact the most “true” to an inherent vampire nature. However, Brite provides plenty of context for Arkady’s negative opinions, detailing his convoluted relationship to the vampires who were to blame for his brother’s death. Further, Raventon’s knowledge is shown to be unreliable; his methods fail to save Ann from her pregnancy, and his suggestion that vampires are all alike, and have a set pattern of behavior, are shown to be false.

There is no single reliable source of information on vampirism offered in the novel, no clear boundaries that set out who belongs and who does not, there are only various experiences of vampirism. Christian is no more integrated within the vampire sub-community than the human mainstream, both of which are presented as being fractured along lines of age, gender, beauty, and other physical markers of bodily and experiential difference. The younger trio of Zillah, Twig, and Molochai show no loyalty to any sense of community based on a shared physical nature. Although they enact significant rituals of greeting the first time they enter Christian’s bar to identify themselves as vampires, they only ever

exploit this connection and location endangering Christian’s normative lifestyle: “so eager to make your kill – in our alley, under our window... are you all mad?” (*Lost Souls* 329). Christian’s greater age, and more overtly vampiric biology, is never presented as a respected characteristic, even as the others file their teeth and ape his physical characteristics; instead, it marks him as weaker than his compatriots who, caught between vampire and human norms, exploit both to their advantage. Brite acknowledges the competing pressures at work in intersectional identity formation, exploring identity as both biologically “inherent,” linked to concepts of heredity, and socially determined through performative acts of belonging. I would argue that it is impossible from the text of *Lost Souls* to construct a clear impression of any vampiric ideal of “normativity,” beyond the marked preference for homosocial groups and sexual pairings that seems a necessary adaptation.

The negotiation of vampire identity by Christian and Nothing focuses on an achievement of acceptance by the Trio, and, though this superficially reinforces Arkady’s reading of inherent vampirism, Brite clearly maps the power dynamics of the situation that depend upon social dynamics as much as physical embodiment. Zillah is strong and often boasts of his fighting ability, but he does not use violence to subjugate Nothing and Christian, instead exerting social pressure. Zillah withholds intimacy and approval from the younger vampire who seeks acceptance, and threatens Christian repeatedly with exclusion. Zillah insists that Christian drink alcohol, knowing it poisons him, and the older vampire submits: “could he live like this, with Zillah always [...] dangling the constant spectre of loneliness over his head? [...] he knew he could not live alone again” (*Lost Souls* 330). Christian’s deep loneliness also leads him to accept Nothing’s sexual relationship to Zillah, his own father: “perhaps being loved by his mad, beautiful father was better than being alone” (*Lost Souls* 231). Brite’s depiction of this ancient, thoughtful, and physically strong being’s willingness for self-abasement to achieve a measure of community with the obnoxious trio suggests to the reader that they should fear not Christian’s figure, but his fate. We worry more about living like Christian than dying gently at his hands. Normativity is deconstructed as the social process of the creation of community standards, fuelled by an emotional desire to belong.

### PERFORMING MONSTROSITY— PERFORMATIVITY, IDENTITY, AND CONSEQUENCES.

Brite suggests that the lived experience of minority groups, particularly emotional isolation and the threat of physical danger, creates further disability, not only in social terms, but also more physical symptoms or illness. Christian, living among normative society, labels Zillah’s self-absorption, recklessness, and wanton

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destruction “mad,” suggesting that social isolation is the ultimate cause; “perhaps the whole race was mad one way or another. Surely years upon years of living on the fringes of the world would drive anyone to madness” (*Lost Souls* 230). Yet, he immediately offers a counter argument to his own rationalization, suggesting instead of a simplistic equivalence of violence and insanity that would offend anyone experiencing mental health problems, that their madness is their acceptance of their place on the fringe, “that they had grown to love living as nomads, outlaws, murderers” (*Lost Souls* 231). Christian’s self-abasement and Nothing’s willingness to murder to fit in with the trio might thus be read as forms of disordered mental health. However, Brite once again plays on the complicated links between embodiment and experience in describing Zillah’s “madness.” When Ghost forges a psychic connection with Zillah, he thinks “of a blank soul, a being with no morals” (*Lost Souls* 186). Without the framework of a clear religious belief system at work in the novel, it is impossible to categorize this “soul”; is it another term for personality, or is it an inherent essence? This fluidity and uncertainty remains throughout the novel; no resolution is offered as to whether there is any such thing as a vampiric nature that is not shaped by social experience in a world dominated by human culture. If the biological differences between the vampires and the humans are so minimal, how then do we determine identity except by behavior? And, thus, isn’t all identity purely performative?

