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To Hell and Back: Power, Violence, and Sexuality in Urban Fantasy

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TO HELL AND BACK:
POWER, VIOLENCE, AND SEXUALITY IN URBAN FANTASY

by

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B.A., North Carolina State University, 2012

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To Hell and Back: Power, Violence, and Sexuality in Urban Fantasy
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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To Hell and Back: Power, Violence, and Sexuality in Urban Fantasy

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Deborah Whitehead

This thesis project is an interdisciplinary study of the contemporary mass-market fiction genre urban fantasy. It provides an intersectional feminist analysis of the urban fantasy genre's significance for both religious studies and women's studies. It examines how the city is imagined as a racialized locus of power and magic, and how women utilize the genre's conventions to explore and depict issues of gendered and sexualized violence against women through narratives of supernatural transformation. It also contextualizes urban fantasy in a recent surge of critique by authors and readers against the science fiction and fantasy publishing industry's tendency to erase people of color from a genre defined by depictions of urban life. In so doing, this thesis demonstrates the vital religious work urban fantasy and popular culture more broadly conducts in individuals' lives and argues that analyzing the religious functions of popular culture through intersectional feminist lenses is critical for religious studies scholars to fully understand the impact of popular culture on the religious lives and worlds of individuals.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF URBAN FANTASY

This thesis project is an interdisciplinary study of the contemporary mass-market fiction genre urban fantasy. Urban fantasy is a genre of literature established in the 1980s and popularized in the 1990s by authors such as Emma Bull, Tim Powers, Laurell K. Hamilton, Kim Harrison, and Charles de Lint. It features supernatural beings and creatures like vampires, witches, werewolves, and demons in distinctly urban settings, whether that urban environment is contemporary New York City, Victorian London, or Seattle several centuries in the future.

In this thesis, I provide an intersectional feminist analysis of the genre's significance for both religious studies and women's studies scholarship on popular culture. I examine how the city is imagined as a locus of power and magic, inhabited by multiple supernatural species, and how women in particular utilize the genre's conventions to discuss pressing issues of gendered and sexualized violence against women. I also contextualize the genre in a larger, recent surge of critique by authors and readers against the science fiction and fantasy publishing industry's tendency to erase people of color from a genre defined by gritty, noir-inspired depictions of urban life.

In so doing, I advance the work of scholars of popular culture and religion such as Lynn Schofield Clark and David Chidester. Popular culture teaches us how to be particular kinds of people in the particular worlds we inhabit; in so doing, David Chidester argues, popular culture shares a project with religion when religion is defined as "discourses and practices that negotiate what it is to be a human person both in relation to the superhuman and in relation to whatever

might be treated as subhuman.”¹ Urban fantasy literature takes the project of negotiating the superhuman and the subhuman seriously with its cast of vampires, werewolves, werehyenas, demons, angels, witches, necromancers, shamans, and virtually every hybrid combination of the above species imaginable. Humans do not stay human in this genre of literature, but in their transformations they bring an intractable humanity into the worlds and value systems of the monsters. How authors imagine this humanity and its moral obligations, its integrity and authenticity, its frictions with fictional fundamentalist religio-political entities, and its capacity to endure and guide the character through extraordinary violence heaped upon body and soul is of vital significance to scholars interested in how popular culture conducts religious work and constitutes religious human beings. At the same time, intersectional feminist critiques of popular culture and the processes by which popular culture dehumanizes and marginalizes people, and aids in the construction and maintenance of the category “subhuman,” are crucial to understanding the real world effects of these representations of super- and sub-humanity.

Rationale and Thesis

Currently, little academic attention is paid to the category of urban fantasy as a whole between both women’s studies and religious studies. This thesis project seeks to remedy that dearth of research, and to demonstrate how attention to this best-selling, popular genre—popular across a variety of media, including literature, film, and television—contributes to religious studies scholars’ understanding of the religious work that supernatural popular culture does for audiences. The study of monsters, science fiction, horror, and the supernatural imagination in historical and contemporary American culture has been conducted by scholars such as Jeffrey J. Kripal, Timothy Beal, Lynn Schofield Clark, W. Scott Poole, and Victoria Nelson. But in these

¹ David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), vii-viii.

works, little attention has been given to the specific architecture of urban fantasy and the discourses about religion that its authors produce through narratives of supernatural transformation, redemption and salvation, critiques of fundamentalist Christianity, and the valorization (often through appropriation) of non-western, indigenous, and/or neopagan religious traditions and practices.

Women's and cultural studies scholars, on the other hand, have studied individual novels/series, television programs, and films that may fall partially or completely under the rubric of urban fantasy, but without thinking about the genre's larger thematic conventions and narratives as a whole. These scholars focus on depictions of violence against women, post-feminist gender roles, representations of BDSM, female modes of violence, and the dynamics of heterosexual romantic relationships in particular works like *True Blood*, *Twilight*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In this thesis project, I seek to bring together these strands of feminist and religious studies work on horror, fantasy, religion, and popular culture to provide an intersectional feminist analysis of urban fantasy that incorporates perspectives on gender, race, class, and sexuality in the genre, rather than considering strictly the gender of protagonists.²

Methods, Sources, Approach

This thesis project builds on the work of religious studies scholar Jeffrey J. Kripal in analyzing the religious functions and genealogies of horror and science fiction literature. Kripal's overarching argument is that horror and science fiction genres inform and feed into a popular religious imagination from which individuals may draw when they seek to interpret experiences of bizarre, non-rational, mystical, or altered states of consciousness. Kripal finds that authors and

² My definition of "intersectional feminist analysis" is derived from Kimberlé Crenshaw's foundational article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241-1299.

artists of science fiction and horror draw deeply from American metaphysical and occult religious traditions for source material, and that their literature feeds back into the cultural imagination. He sees a narrative of human divinization and potential for metaphysical transformation operating as a key theme in these genres. Similarly, Victoria Nelson's work argues that supernatural fantasy and horror fiction is articulating a narrative of human divinization and apotheosis which centers and valorizes human expressions of morality and intuition, upending old traditions of horror and religion where humans bent to accommodate divine orders of morality. I situate my analysis of urban fantasy within these religious studies frameworks to look at how this genre and key authors contribute to and refine narrative themes of metaphysical human transformation into gods and monsters.

Furthermore, I draw on intersectional feminist analyses and critiques of horror, science fiction, and fantasy literature to examine the absence of critical attention paid to gender and race in Kripal's and Nelson's frameworks of transformation, in order to foreground how urban fantasy authors intentionally employ these categories to highlight stark cultural power imbalances between men and women, white people and people of color, and the wealthy and impoverished in urban environments. Such power imbalances are inextricably threaded into the narratives of transformation and magic these authors weave and thus fundamentally define the experiences of transformation and power the characters undergo. This thesis project, then, asks how attending to the specific stories about power and transformation that women and people of color compose through urban fantasy literature refines our understanding of the religious work supernatural pop culture does for readers and authors alike.

This thesis project relies on textual interpretation and intersectional feminist analysis of literature along the lines of gender, sexuality, and race. Its primary source material is comprised

of mass-market novels that span the history of urban fantasy, from the early books of Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* series (published 1993-present), to novels written by Daniel José Older published in 2015. Where possible, I analyze specific urban fantasy series as a whole, paying attention to character development and plot arcs from the beginning to the conclusion of the series. Key series authors included in this project are by Laurell K. Hamilton, Jenna Black, Daniel José Older, and Lilith Saintcrow. My secondary source material relies on the arguments of Jeffrey J. Kripal, Victoria Nelson, Robert A. Orsi, and various feminist scholars of pop culture and literature such as Barbara Christian, Janice A. Radway, and Abby L. Ferber. I also incorporate feminist analyses of trauma literature, intersectional feminist media criticism, and a variety of religious studies sources on the role of the supernatural and monstrous in contemporary American culture.

When I say that I will conduct a feminist analysis of the urban fantasy genre, I want to be clear: I do not label these authors or their work “feminist.” I am not making that claim and I doubt the authors would make such claims either. The authors may personally identify as feminist, they may publicly identify as feminist, they may find such political orientations distasteful. But key to this project is the argument that these writers write from a certain consciousness that orbits issues of gender, race, and power in contemporary American urban environments: they write from an awareness of being disadvantaged living as women in a world dominated by men; from deep experiential histories with gendered violence and abuse at the hands of those who hold power over them; from frustration with publishing norms and genre conventions that favor men’s writing over women’s writing, or that shunt works the author sees as transcending genre into genres they do not recognize by virtue of the author’s gender alone.³ Urban fantasy as a genre or as a set of narrative conventions and tropes is particularly attuned to

³ Thanks to Dr. Robert Buffington for the language of “writing from a certain consciousness.”

narrating the power imbalances and forces of oppression that shape living in contemporary American cities as a certain race, class, gender, age, or sexuality. To be sure, not all urban fantasy authors utilize the genre to such ends. For many, urban fantasy is a way to make the contemporary city as magical as the worlds of epic high fantasies, to simply write magic into the worlds around them. But to be sure, many authors *do* utilize the genre to narrate and highlight the costs of racism and sexism in a world of inequalities. The novels of Lilith Saintcrow and Daniel José Older are explicit in their narrative engagements with power. Other authors, like Laurell K. Hamilton, Jenna Black, Kim Harrison, and Dianne Sylvan, to name just a few, allow these themes to ebb and flow through their novels without centering them. My aim is not to determine whether or not these novels are feminist, but to examine how gender, race, and class are at play in these works.

I have made the choice in this project to excerpt large passages of text from the novels with which I am concerned. I make this choice in order to give readers a better sense of the wider context of the close analytic readings I conduct, and to demonstrate the deep intertwinement of the various themes I explore and argue for in this literature. I have selected the larger passages carefully for their ability to demonstrate descriptive connections between power, magic, gender, and violence in this genre that smaller excerpts might lose, and I ask the readers to indulge me in this approach.

This thesis has at its heart the urban fantasy genre but veers through other generic categories recognizing that such borders and boundaries are strategic fictions of classification and commercialization—bookstores need to know where to shelve novels; publishers need to know what standards to use to measure the novel's fit for their assumed audiences. And in their own right, the speculative and creative imaginaries of science fiction, fantasy, and horror realms

have always been hybridized. Thus, though the urban fantasy genre is at the heart of this project, I also consider novels and authors who transgress and transcend categorical conventions of genre. Not every book considered here is an urban fantasy. ‘Speculative fiction’ is a term that more properly, because more broadly, encapsulates the books considered here. ‘Supernatural fiction’ would also suffice. The books I consider are stories of supernatural forces coming to bear on individuals living in contemporary worlds, most often situated in major English-speaking cities, hence my selection of the term “urban fantasy.”

Organization

In what remains of this introduction, I give a brief history of key authors, texts, narrative conventions, and themes that comprise the genre and consider some of the definitions of urban fantasy that critics have offered. The introduction explains the role of supernatural creatures in the literature and examines the constructions of humanity and monstrosity depicted by the genre. I also introduce the genre’s heavy reliance on indigenous, historical, occult, and neopagan cosmologies and mythologies, and situate the genre in current trends in American religiosity. I then introduce the theoretical framework of the research and explain how I intend to build on and refine Jeffrey J. Kripal’s theories of religion, transformation, and science fiction literature.

Part I of this thesis, “Power, Violence, Sex, and the Supernatural in Urban Fantasy,” conducts close readings of a number of urban fantasy texts to examine the conjunction of sex, violence, and power, both social and supernatural. Beginning with chapter 2, “‘To quiet the screaming in our own heads’: Trauma and Violence in Narratives of Heroine’s Supernatural Transformations,” I analyze novels written by women which situate stories of a heroine’s transformation into a supernatural being as the consequence of gendered and sexualized violence. These heroines narrate experiences of abuse and survival throughout their lives at the

hands of both human and supernatural men, making explicit references to systematic and sustained sexual violence due to social power imbalances. I analyze the representation of trauma, violence, and transformation into the supernatural in three key works of urban fantasy literature, and conclude by thinking about the implications of literary trauma theory for Kripal's model of trauma and transformation, asking what stories in particular women tell about female transformations into the supernatural and the abuses that drive them. This chapter demonstrates that women, as both readers and authors, are using the urban fantasy genre to articulate and process the realities of gendered and sexualized violence against women experienced in contemporary culture.

Chapter 3, “‘You weren’t supposed to bite me, you were just supposed to rape me!’: Sex Magic, Romance, and Rape in Urban Fantasy,” analyzes depictions of romantic consensual and non-consensual sex in urban fantasy literature. Romance between heroines and the monsters is a standard convention of urban fantasy novels and contributes to the genre’s association with a female audience and authorship. The genre’s focus on power and control through magic often leads to representations of sex that blur the lines between what is consensual and non-consensual in the heroine’s romantic experiences with the monsters. This chapter studies and critiques the use of sex magic, magical sex, and interpersonal power relations in key urban fantasy novels and examines how the category of monstrosity is negotiated and experienced by heroines’ sexual involvement with supernatural men. I briefly discuss the genre’s connection with the romance novel subgenre of paranormal romance, and ask how, given urban fantasy’s close ties with romance novels, urban fantasy authors utilize and subvert standard romance tropes in their depictions of sex and romance with the monsters. I also look at how urban fantasy depictions of

sex magic interact with and diverge from more traditionally masculine occult systems of sex magic.

Chapter 4, “Power, Memory, and the Heroine’s Refusal,” continues to analyze urban fantasy alongside its sister genre of paranormal romance and examines critical moments in urban fantasy texts that reverse and revalue the heroine’s acts of refusal to men. Janice Radway’s famous *Reading the Romance* posits that romance literature renders heroine’s refusals and negations impotent and irrelevant in the face of the hero’s desire and plans. I argue that urban fantasy texts, drawing on but exceeding the conventions of the romance genre, flip the efficacy of the heroine’s refusal into something critically, metaphysically powerful, such that her refusal, her resounding “No!” is a moment of metaphysical, magical triumph over villain *or* love interest, a refusal to submit to men’s power over her. At the same time, I show that some of these moments of *no* are peopled with the supernatural, ghostly presence of victimized dead women whose refusals were rendered futile by the overcoming power of the male villain. I use this chapter to demonstrate that the women writing these stories do so through a certain consciousness about living as a woman in a world of power inequalities that facilitate violence and violation, and that this literature serves to speak back to that world through a heroine who survives it, whatever the cost, while remembering the dead who came before her.

Part II of the thesis, “‘A Terrible, Beautiful Collision’: Power, Race, Privilege, and Truth in Fiction,” steps back from close readings of urban fantasy texts to look at the larger conversations science-fiction and fantasy authors and readers are conducting about gender, race, class, and sexuality. Chapter 5, “Better Horrors, Better Truths,” traces out three different discourses seeking “better” speculative stories. Jeffrey Kripal posits a need for “better” fantasy, sci-fi, and horror stories so that more paranormal experiences can be interpreted with recourse to

positive stories that “flip” the horror into a better, more positive and productive experience. To Kripal, these stories are vital to how humans will engage with metaphysical forces of evolution and consciousness. I then move on to analyze Daniel José Older’s critiques of urban fantasy for white-washing cities and making people of color into exotic, frequently villainous magical others, at the same time it appropriates African, Asian, and Latin American religious practices and cosmologies to exoticize the supernatural powers of main white characters. I then examine a final discourse about speculative fiction, surrounding the question of Young Adult (YA) fantasy literature’s putative “darkness,” in which literary critic Megan Cox Gurdon calls for better “taste” in novels written for teenage audiences. Gurdon’s article generated a Twitter hashtag campaign called “#YAsaves” in which thousands of readers and authors critiqued the paternalizing classist, racist, and even ageist underpinnings of Gurdon’s call for better fiction. I analyze these discourses and critiques and articulate their significance for Kripal’s argument that science fiction, fantasy, and horror literature contributes inextricably to a larger religious imagination from which people who experience strange, mystical events draw to interpret those events. I use the critiques waged by feminist and critical race scholars against media that perpetuates harmful, reductive stereotypes of people of color to ask what the implications and *costs* of this stereotyping and symbolic annihilation might be when popular culture can play such a constitutive role in sustaining a religious imagination.⁴ Weaving together these three discourses also enables us to understand in readers’ own terms how speculative, sci-fi, and fantasy literature interacts with the religious and religio-political worlds of readers, especially queer, female, and non-white readers.

⁴ My definition of symbolic annihilation comes from Gaye Tuchman, “The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media,” in *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media*, ed. by Gaye Tuchman, A.K. Daniels, and J. Benet, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 3-38, and Cynthia Carter, “Sex/Gender and the Media: From Sex Roles to Social Construction and Beyond” in *The Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Media*, ed. by Karen Ross (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 365-82.

Defining Urban Fantasy

Urban fantasy is a contemporary genre that hybridizes fantasy and horror fiction and is defined by its recognizably urban setting, as opposed to the invented or historical settings that characterize high, epic, and low fantasy. Urban fantasy is considered by authors and critics to date to the mid-1980s and early 1990s, although due to the hybridity of fantasy and science fiction subgenres in general, it would be almost impossible to identify a specific origin author or novel. The progenitors of the genre are most commonly held to be Emma Bull, Tim Powers, and Charles de Lint, with Laurell K. Hamilton and Neil Gaiman responsible for generating sustained and widespread readership.⁵ Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks* (1987) and de Lint's multiple titles, the earliest of which include *Moonheart* (1984), *Mulengro* (1985), and *From a Whisper to a Scream* (1992), set the initial tone of urban fantasy by bringing magic and folklore into recognizable, contemporary urban environments, though as Irvine notes, these novels are peopled with the creative souls of artists and musicians rather than the detectives, bounty hunters, and occult specialists who characterize the genre today.⁶ Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter* series (1993-present), and later her Merry Gentry novels (2000-present) established a noir-crime aesthetic that continues to influence the genre.⁷ Her novels consistently rank on *New York Times* bestseller lists, and have been rewritten and illustrated as graphic novels released by comic book and cinematic powerhouse Marvel. A number of urban fantasy series have been turned into recent television shows and films of varying popularity, including *True*

⁵ Alexander C. Irvine, "Urban Fantasy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 200.

⁶ Irvine, "Urban Fantasy," 206.

⁷ Linda J. Holland-Toll, "Harder than Nails, Harder than Spade: Anita Blake as 'The Tough Guy' Detective," *The Journal of American Culture* 27 (2004): 175; see also Joseph Crawford, *The Twilight of the Gothic?: Vampire Fiction and the Rise of Paranormal Romance, 1991-2012* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), 109-10.

Blood (running from 2008-2014), *The Dresden Files* (2007), *Witches of East End* (2013-2014), *Bitten* (2014-2016), and *Vampire Diaries* spin-off *The Originals* (2013-present).

As stated, urban fantasy is primarily characterized by its setting in major European and American metropolises like New York City, London, Atlanta, New Orleans, St. Louis, or Cincinnati. The bulk of the literature takes place in contemporary cities, but many authors place the cities in different timelines, such as in an alternate-Victorian “steampunk”-styled London (e.g., Lilith Saintcrow’s *Bannon and Clare* novels, 2012-2014, or Devon Monk’s *Age of Steam* series, 2011-present), or in futuristic cities heavily influenced by cyberpunk and space opera subgenres (e.g., Saintcrow’s Dante Valentine series, 2007 – 2008, and Kelly Gay’s Charlie Madigan series, 2009 – 2012). The city environs and its social infrastructure are salient and integral to the structure and arc of the story. Elements of city life such as crime, poverty, and social stratification become key plot points in novels; supernatural beings are constantly fighting for more power, control, and wealth over the social landscape of the city, and protagonists are often in dire economic straits or victims of crime and violence, which becomes narratively pivotal to the progression of those characters throughout the series and in their relationships with wealthy and powerful supernatural beings.

Though the urban setting is constructed as mundane and dreary, the existence of the paranormal infuses the city with magic and power. Irvine writes that urban fantasy “redeploys the tropes and characters of older fairy tales and folklore, forcing them into collisions with a contemporary urban milieu.”⁸ Fairies, monsters, and supernatural beings exist side-by-side with normal humans, and the tensions that result from this proximity are often what drive the stories’ crises. The most common supernatural beings in the genre are vampires, demons, the fae (another name for fairies, meant to differentiate them from their “Disney-fied” representation as

⁸ Irvine, “Urban Fantasy,” 201.

tiny, winged, wish-granting creatures), and shapeshifters (like werewolves, werelions, werehyenas, etc.), but authors constantly mine folklore and mythology for new monsters and creatures. These monsters mostly manage to “pass” as human in the nighttime crush of the city, though their traffic is circumscribed by certain celestial bodies, and closer inspection would reveal the oddly-colored eye, glittery visage, or descended fang. Notably, there are implicit categories of “human” and “non-human” supernatural creatures that operate in the genre. The non-human creatures tend to be represented as fundamentally other to humans—transformed, born, or created such that they cannot or can no longer claim a human identity, being a different species such as vampire, demon, or fae. Paranormal humans like witches, mages, healers, empaths, and necromancers, on the other hand, tend to be born or transformed into their supernatural powers, but maintain a fundamental sense of an underlying humanity.⁹ Emotional and psychological crises that drive character evolution comes from rubbing shoulders with the supernatural “others,” bringing one’s innate humanity—or monstrosity—into question.

