Tropical Liminal:
Urban Vampires & Other Blood-Sucking Monstrosities

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Vampires and other blood-sucking monstrous beings constitute some of the most famous myths, legends and stories that continue to haunt contemporary societies. This special issue examines the presence of these beings within cities and their rural surrounds. The contributions to this special issue reflect upon vampires and other monstrosities in relation to the tropical regions of the world from historical pasts to present-day manifestations, and imaginary tropical futures, including: the British colonial empire in the tropical east, New Orleans in the deep south of the United States, across the border to Mexico and Latin American communities, over to India and Southeast Asia, including Bangkok in Thailand, Singapore, and Sabah on the island of Borneo, and to the tropical east coast of Australia. However, the concept of the tropics is not simply a geographical construct, the imaginary of the tropics also emerges out of the spaces of mythology and oral storytelling, ethnographic reports, literature, science fiction magazines, film and television, video games and the internet.

Myths and tales of vampires are often linked with experiences of liminality. In anthropology, liminality was first introduced to describe the in-between state in Arnold van Gennep's three phases of the *Rites of Passage* (1960 [1909]). The concept of the liminal was further emphasised by Victor Turner (1967 [1960]) in his ethnographic studies of ritual, where he identifies liminality as betwixt and between the structures of society where everything is topsy-turvy and chaos manifests. This is the space in which the repressed returns. The term liminal has since entered the discourses of other disciplines, including cultural studies, literary theory, and cinema studies. This special issue examines three aspects of liminality. Firstly, the liminal qualities of monstrous beings such as vampires, ghosts, spirits, were-tigers, shape-shifters, mythical animals, liminal criminals, and the wild feminine. Secondly, the liminal spaces from which they arise, such as heterogenous cities, derelict buildings, hospitals, cemeteries, the wilds that surround urban spaces, tropical jungles, rivers, and everyday spaces of taboo. These spaces are openings through which the repressed continues to haunt us, expressed through the fear of the 'other': colonized peoples, foreign cultures and their practices, the feminine, sexuality, the abject, animality, and criminality.

In the first paper of this special issue, Stu Burns analyzes this fear of the 'other' through an in-depth exploration of vampires and empire. He provides a background to the myths and folklore associated with Eastern European vampires and the concomitant concerns over movements of people through migration and how these are reflected in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). He theorises *Dracula* through Orientalist and imperialist discourses, which he relates to examples from Africa and South Asia. In order to further demonstrate how the imperial gaze is central to the story of *Dracula,* Burns traces the vampire

myths through parts of the British Empire, including ethnographic texts of Malaya, and further to China. He makes a sustained critique of the power relations inherent in the imperial gaze and addresses the European fears of colonial 'others' migrating to the metropole and/or the fear of colonial officials 'going native'.

Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska also addresses the fear of the cultural 'other'. Her paper takes us to the deep south of America and demonstrates how cultural anxieties manifest in contemporary vampire literature represented by Charlaine Harris' *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (2001-2013), which also formed the basis of HBO television series *True Blood* (2008-2014). The city of New Orleans (and surrounds) with its 'excessive heterogeneity', its mixed ethnic heritage and angst regarding racial interbreeding, becomes the site of this new subtropical gothic genre. And in the process of becoming a centre of vampires and other monstrosities, the city transforms into a liminal space where vampires and their multiple interrelations (including inter-species) exemplify cultural blending with 'others'.

Another aspect of the 'other' is embodied in the female. Katarzyna Ancuta analyses the Thai monstrous feminine based on the animist mythologies of *phi pop* and *phi krasue* as complex notions of the female vampire which disrupt the patriarchal order. Through their cinematic portrayal, *phi pop* and *phi krasue,* which are traditionally associated with rural spaces or wilderness, are reinterpreted in line with the challenges of modern urban life, especially within the cityscape of Bangkok. Ancuta analyzes two Thai horror films, Paul Spurrier's *P* (2005) and Yuthlert Sippapak's *Krasue Valentine* (2006), and demonstrates the ways in which these predatory creatures manifest in liminal urban spaces – in decrepit hospitals or areas inhabited by sex workers with their stains of blood and other bodily fluids. She furthermore points out that the city itself is vampiric.

Europe's Dracula, southern vampires and female vampires not only make compelling mythic, ethnographic, literary and cinematic narratives; these tropes also inspire innovative video games. Roberto Dillon and Anita Lundberg demonstrate how vampire myths, which reflect socio-cultural issues of particular times and places, are retold and re-enacted through video games. Using a combination of narratology and ludology methods, they analyse examples from the history of games, including: the early "Dracula" (Imagic for Intellivision, 1982) based on the European gothic tradition; the complex multi-player game "Vampire the Masquerade: Bloodline" (Activision for PC, 2004) based on the southern vampire genre; and the innovative game "Tainted" (ITE/NUS for PC, 2016) based on the Malay female vampire-ghost Pontianak. The authors argue that these video games are a new retelling and enactment of these myths.