The difference between the freely-chosen performance of identity and socially-experienced difference based on embodied behaviors or appearance is made a constant theme within Brite’s horror stories. The club kids Christian feeds upon and Nothing’s teenage drop-out friends cultivate outsider status from the mainstream culture of their parents, their disaffection based on choice. Suburban teenagers perform queer sex acts without seeming desire or enjoyment merely to embody transgression and cultivate an outsider status; a fourteen year old boy is described by the narrator of *Lost Souls* as “cultivating arcane talents,” with the sarcastic clarifier “the legend *Laine Gives Killer Head* inscribed on more than one bathroom wall at school” (33). Laine, unsurprisingly, ends up being eaten – not content with remaining in the safe normative sphere, but not an outsider enough to be able to find a safe community. Brite is quite unforgiving of those who lay claim to an outsider status without fully understanding, or accepting, the negative implications of marginalization.

Privileged teenagers choosing rebellious stances recur in Brite’s work: as the cowardly narrator running from his queerer and more disabled friend’s problems in “A Georgia Story,” or the dilettante pseudo-others in “His Mouth Will Taste of Wormwood”. In these tales, the narrators recount gory horrors enacted

upon others, horrors that resulted from their own actions, as the result of their lack of thought about the consequences. As middle or upper-class white men, with the ability to ensure their own economic and social stability, these characters choose to engage in risky behaviors, such as ritualistic magic or unsafe sexual practices, or choose to disengage from the pain of others, their motivations selfish or merely self-absorbed. The unnamed narrator of “A Georgia Story” shares a house with outsider artists, who are queer and suffer from mental health problems, but he himself has the option to leave – he is shown to be in contact with a supportive family, willing to fund further education. The narrator of “The Ash of Memory, The Dust of Desire,” though a poor kitchen worker in an upmarket hotel, doesn’t fully understand the privilege of his masculinity until his girlfriend needs an abortion, which he initially approaches in a blasé manner, thinking it has no real impact on him. These characters are punished by their author with solitude; “the ribbon of highway rolled away from Rockville, and in its dwindling brightness I saw all the miles, and all the years of the rest of my life” (“A Georgia Story” 32). They become “othered” by their experiences, alienated from themselves; “I hate to look in the mirror. I hate to see the beginnings of an old man’s face [...] But I know what Leah’s eyes must look like by now” (“The Ash of Memory, the Dust of Desire” 223). And they lack a community with whom to share their pain and sorrow; “the boy has not come to me again, though I leave the window open every night” (“His Mouth Will Taste of Wormwood” 50). Over and over again, such characters are forced to confront the monstrousness of their own actions in Brite’s work, to see themselves as the “other.”

In Brite’s fictions, monstrosity is made when community boundaries are crossed, echoing the theoretical perspectives of Canguilhem and Foucault. Foucault suggests that “there is monstrosity only when the confusion comes up against, overturns, or disturbs, civil, canon, or religious law” (63). Foucault thus defines four potential boundaries for the monster to transgress – the natural, the legal, the social, and the scriptural – all of which depend upon cultural interpretation. These boundaries are all explored in Brite’s short story “Angels,” in which well-meaning parents decided to surgically intervene and normalize their children. Formerly conjoined twins are judged as being behaviourally abnormal for their age, and refuse to communicate with their other family members. When Brite writes that an observer “could not at once grasp the nature of their deformity,” the old-fashioned term is a pointed comment on the medical intervention that has “de-formed” them (“Angels” 6). The biblical imagery and sprinkled mysticism throughout the short tale suggests the crossing of multiple boundaries: the twins refuse to attend church and whisper about ghosts. Their mother seems to lack maternal feelings towards them. Legal