The abundant presence in urban fantasy of supernatural beings in otherwise ordinary urban environments connects with Robert A. Orsi’s work on supernatural presence in Americans’ lived religion. Urban fantasy is predicated on presence—the presence of the gods and monsters, and on the infinitely permeable boundaries between life and death, human and non-human. In the worlds of urban fantasy, gods and monsters seek *humans* out, sometimes as prey and food but more often as partners and love interests. They seek different forms of communion and community with us—they go to high school and college, play on football and cheerleading teams, investigate supernatural crimes, become doctors and rock stars, using their

⁹ Some definitions: witches and mages are like sorcerers, humans who practice magic. Necromancers have power over the dead, such as raising zombies or calling ghosts, or their magic is correlated with and powered by death. Empaths are psychics who can read or manipulate other people’s feelings, and healers heal wounded bodies with metaphysical power and speed.

powers to save us from “bad” monsters and negotiating their own monstrosity in the process. They also seek sex and romance with us, trying to love, court, and woo us with their strength, beauty, and wealth. And in turn, we seek communion with the gods and monsters, collectively spending billions of dollars to watch them seduce and save us on screen and between the pages. But our fictions are one of the few cultural places outside conventional religious institutions where gods and the supernatural reign freely and boldly. Orsi holds that one function of imagining and constituting modernity has been to banish and deny the presence of gods, saints, angels, demons, spirits, and the dead in the lived daily realities of people’s lives—especially those people who aspired to heteronormative, middle-class, Protestant, American lifestyles. When the supernatural did manifest, Orsi writes, these “practices of presence became—and to a great extent they remain—the province of people of color, women, the poor and marginalized, children and childish or childlike adults, the eccentric, the romantic, the insane, and those unhinged by life experiences that overwhelm their reason.”¹⁰ And yet,

...modern anxieties about and prohibitions against presence generated an enduring and intense longing for it. Ostensibly secular moderns...most often believed they might glimpse this someone or something Other among those upon whom the various costs of industrial and colonial modernity fell most heavily. These modern searchers have ‘hunted the elephant’ in working-class neighborhoods, they have ‘dragged themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for a fix,’ and they have sought out the presence of the gods among the poor and outcast...Romantic moderns have wanted the people whose lives did not conform to the normative modern to remain that way, so that they might continue to be enjoyed as exciting alternatives to modernity.¹¹

Urban fantasy could certainly be read as a cultural site where the presence of the supernatural is given free reign, safely contained in “imaginative” works so that it does not step on those delicate rationalist, positivist, or materialist toes. It also makes sense that supernatural presence moved into the city, haunted as it is with the non-normative, non-modern “Others” of the

¹⁰ Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2016), 41-42.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

working class and immigrant neighborhoods. Since the monsters and magical humans that populate urban fantasy have long been understood as signifiers of queerness, otherness, and difference, the popularity of urban fantasy can be understood as an expression of longing for intimacy with those presences which have been banished under the rubric of modernity. I discuss religion, supernatural presence, and the city more extensively in chapter five.

The magical-material trappings of urban fantasy draw from contemporary neopagan, occult, and metaphysical religious traditions, including those traditions' appropriation of indigenous religious cultures and practices. Characters have auras and psychic shielding, crystals, magical spells, and grimoires. They consort with demons and angels; they worship, serve, and are claimed by patron deities from Celtic, South Asian, and Ancient Near Eastern pantheons; they draw on magical cosmologies and shamanic practices from native and indigenous religious traditions. The genre also explores the conjunctions and convergences of "new" and "old" religious traditions, and exposes authorial anxieties about religious fundamentalisms and religious freedoms. In this sense, the genre can be culturally situated as a literary expression of neopagan and occult traditions and practices, and of contemporary trends in "mixing" elements of multiple religious traditions.¹² The Pew Research Center released a 2009 report which "finds that large numbers of Americans engage in multiple religious practices, mixing elements of diverse traditions," such as attending services of multiple religions or "blend[ing] Christianity with Eastern or New Age beliefs such as reincarnation, astrology and the presence of spiritual energy in physical objects."¹³ The report finds that in total, 65% of

¹² Whether neopagan or metaphysical practitioners would recognize the characters as embodying "true" pagan religion is an open question. Interestingly, many popular urban fantasy authors identify in some way with neopagan religions. Laurell K. Hamilton has written on her blog that she is Wiccan, and Lilith Saintcrow and Kim Harrison regularly blog and Tweet their celebrations of neopagan holidays.

¹³ "Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths," Pew Research Center, accessed April 28, 2015. <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/12/09/many-americans-mix-multiple-faiths/>

Americans “express belief in or report having experience with *at least one* of these diverse supernatural phenomena (belief in reincarnation, belief in spiritual energy located in physical things, belief in yoga as spiritual practice, belief in the “evil eye,” belief in astrology, having been in touch with the dead, consulting a psychic, or experiencing a ghostly encounter).”¹⁴

Specifically, 29% of Americans have “felt in touch with someone who has already died,” 18% have “seen or been in the presence of ghosts,” and 26% of Americans “believe in spiritual energy located in physical things such as mountains, trees or crystals.”¹⁵ These supernatural phenomena can all be found in various expressions in urban fantasy literature, and suggest that one reason urban fantasy’s supernaturalism strikes a chord with readers is that the experiences the literature explores are quite widespread, though often culturally derided. On the whole, urban fantasy as a genre responds to a number of spiritual and religious trends in American culture, including the project of constituting modernity under signs of “absence” rather than “presence” and the stubborn proliferation of the paranormal and supernatural in people’s lived experiences of presence and power.

Typologies Considered in This Project

While common themes of urban fantasy permeate multiple science fiction, horror, and fantasy genres, and the category “urban fantasy” covers a diverse and fluid range of tropes, protagonists, and settings, there is a particular subsection of the genre that I focus on for this project: mainly female-identified authors who write female protagonists and foreground those characters’ experiences of violence as central to both plot and the psychological evolution of the character. These authors tend to write a particular type of protagonist: she is tough and hardened,

¹⁴ Ibid., emphasis mine.

¹⁵ Ibid.

someone who has been beaten up by life and learned to fight back; she is independent, sexually liberated, and foul-mouthed. More importantly, her relationship with the supernatural, non-human community is shaped by two general imperatives: to fight or to survive. When the protagonist fights, her aim is to proactively vanquish the monsters who threaten the peaceful existence of either human or non-human communities, and she is uniquely skilled to do this, either being trained in a teacher-apprentice role or by government agencies who clandestinely police the supernatural world. Lilith Saintcrow's character Jill Kismet typifies the fight imperative. In describing her job duties as the city of Santa Luz's resident demon hunter, Jill says:

Cities need people like us, those who go after things the cops can't catch and keep the streets from boiling over. We handle nonstandard exorcisms, Traders, hellbreed, rogue weres, scurf, Sorrows, Middle Way adepts...all the fun the nightside can come up with.

[...]

Sometimes—often enough—it's our job to find people that have been taken by the things that go bump in the night. When I say "find" I mean their bodies, because humans don't live too long on the nightside unless they're hunters. More often than not our mission is vengeance, to restore the unsteady balance between the denizens of the dark and regular oblivious people. To make a statement and keep the things creeping in the dark just there—creeping, instead of swaggering.¹⁶

On the other hand, when the protagonist's imperative is survival, her entanglement in the supernatural community and the power struggles among the monsters threatens her life and freedom, and her goal becomes to escape the situation alive. A unique supernatural ability, gift, or identity is usually what makes her appealing to the monsters. She may have a power that makes her strong enough to combat the monsters at their level of strength, or that power may be what embroils her in supernatural power games. Lilith Saintcrow's character Dante Valentine typifies this relationship. Dante is a powerful "necromance" whose abilities make her desirable

¹⁶ Lilith Saintcrow. *Night Shift* (New York: Orbit, 2008), 15-16. Traders are humans who bargain with demons and so gain a taint of corruption; hellbreed are demons; scurf are zombie-like vampires with little sentience; Sorrows are a succubus-like demon; Middle Way adepts are humans who worship ancient near eastern deities.

but also dangerous to the Prince of Hell.¹⁷ Her story is one of surviving the Prince's attempts to control and finally kill her. Dante's story begins when the Prince summons Dante to Hell and "asks" her to hunt down a rogue demon on earth:

The Prince regarded me. His eyes were lighter but more weirdly depthless than Jaf's, a sort of radioactive silken glow. Thirty seconds looking into those eyes and I might have agreed to anything just to make it stop.

As it was, I looked down at my knees. "You wanted to see me," I said. "Here I am."

"Indeed." The Prince turned back to the fireplace. "I have a mission for you, Dante. Succeed, and you can count me as a friend all the years of your life, and those years will be long. It is in my power to grant wealth and near-immortality, Dante, and I am disposed to be generous."

"And if I fail?" I couldn't help myself.

"You'll be dead," he said. "Being a Necromance, you're well-prepared for that, aren't you?"

My rings glinted dully in the red light. "I don't want to die," I said finally. "Why me?"

"You have a set of...talents that are uniquely suited to the task," he answered.

"So what is it exactly you want me to *do*?" I asked.

"I want you to kill someone," he said.¹⁸

Dante protests, arguing she isn't a "contract killer," but Lucifer has no intention of allowing her to say no. The rogue demon has run off with an artifact of Hell called "the Egg" which Lucifer wants Dante to return after killing the demon:

The Prince shrugged. "I wish the Egg found and the thief executed. You are a Necromance, capable of seeing what others do not. Some have called you the greatest death-talker of your generation, which is high praise indeed. [...] What do you want, Dante Valentine? I can give you the world."

It whispered in my veins, tapped at my skull. *I can give you the world...*

I actually thought about it, but Lucifer couldn't give me anything I wanted. Not without the price being too high. If I was sure of nothing else in this situation, I was sure of *that*. "Get thee behind me," I whispered, finally. "I just want to be left alone. I don't want anything to do with this."¹⁹

¹⁷ "Necromance" is Saintcrow's term for a necromancer in the novel, set about 600 years in the future. Necromances have an intimate relationship with various gods of death. Access to those gods' realms allows necromances to bring the ghosts of the dead into the world of the living for an hour or so, usually either for the identification of remains, to question them about how they died, or to help settle legal affairs.

¹⁸ Lilith Saintcrow, *Working for the Devil*. (New York: Orbit, 2007), 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27-29.

As I will show, this entanglement with vampires, demons, or shapeshifters inevitably results in gains to the protagonist's base-level powers and abilities, if not a complete transformation into a new supernatural being. The monsters grow ever more powerful, deadly, and threatening, and so must the protagonist if she wishes to fight or survive them. The protagonists that I consider in this thesis are all defined by the imperative to either fight or survive the monsters, and thus supernatural transformation is intimately connected to issues of power and control.

Theoretical Context: Transformation in Religion and Fantasy Literature

Why take fantasy literature seriously in conjunction with religious studies? The work of scholars Victoria Nelson and Jeffrey J. Kripal each pose a similar answer to this question. In her study of contemporary supernatural stories she terms the “bright Gothick” (to distinguish them from their dark Gothic literary counterparts of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries), Nelson argues that our supernatural fiction has taken a turn toward brightness, putting the themes of human transformation and human expressions of morality front and center. There is a spiritual dimension to this centering of human experience and morality in supernatural fiction, she writes:

As they have moved increasingly from the margins to the mainstream over the last twenty years, many Gothick subgenres display—in a variety of provisional and eclectic ways—an implicit heterodox spirituality that grows directly out their robust supernaturalism. The most striking characteristic of the new Gothick's spiritual framework is what René Girard calls ‘the metamorphosis of the maleficent into the beneficent,’ in which antagonist-villains (vampires, werewolves, assorted demons and imps from hell) have become protagonist-heroes who struggle with their darkness even as they incarnate on earth as gods.²⁰

Among her analysis of a variety of novels, television shows, and films, Nelson spends a couple chapters situating contemporary vampire novels (from a range of subgenres including young

²⁰ Victoria Nelson, *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the New Supernatural* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 8.

adult, paranormal romance, and urban fantasy, mostly published during and after the 1990s) into this Gothick archetype, analyzing the narratives of transformation employed in these texts. Whereas vampires, werewolves, demons, and other monsters were formerly creatures (or metaphors for human Others) who came from outside the social order and represented threats to the cohesion and norms of that society, now our monsters *are* us. She quotes Katherine Ramsland to say that through this literature, ““the collective cultural subconscious was building toward the day when many of us would identify with the monster, who in earlier vampire tales had to be annihilated as the evil other. We were beginning to understand that to take out the vampire with a stake through the heart was to kill a part of ourselves—a part that might yield some real treasures.””²¹ In other words, supernatural creatures stopped being radically different, monstrous, socially threatening Others and became humans who were unceremoniously dropkicked into the supernatural. Humans who transformed into vampires, werewolves, and other paranormal beings would become gods, not monsters.

Nelson finds Anne Rice’s vampire novels of the 1970s and on to be one popular progenitor of this theme of human divinization. She writes that, “Anne Rice’s novel *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) was a radical innovation in this subgenre because it was the first to tell the story from the vampire’s point of view, foregrounding him not exactly as a good person but certainly as far more dimensional and ethical than any vampire character before him.”²² This “representation of vampires as subjects, not objects,” was the first move toward detaching them from their “dark Gothick” roots.²³ “The second new element was a more explicit disassociation of vampires from a Christian matrix”—a matrix in the form of vulnerability to holy objects like

²¹ Ibid., 133.

²² Ibid., 124.

²³ Ibid., 124.

churches, crosses, holy water, and silver— and the third element was “the upgrading of vampires from ‘undead’ to ‘immortals,’ with the strongest vampires becoming gods over the centuries.”²⁴

Anne Rice’s vampires were wildly in love with humanity and human art, they possessed a deep, nuanced subjectivity and conscience, they were no longer controlled or annihilated by religious authority, and they behaved and spoke of themselves as gods. Drawing on the reflections of Rice’s vampire Armand, Nelson writes,

...if God doesn’t exist, then vampires have the ‘highest consciousness’ of any being in the world because they have the perspective to understand the passage of time and the value of human life. ... In this new representation, the process of becoming a vampire is one of expansion of consciousness leading to divinization: vampires as transfigured humans, gods incarnated on earth—a theme that will be taken up again and again in the twenty-first-century versions of the mythos.²⁵

When humans become vampires, they evolve into divine consciousness because of their sense of the passage of time, because of their valorization of human artistic accomplishments and human beauty, and because of their control over the physical world in the form of superpowers like flight, telepathy, mental compulsion, pyrokinesis, and immortality. These gods, however, struggle and wrestle with their new supernatural instincts, *especially* when those instincts put human lives at risk. This is a fundamental characteristic of what becomes the bright Gothick, and subsequently urban fantasy, in the 1990s and 2000s. Nelson explains:

Most broadly, vampirism in the new Gothick seems to function as an emblem of a kind of original sin; it represents the irresistible impulse to evil the now thoroughly humanized supernatural character must struggle against to stay a moral person. These characters retain their generic identity (demon, vampire, werewolf) along with the innate dark desires connected with that identity (killing humans) but are able to rise above their instincts by an act of will that must be tested again and again.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., 124-25.

²⁵ Ibid., 125.

²⁶ Ibid., 134

In *Interview with the Vampire*, for example, the new vampire Louis refuses to drink human blood, dining instead on rats, which makes him a laughing stock to his less-scrupulous maker, Lestat. Lestat masters what he calls the harmless “Little Drink”—drinking human blood straight from the source but not in quantities that kill—and eventually restricts his binge-drinking to murderers and rapists. In the *Twilight Saga*, the Cullen family and other “good” vampires only drink from animals.²⁷ The theme of wrestling with the ambiguous supernatural inheritance carries directly through into urban fantasy, where transformed protagonists attempt to tame and control their powers such that they can continue to pass as human in the mortal world.

Nelson finds a particular religious significance to the ambiguous supernatural power in bright Gothick stories: “The supernatural aspect of [these protagonists’] hybrid natures, the exact point where materiality flips over into something else, is the wild card they must gain control over or risk forfeiting their human morality.”²⁸ She asks:

If the locus of goodness and right living in this metaphysics is the human dimension and not the transcendent one, what does that suggest about “becoming divine” as the ultimate extension of personal gnosis? . . . I think it indicates a kind of nervous ambivalence, certainly warranted given the darkness of the Gothick tradition, about the *mysterium tremendum* itself. What can happen to a person in that moment of mystical connection, judging by these stories, is anybody’s guess. Based sheerly on Gothick precedent, it is likely to be unpleasant. Thus human instincts are more trustworthy than supernatural ones. This trustworthiness means something specific in the context of supernaturalism. It means that these divine humans must temper and harness the transcendental in accord with their own human values, not the other way around. Profoundly antitotalitarian, it is a metaphysics that turns the top-down religions of the past on their heads.²⁹

²⁷ Interestingly, while the “bunny diet,” as characters in *The Vampire Diaries* call it, makes the Cullens weaker than the vampires who drink human blood, it makes them more traditionally attractive. The Cullens and other “good” vampires gain gold-yellow eyes, while “bad”, human-eating vampires have bright red eyes that make it impossible for them to pass as humans. Bunny-munching vampires pass for humans and move through the human world—as long as it’s not too sunny out—as humans.

²⁸ Nelson, *Gothicka*, 263.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 263-64.

Supernatural fantasy fiction today narrates a story of human deification *on human terms*. The supernatural—the encounter with the *mysterium tremendum*, in Nelson’s terms—is an ambiguous force that needs to be tamed and controlled according to a fundamentally human moral code. Moreover, this bright Gothick literature articulates a particular mode of spirituality that usurps traditional religious orders and authority over the individual, but which also characterizes Euro-American metaphysical new religious movements. The bright Gothick parallels metaphysical narratives about innate human divinity and unlimited human potential that a transformative experience with the *mysterium tremendum* can initiate. This is a theme that scholar Jeffery J. Kripal details extensively in his book *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*, to which I now turn.

Mutants and Mystics is a sustained analysis of the mechanisms of transformation in superhero comics and science fiction literature that seeks to situate those mechanisms in the secret traditions of Euro-American occult, metaphysical, and paranormal spiritual histories.³⁰ Kripal’s primary message in the book is that scholars of religion should take science fiction and fantasy literature seriously as religious phenomena, as the literature draws from deep metaphysical histories of supernatural abilities and transformation. Kripal explains:

many of the extraordinary capacities that science fiction stories and superhero comics treat as fantasies (telepathy, precognition, psychokinetic or magical influence, subtle bodies and energies, cosmic unity, and clairvoyance, to name the most common) are well-documented experiences in the history of folklore, religion, and psychical research. These things are real in the simple sense that *they happen*. What they *mean* is an entirely different issue. But whatever they mean, I think it is safe to say that the sci-fi and superhero fantasies reflect, refract, and exaggerate these real-world paranormal capacities.³¹

³⁰ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

Sci-fi and superhero comics explore themes of transformation according to seven “mythemes” or “mythical themes,” which Kripal defines as “a set of tropes or story lines about the metamorphosis of the human form that are deeply indebted to the history of the religious imagination....”³² These mythemes are mechanisms of transformation, the root sources of the superhero’s superpowers—in short, their origin stories. They are: (1) *Divinization and Demonization*: for example, consider the character John Constantine, whose powers are gained from traffic with angels, gods, or demons; (2) *Orientation*: Dr. Strange, whose mystical powers come from learning exotic mystical traditions in far away lands, like Tibetan yoga; (3) *Alienation*: Superman, where powers are derived from advanced outer space civilizations or simply being an alien; (4) *Radiation*: the Hulk, whose powers were derived from exposure to forms of energy or nuclear radiation; (5) *Mutation*: the X-Men, whose powers are derived from mutations or evolutions in human genetics; (6) *Realization*: Captain Marvel, whose powers are derived from the realization that identities are arbitrary, interchangeable, and uncannily scripted; and (7) *Authorization*: Promethea, who exhibits the idea that if identity is arbitrary and scripted, we can write the script ourselves, and the imagination’s possibilities are limitless.³³ Kripal demonstrates that all of these mechanisms of transformation have deep roots in occult, paranormal, and metaphysical experiences and traditions, and the authors and artists of superhero comics (especially Grant Morrison, Alan Moore, and Doug Mense) are extensively aware of and deliberately utilize these connections. These authors and artists have their own experiences with the paranormal that they turn around and embed in their work; in some cases (such as Alan

³² Ibid., 1.

³³ Ibid., 26-28. Realization and Authorization are complicated techniques and mechanisms of transformation that hinge on capacities to write and re-write reality and im/possibility, given the awareness that reality is a story we can change and reconfigure to our liking.

Moore's *Promethea* or Grant Morrison's *The Invisibles*), Kripal writes, the comics themselves are designed to draw on mystical processes of reading and writing to effect transformation in the reader.³⁴

Ultimately, Kripal concludes that all this material points to a new understanding or definition of humans and our capacities that circulates in both popular sci-fi and fantasy literature, and in occult, metaphysical spiritual systems. He glosses this new vision of the human being as the "Human as Two," a model that suggests consciousness is not restricted to the ordinary level of everyday operation, in which we are scripted and socialized since birth, but that higher levels of consciousness and concomitant metaphysical abilities are possible once extraordinary experiences crack open the ordinary cognitive states. That is, every Bruce Banner has a secret Hulk inside, every Wanda Maximoff has a Scarlet Witch, every Clark Kent has a Superman; they are two-in-one and it takes an extraordinary, often traumatic experience to crack open the states of consciousness that correlate to the superhuman. I discuss the Human-as-Two at much more length in chapter five, but for now it is enough to consider why Kripal finds it necessary to look to science-fiction's articulations of secret human potential and duality. He writes:

So here is my conclusion stated in its clearest terms: *the Human as Two (and One) is the neuroanatomical, cognitive, and spiritual bedrock of the paranormal and its fantastic both-and, physical-mythical, masterful-mental, real-unreal expressions in pop culture.* This Two-in-One, this Third Kind, this impossible structure is why we have something profound to learn from the imaginative genres of science fiction and superhero comics. This is why the truth can sometimes only be spoken through the trick, and why the fantasy sometimes also expresses the fact.³⁵

To Kripal, alongside metaphysical spirituality, paranormal pop culture is the place where secret human potential is articulated, because epistemologically, western culture can rarely take

³⁴ See Kripal, *Mutants*, "Origins."

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 333. Emphasis in original.

seriously claims of mystical or paranormal experiences. Our artists, authors, and creators instead bury those experiences in “low brow” pop culture, especially in fantasy and science fiction.

Human “Consciousness” is the site or locus of mystical experience to Kripal, but it needs “Culture” in order to express itself. Thus, Kripal

want[s] to suggest that the psyche and our social consensus of what reality is somehow ‘make each other up’ within a constant loop of Consciousness and Culture, and that the Culture through which Consciousness often manifests itself most dramatically as the paranormal is that form in which the imagination (and so the image) are given the freest and boldest reign: popular culture.³⁶

Science fiction and fantasy should be taken seriously by scholars of religion because it is a reservoir for imagining human potential, it functions as one significant locus of human potential at this cultural moment, and in certain forms, it shares a project with occult and metaphysical spiritual traditions.