The internet is another medium through which myths of vampires and monsters are reiterated and modernised. David Ramírez Plascencia illustrates how the legend of the ghost of the weeping woman *La Llorona* is continuously transforming as it is retold on the internet. The legend can be traced to pre-Hispanic cultures in Mexico, and has, since the arrival of the internet, been incorporated in the online Spanish language spaces that are shared with Guatemalans, El Salvadorians, Costa Ricans, and Latino communities in the United States, among others. The author's analysis of online sources demonstrates that *La Llorona's* liminal qualities and the liminal places in which she appears, have expanded to reflect the manifold socio-cultural anxieties, ambiguities and fears of the various cultures which she adopts.

A focus on the online perpetuation of myths is also reflected in Catherine Livingston, Felise Goldfinch and Rhian Morgan's analysis of the Australian legend of the *drop bear* – a massive and vicious koala-like creature which launches itself from trees at unsuspecting passers-by*.* Taking a digital anthropology and folkloric approach, the authors review pseudo-scientific, satirical and social media sources that describe and create this uniquely Australian manifestation of the vampire motif – including archaeological 'evidence' which speculates on the possible factual origins of the myth. The authors analyse *drop bear* narratives as a form of urban legend, which serves to warn-off tourists through emphasising the dangers of the tropical Australian bush, while, in a humorous way, tapping into shared Australian identity. This paper draws attention to how *drop bear* narratives – disseminated as truth, fiction, cautionary tale, or satire – have crossed Australian borders through the spaces of the internet.

In Francesco Brighenti's paper we enter the realm of the weretiger – in which human beings can turn into ferocious tigers and back into human form. The rich weretiger mythology, legend and folklore of the Garo people of tropical South Asia is explored through an extensive analysis of ethnographic sources on traditional beliefs. The paper offers a preliminary classification of weretiger types. These include: a legendary 'race' of tigermen ruled by a matriarchal Tiger Mother; a 'dual' vitality principle which inhabits a human body during the day and a tiger body at night; and shape-shifters who, through magical arts, physically transform into tigers. This classification provides a strong sense of the place of these quintessentially liminal beings that prowl the wild spaces surrounding villages and urbanising settings.

A strong sense of place – and its liminal qualities – is also offered in Martin Potter's paper that arises out of documentary fieldwork for a transmedia production in two Dusun villages in Sabah on the island of Borneo. Two stories, relating to hungry and sacred entities, were reiterated as part of the oral storytelling aspect of the project. One speaks of a monstrous moon-eating spirit, and the other, of a sacred oath bound in blood. Potter analyses heterotopic aspects associated with folklore in Southeast Asia – citing the classic ethnographic text of Evans (1953), which specifically pertains to Dusun indigenous culture. Potter argues that the combination of transmedia and folklore as a space that allows for both the representation and re-articulation of cultural identities, enables ongoing and nuanced cultural awareness.

Christopher Menadue emphasises the role of the tropical environment in narratives of monstrosities. Taking a digital humanities approach, he analyses a corpus of fifty science fiction magazines with stories that relate to tropical landscapes. His analysis demonstrates that in the first half of the twentieth century, tropical jungles were represented as untamed and uncivilised liminal places in which monstrosities were hidden: supernatural beasts, wild people, undiscovered cities and untamed female sexuality. Tropical jungles were wild, dangerous, mysterious and sensual places that drew out monstrous behaviour in those who entered them. Menadue shows how at the end of the twentieth century, ideas about tropical jungles changed from places of exploitation, to places of conservation.

The paper by Molly Hoey returns us to the city as the site of monstrous human behaviour in her analysis of liminality and abjection in the existential worlds of Albert Camus' *The Outsider* (2013 [1967]) and William Burrough's *Junky* (2002 [1953]). The environment hangs heavily over the various urban spaces depicted in these novels. In *The Outsider*, the environment is the overwhelming North African sun of

Algiers while in *Junky,* the narrator of the story moves in a daze from cold New York, to subtropical New Orleans, across the border to Mexico until the reader loses him in the steamy tropics of Columbia. The overbearing qualities of the environment create a liminal space in which the character/narrators become monstrous as they are transfixed in an abject world of blood, criminality and drug addiction.

The papers in this special issue analyse notions of vampires and other blood-desiring monstrosities which arise from liminal spaces and embody liminal qualities. The papers address how these monstrosities manifest in cities and the surrounding 'wilderness' that impinges upon these 'civilised' spaces. Whereas once the liminal was associated with the wild, contemporary movements of people into cities have brought with them anxieties, which are reflected in stories of vampires and monstrosities. The city itself has become wild – an urban jungle. The papers that comprise this special issue examine the theme of 'tropical liminal: urban vampires' from various disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, including anthropology, archaeology, folkloric studies, digital anthropology and humanities, video games analysis, cinema studies, literary studies, and documentary media making. As a collection, these papers demonstrate that vampires and other monsters are very much alive in contemporary societies, including those of the tropics, and that the specific qualities of tropical vampires and monstrosities are now being shared around the world through new media. The importance of these papers is that they show how stories are essential; they are ways in which people express repressed aspects of society – desired and also dangerous.

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