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boundaries are also transgressed; Steve is convinced that he and Ghost will be arrested for kidnapping the twins, and it is a policeman who returns to their family with the news of their death as a result of back-alley surgery. But this is a tale of the monstrous without a monster. After all, who is the monster – the children themselves, or the mother who seems to put social normativity above her children's happiness? Is it the doctor who agreed to perform the operation that kills them both, or Ghost the eponymous "angel" who smuggled them to the city and gave them the money? The twins become monstrous to themselves once they are made normative, and their corpse is a monstrous parody of their true self stitched back together, yet the children are never presented as inherently monstrous through their physical difference. Transgression produces monstrosity, yet Brite demonstrates that there are many forms of transgression, explicitly questioning in tandem boundaries, actors, and context, to conclude that there is no fixed opposition between normativity and otherness.

Transgression also holds the potential for the formation of community and for healing monstrosity. Ghost embodies non-normativity; his albinism is linked to his ability as a medium as inherited qualities, passed down through his family. This links Ghost to the vampires; physically marked out as different by both his bodily appearance and behaviours he must adopt due to this difference. Nothing first views Ghost and Steve as "brothers," and Steve's acceptance and love for Ghost has developed not despite his friend's otherness, but because of it; "what did he love best about Ghost? What had he always loved about Ghost? The magic" (*Lost Souls* 172, 326). Steve is physically normative, with no mystical gifts and "might never have picked up a guitar, might have graduated from NC State with a bachelor's degree in advertising or some such deathsome thing" if he hadn't met Ghost (*Lost Souls* 49). Steve relies upon Ghost's greater knowledge to enable him to distinguish those others who mean him harm from those who do not, at times exhibiting the traditional trait of assuming that all otherness signifies dangerous intent: "Steve would be suspicious, cynical, spooked, though he wouldn't want to admit that last one" (*Lost Souls* 265). Accepting, investing in, and enjoying the possibility of otherness opens Steve's eyes to other possibilities; in the company of Ghost, he gains access to other spaces, other perspectives. Yet, Steve's awareness only extends so far outside of his own experience, as his relationship to Ann demonstrates. Steve does not respect Ann's boundaries, and their relationship is destroyed because he rapes her. Steve's inability to process his feelings about this event, Brite suggests, are due to the norms of masculine behaviour that govern the mainstream community in which Steve has grown up:

Ghost never asked Steve why he didn't forget about Ann and

get himself a new girlfriend. Ghost understood why Steve didn't want to see Ann or any other girl, not for month and months, maybe not ever. Not until he could trust himself, anyway. (*Lost Souls* 18)

Other men pressure Steve to empathize less, to accept violence as normal. In accepting Ghost, Steve develops the possibility to accept himself as other, to embody a different sort of masculinity, although this realization comes too late to save Ann from the repercussions of male violence.

### LET THE RIGHT ONE IN – SAFE SPACES AND DANGER ZONES

Normativity, Brite's narratives suggest, is for those who don't have the imagination, perhaps the courage, to live in a more exiting, more diverse, and yet potentially even more dangerous world, represented as a Gothic world of magic. Brite is certainly not advocating a touristic approach to marginalized identities. As Steve's relationship to Ghost suggests, the recognition of magic and otherness by otherwise normative individuals can be a rewarding experience, even if it leads Steve to share in the dangers that face Ghost. Brite's horror fictions are set within a contemporary American society that is not presented as homogenous and unified, but fractured – between urban, suburban and rural spaces; youth and middle-age; a desire for social change and investment in status quo. Every character in *Lost Souls* experiences multiple intersections of exclusion and inclusion dynamics based on their embodied experiences of class, gender, and ability; power dynamics, therefore, play out in access to embodied-identity based sub-communities, rather than between the dominant mainstream and the excluded "other." Ghost's physical difference does not physically limit him, as Christian's vampirism does, but it socially isolates him within the normative community just as his psychic ability does. There isn't an easy boundary as to where "disability" as a term ceases to be appropriate; although a division is created between vampire and human based on physical, or mechanical, norms, Brite suggests that social dynamics and alignments have more potential fluidity.