While Kripal makes compelling claims about the source of religious experience and the nature of the human being, I wish to focus on a smaller part of Kripal’s “Super-Story,” the role of trauma in initiating these transformations into the supernatural.³⁷ In *Mutants and Mystics*, Kripal elaborates briefly on trauma and the origin story in superhero comics:

Often the superhero acquires his or her powers from some sort of accident or trauma: the alien Superman crashes onto planet earth from Krypton; Batman, struggling with the horrible memory of the murder of his parents, learns the martial arts and dedicates his life to fighting crime; scientist Bruce Banner is radiated by an atomic bomb test—that sort of thing. Every superhero, it turns out, needs a story about how he or she came to be different, how he or she became *super*.³⁸

Kripal analyzes the role of trauma and violence in Whitley Strieber’s non-fictional *Visitor* corpus, demonstrating how extreme states of fear and horror in the face of paranormal,

³⁶ Ibid., 5.

³⁷ Kripal names his account the “Super-Story” in *Mutants*, 5.

³⁸ Ibid., 28-29.

inexplicable experience contributes to, and sometimes fully generates, phenomena like out-of-body experiences and states of dissociation.³⁹ In the same vein, Kripal recently wrote a short foreword to psychotherapist Janet Elizabeth Colli's self-published volume *The Dark Face of Heaven: True Stories of Transcendence Through Trauma*, in which Kripal articulates his stance on trauma and transformation more clearly: "Trauma is god awful. Trauma is, in turns, horrific, devastating, gory, cruel, sickening, and dehumanizing. But sometimes, sometimes, for reasons that we do not really understand, trauma can and does also function as a trigger of transformation and transcendence."⁴⁰ He continues:

Through [her work, Dr. Colli] has come to understand that, yes, trauma is horrible, but that, in some remarkable cases...it can trigger transcendent states of knowledge and vision that fundamentally—physiologically, energetically, neurologically—alter, re-wire, and gift the person who undergoes them.... In Dr. Colli's own language, in these instances, 'extraordinary experience appears to be the portal to a biologically-based transformation of the human personality.' Or again: 'What happens is *evolution*—the future of the brain.'

The future of the brain. Evolution. These are very strong words. They are outrageous words, really. But for anyone who has known such states of suffering and consequent altered states of mind and energy, they are eerily familiar and immediately persuasive. The truth, for those who know it, really is fantastic.⁴¹

Trauma functions in Kripal's mythemes, and, more generally, in his recent thought, as a trigger of supernatural or paranormal experience. Trauma, in other words, is an origin story.

I have demonstrated how Nelson and Kripal both see these narratives of transformation as literary expressions of a new human divinity; I intend now to take this framework of trauma as origin story and apply it to the urban fantasy genre, specifically to the work of Lilith Saintcrow, Dianne Sylvan, and Laurell K. Hamilton. I will show that a particular kind of trauma—violence

³⁹ See Kripal, *Mutants*, "Authorization."

⁴⁰ Janet Elizabeth Colli, *The Dark Face of Heaven: True Stories of Transcendence Through Trauma* (Self-published, 2014), 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

against women at the hands of men—functions intentionally as a key to transformation in the work of these novelists. I want to push Kripal's framework of trauma as transformative further to analyze the *structural conditions* of heroines' transformations, to look at what specific kinds of trauma women are connecting to supernatural transformation. Urban fantasy employs this mechanism of trauma as transformative, and in so doing it engages narratively and thematically with lived social realities of power, gender, and race that are left unaccounted for in Kripal's work. Bringing this framework to bear on urban fantasy narratives of transformation will allow us to push Kripal's work forward and interrogate particular intersections of trauma, power, and gender in urban fantasy fiction.

PART I: POWER, VIOLENCE, SEX, AND THE SUPERNATURAL
IN URBAN FANTASY FICTION

CHAPTER 2

‘TO QUIET THE SCREAMING IN OUR OWN HEADS’:
TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE IN NARRATIVES OF THE HEROINE’S SUPERNATURAL
TRANSFORMATIONS

Trauma, Violence, and Transformation in Urban Fantasy

The themes of trauma and transformation intersect in urban fantasy at the moment when the protagonist is forced to pursue or undergo techniques of power gain in order to fight or survive the monsters. Laurell K. Hamilton’s *Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter* series exemplifies this theme. The series features necromancer and vampire executioner Anita Blake who begins the story as a trained bounty hunter, later becoming a Federal Marshal, with license from the government to execute vampires who harm humans. Over the course of twenty-six novels and various novellas, Anita is coerced into a “human servant” relationship with the Master of St. Louis, vampire Jean-Claude. Up against stronger, more sadistic vampires who would force Jean-Claude’s territory from him and take Anita against her will to be their pet necromancer, survival compels Anita and Jean-Claude to forge a cooperative, eventually romantic relationship that results over the course of the series in immense power gains for Anita, including the ability to use her necromancy to control *all* the undead, not just zombies. Later in the series, magical sex with Jean-Claude possesses Anita with the *ardeur*, a power that makes her a living vampire who feeds on sex and rage. To satisfy the hunger of the *ardeur*, Anita is forced to take several lovers beyond Jean-Claude, including men from the pool of St. Louis’s shapeshifters (wereleopards, weretigers, werelions, werewolves, werehyenas, wereswans, etc.), over whom she eventually becomes a leader. Her sexual encounters with the shapeshifters lead Anita to be infected with an internal “beast” of her own; unlike her lovers, she cannot physically transform into her beast form, but she does contain the physical and metaphysical essence of several were-species in her

blood, and must constantly suppress animal-like instincts in her conflicts with enemies. Navigating this new landscape of power, love, desire, sexual satisfaction, and polyamory—and with the creatures she used to hunt and put down with the government’s sanction—becomes central to the psychological, emotional progression of the protagonist over the course of the series. Along the way, Anita is forced to reckon with lovers with a taste for BDSM, with her lovers’ traumatic pasts of sexual slavery, the desire of stronger, malevolent, outside supernatural creatures to possess her, her ability to addict lovers to her through the *ardeur*, and other imbalances of power in the community of supernatural beings she forges around herself.

Most strikingly, her power gains and transformation are a direct result of the interference of stronger monsters who would control her or harm those she takes under her protection. In the first book of Hamilton’s Anita Blake series, *Guilty Pleasures* (1993), readers see the initial metaphysical connection between Anita and Jean-Claude forged after Anita is brought to the powerful vampire girl-child Nikolaos, the current Master of St. Louis from whom Jean-Claude will wrest control. Nikolaos knows of Anita’s skill in raising zombies and needs that skill to reanimate a difficult corpse. The vampires coerce Anita into accompanying them by first threatening Anita’s human friend; Anita gets angry about being manipulated and insults an old, powerful vampire who then backhands her:

Aubrey’s hand came out of nowhere and caught me in the shoulder. The blow knocked all the air from my body and sent me flying backwards. My back slammed into the wall. My head hit a moment later, hard. The world went grey. I slid down the wall. I couldn’t breathe. Tiny white shapes danced over the greyness. The world began to go black. I slid to the floor. It didn’t hurt; nothing hurt. I struggled to breathe until my chest burned, and darkness took everything away.⁴²

Anita has yet to see Nikolaos, and Nikolaos is a dangerous, violent, vindictive vampire; her vampire lackeys cannot risk angering her, so Jean-Claude metaphysically heals Anita. A second

⁴² Laurel K. Hamilton. *Guilty Pleasures* (New York: Ace Books, 1993), 42.

vampire, Theresa, understands the significance of this healing and eggs on Jean-Claude to share it with Anita:

“Go on, master vampire, tell her. See how grateful she is.”

Jean-Claude stared at me, watching my face. “You are badly hurt, a concussion. But Nikolaos will not let us take you to a hospital until this...interview is over with. I feared you would die or be unable to...function.” I had never heard his voice so uncertain. “So I shared my life-force with you.”

I started to shake my head. Big mistake. I pressed hands to my forehead. “I don’t understand.”

“Oh, allow me,” Theresa said. “He has taken the first step to making you a human servant.”

“No.” I was still having trouble thinking clearly, but I knew that wasn’t right. “He didn’t try to trick me with his mind, or eyes. He didn’t bite me.”

“I don’t mean one of those pathetic half-creatures that have a few bites and do our bidding. I mean a permanent human servant, one that will never be bitten, never be hurt. One that will age almost as slowly as we do.”

I still didn’t understand. Perhaps it showed in my face because Jean-Claude said, “I took your pain and gave you some of my...stamina.”

“Are you experiencing my pain, then?”

“No, the pain is gone. I have made you a little harder to hurt.”

I still wasn’t taking it all in, or maybe it was just beyond me. “I still don’t understand.”

“Listen, woman, he has shared with you what we consider a great gift to be given only to people who have proven themselves invaluable.”

I stared at Jean-Claude. “Does this mean I am in your power somehow?”

“Just the opposite,” Theresa said, “you are now immune to his glance, his voice, his mind. You will serve him out of willingness, nothing more. You see what he has done.”

I stared into her black eyes. They were just eyes.

She nodded. “Now you begin to understand. As an animator you had partial immunity to our gaze. Now you have almost complete immunity.”⁴³

Being trapped in vampire power games has resulted in Anita taking the first of three marks of a human servant. Before Nikolaos wants to see Anita, however, they put her in a dungeon with the wererats under Nikolaos’s control, intending to break Anita’s will through torture and rape. The fortunate arrival of the king of the wererats prevents this from happening, and finally Anita is taken before Nikolaos. Nikolaos is the thousand-year old Master of the City, and she makes it crystal clear that Anita is subject to her power:

⁴³ Ibid., 45-46.

[Nikolaos] stood there without moving and opened her mind to me. It felt like she had opened a door that had been locked. Thoughts ripped into me like knives, steel-edged dreams. Fleeting bits of her mind danced in my head; where they touched I was numbed, hurt.

I was on my knees, and I didn't remember falling. I was cold, so cold. There was nothing for me. I was an insignificant thing, beside that mind. How could I think to call myself an equal? How could I do anything but crawl to her and beg to be forgiven? My insolence was intolerable.

I began to crawl to her, on hands and knees. It seemed like the right thing to do. I had to beg her forgiveness. I needed to be forgiven. How else did you approach a goddess but on bended knee?⁴⁴

Ultimately it is pain and rage that gets Anita through Nikolaos's psychic assault:

No. Something was wrong. But what? I should ask the goddess to forgive me. I should worship her, do anything she asked. No. No.

"No." I whispered it. "No."

"Come to me, my child." Her voice was like spring after a long winter. It opened me up inside. It made me feel warm and welcome.

She held out her pale arms to me. The goddess would let me embrace her. Wondrous. Why was I cowering on the floor? Why didn't I run to her?

"No." I slammed my hands into the stone. It stung, but not enough. "No!" I smashed my fist into the floor. My whole arm tingled and went numb. "NO!" I pounded my fists into the rock over and over again until they bled. Pain was sharp, real, mine. I screamed, "Get out of my mind! You bitch!"

I crouched on the floor, panting, cradling my hands against my stomach. My pulse was jumping in my throat. I couldn't breathe past it. Anger washed through me, clean and sharp-edged. It chased the last shadow of Nikolaos's mind away.

I glared up at her. Anger, and behind that, terror. Nikolaos had washed over my mind like the ocean in a seashell, filled me up and emptied me out. She might have to drive me crazy to break me, but she could do it if she wanted to. And there wasn't a damn thing I could do to protect myself.

She stared down at me and laughed, that wondrous wind chime of a laugh. "Oh we have found something the animator fears. Yes, we have. [...] Good, animator, we understand each other. You do what we want, or I will peel your mind away like the layers of an onion." She breathed against my face, voice dropping to a whisper. A child's whisper with an edge of giggling to it. "You do believe I can do that, don't you?"

I believed.⁴⁵

Over the course of the same evening, Jean-Claude is forced to give Anita the second mark of a human servant so that he can survive the distraction he provides for Anita to escape. Nine books

⁴⁴ Ibid., 59-60.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 60-61.

later, Anita still has not received the third mark of a human servant, but she has grown more entangled with Jean-Claude and with the werewolf “alpha” of the pack, Richard. After a long break from complicated relationships with both men, Anita comes back into town and finds out that were-leopards for whom she is responsible are endangered by someone who knows the unfinished marks, now shared between Anita, Richard, and Jean-Claude, make their power weak. Anita has tried everything to repair the metaphysical “wounds” herself:

I hated metaphysics. Preternatural biology is still biology, metaphysics is magic, and I’m still not comfortable with it. For six months when I wasn’t working, I was meditating, studying with a very wise psychic named Marianne, learning ritual magic, so I could control my God-given abilities. And so I could block the marks that bound me to Richard and Jean-Claude. An aura is like your personal protection, your personal energy. When it’s healthy it keeps you safe like skin, but you get a hole in it, and infection can get inside. My aura had two holes in it, one for each of the men. I suspected that their auras had holes in them, too. Which put us all at risk. I’d blocked up my holes. Then only a few weeks ago, I’d come up against a nasty creature, a would-be god, a new category, even for me. It had been powerful enough to strip all my careful work away, leaving me raw and open again. Only the intervention of a local witch had saved me from being eaten from the aura down. I didn’t have six more months of celibacy, meditation, and patience in me. The holes were there, and the only way to fill them was with Jean-Claude and Richard.⁴⁶

Before Anita and Jean-Claude can rescue her wereleopards, they discuss the consequences of filling the marks, completing their binding:

“The woman I’m studying with...”

“Marianne,” he said.

“Yes, Marianne. Anyway, she says that I can’t keep blocking the holes in my aura. That the only way to be safe from preternatural creepy-crawlies is to fill the holes with what they were meant to hold.”

Silence on the other end of the phone. Silence for so long that I said, “Jean-Claude, you still there?”

“I am here.”

“You don’t sound happy about this.”[...]

“I want this very clear between us, *ma petite*. I do not want you coming back to me later, crying that you did not understand how tightly this would bind us. If you allow Richard and me to truly fill the marks upon your...body, we will share our auras. Our energy. Our magic.”

“We’re already doing that, Jean-Claude.”

⁴⁶ Laurell K. Hamilton. *Narcissus in Chains* (New York: Berkely, 2001), 16.

“In part, *ma petite*, but those are side effects of the marks. This will be a willing, knowledgeable joining. Once done, I do not think it can be undone without great damage to all of us.”⁴⁷

Jean-Claude keeps pressing Anita on the issue of her preparation for the act of merging auras and filling the holes in their metaphysical shielding:

I shook my head, realized he couldn't see it, and said, “I'm not brave. I'm pretty much terrified. Terrified that if I do this, there is no going back, that maybe I'm fooling myself about a choice. Maybe there is no choice and there hasn't been for a long time. But however we end up arranging the bedrooms, I can't let us all go around with gaping metaphysical wounds. Too many things will sense the weakness and exploit it.”⁴⁸

The problem for Anita and Jean-Claude comes down to the fact that they cannot defend their territory from strong outside contenders for power because the unfinished human servant marks create weaknesses in their metaphysical defenses. By finishing the binding, Jean-Claude and the werewolf Richard shore up their power and defenses; Anita, on the other hand, as the only human in the power triangle, will become near immortal, much harder to break or kill, and she will gain the *ardeur* which turns her into a living vampire-succubus who must feed from her lovers on sex and rage in order to survive. This physical and metaphysical transformation is not a result of the pure search for knowledge of self and God or ultimate reality, as Kripal articulates the theme of magical transformation in western esoteric traditions, but is a direct consequence of threats from more powerful supernatural beings of violence and subservience. Anita points out in both texts that choice in the matter is an illusion. She can reject magical binding to her lovers Jean-Claude and Richard in order to remain personally autonomous, but that puts her at immediate risk of being captured, hurt, and killed by monsters more powerful and sadistic than her lovers. She can agree to conclude the magical binding that will seal their metaphysical shields and geographical territory at the cost of tying herself inextricably close to two men she

⁴⁷ Ibid., 20-21.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 21-22.

already has ambiguous feelings for, but she will be better prepared to defend against those who would take advantage of her metaphysical weakness. Anita chooses to finish the marks and protect her people. Paradoxically, however, the more powerful Anita and her lovers' triumvirate grows, the more dangerous the monsters their triumvirate attracts. The twenty-six novels and novellas that make up this ongoing series can be characterized by this constant cycle of threatening monsters, magical transformation to fend off and kill the threat, and more threatening monsters attracted by the new power.

The vagaries of power that drive transformation into the supernatural is a common theme in the line of urban fantasy writers I focus on. In Lilith Saintcrow's Jill Kismet series, the desert city of Santa Luz is protected from the scourge of demonic infestation by the city's resident hunter, Jill Kismet. Jill's story foregrounds the issue of violence against women and the brutal costs of survival. Jill was forced into prostitution in her late teenage years by an abusive pimp, but the abuse and the violence done to her body by the pimp and her "johns" eventually leads her to kill the pimp and numbly wander the city with the gun in her hands. The city's demon hunter, Mikhail, a Russian expatriate who speaks in broken English, finds Jill and takes her in, and, sensing in her the drive to fight past even a broken mind and body, offers to train her to hunt demons, or "hellbreed," and the humans they bargain with, "Traders." She accepts the deal, begins her training, and months later is introduced to the city's most powerful demon, Perry (short for both Pericles and Hyperion, two other names by which he is known), who rules the demonic "nightside." Perry takes a special interest in Jill and offers a bargain that her teacher encourages her to accept, in which Jill receives a demon's mark that will allow her to pull on "etheric force" and give her the strength and sorcerous power of a demon. Perry explains:

"I'm going to mark you, my dear. While you carry that mark, you'll have a gateway embedded in your flesh. Through that conduit, you're going to draw sorcerous energy,

and lots of it. It will make you strong, and fast—stronger and faster than any of your fellow hunters. You'll have an edge in raw power when it comes to sorcery, even that week-kneed trash you monkeys flatter yourself by calling magic."⁴⁹

The mark takes the shape of a pair of puckered lips, seared into her wrist when Perry seals their deal with a kiss. In turn Jill must visit Perry once a month to pay for the use of the mark that allows her to draw on power and fight hellbreed on a more even playing field. His chosen form of payment is to force her to torture him, ripping open his flesh with fist or knife. Jill recounts the experience:

My mouth was parched, the fumes of the Jack Daniel's I'd taken down reaching my head. I hadn't eaten, my body was starting to get that funny shaky feeling it usually did just before Perry ordered me to strap him into the frame and start.

I knew that shaky feeling. It's the same thing as when your body rebels and tries to collapse on you, but your mind won't let it.

Sometimes he wanted the knives. Most of the time it was the flechettes, razor-sharp and silver-plated. On a few very bad nights he made me use my fists until his preternatural skin broke and bled, and the only sounds would be my sharp exhales of effort and his low, bubbling breath right before he gurgled *More*.

Just the single word. Each and every time.

I'd given up wondering why he wanted me to hurt him. Maybe it was just another move in the game he played, trying to get inside my head. Maybe he couldn't get it anywhere else.⁵⁰

Perry's ultimate goal is to worm his way inside her mind, to break her to his will, and to use her strength in his own battles with hellbreed on earth. Ostensibly, Jill has the cooperation of the Catholic Church in purging the night side of hellbreed and Traders, but all hunters are excommunicated because of their proximity to corruption and the murders they commit. The Church's rejection of hunters, and the mark she bargained with a demon for, both leave Jill with the fear of being no different than the hellbreed and Traders she kills to maintain peace, and that exact fear, the fear of being "corrupted," is what Perry plays on to get inside her head.

⁴⁹ Saintcrow, *Night Shift*, 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 93-94.

As with Anita Blake, a sense of duty and responsibility to protect innocents drives Jill to bargain with a demon and thus gain immense supernatural powers. But even more compelling than the obligation of duty is the following sentiment of her teacher's: "*Idiots*, Mikhail often sneered. *They think we do this for them. Is only one reason to do, milaya, and that is for to quiet the screaming in our own heads.*"⁵¹ While Jill does want to protect the innocent, the sentiment Mikhail expresses is that they are particularly well-suited for the job of hunter because of their lifelong exposure to powerlessness, violence, and darkness—a life spent teetering on the edge of madness, a life that leaves one screaming internally. Mikhail's words come back to Jill at least once in every book.

Furthermore, the bargain with Perry is narratively constructed as a parallel to the violence Jill experienced as a prostitute:

The hellbreed laughed again. "Very good, little hunter. The bargain goes thus: you bear my mark and use the power it provides as you see fit. Once a month, you'll come visit, and you'll spend time with me. That's all—a little bit of time each month. For superlative use of the power I grant you, you might have to spend a little more time. Say, five or six hours?"

Now it was negotiation time. I wet my lips with my tongue, wished I hadn't because I suddenly knew his eyes had fastened on my mouth. "Half an hour. Maximum."

Bargaining on streetcorners taught me that much, at least—you never take the john's first offer, and you never, ever, ever start out with more than half of what you're willing to give.

*Sometimes you can pick who buys you, and for how much.
That's what power really is.*⁵²

Bargaining with hellbreed is no different than bargaining with johns on streetcorners. Violent men are the same to Jill no matter what species they are. This theme carries through to the last two books of her series, where Jill has to convince Perry that his plan to alienate her from her few loved ones so that he can claim her has worked. She needs to get close to Perry to stop his

⁵¹ Lilith Saintcrow, *Flesh Circus* (New York City: Orbit, 2009), 153.

⁵² Saintcrow, *Night Shift*, 4.

attempt to summon his infernal father to earth, so Jill goes to Perry's demonic nightclub, the *Monde Nuit*, to play him, feigning a reckless defeat:

I felt him arrive like a storm front, a flash of paleness and his fingers were over mine. Perry took the vodka bottle, raised it to his lips, and grinned at me, the blandness dropping for a moment. High cheekbones, bladed nose, sterile beauty shining briefly before the screen of average came back up. His bright blue gaze fastened on me, indigo threads staining his whites with an inky vein-map, and the music took on fresh frenetic energy. [...]

The woman, Mikhail had reminded me so often, *has advantage in bargain like this.*

And God, I was hoping it was true.

"You shouldn't be here." Perry's lips shaped the words, they sliced through the jet roar with no difficulty at all. "Not yet."

Come on, Jill. This is just like working a sharkjohn. The kind that will pay double if you perform according to his little script. The cold calculation wasn't a hunter's toting up of percentages and averages—no, this was an older feeling.

It was the metal scrabble that lights like a ratlike gleam in a quarry's eyes. The *how can I make this work for me* gleam, the one my mother used to get when her boyfriends got too drunk or too loud and she started thinking about how to make their attention fasten on something else, anything else.

Even me.⁵³

Jill is able to work the demon Perry because of her experience working human johns as a forced prostitute. The principle is the same, the skill translates. Jill continues:

The last of the vodka vanished down my throat. I slammed the bottle down, a gun crack that managed to cut through the music. My apprentice-ring spat a single spark, bright blue and quickly snuffed.

"*Do svidanye*," I yelled, and I grinned with all the sunny good humor I could muster. "Hello and good night!"

Perry cocked his blond head. The light ran over him, the tiny skulldapples screaming as they touched the pressed linen of his suit. He was even wearing bleached suede wingtips, for God's sake.

You're carrying this much too far. Maybe the vodka was affecting me after all. But no, I just felt cold all the way through. Making myself ice, the real me curling up inside my head and a stranger taking over.

The stranger was hard and cruel, and she had no trouble surviving. She'd shot Val in the head, and she was the one Mikhail had rescued from a snowbank that night. It was probably *her* who had made me refuse to die. Certainly she'd been the one who had pulled the trigger in that circle of banefire, breaking my skull and brain open for the hornets to devour.

*I might be weak, but that bitch never gave up. And I was going to need all of her to pull this off.*⁵⁴

⁵³ Lilith Saintcrow, *Angel Town*, (New York: Orbit, 2011), 195-96.

The second face of Jill's Human-as-Two, to put it in Kripal's terms, is the survivor, the one who takes over when the violence becomes personal, threatening, and vertiginous. Cultivated to protect Jill against a desperate mother and her abusive boyfriends, against the man who forced her into prostitution, against the demon who seeks to control and claim her, this "bitch" who never gives up is a strategy of endurance and perhaps a nod to the dissociative states many survivors of trauma experience. Here, the Human-as-Two is less about progressive evolutions in consciousness, as Kripal constructs it, than it is about sheer survival.

For Anita and Jill, rubbing shoulders with the monsters transforms each woman into something more powerful than human. Whether she is transformed in order to gain power to fight the monsters' threats to the city's peace, or to survive the monster's interest in possessing her body and abilities, that proximity and intimacy is a spiraling entanglement in ever-darker power games, and escape isn't often a possibility. These protagonist's experiences of violence force and compel the transformation into the supernatural, whether the powers are chosen to even the playing field between her and the monsters, or are accidentally gained as a consequence of sexual entanglement with the monsters. For the heroines, these transformations are intimately tied to navigating extreme and unbalanced fields of power and the constant threat of torture, slavery, or annihilation at the hands of more powerful monsters. Their ties to supernatural beings are understood from the perspective of power and past experiences of abuse. Jill's past as a prostitute defines and situates her relationship to Perry, and Dante's hatred of being manipulated originates from childhood abuse at the hands of a sadistic psychic headmaster who tortured and raped the orphaned students assigned to his school. While Anita does not talk about childhood or adolescent events as traumatic, she trained to become a vampire executioner in her early twenties

⁵⁴ Ibid., 196-97.

and her body is marked and scarred by the fights with vampires who would rather not be executed and fight for their own survival.

Trauma, Identity, and Transformation

In *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, literary trauma theorist Michelle Balaev argues that theorists of trauma in art and literature focus too much on a model that privileges narratives of identity fragmentation. This “critical trope of fragmentation...claims that traumatic experience is not properly registered in memory. As such, the event will never be normally incorporated into consciousness, thus leading to a fragmented sense of self and producing a type of memory with pathological symptoms in which the experience is inaccessibly frozen and unrepresentable.”⁵⁵ Balaev prefers to work with a “pluralistic model” of trauma that accounts for multiple ways in which trauma manifests and is processed, as the fragmentation model has several problems, including the fact that it essentializes the notion of a pure, integrated, pre-trauma psyche, and that it builds an archetype of the traumatized individual, which becomes a problematic expectation when an individual who has experienced trauma does not perform and live up to the archetype’s pattern. Instead, Balaev argues for a “pluralistic model” which “views trauma and the process of remembering within a framework that emphasizes the multiplicity of responses to an extreme experience and the importance of contextual factors in determining the significance of the event.”⁵⁶ The pluralistic model allows scholars to look at how identity and trauma constitute each other after the traumatic event. Balaev explains:

trauma is a disruptive experience, yet one that propels the protagonist and the plot forward to contemplate new ways of knowing the self and world. Trauma in a novel can catalyze the reformulation of identity and the coherence of the self, rather than intrinsically acting to annihilate knowledge...Trauma might be shown to disrupt the

⁵⁵ Michelle Balaev, *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012), xiii.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, xi.

previous framework of reality that the protagonist functions within, causing the character to reorganize the self in relation to this new view of reality.⁵⁷

In short, one possible reaction to trauma is a reorganization of the protagonist's worldview or identity. This particular function or result of trauma (or "mytheme," one might say) is immediately recognizable in the work of Kripal, Nelson, and Lilith Saintcrow. Kripal's work on paranormal transformation and the Human-as-Two turns implicitly on this assumption that trauma changes an individual's fundamental make-up, both consciously and physically. While Nelson does not explicitly engage with trauma theory, she does demonstrate that transformation into the supernatural has a profound physical and psychological effect on the individual's new being, including a new struggle against supernatural instincts that manifest in violence toward humans. The stories of Jill and Anita focus on transformation as a result of environmental necessity (i.e., transform or become the monster's plaything) rather than as an evolution of consciousness, but the heroine's transformation fundamentally changes her place in the world, her humanity, and her relationship to the monsters.

The final book of Dante Valentine's story, *To Hell and Back*, demonstrates this reorientation of the individual to a new mode of being. In this novel, Lucifer attempts to torture and rape Dante into submitting to his will. She and her demon lover Japhrimel have grown too powerful, have allied with the wrong political factions, and represent a dire threat to Lucifer's control over Hell, so he abducts Dante to Hell and tortures her for six months:

"There is more than one way to break a human," he said, softly. "Especially a human woman."

I hung between sky and ground, the constellations of Hell overhead and sterile rock underneath, the icy inhuman heat of a place far removed from my own world lapping at my skin. I had come looking for my own clean death in battle, and found this instead. This indignity.

The Devil doesn't believe in killing you, if you can be made to serve.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 116-17.

I will not scream. *The world narrowed, became a single point of light as the writhing claws slipped below my flesh and the wet sounds of the thing that would break me to his will echoed against stone walls.* I will not scream. I will not give in.

I did scream. I screamed until my voice broke itself again as the scar on my shoulder woke with frigid hot pain, my body healing even as he tore at me. I fought as hard as I could. I am no stranger to fighting, I have fought all my life.

None of it mattered.

Nothing mattered.

I died there. In Hell.

It was the only way to escape something worse.⁵⁸

After six months, Dante is released back to earth. She wakes up in “North New York Jersey,” (recall that this series is set several hundred years in the future) and the ghost of a dead lover helps her find a Temple to take shelter in until an ally finds her. This temple houses an “Egyptiannica” wing, but she passes over her patron god of death, Anubis, whom she refuses to face or kneel before, and moves on to find Sekhmet, the lion-headed goddess of destruction:

I folded down to my knees, each fresh jab of agony in my belly echoed by my dragging right leg and a thousand other weals of smoking pain. My fingers were slippery with blood, and I kept swiping at my face. I tipped my chin up.

My eyes rested on Her carved breasts, the stone knot between them. The shadows whispered and chuckled again, soft little feathery touches against my skin and ruined, flapping, blood-crusting clothes. [...]

I tipped my head back.

A scream welled out of me, out of some deep numb place that was still fully human. However wrecked and shattered that place was, it was still mine, the only territory I had left. Everything had been taken from me—but by every god that ever lived, I would take it *back*.

Just as soon as I could figure out who to kill first.

The prayer beat inside my head, an invocation as old as rage itself. *I invoke You. I summon You, I demand You, I call You forth and into me.*

Sound careened and bounced against stone, echoes like brass guns tearing the air itself, the walls of the temple creaking and groaning as I howled. My lips were numb and my body finally failed me. I slumped over to the side, my head striking the floor with a dim note of pain, my fingers clutching empty air. Blood smeared between my cheek and the stone, and as my vision wavered Her lips pulled back, teeth gleaming ivory-white as the rushing of flame surrounded me. I spiraled again into oblivion. This time it wasn't dark, and there was no blue glow of Death's far country.

No. This time I descended into blood-red, the sound of an old slow heartbeat and the running liquid crackle of flame. I fell, again, and this time I felt no pain.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Lilith Saintcrow, *To Hell and Back* (New York: Orbit, 2008), 1-2.

Dante died in Hell, and when she returned to earth, her old god Anubis, the god of a necromance, is no longer adequate. Dante hears Sekhmet call to her, and invokes Sekhmet to help her fight, to help her get revenge, and to help her survive. Note too how Dante's scream comes from her human self rather than her near-immortal half-demon self. Her *human* soul is agonized by what has been done to her, her humanity seeks out the vengeance and power only Sekhmet, a goddess, can offer. While this scene may not show an explicit shift in consciousness (although Dante falling into a fiery red space of unconsciousness rather than Death's traditional crystal blue glow suggests that it may indeed be such a shift), it is a symbolic shift in spiritual identification, at the same time as it evokes Kripal's concept of the Human-as-Two. Dante is half-demon, half-human, and she clings to the human part of herself to survive and demand vengeance, much like Jill calls on the "bitch" survivor to endure Perry's manipulations.

At the climax of the novel where Dante kills the Prince of Hell, Sekhmet and Anubis both possess Dante's body, preventing Lucifer from claiming her. They do not, however, help her kill him; that feat is left to her, and it is human compassion—as her martial arts instructor used to say, “not her strongest quality”—that defeats the Devil.⁶⁰ Afterward, she cannot go back to devotion to the gods of her human life, telling the reader in the epilogue that, “*The broken places inside my head are healing, slowly. I have not spoken to a god since the moment of spillskin ecstasy when they filled me, denying me, body and soul, from a demon's grasp. I can't call my faith lost, precisely. It's just...quiet.*”⁶¹ But what need of gods and faith does a half-human, half-demon necromancer have when she can survive Hell, kill the Devil, and live to tell the tale?

Conclusion

⁵⁹ Ibid., 13-14.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 364.

⁶¹ Ibid., 378.

I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter that trauma and violence are constitutive of supernatural transformation in a popular subgenre of the fantasy literature that Kripal and Nelson ask us to take seriously. For Lilith Saintcrow's novels in particular, violence against women is the cultural backdrop against which such transformation is foregrounded. Jill and Dante are both broken characters in their own way, fighting tooth and nail to stay one step ahead of the demons who use rape, torture, and coercion to get their way, just like the human men Jill and Dante grew up under. In Mikhail's words, "*Is only one reason to do, milaya, and that is for to quiet the screaming in our own heads.*"⁶²

Nelson and Kripal remind readers that these stories of transformation have real-world implications and function as more than mere entertainment. To Nelson, the "new human gods" speak to a new spirituality evolving among reader and fan communities who see these stories of self-deification as something to emulate, as an articulation of a real spiritual process of encountering the *mysterium tremendum* and circumscribing it inside codes of human morality. The *mysterium tremendum* is, as Kripal defines it, "fucking scary,"⁶³ and as Anita, Jill, and Dante show us, fucking dangerous. Moreover, in the real world, urban fantasy does have a transformative effect on readers. Laurell K. Hamilton explains in blogs and interviews that she regularly gets fan mail from women who leave abusive relationships after reading Anita's books, saying in a 2008 interview with *Time* magazine that "I've had more women than I can count tell me that they've left abusive relationships because my character Anita wouldn't take it. I take great pride in that."⁶⁴ In a 2010 interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, she writes that not just

⁶² Saintcrow, *Flesh Circus*, 153.

⁶³ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 9.

⁶⁴ Gilbert Cruz, "Q&A: Vampire Novelist Laurell K. Hamilton," *Time*, October 30, 2008, accessed December 21, 2014, <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1854991,00.html>.

women but men, too, have expressed this sentiment to her at book signings.⁶⁵ It is clear to Kripal, Nelson, Hamilton, and Saintcrow that these stories are more than mere entertainment. They are stories about the dreadful yet transformative costs of living in a world characterized by power inequalities, stories that reach beyond the page and influence the lives of readers.

⁶⁵ Catharine Garcia, "Q&A: Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter author Laurell K. Hamilton," *Entertainment Weekly: Shelf-Life*, June 1, 2010, Accessed December 23, 2014, <http://shelf-life.ew.com/2010/06/01/qa-anita-blake-vampire-hunter-author-laurell-k-hamilton/>.

CHAPTER 3

“YOU WEREN’T SUPPOSED TO BITE ME, YOU WERE JUST SUPPOSED TO RAPE ME!”: SEX MAGIC, ROMANCE, AND RAPE IN URBAN FANTASY

In this chapter I focus on the connections between sex, sex magic, and transformation in two contemporary urban fantasy novels, Lilith Saintcrow’s *Selene: A Saint City Novel*, and the continuation of Anita Blake’s story in *Narcissus in Chains*. In the previous chapter, I argued that women’s experiences of supernatural transformation in urban fantasy are often triggered and compounded by experiences of trauma and gendered violence. I looked at how unequal power relations between *non-human* supernatural male beings and *human* supernatural female characters force the heroine to undergo techniques of transformation and power gain that transform her from human into supernatural being. I analyzed how the threat and risk of gendered forms of violence specifically contribute to the heroine’s need to gain more power to fight or survive the monsters that threaten her life and wellbeing. This chapter moves that argument forward by analyzing how sexual and romantic relationships between non-human males and human females—a key genre convention and expectation of the reader for urban fantasy literature—contribute to the heroine’s transformation. Sex magic and magical sex are integral components to the romantic relationships of the genre’s main characters, and frequently draw on imagery and associations that also permeate western esoteric formulations of sex magic. Thus, I engage here with Hugh Urban’s work on the history of sex magic in western esoteric practice and imagination. I will show how sex magic and magical sex in urban fantasy contribute to a larger religious imagination informed by both pop culture and esoteric western religious practices, and suggest that women are telling quite different stories about power and magic than what is highlighted in this academic literature.

In the novels that I analyze for this chapter, the means of effecting metaphysical transformation occur through sexual encounters with the monsters. The protagonist's involvement with the supernatural community—whether they have come to her for help solving a murder or because they want to control and manipulate her powers for their gain—inevitably brings her to the attention of individuals or groups who perceive her as threatening and wish to control or outright kill her. Male characters like vampires, demons, and shapeshifters are generally the most powerful beings of the city, known variously as the “Master of the City,” the “Paranormal Prime,” the “Prince,” or the “Alpha,” which creates an immediately gendered power dynamic between the female protagonist and the monster. Over time, as in Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* series, or in Lilith Saintcrow's *Selene* or *Working for the Devil*, the vampire or demon falls in love with the heroine, seduces her, and they enter a sexual relationship. The heroine's sexual relations with the monster result in a transfer or sharing of power that directly triggers her transformation into a supernatural being. This chapter will conduct a close reading on that dynamic in two urban fantasy texts where sex magic transforms the heroine, either coercively or consensually, into something other and more than human. I turn now to examine two particular novels that emphasize sex magic as productive of transformation, and show how they demonstrate transformation as being embedded in relations of stark power differentials and threats of violence between supernatural men and human women.

Sex Magic, Romance, and Rape in Urban Fantasy

In the previous chapter, we saw that Anita consented to “marry” the metaphysical marks binding her to the Master of the City, Jean-Claude, and the werewolf alpha, Richard, so that outside challengers to their control of the city would have fewer magical weaknesses to exploit. Anita, Jean-Claude, and Richard marry the marks in an emergency public hook-up on a stage

before a crowd in the BDSM nightclub in which Narcissus holds Anita's wereleopards hostage. To marry the marks, the men "fill" her "chakras" and the magical, sexual power they release fills the club. In the passage below, note the seamless appropriation of the chakras from Tantric conceptions of the subtle body; for context, Anita is still more or less Catholic, one of her teachers is a pagan witch, another is a retired necromancer trained in voodoo, and the magic sex scene that turns her into a living vampire is coded in language of Tantric chakras and sexual energy:

[Richard] was kissing his way down to the hole over my heart chakra, my energy center. Jean-Claude had already covered the one at my base, my groin... [Richard] buried his mouth inside the halter top and touched over my heart, and my mouth found his heart at the same moment. The power didn't just build, it exploded. It was like lying at ground zero of a nuclear explosion, the shock waves shooting out, out, out into the room, while we melted together in the center. For one shining moment I felt both of them inside me, through me, as if they were wind, pure power, pouring through me, through us. Richard's electric warmth buzzed over us; Jean-Claude's cool power poured over and through like a chill wind; and I was something large and growing, holding the warmth of the living and the cold of the dead. I was both and neither. We were all and none.⁶⁶

This novel is a turning point for Anita in that the marriage of the marks transfers to her the *ardeur*, a hunger for sex that Anita must feed or else die from starvation. The *ardeur* enables increased metaphysical intimacy between Anita and her lovers, but also addicts some of them to her, since they also get a charge off the magic. The very questionable issues with consent generated by the *ardeur* makes Anita think of herself as a monster both in terms of what she does to other people and what that makes her. Jean-Claude apologizes for the transference of his "demon" to her through the marks, and tells her the power can hurt her as much as aid her: "You can feed off his lust, but the price for that is that you will crave his lust, his sex. It is the double-

⁶⁶ Hamilton, *Narcissus*, 49.

edged sword of being incubus.”⁶⁷ After feeding the *ardeur* for the first time with a new wereleopard partner, Micah, Anita weeps, thinking:

I’d tried not to be one of the monsters for so long, and now, in one fell swoop I was them, both of them. You couldn’t be a bloodsucking vampire and be a lycanthrope at the same time. They canceled each other out as a disease or a curse. But I had felt my beast curl around Micah’s. I had felt it like an embryo in a safe warm place, waiting. And I had fed off him as surely as any vampire. I’d always thought I’d have to drink blood to be one of them. But I had been wrong, wrong about so many things.⁶⁸

Anita struggles for several of the next books in the series with coming to understand her new powers and the ways they enable her to protect her loved ones at the same time the powers make them all vulnerable and appealing to stronger, older vampires who now see the triumvirate as a threat.

I turn now to the 2014 novel *Selene: A Saint City Novel* by Lilith Saintcrow, a self-published book originally released in serial format via her website.⁶⁹ The paperback volume includes the short stories “Brother’s Keeper” (2008) and “Just Ask,” (2011) which bookend the eponymous character Selene’s story. Selene is a sexwitch or “*tantraiken*” trying to survive her powers in the futuristic Saint City. Born a witch, Selene is considered human, but she draws power from the energy released during sexual activity, which she can shape into magic and cast. The harnessing and performance of her magic is deeply implicated in sexual activity and desire. We see this in one of the first scenes describing an act of working magic:

“She clasped [the athame] in her left hand while she began to speak the language of her magick, the spell falling from her lips in a stream of syllables that was never the same twice...[she] took a deep breath in, and felt the first few glimmers of feeling down low in her belly...Selene’s head tipped back, and she gasped. She liked her privacy while she Worked, because it was so close to sex even she couldn’t tell the two apart.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ibid., 157.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 160

⁶⁹ www.lilithsaintcrow.com; having self-published *Selene* in e-book and paperback format, the novel is no longer available for free reading on Saintcrow’s website.

⁷⁰ Saintcrow, Lilith. *Selene: A Saint City Novel*. (2014), 60-61.

Sexwitches are known as the “beggars” of the paranormal community because their bodies turn all heightened emotions like anger, fear, and pain into physical desire the witch cannot control and always succumbs to, making her vulnerable to the manipulations of anyone who wants to control her: “The official word for people like her was *tantraiiken*. The working title was ‘sexwitch.’ The paranormal community, with its absolute genius for boiling everything down to essentials, called those like her *beggars*. Because they were always pleading and pleasing, born to be slaves. It was hard to mount a war for independence when your body kept betraying you.”⁷¹ (Note again the author’s reliance on Tantric traditions to make sense of and categorize sex magic.) No matter what her mind wants, her body submits to desire, even when her life is endangered, and she despises herself for it:

A sexwitch didn’t feel fear the way other people did. No, being afraid just turned into a different sensation entirely. One below the belt, thick and warm enough to make her heartbeat pound in her ears, a trickle of heat beginning way down low.

I hate this. The thought was so familiar it was gone almost as soon as it started.

Agonized dread spiraled, kick-started a wave of desire that tipped her head back against the wall, forced her breath into another jagged half-gasp. Any more of this and she’d be a quivering ball of need and nerves by the time Nikolai reappeared.⁷²

To feed her power she must take sexual partners, and before the events of this novel, she resorted to sex work on the streets to do so. Selene refers to her power as a curse and loathes how helpless it makes her in situations of danger; life for her has been fleeing from city to city trying to avoid the attention of more powerful supernatural beings who would use her power to shore up their own. In Saint City, Selene comes to the attention of the thousand-year-old vampire Nikolai, (vampires are called “Nichtvren” in this world) who controls the paranormal community. The vampire Nikolai claims Selene for himself, provides her with a home, a job at the local

⁷¹ Ibid., 55.

⁷² Ibid., 20.

university, and ensures she sleeps only with him. She functions as a supernatural battery and he can get a charge off their sex that increases his power and control over the city.

The plot of *Selene* revolves around a former vampire nemesis of Nikolai's, named Grigori, who returns to Saint City seeking vengeance. To do so he targets Selene as a way to hurt Nikolai. To remain in possession of Selene, Nikolai bites her during sex to initiate the magical transformation and turn her into a vampire like him. The "infection" of vampirism occurs during orgasm: "The first climax shook her, white fire exploding behind her eyes...Power rising through her entire body and spilling through every nerve channel, static crackling in the air. Sparks rang against the edges of the bed, electrical energy spilling out and mixing uneasily with the close, still air."⁷³ This is Selene's transformation; while in this novel's cosmology she was still considered human as a witch, transformation into a vampire means she's something completely different—a monster, "infected." Her transformation into monster occurs during a monstrous act, a monstrous sexual act she narrates internally as rape: "*You bastard, I wish I could kill you. You weren't supposed to bite me, you were just supposed to rape me!*"⁷⁴ Selene is terrified, never having wanted to be a vampire:

It finally ended. Selene shuddered into stillness. Her eyes closed. Power spilled into bruised and torn flesh, knitting together, repairing bruises and torn muscles. It was Nikolai—she didn't have any of the control required to perform even the smallest act of magick right now.