Brite suggests that communal spaces have established behavioral norms that protect their residents from harm and sustain the possibility of communal difference from the external dominant norms. The bar owner in *Missing Mile*, Kinsey Hummingbird, echoes Christian in his motivations for owning and running a social business; the bar provides a potential meeting place for outsiders, or vampires, as much as an income and a home. The wealthy Maryland suburb of *Nothing's* adopted parents is as much a "safe space" as the *Sacred Yew* in *Missing Mile*, or Christian's bar in *New Orleans*, each created for a different community, looking to establish different norms of behavior and appearance. There

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is no easy way to guard against the danger posed by the vampire whose sole goal and purpose is to infiltrate the normative sphere as in *Dracula*, where the horror develops because the dangerous outsider mimics normativity to lure victims into his home, and then gain access to theirs. Normativity itself, thus, becomes suspect, and the narrative conclusion struggles to reassure the reader that equilibrium has been restored and the dangerous other ejected. In Brite's vampire novel, the dangerous "other" never disguises itself, it simply exists; what leads to the death of their victims is the fetishization of the appearance or performance of difference, or the insistence that the normative individual can meet the other on their terms, maintaining a hierarchy of normalcy.

It would be simplistic to suggest, however, that there is an unmarked, unexamined idea of normality present in these texts. Those who come into contact with the vampire, the geek, the conjoined twins, are there for a reason. What sort of normal couple adopts a baby left on their doorstep without involving the authorities and exploring its history? The family that produce the conjoined twins are a monstrous family from the normative perspective, no matter how they try to recover their normality. The human, Jessy Creech, who goes looking for the vampires in Christian's bar, has a far from normative relationship to her own father. Though, given the known incidence of sexual abuse within contemporary society, we could hardly call her experience abnormal. Her father's desire to avenge his child is a monstrous hypocrisy, as much a parody of the normative role his community would sanction, as his "loving" acts with his daughter. As a heterosexual woman, however, Jessy is demanding access to the queer and differently-embodied community of the vampires. The result is almost a parody of the warnings that her father's normative religious community would offer her; Jessy becomes pregnant with an illegitimate child that will literally end her life. Jessy disappears from the narrative swiftly, the birth of her child and her death viewed only through Christian's unforgiving eyes; little sympathy is offered for the result of her transgression into a space in which she was unwanted, a space her presence endangered. The ease with which a supposedly normal family is revealed to be abnormal, and is destroyed by its secrets, is a repeated trope in Brite's work.

Normativity itself, however, is presented as dangerous. Ann is lured into the murderous space of the trio's van by Zillah's performance of a very traditional model of gentlemanly behavior, though her previous experiences of family life and romantic love have shown her that traditional gender roles are dangerous and damaging. Ann Bransby-Smith is part of Missing Mile's alternative community, seduced by Zillah, and then trapped in a parodic performance of seduced femininity: convinced she is in love with

Zillah, she is unknowingly pregnant and under the influence of the vampire pregnancy. Ann is depicted more sympathetically than Jessy; trapped by the traditional narrative of seduction, unable to survive the pregnancy, she is very definitely Zillah's victim as he knowingly exploits normative models that have always proved dangerous for women.

What makes the vampiric trio into monsters, rather than simply monstrous in form, is their absolute refusal to allow anyone a zone of safety. They use the markers of queerness and bodily-difference to demand access into what should be safe locations and stir up fear against the other, further endangering already marginalized groups. They conversely exploit dominant norms to hide in plain sight the danger they pose to humans and other vampires alike. The trio are akin to the privileged human narrators of the short stories collected in *Wormwood*, referenced above; free to live comfortable and normative lives if they wanted, they instead exploit their knowledge of, and access to, marginal spaces and bodies for entertainment. The trio feed indiscriminately on hitchhikers, even lost children, not caring what future they might be destroying, what family unit they will affect. Christian may be a murderer, but he is not a monster; killing only to feed, refusing to lash out in anger at Wallace Creech, Christian is as ethical in his choices – if not more so – than many human characters in these stories. Christian dies because of his association with the trio, but he achieves a measure of peace, a gentle death, much as he strove to give his own victims as he gazes in Ghost's face: "as Christian sank beneath the green waters of his death, he thought, *Three hundred and eighty three years. And he was as beautiful as he should have been. He was lovely*" (*Lost Souls* 339). However, in death, Zillah's selfish conviction of his own safety comes to the fore:

Zillah's eyes met Nothing's as the knife went in. There was no love in them, no sorrow. Only pain and blame and blind rage [...] Through all the stupid risks he took he had never considered the possibility of his own death. *This is your fault*, those eyes told Nothing. (*Lost Souls* 340-341)

Nothing is not so very different from his father after all; sending Ghost a postcard promising that "you will be safe as long as I live: forever, or nearly so" (*Lost Souls* 348). He reminds the musicians that their safety is on his terms, not theirs; there is no return address, no equality of contact or contract. As in more traditional Gothic horror, we discover that the monster is not the isolated and physically disabled individual, but the privileged and physically more-than-normative white man: pretty and eternally youthful, Nothing can go anywhere, do anything, be anything he wants.

## CONCLUSION

Brite's Gothic tales utilize the aesthetics of splatterpunk gore and

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references to perverse sexuality to shock and disgust, but the real horror is in the unfolding of a narrative of consequences and personal responsibility. Though characters such as Zillah have been casually referred to by critics as “amoral” without seemingly much reflection, Brite’s text does not suggest that vampires are, in fact, without morality (Campbell 80; Wisker 172). When Nothing tries to disgust himself by reflecting on his own incestuous relationship and imagining his former friends in similar situations, he thinks that perhaps vampires may be “born with some sort of amoral instinct that shielded them from the guilt of killing to stay alive” (*Lost Souls* 228). He is a highly misguided teenager, fifteen years old, and often presented as idealistic and naïve. Nothing’s transformation into a creature like his father is presented overtly as a tragedy as his choices take him further and further from any recognizable moral framework: when he first decides to feed on Laine and join the trio, “a choice that would fashion the rest of his life: he is described as “lost in the slowing pulse, in the taste of blood and salt” (*Lost Souls* 155-159). Again, when Ghost realizes he can’t persuade Nothing to abandon the trio and stay in Missing Mile, he concludes sadly that “Nothing was lost” (*Lost Souls* 214). Nothing is always offered a choice. He has the greatest range of agency of any character in the novel; physically stronger than humans and yet less limited than older vampires, he has the knowledge of human society to begin to forge connections and understanding between the two races. He could carve a new path in an old society, as Ghost and Steve and Kinsey are trying to do in Missing Mile. Yet, Nothing’s choices do not happen in a vacuum; in the creation of Nothing the monstrous vampire from Nothing the lost and lonely teenager perhaps we see an echo of the origin stories of the other monsters, Zillah, Twig, and Molochai, for whom we have limited sympathy, even as they attract and repulse us in their excess and abandon.

In Brite’s fictions, I argue, there are monstrous men, and non-monstrous vampires. The monster is not a monster because of what they are, but because of what they do and how they do it, and this is often because of what has been done to them. Weaving together depictions of marginalized communities and embodied difference Brite teases out the differences between the performance of community norms of behavior and presentation and the lived experience of embodied difference. The trio, and their heir apparent Nothing, enjoy the performance of their vampirism in direct contrast to Christian’s deep sadness at living his embodied vampirism. In their ability to exploit the appearance of a marginal identity only when it suits them, Brite’s vampires Zillah and Nothing revel in the luxury of choice. Brite has created a fictional world that is critically queer and critically disabled, to return to McRuer’s term, in which the monsters are shown to be virtually

queer and virtually disabled – objectifying and fetishizing otherness-as-monstrosity to improve their ability to prey upon the marginalized.

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