I've been infected, oh God, please help me. "Stop," she gasped. "Stop it. Please—"

It was all she could say, all she could even think. *Please, no please, please no, please.* Begging, pleading, entreating, imploring, helpless.

Too late.⁷⁵

The transformation is not instantaneous, which increases the dread and captivity she feels under Nikolai's control. In the next scene, she examines the marks his bite left:

⁷³ Ibid., 119.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 119.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 120.

Selene tilted her chin up to one side, examined her throat in the mirror. The mark was distinctive, two pinpricks in the middle of an oval of purple-red bruising with a serrated edge. One hell of a hickey, the chemicals of Nichtvren saliva mixing with the Power Nikolai had used to make a mark nobody could possibly miss. Just like a brand.

Infected.

Selene combed her hair back, roughly, yanking at tangles. Her entire body glowed, not caring that she had just...had just been...

Infected. That's the word you're looking for. Bitten by a monster.

And you still fucked him.

Everything inside her revolved, fruitlessly. There went all her dreams of escaping, of getting out somewhere, of finding a place where she wasn't a slave. There went everything she'd ever hoped for since she realized what she was. It was all gone, finished, burned up, because she was *infected*.

What if she Turned?

How long would it be before she couldn't even pass for human anymore, if Nikolai kept playing with her?

*Trapped. Again.*⁷⁶

We see in this passage the same dynamic of sexual transformation as a product of entrapment that prompted Jill Kismet's relationship with Perry and Anita's consent to marry the marks with Richard and Jean-Claude. Here, too, sex magic makes Selene a monster, an infected, diseased vampire. Like the *ardeur*, Selene's curse makes her body compliant, willing, and eager, though her mind despises her behavior and vulnerability. Like the *ardeur*, Selene's sex magic traps her in a non-consensual relationship with Nikolai, one that ends with her being "branded" with his mark, a mark that tells every paranormal being in the city she belongs to him. Sex magic, rather than being a means of positive transformation or power, traps Selene in relationships she cannot escape, with a vampire willing to use her curse against her to get his way. Sex magic is deeply tied to inescapable forms of rape and abuse in Selene's story.

Soon after Selene's transformation into a vampire is complete, she attempts to flee Nikolai. Grigori abducts her, though, and uses his power to invade her mind to find Nikolai's weaknesses, and Nikolai, connected to her after the sex magic, uses telepathy to try and help her

⁷⁶ Ibid., 123.

escape. Selene feels powerless with both men magically mucking around in her mind, and turns inward to the only part of her no one can touch, the smallest corner of her mind. Keep in mind previous descriptions of Jill's inner survivor who surfaces when Jill cannot endure any longer:

Leave me alone! She screamed inwardly, to both of them, yanking her between them in a horrible game of tug-of-war. Grigori didn't know she had reserved a corner of herself from him. He thought she was completely open to him.

Completely submissive.

And Selene knew all about submission, didn't she? Knew all about reserving a corner of her mind, some small part of her soul, while her body wept and went pliable with hot need. Wherever the strength to keep that corner of her safe and inviolate came from, she used it gratefully, unquestioningly—and let Grigori rummage through the rest of her mind.

It was no different than letting them use her body, was it? No different, and no less of a rape, made more horrible by the fact that she acquiesced, that she needed it. God was a monster, and she was trapped here again. But this time she had a chance, and she used it, withdrawing in the small safe little corner of herself she could lock everything else out of.

The only part of her that didn't beg.⁷⁷

Sex magic in these two urban fantasy series, as we see, is a power more susceptible to abuse than use for good, or for personal spiritual attainment. Sex magic produces vulnerability, helplessness, sexual coercion, rape, and attracts more powerful beings who would use that power to manipulate those who possess it. While ecstatic heights of pleasure are possible, and sex magic produces profound metaphysical transformations in the characters, the cost of the power is extraordinarily high. If Anita and Selene want to survive, they are forced to constantly calculate these costs, and sex magic prevents them from living the lives and relationships they wish to live.

Sex Magic in Esoteric Western Traditions

I turn now to work produced by religious studies scholars on sex magic in the imagination and practices of western esoteric religious traditions. Hugh Urban's study on sex

⁷⁷ Ibid., 213.

magic, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism*, gives a genealogy of sex magic in Euro-American practices and “analyze[s] the profound transformation of sexual magic from a terrifying medieval nightmare of heresy and social subversion into a modern ideal of personal empowerment and social liberation.”⁷⁸ He argues that modern “literature on sexual magic typically places supreme emphasis on the individual self and the power of the individual will as the ultimate creative force in the universe,” and that “the advocates of sexual magic were all in one way or another in search of radical *freedom* and an extreme, often utopian form of *liberation* on all levels—sexual, religious, and political alike.”⁷⁹ Urban goes on to analyze how sex magic is conceived in the esoteric practices and theories of figures like Paschal Beverly Randolph, Aleister Crowley, Wilhelm Reich, Gerald Gardner, and Anton LaVey. He finds that these figures “provide a remarkable window or *magnifying glass* onto some of the most intense points of ambivalence in specific periods of modern history” and that “the literature on sexual magic has highlighted some of the most complex debates surrounding sexuality in modern Western culture.”⁸⁰

I would argue that the dynamics of sex magic in urban fantasy literature similarly highlight contemporary anxieties about sexuality—specifically, anxieties about women’s experiences of and vulnerabilities to gendered violence and sexual assault. Hamilton’s and Saintcrow’s novels show us that women cannot take for granted that power derived from sexual magic produces *empowerment*. Selene’s story in particular demonstrates trepidation about the idea of possessing power correlating to *empowerment*. Selene’s power is a curse, and while she

⁷⁸ Urban, Hugh B. *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006), 2.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 257.

can work her will on the world through magical acts, her power is repeatedly used against her by stronger male characters, constraining her ability to act in her defense and best interests. As Urban argues in his conclusion, historical figures like Crowley and LaVey touted sex magic as producing social and sexual liberation, but *in practice* they leave behind troubling legacies of misogynistic sexual exploitation and, at times, abuse.⁸¹ The flip side, Urban finds, to sexual liberation through sex magic is “the recurring tendency for this ideal of sexual liberation to become mingled with less admirable sorts of things, such as misogyny, drug abuse, or simple commercialization.”⁸² The lesson western esoteric sex magic has to teach us, then, is

to ask ourselves the larger ethical questions about our liberations: ‘is it obvious that in liberating one’s desires one will know how to behave ethically in pleasurable relationships with others?’ So, too, we might ask: Is it the case that sexual magic, with its promise of transgression and liberation, necessarily leads to positive social or political change?⁸³

Authors like Hamilton and Saintcrow explore these precise questions through depictions of sex magic as constraining freedom and increasing vulnerability. Rather than visions of spiritual attainment, freedom, and enlightenment, these authors foreground women’s vulnerability to power and violence, and propose the idea that while sex magic can increase intimacies and affinities between lovers, it can also facilitate relationships of sustained abuse and coercion. Anita addicts lovers to her through the *ardeur*, and in later novels her lack of control over the power results in non-consensual group orgies and consensual sexual encounters with minors.⁸⁴ While she enjoys deeper physical and metaphysical intimacy with her “sweeties,” she can incite lust, desire, and addiction from strange men by simply forgetting to control her powers. Only

⁸¹ Ibid., 133-34, 260.

⁸² Ibid., 257.

⁸³ Ibid., 262.

⁸⁴ Hamilton, Laurell K. *Skin Trade* (New York: Jove Books, 2009).

Anita's personal code of ethics stands between her and the manipulation of anyone who stands in her way. As with Selene's curse, Anita's *ardeur* can be turned on and fiddled with by others who possess the *ardeur*. A central villain in later novels, the vampire Belle Morte whose lineage begat the *ardeur*, can turn the *ardeur* on and off in Anita, causing black-out orgies that last for days.⁸⁵ Even Jill Kismet must suffer Perry's fiddling with her "internal thermostat," connected as they are through the kiss-shaped scar:

"I could talk to you for hours, dear one." His tone had turned silky, and the scar throbbed. The heat in my lower belly dipped down, and I had to choke back a sharp inhaled breath. He was doing it again, using the scar to fiddle with my internal thermostat and mimicking the physical aspects of desire.

It had to be a mimicry. *Whore*, the voice in my head snarled. *Just like a goddamn whore.*

God help me, but it felt familiar. Did he guess that was where I was weak? How much did he know about me? About my past?⁸⁶

Selene is on the receiving end of that dynamic as well, where her power, her curse, enables most any man to incite lust and desire in her regardless of her consent. The mere act of self-defense is beyond her: "There weren't many things she could take on as a *tantraiiken*, she was worse than useless in a fight since pain and fear turned to desire and swallowed her whole."⁸⁷ These authors clearly demonstrate that sex magic is dangerous and increases vulnerability to abuse and manipulation.

I asserted at the beginning of this thesis my argument that the analytic and historical literature on magical and supernatural popular culture from the religious studies perspective overlooks the question of how gender as a lived experience inflects narratives of supernatural transformation. Urban's study *does* conclude with the recognition that many sex magicians have

⁸⁵ Hamilton, Laurell. K. *Harlequin* (New York: Jove Books, 2007).

⁸⁶ Saintcrow, *Night Shift*, 91-92.

⁸⁷ Saintcrow, *Selene*, 33.

purported social liberation while perpetuating exploitative relationships with women: “Sexual magic is not *inherently* liberating, particularly for women. Indeed, it can just as often be used in the service of patriarchy and misogyny. Thus, if we are to understand the complex relations between sexuality and power in these traditions, we also need to look closely at the complex, often ambivalent gender dynamics that lie at their very core.”⁸⁸ I would point out that while Urban is happy to critique misogynist impulses when they appear in his source material, his study is grounded in the work of key *male* esotericists, such that even the chapter on “Sex Magic and Feminism in the Neo-Pagan Revival” focuses most heavily on Gerald Gardner’s theoretical contributions to neo-pagan sex magic. Female practitioners of sex magic like Starhawk and Maria de Naglowska appear for only a fraction of the time Urban spends analyzing literature produced by women, and thus our understanding of sex magic in his study is deeply male-oriented.

The same critique could be waged against Kripal’s study *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*. Like Urban, Kripal relies primarily on male authors and artists to cultivate this dialectic of culture and consciousness within science fiction and superhero comic literature. While superheroine *characters* such as Promethea, Wonder Woman, and Phoenix, and the esotericist Madame Blavatsky *do* appear within his analysis of metaphysical transformation, the *authors and artists* who do the heavy lifting for his theory are Whitley Strieber, Alan Moore, Grant Morrison, Philip K. Dick, and Jack Kirby—all white men. Kripal pays obligatory lip service to feminist critiques of the hyper-sexualization of women in superhero comic book literature, but the authors and artists whose stories about transformations he theorizes are predominantly male (not to mention white, mostly straight, middle class, and

⁸⁸ Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 263.

educated).⁸⁹ I find this an especially egregious oversight given Kripal's emphasis on trauma and violence as triggering metaphysical transformation.

Conclusion

As the various urban fantasy novels I have analyzed here demonstrate, women's stories of fantasy and metaphysical transformation have a great deal to tell us about the stakes of power, about the magical and religious imagination, and about sexuality in a world with extraordinary power inequalities and extremes of violence. One of urban fantasy's key messages to readers is that power is a double-edged sword; it is just as likely to engender violence, submission, and captivity as it is liberation, self-actualization, and freedom. Rather than reflecting the utopian world or materialist gains that historical practitioners of sex magic may have aspired to manifest, sex magic and magical sex in urban fantasy reflects the world women currently see themselves living in, a world of stark power inequalities and vulnerabilities to violence, reminding readers *and* religious studies scholars that there are dark sides to transformation and power in the contemporary magical imagination. It is vital to account for these dark stories in academic studies on the supernatural and pop culture and avoid monolithically privileging white male voices in our exploration of how pop culture contributes to the contemporary religious imagination.

⁸⁹ Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 164-70.

CHAPTER 4

POWER, MEMORY, AND THE HEROINE'S REFUSAL

The Sister Genres of Urban Fantasy and Paranormal Romance

This chapter of the thesis will continue the analysis of power, gender, and the supernatural by looking at ways in which urban fantasy authors subvert common tropes from urban fantasy's sister-genre, paranormal romance. Popular and enduring paranormal romance authors include Christine Feehan (publishing 1999 – present), J.R. Ward (1998 – present), Nalini Singh (2003 – present), and Sherrilyn Kenyon (1994 – present). Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga* falls firmly within the category of paranormal romance, though it is marketed toward Young Adult (YA) readers. A number of urban fantasy authors publish both paranormal romance and urban fantasy, the differences between the genres being 1) where the novels end up shelved in bookstores, and 2) the prevalence of romance in the conflict and resolution of plot. Outside of these differences, the two genres rely on similar tropes, settings, character types, and supernatural conflict. Though urban fantasy novels are centered around supernatural conflict and romance is a subplot to a story arc, readers have come to anticipate romance and sex scenes especially in novels featuring a female main character. However, not being bound by certain fixed conventions of romance novels allows urban fantasy authors the creative space to break heteronormative, heterosexual tropes, sometimes deliberately.

Urban fantasy authors frequently write heteronormative romances, but a number of authors deviate from heteronormative patterns in their urban fantasy.⁹⁰ Laurell K. Hamilton, for instance, is widely critiqued and derided for Anita Blake's polyamory and many male lovers,

⁹⁰ For example, see Lilith Saintcrow's *Rose and Thunder* (2015), self-published, and her Harlequin titles *Taken* (2011), *Agent Zero* (2015), and *Agent Gemini* (2015).

who number in the double-digits, and for the prevalence of magical sex as a predictable resolution to supernatural conflict in her stories. Lilith Saintcrow has received a great deal of fan mail questioning her decision to write the romance between Jill Kismet and Saul Dustcircle with swapped traditional gender roles—Saul cooks and cleans for Jill while she goes out to hunt down demons. Saintcrow notes often that she would not receive these questions if the roles were reversed and Jill were the dutiful girlfriend while Saul handled the violence and hunting. In Jenna Black's Morgan Kingsley series, a similar polyamorous tension is at play in Morgan's sex life: a gay D/s couple occupies her fantasies while the heroic demon possessing her body wants to claim her romantically in their dreams (the only place they can interact); additionally, Morgan Kingsley strives to maintain a traditional relationship with her human boyfriend despite the demon's seductions.⁹¹ Lilith Saintcrow's character Dante Valentine is bisexual, the first book of her series being the story of how she seeks revenge on the murderer of her lover Doreen. The murderer-demon reveals that he used both Dante's and Doreen's genes to create the "Androgyne" demon Eve, who later wrests control of Hell from Lucifer and who is a key source of conflict between Dante and her present demon lover Japhrimel. While Dante's partners in the novels are all men, her relationship with Doreen haunts her, and her perceived duty to protect their "daughter" Eve is one driving force of the full series.

The less restricted genre conventions of urban fantasy also allow the female character to have both romance and sex without her story being solely defined by either. For example, Saul is a constant, steady supporting presence in Jill Kismet's novels but the main story is Jill's battle with the demon who wants to possess her, Perry. Conflict in Dante's partnership with Japhrimel runs throughout the entire series, but the climax and resolution of the novel is the death of Lucifer and Eve's coup d'état of Hell. There is no romantic resolution in the form of a "happily

⁹¹ See Jenna Black, *The Devil Inside* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2007).

ever after” or “happily for now” for Dante and Japhrimel at the end of the series; the books conclude with their relationship fraught with bitterness and distrust. There are also a number of urban fantasy series featuring female leads where romance as a major component of the heroine’s story is absent altogether.⁹² In this way, though urban fantasy is closely intertwined historically and thematically with paranormal romance, urban fantasy subverts key tropes and conventions of romance literature while retaining its affiliation with a largely female readership.⁹³ The main tropes challenged are those that position the heroine as weak, passive, and in need of protection from the hero (note, too, that paranormal romance has also begun challenging these tropes, but as the popularity of stories like *Twilight* show, the “helpless heroine” is not disappearing and in fact still appeals to readers). By no means does *all* urban fantasy feature subversive heroines, and by no means does *all* romance literature position heroines in such an inferior dynamic to the hero, but in this chapter, I want to explore a significant romance genre trope that female urban fantasy authors frequently challenge—the authority and significance of the heroine saying *no*.

I will demonstrate that in the urban fantasy works I analyze below, the heroine’s *no*, her acts of refusal and negation, are positioned between metaphysical, magical willpower, and experiences of gendered violence. That is, in these novels, one of the deepest expressions of metaphysical power the heroines are capable of uttering is a refusal, a negation of men’s power over them, contrary to trampled-over, ineffectual forms of refusal that characterize romance

⁹² See, for example, C.E. Murphy’s *Urban Shaman* series, beginning with the novel *Urban Shaman* (New York: Luna, 2009).

⁹³ Urban fantasy readership, because of the looseness of the generic categorization, is extremely diverse across lines of gender, race, age, and nationality such that no strict demographic constitutes a majority of readership; however, the *perception* among readers, critics, and especially agents and publishing companies is that urban fantasy literature draws in a mainly female audience *because* of its association with sex and paranormal romance. Popular films like the *Twilight Saga* and television shows like *The Vampire Diaries* confirm these perceptions. Given the television and film adaptations and original urban fantasy stories accruing on the screen (see, for example, the 2015 film *The Last Witch Hunter* or the five *Underworld* films, 2003-present), this perception might soon shift.

novels. The significance of the difference here between genres is that these genres are both aimed at, and perceived to appeal most to, female audiences. *No* has a powerfully different weight to it between these two genres, both of which are invested in exploring anxieties around sexuality and desire, especially female desire. It is this investment that makes the efficacy of refusal significant in urban fantasy.

*“When the chips are down, sunshine, you’re on your own”:
The Heroine’s Refusal in Urban
Fantasy Fiction*

Janice Radway points out in *Reading the Romance* that “as in all romances, female defiance is finally rendered ineffectual and childlike as well as unnecessary,” which is to say, in romance literature, the significance or power of a heroine’s refusal is negligible.⁹⁴ Radway discusses this refusal in the context of historical bodice rippers featuring a hero who essentially rapes the heroine into loving him. The heroine cannot say “yes” to her desire to sleep with the hero; such license would mark her as too “easy,” undeserving of his love, a “whore.” Instead, she must reject his advances and assert her moral and sexual purity. When he uses force or coercion or simply the steady erosion of her determination to bypass these rejections, she is alleviated of responsibility for the pleasure of sex and thus maintains her moral uprightness. This trope appears in romance literature on a spectrum of intensity; sometimes the heroine understands it as a rape, sometimes she is presented as internally desiring that power and force from the hero, which allows her to submit to the inevitability of the encounter.

The notion of female defiance and its efficacy or lack thereof in the face of male desire and possession has trickled into urban fantasy novels, into climactic scenes where a heroine, pressed beyond what she can bear physically, psychologically, and emotionally, issues one soul-deep negation in the face of the male’s power over her. I say “male” here and not “hero” because, as

⁹⁴ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 80.

we will see, this *no* is said to male antagonists and villains as often as it is said to the male love interest. In these novels, “female defiance” is one of the greatest acts of metaphysical, supernatural power the heroine is capable of, and she often contextualizes and understands this refusal as the deepest core, part, or essence of herself and her humanity rejecting the violence of gendered power dynamics—“power” used here to mean both social and supernatural power. In Lilith Saintcrow’s fiction especially, this rejection often takes the form of a choice between life under his control, whoever *he* is, or death.

For an example of a male romantic lead trampling over a woman’s possibility for refusal, consider the following scene from a recent Lilith Saintcrow novel, *Blood Call*. This novel is a hybrid romance-urban fantasy story; romantic resolution is as central to the plot as defeating the villains’ plan to kill the heroine, Anna. Anna has dangerous file of information the villains are willing to kill for, so she turns to an ex-boyfriend contract killer, Josiah, for help. Angry at her for dumping him three years prior, he offers to help her on one condition: “‘I’ve gotten a little lonely since you dumped me, baby. I’ll take payment like *this*—’ He stroked her, just the way she liked it. Her hips jerked forward, and her breath was hot against his cheek. ‘As many times as I want. And you’ll act like you like it, Anna. Got it?’”⁹⁵ Anna is being hunted by killers, has stumbled across her brother’s dead body, and is at the end of her rope with nowhere to go; the angry ex-boyfriend takes advantage of her helplessness, sexually assaults her, and tells her the price for his help is sex any time he wants, and she can neither refuse nor resist, and must perform enthusiastic consent. Josiah never actually claims his price, recognizing later how despicable his behavior was at that moment, but his words haunt Anna and increase her feelings of helplessness and powerlessness throughout the story. In the following pages, I will demonstrate that, contrary to situations like these in which the heroine’s capacity for refusal is

⁹⁵ Lilith Saintcrow, *Blood Call* (New York: Orbit, 2015). Kindle edition.

negated, a number of other works of urban fantasy imbue the heroine's *no* with metaphysical force and efficaciousness.

In the final novel of the Dante Valentine series when all Hell has quite literally broken loose on earth, Dante has lost her faith in any of the people around her, and she and her lover are estranged over which path to take to free themselves from Lucifer's grip and what to do about the demon Eve, who swears she is the genetic child of Dante and Dante's dead lover, Doreen. For this reason, Dante wants Eve kept alive while her lover Japhrimel doesn't trust Eve's demonic wiles and would happily hand her over to Lucifer to secure their safety. The various factions are battling on top of a skyscraper in Paris (or "Paradisise," in their future world), and Eve leaps off the tower to escape. Dante considers jumping after her, and Japhrimel intervenes:

"Dante." Again, Japhrimel did not precisely speak, but mouthed the word. Or was there so much noise I couldn't hear him, as though a great silence had settled over the world?

His voice bypassed my ears, smashing directly into my brain like carbolic flung across reactive. *Come with me. You must come. Now.* Sheer naked command in the words, wrapping around me and yanking.

Demanding. Controlling me.

Forcing me.

Gods above and below, how I hate to be forced.

My fingers loosened, and my sword chimed on the platform, Japhrimel's will wresting it from my hand as easily as an adult might wrench a toy away from a small child.⁹⁶

During this encounter Dante has a flashback to the words Lucifer said while he raped and tortured her in Hell, memories that, prior to Japhrimel's command, she had kept buried in order to maintain her sanity:

It is so easy to break a human. Especially a human woman. Claws buried in my chest, and the sound of my own screams as someone hurt me, invaded me, *hurt me*—

I had thought nothing else inside me could break. But something deep-buried in my mind snapped and rose up like a shattered cable suddenly free of weight, a sheet of flame blinding me. My lips shaped one single word, the only thing I could say.

No.

⁹⁶ Saintcrow, *To Hell and Back*, 310-11.

The alpha and omega of my epitaph, what they would [carve] on my urn when I finally was forced kicking and screaming into the dry land of Death.

But not yet. I wasn't finished yet. The hardest, most stubborn deep-buried core of me ignited even as my body betrayed me, already starting to shift its weight to obey him, to accept the inevitable and *submit*.

To give in.

No. The word boiled through me. I am not sure if I screamed, or if the roar was merely psychic, locked behind my rictus-grin of a face. The curtain between me and a black hole of something too terrible to be spoken or thought of pulled aside for a single heartstopping moment, and I remembered what had been done to me.

Who had done it.

And how much it had *hurt*.

No. The single word filled me. I would *not* give in. I would not endure another rape of my body or my mind. I would not go gently into any dark night of submission. I would not be *forced* any further.

I would die first.

I tore myself free, and hurled my traitorous body out into empty space.⁹⁷

This passage demonstrates the sustained link urban fantasy makes between supernatural power *over* and social power *over*. Dante and Japhrimel share a metaphysical bond, forged through sex and a coerced “familiar” relationship, that links them intimately and psychically.⁹⁸ In his defense, he sees his beloved about to plunge to her death in order to follow a demon he believes is deceiving her. He issues a psychic command conceivably meant to protect her, but to Dante it is a demand, a coercion, an intrusion into her right to make her own choices. Making matters worse, her mind juxtaposes her lover’s command with Lucifer’s brutal rape, the memories she had locked away flooding back in this moment. To Dante, these coercions are the same acts with the same effects: they deny her the freedom to choose; they impose a threatening male’s will over her own. The choice for her in this moment is to submit or die. She chooses death, and leaps off the skyscraper. She *falls* (much like her demon “fell” through love for her),

⁹⁷ Ibid., 311-12.

⁹⁸ Conventionally, witches have familiars like cats, frogs, or owls. In urban fantasy worlds, demons often take human witches for familiars, with or without consent. In Dante’s world, Lucifer gave Japhrimel to be Dante’s familiar in the hunt for the rogue demon, initiating their intimate metaphysical bond. Then Japhrimel *fell* in love with Dante and used sex magic to turn her into a *hedaira*, or demon’s bride, her half-human, half-demon form, sacrificing a great deal of his power to do so.

“pinned between the point of no return and the absolute freedom of death,” “completely free for the first time in my whole miserable existence.”⁹⁹ “A curious comfort spilled through me,” she says, “I was going to die. None of it mattered anymore. I was done, and once in Death’s arms the Devil couldn’t harm me or involve me in any more games.”¹⁰⁰ But *her* demon will not let her die. Japhrimel, winged as most demons of his power are, jumps after her and snatches her out of the arms of Death.

In Dianne Sylvan’s 2010 novel *Queen of Shadows*, heroine Miranda Grey is an empath struggling keep her abilities from killing her. She can feel and manipulate the emotions of people around her and channels this power into playing live music in Austin, Texas. Her introduction to the world of the supernatural and the potential of her power begins with a rape. Walking home through the city at night after a performance, Miranda metaphysically senses the men following her and the darkness of their intent:

There were four of them. One followed her from the club, the others emerged from an alley. Their minds were like oily black snakes, slithering toward her with the dull glow of lust and repressed rage. One of them liked her hair; another one was thinking about her breasts. A third figured she had money in her purse.

[...]

She wasn’t afraid. Fear was for the unknown. She knew exactly what was going to happen.¹⁰¹

The men proceed with a brutal beating and gang rape, graphically described by the narrator until Miranda passes out. She wakes up battered in the alley:

First was the smell. Garbage, engine exhaust. The sickening musty smell of sex and an undertone of blood.

Then came sensations, one by one: pain first in her hands, then in her rib cage, then sharp and hot between her legs. Her face felt huge, her tongue swollen in her mouth.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Ibid., 313.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 312.

¹⁰¹ Dianne Sylvan, *Queen of Shadows* (New York: Ace Books, 2010), 18.

¹⁰² Ibid., 19.

The men are not finished with Miranda, and one of them realizes she's awake and threatens to rape her one last time. Something inside her breaks open:

Some instinct she had never felt before surged up through her battered body. Rage, red-hot and fanged, boiled her from the inside and seized the opportunity that chance had granted it. A sound she'd never known she could make tore from her throat—half scream, half snarl.¹⁰³

Compare the language used above with the language Dante used to describe her own “deep-buried” refusal of male violence: “I had thought nothing else inside me could break. But something deep-buried in my mind snapped;” “The hardest, most stubborn deep-buried core of me ignited.”¹⁰⁴ The imagery of refusal is fire and heat and rage that boils up from some essential and inviolable place in the heroine's otherwise violated, broken body. Through this breaking open, Miranda finds the strength, psychological and supernatural, to fight back:

When they came toward her, all attacking at once, she stepped back, and her entire being screamed, “*NO!*”

The sheer force of her emotions flew outward, hitting them all like sledgehammers, and as one they were knocked backward by it, knives skittering across the concrete. She lashed out again and again, beating them with her agony the way they had with their fists, violating them with her violation. They were screaming, writhing. She didn't stop.

She stood over them in the now-pouring rain, blood oozing down her thighs, her hands fisted at her sides, and ground her emotions into them like putting out a cigarette in someone's arm. She made them feel the fear and pain of every woman they'd raped and killed, imagining their last thoughts. The women had mothers, daughters, boyfriends waiting at home who would never see them again. They had hopes and fears and possibilities that Miranda had never had. These pathetic little men had taken all of that away. Their hatred for women had made them bold.

One of them was begging for his life. She stared down at him, and he flinched from her eyes, eyes no one had seen in months. He had a wife, kids. Please. He offered her anything she wanted if she'd just let him go.

She stared, feeling nothing. “No.”

She didn't know how she knew, but she knew what to do. The mind was tethered to the body, and she imagined reaching in and snapping the cord as if she were snapping his neck.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 20-21

¹⁰⁴ Saintcrow, *To Hell and Back*, 311.

He stopped begging.

Now the others started. Even Gordon, who lay in a pool of his own blood not far from the pool of hers, where he had thrust his thick, blunt penis into her body over and over again, then watched and jerked off while the others did the same.

Had the other women begged? Yes, most of them had. They hadn't fought, but they had appealed to hearts that were little more than lumps of rotten wood. Women always went for the emotions. Men went for fists. That was how the world worked.¹⁰⁵

Miranda kills her rapists with a new metaphysical insight into the nature of the connection between mind and body, a revelation derived from an experience of astounding stress, trauma, and agony. This is the first moment when Miranda is able to exercise a measure of control over her empathic powers. One wonders why the character did not have this strength to fight and refuse the violence of her rapists *before* the rape; in other words, why did the author feel it necessary for the heroine to be subjected to such brutal violence in order for the strength of her powers to be awakened?

I posit two possible answers to this question. The first answer comes from Jeffrey Kripal's work on the mechanisms of transformation and transcendence in science fiction and fantasy literature. In Kripal's theory of religion and the "Super Natural," trauma—physical, emotional, or sexual—plays a key role in opening up the human's capacities for transformation. To Kripal, it is an issue of ego dissolution. The ego, understood to be the socially cultivated mind, is unmoored and unanchored during traumatic experiences, and altered states of consciousness flood in and open up the mind, pushing it beyond its normal operating systems, so to speak.¹⁰⁶ He traces this traumatic equation through the lives of certain historical and contemporary mystics, such as Whitley Strieber, and through the stories of comic book superheroes and science fiction novels as a cultural imaginary where these techniques and mechanisms are deployed with abandon.

¹⁰⁵ Sylvan, *Queen of Shadows*, 21-22.

¹⁰⁶ Whitley Strieber and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher | Penguin, 2016), 226-28.

Consider the 2016 Marvel film *Deadpool*, set in the world of the X-Men, in which mercenary Wade Wilson is captured and tortured for months in order to activate his “mutant” genes. Only once his body has been wracked with enough stress by keeping it on the razor’s edge of suffocation for days, while he remains untreated for lung cancer—does his mutation trigger and turn him into the anti-hero Deadpool who can regenerate any lost limb and heal virtually any wound, no matter how grievous. Having triggered his transformation, his captors plan to collar and sell him as slave labor to the highest bidder.¹⁰⁷ Kripal reminds us that “extraordinary human experiences often occur in the most destructive and dangerous of contexts...human beings sometimes have profound spiritual experiences amid or after suffering and death, and...trauma sometimes opens up into transcendence”—that is, into superpowers in the comics and fiction, and into visionary, mystical experiences in the real world.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps this is what the author of Miranda’s story intuits when she writes Miranda’s story beginning with a vicious rape. Only after profound violation does Miranda awaken into her ability to use her emotions as a weapon, to metaphysically sever the link between mind and body, immediately ending her rapists. Hers is a story about the aftermath of trauma, a story about survival in supernatural dimensions.

The second answer to the question of why Miranda had to endure the rape before coming to control her powers is that this literature reflects the reality of the culture that women, especially urban fantasy readers, live in, a culture where men wield significant power over women institutionally and physically; where survivors of rape are doubted and assumed to share responsibility in their rapes; where “identity threats” that saturate popular culture function to remind women of their omnipresent vulnerability to rape, which, again, they might be held

¹⁰⁷ Paul Wernick and Rhett Reese, *Deadpool*, directed by Tim Miller (Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2016).

¹⁰⁸ Strieber and Kripal, *Super Natural*, 228.

responsible for.¹⁰⁹ Identity threats, as feminist media critic Abby Ferber describes, are “‘cues’ experienced by subjugated group members that remind them of their marginal status [and] can reinforce and contribute to the experience of oppression.”¹¹⁰ Identity threats remind certain readers that, by virtue of being a member of a certain group, one is always vulnerable to certain forms of violence. Thus, “the refrain of images of women experiencing sexual abuse can serve as an identity threat, reminding women that they are targeted for violence simply because they are women.”¹¹¹ To Ferber, the identity threat, alongside the normalizing functions of gratuitous sexual violence in media, is one reason why makers of popular culture should reconsider its dependence on graphic stories of sexually abused women. Graphic depictions of sexual brutality, she writes,

serves to remind women that nowhere is safe. Just as we might encounter sexual harassment and assault at any moment of our lives, no matter where we are, such novels remind us that we cannot escape that reality, plunging us directly into it when we least expect it. Can’t we challenge the rape culture we live in without reproducing its disturbing and violence imagery?¹¹²

We can refer again to Radway where she points out that her Smithton romance readers “are, in sum, significantly more inclined than their feminist critics to recognize the inevitability of male power and the force of social convention to circumscribe a woman’s ability to act in her own interests.”¹¹³ That is, popular media like romance novels and urban fantasy novels can also offer safe spaces in which to explore living in these worlds, and, moreover, to a number of readers, depictions that deny or decline to imagine and confront the pervasiveness of male power and

¹⁰⁹ On identity threats, see Abby L. Ferber’s “Always Ambivalent: Why Media is Never Just Entertainment” in *Men Who Hate Women and Women Who Kick Their Asses: Stieg Larsson’s Millennium Trilogy in Feminist Perspective*, eds. Donna King and Carrie Lee Smith (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012), 3-14.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 12

¹¹³ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 78.

violence is an unrealistic representation of the world. I have argued throughout the preceding chapters that that inevitability and power, and the cost of surviving it, is at the heart of urban fantasy stories of power, magic, and violence. As Dante tells the reader, this is “the ultimate lesson of a life spent on the edge of Power and violence—*when the chips are down, sunshine, you’re on your own.*”¹¹⁴

But urban fantasy authors do go further than representing the inevitability of male power. I also hold that these fictions contest it in a number of ways. The power of a heroine’s refusal in certain urban fantasy works is one contestation; now I want to look at another, at the *presence* of dead women’s ghosts in these moments of refusal. We saw above that Miranda’s rage is driven in part by the thought of the other women her rapists have also hurt and killed. She can feel the men’s memories of the other women they have attacked in this manner. In the previous excerpt, we saw her imagining the lives and possibilities of the victims that the rapists took from them. As Miranda kills her rapists one by one, severing their minds from their bodies like snapping necks, she dwells on the other female victims:

She turned on Gordon.

She didn’t hear his words, was unmoved by his begging, even when he crawled to her feet and sobbed. How many others were there? How many for Gordon? At least a dozen over the years; she could feel it. A dozen women’s voices cried out to her as if they stood beside her. The choir of the dead, her own voice joining them, once an angel’s song but now a scream.¹¹⁵

Through the rapists’ deaths, these fellow victims become present to Miranda, a “choir of the dead” singing, or screaming—recall the sentiment of Jill’s teacher Mikhail; they fight “*to quiet the screaming in our own heads*”—alongside her.

¹¹⁴ Saintcrow, *To Hell and Back*, 4.

¹¹⁵ Sylvan, *Queen of Shadows*, 23.

We can compare the way the souls of women are metaphysically present with Miranda with the presence of women killed by a sorcerer in Lilith Saintcrow's 2014 novel *The Ripper Affair*.¹¹⁶ This novel is set in an alternate "steampunk" version of Victorian London, in which sorceress Emma Bannon is hunting Jack the Ripper. This world's version of Jack the Ripper is an evil sorcerer—a former lover of Emma's, before he turned to the darkness—who uses sorcery to create a demon-like spirit that kills poor prostitutes and feeds on their reproductive organs to gain metaphysical power. Because Emma was born to a destitute mother, hunting the sorcerer and his creation is deeply personal and frightening; she recognizes that, but for the magic and power which make her useful to Queen Victoria, she would still be on the streets, probably a sex worker herself and just as vulnerable to the horrific magical violence of the womb-eating creature. This understanding wears her down throughout the course of the novel; she is exhausted, tired of fighting for a country that does not value her gender, and tired of watching society reduce women to expendable, brutalized subhumans.

At the climax of the novel, Jack the Ripper has captured Emma and plans to use the power from her own ritual sacrifice to create a "ruling spirit," a vast, disembodied, extraordinarily powerful spirit anchored to and ruling over a land like "Britannia." His ruling spirit is intended to dethrone the present ruling spirit of Britannia, who reigns through her chosen "vessel," Queen Victoria. Jack slashes Emma's throat, and in the moment between life and death, time slows. We see Emma's "Discipline," her power, awaken, and a number of women appear to her in ghost form, including the last victim of the Ripper, Marta Tebrem:

The first surprise was that it did not hurt. The knife cleaved flesh, yes, and there was a hot jet of salt-crimson blood.

¹¹⁶ Lilith Saintcrow, *The Ripper Affair* (New York: Orbit, 2014).

Then...droplets hung in midair, and the blooming within her was a sweet pain. Her Discipline roared, needing no chant to shape it. No, when a Discipline spoke, the entire sorcerer was the throat it passed through.

It required only the strength to submit. As long as that strength lasted, wonders could be worked.

What had she done? Turned inward, yes, and found...what?

Not m'pence, Marta Tebrem whispered. Needs it for my doss, I do.

They spun around her, sad women and merry, dead on a knife or by a strangle, in childbed or by fever, by gin or misadventure, in hatred or desperation, by folly or chance. She was of the Endor [that is, a sorceress], but even more importantly, she was of their number, and the spark that rose within her was both negation and acceptance.

Some of them had wished for release from the miserable drudgery and endless pain. There was the acceptance.

Yet even louder, and containing the acceptance as a shell contains a nut, the denial.

No. I will not.

Should not, or could not, those were incorrect. The refusal was a hard shell, wrapped around the tender thing called a soul trapped in a fragile and perishable body.

Beat me, hurt me, kill me, I will not.

Or perhaps the refusal was merely her own, even her Discipline bending to a will grown strong by both feeding and confinement.

They streamed through her, the women of Whitchapel, and their cries were the same as the Warrior Queen Boudicca in her chariot—a vessel of Britannia dishonoured, slain in battle, but still remembered.

Still alive, if only in the vast storehouse of memory a ruling spirit could contain.

No. I live.

The heart struggled, the lungs collapsing with shock. Her murderer crowed with glee, his purpose achieved, his chant becoming the savagery of an attacker's, almost swallowing the sound of sorcery spilling through the bloody necklace of a cut throat.

I live.

They burst free of her not-quite-corpse – for the throat-cutting does not kill immediately, for a few crucial moments the sorceress, her Discipline invoked, was between living and dead. A threshold, a lintel, a doorway...

...and Death itself, the other face of the coin called Life, for a bare moment gave a fraction of the citizens of its dry uncharted country their mortal voices back.

The unsound was massive, felt behind eye and heart and throat...

...and it struck down the man who had sought to give a mockery of Life with a flood of leprous-green flame.¹¹⁷

The evil sorcerer is struck down by the power and the sheer will of Emma, but also by the power of the spirits of the dead women his creature brutalized. Death gives the women “*their mortal voices back*” in this moment, and with those voices, combined with Emma’s power, they destroy the sorcerer who would establish his power on their backs, on their brutal deaths. The ruling

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 351-53.

spirit of Britannia, also coded feminine in the series, holds these women's deaths "*in the vast storehouse of memory*;" Emma's weariness is linked to the deceased victims, who in turn comprise a lineage of women brutalized by men, one that runs all the way back to "the Warrior Queen Boudicca." It is not just Emma's refusal that defines this moment, but, as we saw with Miranda's refusal, the moment of *no*, the profoundly metaphysical negation is defined by the ghostly and memorial presence of entire histories of women who suffered under these power inequalities, whose autonomy, agency, and refusals were trampled by male power. These works invoke a secret historical lineage, perhaps even sisterhood, of suffering women that emboldens the refusal; it is secret because it is ignored and hidden except to those like Emma and Miranda who share its legacy, and it is held within "*the vast storehouse of memory*" of the ruling spirit, witnessed and remembered, but not honored or amended.

Though the evil sorcerer and his creation are destroyed, the sorcerer's spell to create a new ruling spirit of Britannia could still be completed if Emma consents to death. The ghosts call to Emma:

...on a wooden shelf in a stone womb underneath Londinium, a sorceress's mortality writhed.

For a dizzying moment she trembled between, neither alive nor dead, as the sisters of murder and confinement clamored for her voice to be added to their number.

No.

In the end, the choice was hers alone. If she suffered under the lash of living in a world not made for her sex, it was the price extracted for protecting those upon whom her regard fell. Those she protected—did her arrogance extend so far as to think she was, in her own way, their final keeper?

To rule is lonely, and there was the last temptation.

The pieces of her erstwhile lover's spell curled about her. Her mortal death could fuel its completion, for she had taken from him, again, everything.

He had wrought too well, when he sought the perfect victim. In that perfection itself lay his undoing.

Oh yes, it was possible. To take the shards and knit them together, to drive the taproot deep into the shimmering field of pain and Empire, and to become what he had wished to create: a spirit of rule.

One last, painless lunge, and she would Become.

She could be what she had pledged to serve and turned against. She could drain the vital force of the ancient, weary being who charted Empire's course. She could wrap herself in its vestments and strike down the physical vessel of that being, choose a vessel of her own and arrange not merely her household but the world itself to her liking.

It would take so little. In the end, only the decision to do mattered.

And yet.

For the final time, the will holding the door open for Discipline spoke. The choice was made, had always been made, for she was as she had been created, and the pride she bore would not allow her to become an usurper.

Her answer was clear, if only in the shuttered halls of a human heart—that country where sorcery and even Death are only guests. Tolerated, but in the final weighing, negligible.

I live.

I live.

I live.¹¹⁸

In this moment of refusal, the choice is between dying to become something immensely powerful, something that could never be hurt again, and living—living in a world “*not made for her sex,*” a world unkind to women, serving a ruling spirit of Empire who abused her trust and power. The difficult choice here is between life in *a whole world* dominated by exhausting, dehumanizing, unequal power relationships, and becoming something like a god who could “*arrange the world itself to her liking.*” Emma says no to the power, reaching down to some deep core of humanity, untouched by power and death, and chooses to live: “*for she was as she had been created, and the pride she bore would not allow her to become an usurper.*” Instead, she lives.

Conclusion

As I highlighted in the introduction, Victoria Nelson argues that supernatural literature presents super-human characters wrestling with the *mysterium tremendum*, forcing supernatural instincts into submission to human morals. We can see this precise dynamic at work in Emma's story; though the evil sorcerer is dead, his spell is still active, and if Emma is willing to let her physical form die, she can take the spell, remake it, and “Become” a ruling spirit, something like

¹¹⁸ Saintcrow, *The Ripper Affair*, 353-55.

an untouchable god. But her humanity, her pride (a quality often deemed sinful in what Nelson terms “the top-down religions of the past”¹¹⁹), will not allow her to usurp the present ruling spirit to whom she pledged loyalty. Emma *could* become a god with “*one last, painless lunge*” into the transcendent, but in this moment she refuses the *mysterium tremendum* and the lure of power. Recall Nelson’s comments about these characters’ “nervous ambivalence” toward the *mysterium*, and the refrain permeating this literature of supernatural characters rising “above their instincts by an act of will that must be tested again and again.”¹²⁰ That will is exactly what is being tested here between life and death, and critically it is *not* a test of the gods, not even a test from her sisters in death, but she is measured by the “*shattered halls of a human heart*” and by her own pride. As Nelson argues, contemporary supernatural literature seeks to elevate the trustworthiness of humanity and human instincts in the face of the ambivalent *mysterium tremendum*: “the general shift in the imaginary worlds these practices draw from has been away from demonic and toward human accountability...the locus of goodness and right living in this metaphysics is the human dimension and not the transcendent one,” she writes.¹²¹ We see this shift repeatedly in urban fantasy, where necromancers, half-demons, sorcerers, and hunters struggle against the monsters who threaten the city but also the monsters within themselves, monsters forged by “a life spent on the edge of Power and violence.” They survive by tapping into some essential core of humanity, the “ruling spirit” of each individual human, if you will, the one thing that cannot be stripped of a character despite the world’s every attempt to do so. Jill has her survivor “bitch,” Selene has the small place in her soul that does not beg, Emma has her pride, and Miranda and Dante have a “deep-buried” and red-tinged fury that roars open from

¹¹⁹ Nelson, *Gothicka*, 264.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 134 and 263.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 263.

within them. Monstrous men attempt to make these characters submit and surrender, but through the “alpha and omega” of that core and essence and willpower of humanity, the women survive.

Saintcrow has theorized this core of resilience explicitly. Writing in 2009 for the blog *Deadline Dames*—run by nine female urban fantasy and YA authors, including Jenna Black and Jackie Morse Kessler, the latter of whom we look at in the following chapter—she writes, “Way down deep, in the nonphysical (but still-in-my-body) core of me, there’s a band of steel. It can get beat up, heated red hot, ground at, and bent, but it’s always there. And it just gets stronger.”¹²² Note the language of duality: the steel is non-physical but still found within the body. Like the place from which the heroines utter their non-negotiable refusals, that steel is something metaphysically, inviolably anchored to the deepest essence of the self, in the “shuttered halls of the human heart.” Saintcrow continues:

Writing has taught me a lot about that steel. One of Jill Kismet’s most admirable (or maddening) qualities is that she doesn’t know when to give up. Quit is so not in her dictionary...Dante Valentine endures whatever the world throws at her, and struggles to endure on her own terms. Many of my characters have that core of resiliency, of inner strength. Finding it in a character helps me find it in myself.

I think everyone has some steel in them. Some more, some less, but everyone has *some*. The trick is, when everything is whirling around you like a snowglobe full of razorblades, to find the stillness, the strong space inside you. No matter how battered I get, that steel is there. Sometimes it cuts deep, but when I need something other than my spine to carry me, well, it takes up the job. [...]

The steel doesn’t count the cost and it doesn’t care about what you think you can do. It’s a tiny piece of irreducible grit we’re all built around. We’re pearls, but at the heart of each pearl is that harsh speck of irritation...It hurts, it’s goddamn uncomfortable sometimes, but that steel is a gift from the gods. When you cannot rely on anything else, if you can find your core it can and will carry you through.¹²³

Read together with the passages above of heroines surviving through reliance on that grit and will and steel, we see these authors, Saintcrow especially, building their own model of the

¹²² Lilith Saintcrow, “The Mystery of Steel,” *Deadline Dames*, November 20, 2009, accessed April 30, 2015, <http://www.deadlinedames.com/2009/11/20/the-mystery-of-steel/>.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

Human-as-Two, with an irreducible, sacrosanct core of humanity that cannot be violated by men, whether human or supernatural. Not only is Death is a stranger there, but even the heroine's own supernatural heritage, in Nelson's terms—the heroine's sorcery, her infection with vampirism, her beast, her *power*—is a stranger, a “hard shell” that can be cracked open, that fails to define or even contain the whole. The only presences that can keep company with this metaphysical steel core and its indomitable refusal are the ghosts of violated women, that secret historical lineage held in female memory. Emma “*was of the Endor,*” a sorceress of dark, dangerous magic, “*but even more importantly, she was of their number,*” one more voice in Miranda's “choir of the dead.” The Human-as-Two in urban fantasy appears to be a contraction inwards toward an unbreakable essence, whereas for Kripal the Human-as-Two is an expansion outwards beyond the body toward cosmological unity.

Thus we see women narrating metaphysical duality as a source of power and potential in different terms and registers than Kripal does, grounded in the experiences of living through gendered forms of abuse and violence. We can push the implications of Kripal's work on human potential further, toward accounting for the lived experiences (or their representations in fiction) that embody and animate and imbue the trauma-as-transcendence model with its power, and that is what I intend to do in the next chapter. Up to this point, I have focused heavily on power, sexuality, and gender in urban fantasy fiction with little attention paid to race. This focus is largely a function of the overwhelming *whiteness* of the genre, the authors published by the industry, and the characters they write. In Part II of the thesis, I want to analyze critical and social media discourses surrounding the absence of people of color from both the larger science-fiction, fantasy, and horror genres and from urban fantasy in particular. I also include perspectives on the intersections of literature, class, and age as critics and authors articulate them

in social media commentary. I look at the implications of these absences especially as they pertain to Kripal's theory of religion and his work on the role of speculative literature in articulating new visions of the paranormal and of human metaphysical potential, and argue that feminist media criticism is a vital addition to Kripal's project of analyzing the religious contours of pop culture.

PART II: "A TERRIBLE, BEAUTIFUL COLLISION":
POWER, RACE, PRIVILEGE, AND TRUTH IN FICTION

CHAPTER 5

BETTER HORRORS, BETTER TRUTHS

In this chapter, I aim to analyze Kripal's arguments about "better horror" and science fiction and fantasy literature, looking at why such interventions in fiction are necessary and salutary for the work Kripal sees the genres doing. I offer a critique of the absence of women and people of color in the primary and theoretical source material Kripal uses to come to his conclusions, asking what might be left out of his "Super-story" with such exclusions. I then turn to analyze two parallel discourses about "better" genre fiction circulating on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and book review sites. These narratives come from readers, authors, and literary critics and orbit two different themes: 1) the erasure of people of color from speculative fiction, and 2) the putative danger of themes of violence, suffering, and trauma in young adult fantasy fiction.

Urban fantasy and young adult author Daniel José Older takes the speculative fiction publishing industry to task for the erasure and absence of people of color in urban environments like New York City. His conversation calls for better science fiction and fantasy literature that truthfully represents the stories, worlds, and lives of people of color, and for an end to discriminatory publishing practices and preferences. Following Older, I analyze the commentary of literary critic Megan Cox Gurdon, writing for an online *Wall Street Journal* book review site, where she argues that themes in contemporary young adult (YA) fantasy fiction are too "dark" and dangerous for teenage minds, and that teens should be reading "better" fiction that edifies and uplifts the reader. Her comments sparked the Twitter hashtag campaign #YAsaves in which thousands of readers and authors spoke back to Gurdon and the *Wall Street Journal*, describing

how “dark” YA literature “saved” them from various horrors experienced as teenagers, contrary to Gurdon’s assumptions. I contend that altogether, these three calls for “better” fiction by Kripal, Older, and Gurdon—though they comment upon a variety of arenas like the publishing and bookselling industries, authorial creativity, and racism and classism in the U.S.—also orbit vital religious questions and/or solutions to what each critic respectively frames as the problem within literature that needs fixing. Reading Older’s critiques and #YAsaves commentary into Kripal’s call for better fiction brings to Kripal’s work a much-needed focus on power and social conditions that inform experiences of trauma and transformation.

Kripal’s Theory of Religion and Human Consciousness

Kripal’s arguments about the need for “better horror” and its connection to the theme of transformation in science fiction and fantasy literature (SFF) must first be understood in terms of the controversial work he is doing challenging religious studies scholars to rethink the discipline’s current conceptualizations of sacred, paranormal, and mystical experiences. By sacred, mystical, and paranormal experiences, I mean encounters and experiences of non-rational, non-ordinary, and/or altered states consciousness that are interpreted by the experiencer as having mystical, paranormal, or supernatural valences of meaning.¹²⁴ This includes phenomena such as “altered states of trauma, trance, psychical phenomena, psychedelic states, certain types of erotic rapture, numinous dream, vision, and near-death events.”¹²⁵ These experiences can also include relational interactions such as with the dead, saints, gods and goddesses, non-human beings, spirits, and demons. In critically engaging with these types of

¹²⁴ More specifically, *paranormal* experiences interpret the event in scientific terms (e.g., psychical powers); *supernatural* explanation tends toward interactions with folkloric and mythical/religious beings (e.g., aliens or angels); and *mystical* experiences utilize explanations like cosmic/divine unity, psychedelic states, trance, rapture, etc. Essentially, these are the “registers” in which the experience is imbued with meaning. See *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 9.

¹²⁵ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 165.

experiences as a comparative historian of religion, Kripal's body of work produces: 1) A theory of religion grounded in hypotheses regarding human consciousness, as opposed to theories about religion which explain them (away) through socio-cultural, socio-historical, and materialist frameworks;¹²⁶ 2) an application of this theory to contemporary popular culture, especially focusing on the SFF texts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries like comic book superheroes, the novels of Philip K. Dick, and the non-fiction *Visitor* corpus of Whitley Strieber, which he holds to exemplify current spiritual discourses about human potential, evolution, and consciousness;¹²⁷ and 3) an articulation of the implications of this theory of religion for the phenomenological and ontological grounds of experiences with what he comes to define as the "super natural."¹²⁸ In short, Kripal takes a phenomenological approach to the weird and paranormal, hypothesizes that these experiences are grounded in certain structures of consciousness that exceed the body, and argues that since current epistemological paradigms generally discourage science and humanities scholarship from investigating these experiences and producing meaningful knowledge about them, they have been buried and encoded in imaginative, speculative forms of fiction.

Kripal's work critiques the discipline's *exclusive* reliance on positivist, psychological, socio-historical, and materialist paradigms of research on mystical and paranormal experiences as being insufficient *on their own* for a robust understanding of the history of religions; he argues that the discipline of religious studies has shied away from analyzing mystical and paranormal experiences on their own terms, as the people who experience them make sense of and report

¹²⁶ See *The Serpent's Gift* and *Authors of the Impossible*.

¹²⁷ See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

¹²⁸ On the "super natural" and the intentional bifurcation of the term, see his latest book co-authored with Whitley Strieber, *The Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher | Penguin, 2016).

them, despite the fact that these kinds of phenomena historically saturate our subject of study. Kripal argues that we boil down the mystical, supernatural, and paranormal into psychological, socio-historical, materialist explanatory frameworks, which, while being crucial to understanding the historical and cultural contexts of the mystical, do not tell us the whole story. Something important is missing:

Indeed, the sacred as sacred...is *precisely* what has been eclipsed in the contemporary study of religion. The field has denied, in principle...that the phenomenon can only be understood on its own level and on its own terms, and that, moreover, it can only be misunderstood if reduced, without remainder, to our physics, our psychology, our cultures, our ethnicities, our materialism, our politics, our ethics, or whatever.¹²⁹

To be clear, Kripal is not working to abolish materialist or socio-historical theories *about* religion altogether; rather, he argues that they are simply, by themselves, not enough to account for this “remainder,” the paranormal, supernatural, and mystical experiences of the very subject we study. Something is left over and unaccounted for in these explanations, something remains: the sacred, the extraordinary, the mystical, the abundance and excess of the experience.¹³⁰ He reminds us that “the discipline constantly encounters robust paranormal phenomena in its data—the stuff is *everywhere*—and then refuses to talk about such things in any truly serious and sustained way.”¹³¹ His theory *of* religion aims to grapple sincerely with this sacred remainder and challenges reigning epistemological paradigms of positivism and materialism in the academy that constrain what is possible to think, publish, and say as a scholar of religion.¹³²

¹²⁹ Kripal, *Authors*, 254.

¹³⁰ For another approach to the excess and abundance of encounters with the sacred and supernatural, see Robert A. Orsi’s recent book, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016) 38 and 64-65.

¹³¹ Kripal, *Authors*, 6.

¹³² For an extensive critique of these epistemological paradigms, see the introductions to Kripal’s *The Serpent’s Gift* and *Authors of the Impossible*.

Kripal's theory of religion is an ontological claim about human consciousness and the sacred, grounded in phenomenologically oriented accounts of mystical and paranormal experiences (such as Whitley Strieber's *Visitor* corpus). This theory of religion posits a model of human consciousness that he comes to call variously the "Human as Two"¹³³ and the "dialectic of culture and consciousness."¹³⁴ He posits that "*Each human being...is Two, that is, each person is simultaneously a conscious, constructed self or socialized ego and a much larger complexly conscious field that normally manifests itself only in nonordinary states of consciousness and energy....*"¹³⁵ This definition emphasizes that *both* the "conscious field" which facilitates experiences of the sacred *and* the cultural, historical particulars and conditions of lived reality that socialize the individual—race, class, gender, religion, power, language, etc.—produce the sacred event through dialectic interaction. The experience of altered consciousness occurs, but then must be translated or interpreted—imbued with meaning—through the available cultural repertoire on which the individual has to draw. The phenomenological experience and the cultural meaning-making processes go hand in hand, or as Kripal says, "the sacred and the human are two sides of the same coin."¹³⁶ This theory relies on the idea of communication, translation, and hermeneutic interpretation as an act of story-telling, of reading and writing the sacred. Hence the importance of "better" stories.

Better Horror: Pop Culture Hermeneutics and the Paranormal

¹³³ Kripal, *Serpent's Gift*, 165.

¹³⁴ Kripal, *Authors*, 29.

¹³⁵ Kripal, *Serpent's Gift*, 164. Emphasis in original.

¹³⁶ Kripal, *Authors*, 255.

Why the focus on science-fiction, fantasy, comic books, and horror literature in this new theory of the sacred and human consciousness? Why mass-market popular genres that are so often devalued along classist and sexist lines as pulpy, trashy, hacky, and not “real” literature? There are a number of reasons. The first, according to Kripal, is that since positivist epistemological paradigms work so hard to prevent thinkers from considering paranormal experiences as anything other than anecdotes, hysterics, and malfunctions of the brain’s hardware, this material gets channeled into popular forms of culture which are easier to digest because we do not have to take them seriously. The epistemological laxity in one’s approach to what is safely termed and contained as “fiction” helps account for the extraordinary popularity of the paranormal and supernatural in current popular culture: consider the billions of dollars made by novels and film adaptations like *The Twilight Saga*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Hunger Games*, the Marvel and DC “cinematic universes,” the comic book industry, the popularity of television programming about vampires, zombies, werewolves, and witches, and major SFF conventions like Comic Con and fan cosplaying. “We are obviously fascinated by such things and will pay billions of dollars for their special display,” Kripal notes, “and yet we will not talk about them, not at least in any serious and sustained professional way. Popular culture is our mysticism. The public realm is our esoteric realm. The paranormal is our secret in plain sight.”¹³⁷ And as Victoria Nelson similarly suggests, “when the divine has been exiled from the table of serious art and intellectual discussion for well over a century, you have to look for it in what elite culture thinks of as the trash. That is, in the sub-Zeitgeist, that disreputable realm of popular culture, B movies, pulp fiction, and folk belief where, modernity or no, the line between belief and

¹³⁷ Kripal, *Authors*, 6.

imagination is often erased.”¹³⁸ In this “shadowy territory,” she continues, a “certain kind of low-level but potent theological rumination is constantly taking place.”¹³⁹

One consequence of the mystical and magical being buried in imaginaries of pop culture is that these pop cultural imaginaries then help shape alternative spiritualities. Nelson argues that contemporary speculative “Gothick” fictions are telling us stories about what trends already circle just beneath the surface of alternative, metaphysical, and New Age American traditions, soon to burst through to the surface, and what affective, devotional shapes these spiritualities might take.¹⁴⁰ As I demonstrated earlier, Nelson and Kripal both argue that this pop culture material demonstrates a re-localization of the sacred from *out there* (in the heavens or hells, in gods or saints, in outer space) to *in here*, that is, inside human beings and as the grounds of human potential and evolution: “the notion of self-deification is somehow in the metaphysical air surrounding all these various narratives.”¹⁴¹ Both Kripal and Nelson see this material as the site of religious and spiritual narratives of contact, communion, and transformation. Whatever humans will become in the future, we are already writing about the possibilities. New gods stalk our screens and haunt our bookshelves, and they look a lot like us. Or rather, with just a few super-modifications—a nibble here to transmit vampirism, an accident there to activate mutant genes, or, more darkly, the trauma of rape and violent near-death experiences—we look a lot like them.

The final reason to take speculative pop culture seriously in conjunction with religion and the sacred grows from the second. These stories about the supernatural and paranormal are

¹³⁸ Nelson, *Gothicka*, 18.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁴⁰ Nelson, *Gothicka*, 42-43; 262.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 263.

already influencing how people interpret or seek experiences with the sacred. That is, they inform the hermeneutic repertoire that people—especially those who eschew orthodox, organized religious traditions—have available to seek out or make sense of extraordinary experiences. Consider fantasy-lover and neopagan Sonja Sadovsky’s experiences with Marion Zimmer Bradley’s fiction as it centered female magic and power:

I purchased a copy of *The Mists of Avalon* when I was eleven years old and it felt like a gong had gone off in my mind. The book expressed so many of the themes that I had been searching for and introduced me to the concept of the Goddess as well as her earthly counterpart, the priestess.

These ideas resonated so strongly with me that I had no doubt of their authenticity. It made no difference that the story was fiction. The passion and conviction the author put into her images and the complexity of the religion of Avalon convinced me that this writer fully believed in these ideas and that what I was reading was more than just a retelling of an ancient myth. There seemed to be a completely different story hidden between these pages, a secret that was presented in code. I was convinced that divine inspiration had sent the book to me and that this was a clue to something powerful, something real.¹⁴²

Kripal describes Whitley Strieber’s account of a similar relationship to fiction when it came to understanding his experiences with the Visitors:

I once witnessed Whitley speak to a group of academics I had convened at the Esalen Institute for a private symposium on the paranormal and popular culture. One evening he explained to us that he was perfectly aware that his visionary experience of the visitors was deeply informed by the bad sci-fi B movies that he had seen in such numbers as a kid in the cold war 1950s in southern Texas, but he was also perfectly aware that something else and more was behind these visionary displays. And then he went further. He said that, if it is in fact the case that the bad sci-fi films have shaped the reception, understanding, and even experience of the visitors, it follows that what we need to do now is make better science fiction movies so that future abduction experiences will be more positive and productive.¹⁴³

This last point is crucial. Kripal and Strieber both call for “better” horror, “better” science fiction and fantasy, “better” stories so that profound sacred experiences, in whatever hermeneutic

¹⁴² Sonja Sadovsky, *The Priestess and the Pen: Marion Zimmer Bradley, Dion Fortune, and Diana Paxson’s Influence on Modern Paganism* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2014), xxii.

¹⁴³ Jeffrey J. Kripal, “Better Horrors: From Terror to Communion in Whitley Strieber’s *Communion* (1987)” *Social Research* 81.4 (2014), 905.

register the interpreter employs, can “flip over” into something more than horrific and terrifying, into something better, edifying, and productive.

Strieber’s first book in the *Visitor* corpus, *Communion* (1987) was originally titled *Body Terror* because of the “extreme physical sensation of fear” Strieber felt in the early days (and quite a few of the later days as well) of his “visionary” experiences with the Visitors.¹⁴⁴ He was raped, abducted, chased, haunted, implanted with objects that baffled doctors and scientists; he was terrorized and horrified and wounded by his visionary experiences. These physical remainders, as it were, are why Strieber stands firm in his conviction that there is a material, physical quality to his experiences, whereas Kripal remains committed to understanding these phenomena as expressions of the powers of mind and consciousness that manifest physically.¹⁴⁵ The overarching point Strieber and Kripal make is this: based on the hundreds of thousands of letters Strieber received by people who had or were experiencing things similar to him, and based on Kripal’s research into studies and accounts of paranormal phenomena, these experiences with the monstrous and alien and other are generally terrifying, horrifying moments—but they do not have to be. Hence, the title change to *Communion*. “This book is about forming a new relationship with the unknown,” Strieber writes in bold letters on the opening page of his book.¹⁴⁶ Hence, also, the need for “better horrors,” that is, the need “to search for new ways to engage sacred terror more intelligently so that this horror might ‘flip over’ more often into something not terrible but terrific, into a kind of profound mutuality and spiritual transformation that he [Strieber] calls ‘communion.’”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ See *Communion: A True Story* (New York: Harper, 2008), 216.

¹⁴⁵ See chapter 11 and 12 of *The Super Natural* for their differences on this matter.

¹⁴⁶ Strieber, *Communion*, opening page.

¹⁴⁷ Kripal, “Better Horrors,” 905.

The implications for speculative fiction of this call for better stories are numerous. They are political and economic in addition to spiritual. The rest of this chapter considers what is at stake in this call, what is overlooked by Kripal and Strieber through this call, and most importantly, how creators and readers of speculative fiction put out their own calls for better stories. The desire for better stories saturates public discourse about genre fiction today. Popular literary critics fear the “darkness” enveloping young adult fiction. Authors and readers of color are weary of representational regimes and symbolic annihilations that dehumanize and erase their presence from genres that are supposed to excel at exploring difference. One of the larger aims of this thesis has been to look at a speculative sub-genre of fantasy fiction, urban fantasy, to see how female authors are already writing stories of magic, monstrosity, and communion. This chapter in part expands that project to understand how urban fantasy and current issues of race and class in the United States intersect.

As I have shown, Kripal produces specific analyses of how, in SFF, metaphysical transformation (e.g., from Clark Kent to Superman, from Matt Murdock to Daredevil) can be effected through traumatic experiences of physical, emotional, and sexual violence, and the altered states of consciousness that such experiences can produce. However, in building both his theories of the Human-as-Two and his interpretation of contemporary SFF as narrating a “Super-Story” about human potential and (im)possibility, Kripal focuses almost exclusively on white male theorists, authors, and artists: Whitley Strieber, Philip K. Dick, Grant Morrison, Alan Moore, Jack Kirby, John Keel, Ludwig Feuerbach, Charles Fort, Bertrand Méheust, Frederick Myers, and Jacques Vallee, among others.¹⁴⁸ While sexuality and ability statuses are something

¹⁴⁸ These thinkers, authors, and artists appear across several of Kripal’s books. I wage this critique specifically against *The Serpent’s Gift*, *Authors of the Impossible*, *Mutants and Mystics*, *The Super Natural*, and in various articles published between and since the writing of these texts.

his work on comics naturally lead him to account for, absent in his work is attention to how race, class, and gender inflect narratives of transformation and indeed the larger body of SFF as a whole. The stakes of analyzing who is represented, how, and why in popular media and culture has bearing on what kinds of meaning people can make out of visionary, sacred experiences and what kinds of stories can be told. This problem raises some of the following questions: What effect does the dearth of diverse literature have on the available stories from which to make meaning out of profound and impossible experiences? How does this dearth contribute to the continued devaluation, marginalization, and oppression of people of color, of people with different ability statuses, non-hegemonic gender identities, and sexual orientations? How might feminist and intersectional critiques and methods contribute to making better horrors, better science fiction, and better fantasy? I cannot answer all these questions in this thesis, but I do want to open them up by looking at what other critics and readers of SFF have to say about the work conducted by a genre like urban fantasy and, more broadly, speculative fiction. I think it is vital that Kripal's call for better horror also be considered within the context of feminist and critical race studies on media.

“A genre we should rule”: Daniel José Older's *Critique of Urban Fantasy*

Daniel José Older works out of Brooklyn and has been publishing fantasy since 2012, with recent urban fantasy releases in 2015 gaining him critical acclaim and attention. Older is the author of the *Bone Street Rumba* series (2015 – present) and YA urban fantasy novel *Shadowshaper* (2015) both set in Brooklyn, and of an earlier collection of short stories, *Salsa Nocturna* (2012). He is a regular speaker at conventions and conferences, has a sustained presence on Twitter (@djolder) and, as his author biography reads, he “facilitates workshops on storytelling, music, and antioppression organizing at public schools, religious houses, and

universities.”¹⁴⁹ His urban fantasy literature stands out from other works of the genre for a number of reasons: for the rich, imbricated prevalence of community and family in Brooklyn neighborhoods as opposed to the typically individualistic noir-hero plots of urban fantasy; for the minimal presence of white characters in the story, compared with predominant whiteness of the genre; for the sustained, centered presence of Lukumi and Santería lived traditions, practices, materials, themes, imagery, and supernatural beings like orishas and ancestors; and for the literature’s critiques of white power and white-dominated institutions in the U.S., such as the police, universities, and standards of beauty as they impinge on female characters. Older writes from a very particular consciousness about power, race, gender, and story in the U.S. and is a vocal critic, via various workshops and social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and his website, of racism, sexism, and classism in the U.S. especially as those forces intersect with storytelling and the SFF publishing industry.

In April 2015, Older drew up a list on his blog, subject to periodic updates, of writers of color who publish urban fantasy fiction. The list is a community effort and presently tops out at just 38 authors (including Older). The reason behind composing this list, Older writes in the accompanying blog, is that “there’s power in seeing who’s out there making literary magic out of the cities we live in,” noting that he has “written about the gentrification of Urban Fantasy and it is a very very white subgenre, but UF writers of color are out there, and our numbers are growing.”¹⁵⁰ On Twitter the same day, Older held the following conversation about the list and its intent:

¹⁴⁹ Daniel José Older, *Midnight Taxi Tango* (New York: ROC, 2016), author biography on inside back cover.

¹⁵⁰ Daniel José Older, “Urban Fantasy Writers of Color: An Ongoing List.” Accessed April 28, 2016. <http://ghoststar.net/blog/urban-fantasy-writers-of-color-an-ongoing-list>

“Hopefully u find some great new reads on there and some writers get some attention and we all feel less alienated in a genre we should rule”¹⁵¹

“In a time of ongoing racial crises in the city, who gets to inscribe the mythology of urban life? Right now, it is a mainly white folks.”¹⁵²

“Made that list cuz when I 1st started writing UF a couple years ago, 1st of all I didn’t fully realize there was a subgenre called UF...”¹⁵³

“I was just writing ghosts into a place I understood. And then when I looked into it, there were so few of us in the genre...”¹⁵⁴

“and the white big deal folks weren’t talking about the shit that really goes on in the city. It was either provincial or ghetto hellscape”¹⁵⁵

In this conversation, Older points out that urban fantasy fiction functions to “inscribe the mythology of urban life” for contemporary readers, which is to say that the genre is both informed by and contributes to the contemporary popular imagination of urban worlds—a critical function given current political discourses about race, poverty, under- and unemployment, welfare, immigration, police brutality, the prison-to-school pipeline, the so-called “war on drugs,” white supremacy, and the #BlackLivesMatter movement. And how does Older find that urban fantasy represents American cities?

while ‘urban’ has become publishing industry code for books by and for black people, throw the word fantasy on the end and suddenly the characters and authors are very white. In this literary gentrification, the American city becomes either a goofy whitewashed playground, Girls with werewolves and vampires, or an abysmal urban nightmare. And like most dystopias, neither fictionalized versions of this city have much

¹⁵¹ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, April 2, 2015, 11:27 a.m. <https://twitter.com/djolder>. These tweets were also organized and chronologized on the website Storify (<https://storify.com/djolder>) and added to the blog post cited above. For all Tweets quoted in this chapter, I have maintained stylistic choices the author made in Tweeting, such as punctuation, internet slang, asterisks for emphasis, and capitalization patterns.

¹⁵² Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, April 2, 2015, 11:35 a.m.

¹⁵³ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, April 2, 2015, 11:39 a.m.

¹⁵⁴ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, April 2, 2015, 11:39 a.m.

¹⁵⁵ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, April 2, 2015, 11:41 a.m.

to say about the real-world conflicts threatening urban communities of color like police violence and gentrification.¹⁵⁶

Older launches a critique against urban fantasy that takes fundamental issue with the erasure of people of color from “a genre we should rule,” a genre that, given the population demographics of the urban worlds the fiction purports to represent, should prominently feature both authors and characters of color. Instead, the prevalence of white people, white human women especially, and the seductive, white, wealthy, male super-beings like vampires and werewolves with whom the women fall in love, obscures and erases and ultimately *alienates*, in Older’s terms, people of color from the very worlds they live in. When Older mentions “the white big deal folks,” I take him to mean renowned white authors of the genre like Laurell K. Hamilton, Jim Butcher, Kim Harrison, and Neil Gaiman, for whom characters of color most often appear as exotic, mystical others meant to boost the magic-factor, the sexy-factor, or the diabolical-villain-factor of the story.¹⁵⁷ Characters of color are certainly present in these works, but they are secondary and tertiary characters with little character development or motives or actions that bear on the story. They are not the characters readers are assumed to have an interest in or identify with. These authors certainly are not writing about the “shit that really goes on in the city,” the state-sanctioned violence against black and brown bodies, gentrification patterns that disadvantage and force out communities of color and/or low income, unsustainable costs of living, un- and under-

¹⁵⁶ Daniel José Older, “Move over HP Lovecraft, fantasy writers of colour are coming through” *The Guardian*, December 9, 2014, accessed April 28, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/dec/09/move-over-hp-lovecraft-black-fantasy-writers-are-coming-through>.

¹⁵⁷ It is important to note that Anita Blake, the vampire hunter of Laurell K. Hamilton’s most popular series, is actually “half-Hispanic.” In the texts this fact is only discussed when Anita or other men reflect on her appearance, physique, and build. Anita “has her mother’s black hair and brown eyes” but the very pale, white skin of her father. See Laurell K. Hamilton, *Hit List* (New York: Jove Books, 2011), 2. Being half-Hispanic does not seem to affect any part of her story or inflect any part of her experiences in the (supernatural) world. Her assumed whiteness is interesting to juxtapose to the shared whiteness of her French vampire lovers Jean-Claude and Asher, whom she becomes more like as her powers over the dead and undead grow as the series progresses, and the tan and golden—but never dark—skin of her many were-creature lovers.

employment, community violence and crime. If they do, these issues are meant to construct the city as an “abysmal urban nightmare” meant to horrify or titillate the reader. Instead, the city generally functions as a “whitewashed playground” in which white characters and their vampire boyfriends cavort without real acknowledgement of the dynamics of race and class that allow them to move through the world with such ease. Urban fantasy authors, especially women, are attuned to the ways gender affects their characters’ movement through urban space, often featuring scenes of cat-calling, harassment, rape, and violence, threatened or committed—but race and class remain mostly invisible in urban fantasy fiction.

Older’s critique of the city depicted as “playground” or “abysmal nightmare” for white characters is analogous to historical understandings and discourses of the American inner city, especially as a religious, sacred, or holy space from which white people have something to gain, either spiritually or sensually. In his introduction to the edited volume *Gods of the City*, Robert A. Orsi describes these impulses extensively, arguing that a particular configuration of the city emerged from religious and political discourses circulating in the 1800s:

as the industrial city took shape on the ground, it also emerged as a discursive construction in several overlapping idioms, a charged imaginative creation of fantasy, terror, and desire. For two hundred years, despite (or perhaps because of) the ceaseless urbanizing of the population, the city was cast as the necessary mirror of American civilization, and fundamental categories of American reality—whiteness, heterosexuality, domestic virtue, feminine purity, middle-class respectability—were constituted in opposition to what was said to exist in cities.¹⁵⁸

In the mid-1800s, “journalism, anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant polemics, temperance pamphlets, and evangelical tracts together created a luridly compelling anti-urban genre that depicted the city as the vicious destroyer of the common good, of family life and individual

¹⁵⁸ Robert A. Orsi, *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 5.

character, and counter-posed the city to an idealized image of small-town life.”¹⁵⁹ This anti-urban genre which held small-town life as a moral and spiritual exemplar helped generate prohibitions around the urban landscape that in turn made the city appealing as a site for gratifying forbidden, exotic, sensual desires: “the constant reiteration of the dangers and otherness of the city re-created the urban landscape as an object of fascination and a fantasied space of freedom from social constraint.”¹⁶⁰ The city was a place of terror—an “abysmal urban nightmare” in Older’s terms—in need of “Christian intervention” from those strong enough to withstand its temptations, but the city was also a place of desire—a “playground”—where white folk could dabble or disappear into forbidden pleasures before returning to their safe and sanitized small towns.

Orsi traces the development of another “popular American genre of Christian narratives of city redemption” published in the 1950s and 1960s in which urban darkness and depravity is the stage for dramatic transformations that manifest through redemption. Through these narratives, Orsi theorizes the concept of the “urban holy,” a mode of spiritual fulfillment gained by immersion in the darkness and depravity of the city: “the dirty city is also the holy city: by the conventions of the genre it is precisely into these dark, filthy depths that God comes. The dramatic and spiritual fulfillment offered by these Christian narratives of urban conversion lies in their affirmation of the power of grace to touch absolutely the darkest, most vile, and most inhuman corners of the city’s sinfulness.”¹⁶¹ Christians sought these dark, inhuman city spaces out to encounter the urban holy “amid images and fantasies of urban desolation, primitivism, alienation, depravity—of emptiness that fills (as it is filled by) the desire that obliterates the lived

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 11.

reality of the other.”¹⁶² It is plausible that a similar gaze functions in the whiteness and whitewashing of urban fantasy fiction. As the search for the urban holy empties the city of the rich and abundant lives, realities, vitalities, and cultures of its inhabitants, turning them into stock characters in a drama about redemption and the gazer’s own spiritual fulfillment, so the urban fantasy literature peopled by mostly white characters empties out the city of lived realities of people of color, of low incomes (unless our plucky heroine is down on her luck, soon to be rescued by the vampire billionaire), and immigrants—people whose myths, religions, and magical or esoteric practices are then considered fair game in the cosmological grab bag of urban fantasy metaphysics. Orsi reminds us that

urban distress is real, of course, and so may be God’s grace, but missing from these Christian stories are other dimensions of city life—the historical experiences of city people, for example; their cultures; the rich array of religious idioms available to them (including various forms of African Caribbean religion and Roman Catholicism); the social complexity of city neighborhoods; and the local political, social, familial, and religious resources for stability and order.¹⁶³

I am particularly interested in the last dimension of city life Orsi mentions here, that of the social complexity of city neighborhoods and the various social and familial resources urban residents have at their disposal. An earlier contention of mine was that Older’s literature is remarkable among other urban fantasy works for the prevalence of community and family as key spaces and characters in his novels. This is compared to the battle-ready, isolated individualism and distrust for others that characterizes the worlds of Anita Blake, Dante Valentine, and Jill Kismet. Of course, those characters have allies and lovers who assist them in their battles and conflicts, and Older is less interested in exploring issues of violence and trauma that produce such distrust than the authors of Anita, Dante, and Jill are, but these characters lack a sense of embedded

¹⁶² Ibid., 12.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 11-12.

community with their neighborhoods. For Older's characters, Brooklyn neighborhoods are peopled with familiar faces; readers get backstories and motivations for these secondary characters, and they have bearing on the outcome of the plot. In the case of *Shadowshaper*, that communal effort is what overcomes the white villain's plans, whereas the climax of typical urban fantasy heroines is an individual-oriented victory of the protagonist. The "social complexity" and cultural "dimensions of city life" that Orsi reports missing from the Christian redemption genre (and that Older reports missing from urban fantasy) is foregrounded in Older's literature and is a key part of the stories he tells. In this way, Older's literature features more than just a solitary hero or heroine who must fight or survive the monsters; in Older's literature, the entire community works together to undo the villain, and the entire community shares in the victory.

Shadowshaper and the Community of the Living and Dead

Consider Older's novel *Shadowshaper*, marketed toward young adult readers but set in the same universe as his adult *Bone Street Rumba* novels.¹⁶⁴ Sixteen-year-old Sierra Santiago is a Puerto Rican artist living with her extended family in Brooklyn, and, though she doesn't know it yet, she is heir to a magical family legacy called shadowshaping, or the ability to take spirits of the dead roaming the earth and enliven them by channeling them into the shadowshaper's art, music, or storytelling. Sierra's neighborhood was once full of shadowshapers whose gifts manifested in communal forms of art and creativity like the giant painted murals memorializing the dead on major buildings, the stories told on front stoops, or the music played in local clubs and bars, effectively bringing the dead back into everyday life. But the magic is fading and old shadowshapers are being killed off one-by-one by monstrous creatures. Sierra must discover the truth about her family's history and her own destiny to become Lucera, the powerful female

¹⁶⁴ Daniel José Older, *Shadowshaper* (New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2015).

spirit who holds the shadowshaping tradition together, and must defeat the villain of the novel, Jonathan Wick. Wick is a white anthropologist who became enamored with the power that comes from shadowshaping, and compelled Sierra's grandfather to teach him the tradition. To defeat Wick, Sierra has to find the missing spirit Lucera who can help save the shadowshapers; over the course of the novel, we find out the last human to take Lucera's form was Sierra's grandmother, and as the only other female shadowshaper in their family, Sierra inherits this power.

Sierra's transformation into Lucera happens when she finds her deceased grandmother Carmen's spirit by the ocean, hiding from Wick's power. They embrace and Carmen explains Sierra's heritage and the family troubles that hid it from her. In this magical space, Sierra feels the presence of the spirits around them:

Something inside of Sierra was melting inside that embrace—a gentle tide of acceptance flooding through every corner of her body. It was all real, every moment of it, and it reached deep into the heart of her own family. Her abuela – that same old face she'd feared and loved as a child – was Lucera, the exiled sun of the spirit world. [...]

When Sierra lifted her teary face from Mama Carmen's shoulder, she saw that the spirits had circled closer. She thought she could glimpse the hints of faces on some of them, open mouths and eyes both sad and inspired. She wondered what secrets they carried, what powers. They spun in slow orbits around the two women, singing their spirit songs and watching, always watching.

They would help her, these spirits. They would rise up against Wick beside her.¹⁶⁵

Carmen then transfers the power and being of Lucera to Sierra, and the transformation connects her metaphysically to a deep and feminine spiritual lineage:

The old spirit wrapped around Sierra, and suddenly the entire world was full of blinding light. The brightness seared into Sierra's eyeballs, coated the inside of her brain, and burst like a languid, slow-motion explosion down her spine and through her entire body. Light, invincible, unstoppable, infinite light flooded through her veins, filled each of her organs, poured out of her mouth, covered her skin. The same gentle, relentless rhythm that surged through the shadows and Mama Carmen surged through her now. The spirits' hymn grew louder and louder, erupted from inside her, but somewhere beneath it all she heard a voice singing softly. She could barely make out the words.

¹⁶⁵ Older, *Shadowshaper*, 221-22.

And then everything stopped: the crashing waves, the singing spirits, the wind. Sierra floated in an infinite sea of light. The only sound she heard was the old woman's song:
Cuando la luna llena...mata al Viejo sol...

It wasn't Mama Carmen's voice; it was someone else, even older than her. Sierra inhaled; the smell of fresh soil and recent rain surrounded her. And something else: garlic. Garlic simmering on a stovetop nearby.¹⁶⁶

The transformation into Lucera connects Sierra to a world of spiritual presence and to a lineage of powerful women. The "garlic simmering on a stovetop" evokes the presence of family and community, forms of feminine communion around "feminine" work like cooking, and traditions, secrets, and stories passed down between generations over and during this labor. As with the ghosts of suffering women who came to Emma and Miranda in moments between life and death, Sierra's transformation and power is defined by the presence of spirits and ancestors. Power comes from presence; Carmen tells Sierra that "without Lucera there's no shadowshaping, but without shadowshaping there's no Lucera. We are entwined. I drew power from the spirits and spirit workers and I returned it to them tenfold. The true source of shadowshaper magic is in that connection, community, Sierra. We are interdependent."¹⁶⁷

Becoming Lucera opens Sierra up to the full potential of her connection with spirits and ancestors, and she uses this power to hunt down and confront Wick. Because Wick is a white anthropologist whose villainy personifies white imperialist power, subjugation, and appropriation, whole histories of suffering and anger rise in the spirits through Sierra when they confront him together in an old abandoned building:

Sierra was Lucera, a fierce spiritual warrior like her grandmother. She was stepping into her destiny. The spirits' intentions unified with hers. They were righteous, these spirits, and ferocious. They were not about to see their world destroyed at the hands of some old fool like Wick. No. They, Sierra and the spirits, would not be manipulated, dogged, oppressed. Not after so many years of struggle.

[...]

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 224.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 220.

She had to remind herself to breathe. *Become one*. One wasn't a person: It was a state. One with the spirits. Their purpose, energy, power, ferocity had all unified with her body. She was no longer the conduit; she was the form, the vessel. She, they, had become one.

"WICK!" Sierra's voice boomed across the building, echoing back and forth amidst the empty light fixtures and dusty piping. Her voice carried the voices of a hundred thousand souls in it; a whole history of resistance and rage moved with her. It felt terrific. She stepped over the crumpled body of the demon she'd just murked. Wick had to be nearby, the little worm. And she would deal with him. She would end this right now.¹⁶⁸

When Wick's monstrous spirit creatures are defeated, Sierra confronts his cowering form and decides to take his power from him so that he cannot become something more monstrous in death:

She could do better than death, she decided. She was a surgeon, not a butcher. She concentrated for a half second, and then simply allowed all the spirits churning inside her to surge forward into Wick.

They left memories behind as they passed from her hands. A dizzying collage of smells, moments, emotions, longings sped through Sierra's entire body. She was on a horse in the rain forest, galloping toward freedom. She was alone in a cell, coming to terms for the four hundredth time with her imminent death and the deaths she'd dealt. She was in the full rapture of love. She was ashamed. Her brain simmered with bursts of lilac, cigar smoke, sweat, the cringe of a missed opportunity, pangs of hunger. Most of all, though, she felt alive. The dead were so alive! They carried their whole lives with them in those tall, walking shadows, brought each second, each thrill and tragedy with them wherever they went.

She looked down at Wick. He screamed as the spirits swarmed through him, burrowing into the most intimate reaches of his soul. Sierra sharpened her mind and allowed her vision to slip alongside the spirits as they thundered through the old anthropologist's inner workings. *Take his powers*, Sierra told them, but they were already on it. Little flashes of light blinked out as the spirits sped through his blood vessels and entrails, crisscrossing synapses and cell membranes. *All his powers*. Sierra could feel the purge, feel the tremendous vacuum as every last echo of Wick's spiritual power was obliterated like a ramshackle hut in a monsoon.¹⁶⁹

The spirits extinguish his power, and Wick ages and dies in mere seconds. But the battle is not over, for he has monstrous spirits called "throng haints," headed to harm Sierra's family. It takes the entire community, her friends, family, and ancestors in spirit and mural form to protect the neighborhood. The novel then concludes with a memorial service to those community members

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 280-81.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 291-92.

killed by Wick, in which Sierra is surrounded again by her friends and family and spirits of the dead.

Similar to the presence of victimized women in Emma’s and Miranda’s stories, we see the sustained presence of the spirits and the dead in Sierra’s story. But where Miranda avenges the victims’ ghosts, and Emma must resist the collective pull of the women’s weariness, the spirits of the dead aid Sierra in her battles, they survive their physical deaths at the hands of Wick and remain vital spiritual presences in the communities, enlivened through being “shaped” into the murals, songs, and stories of the living. Sierra’s power is intimately tied to the spirits, and through Sierra, the spirits retain life and presence with the living. And it is their unity and the “righteousness” of their rage and ferocity that ends Wick. If Wick is the personification or spirit of white imperialism and histories of enslavement and subjugation, it is the collective, communal, and righteous power that defeats this legacy.

Better Stories, Better Truths

Older’s critique of the erasure of people of color from urban fantasy comes from the belief that literature should tell the truth. For him, diversity in urban fantasy is a matter of *truthfully* representing real worlds—which urban fantasy certainly purports to do while also layering those real worlds with certain supernatural presences and powers (or revealing that they never went away). Truthful representations means representations that do not erase people of color from the world or suggest that they have no place in speculative fiction, and truthful representations do not leave all the heroics to white characters. Older has posed this argument in a number of essays and Twitter conversations, such as the following series of Tweets:

“whiteness sees non-whiteness as ‘diverse,’ as other. But POC living in a ‘diverse’ neighborhood see it as just what is: truth.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, August 24, 2015, 12:37 p.m.

“that’s why I always say when we fight for diverse books we’re really just fighting for a more honest literature. Books that tell the truth.”¹⁷¹

“and why I always flinch a little at the word ‘diverse.’ I get that it’s useful, I’m not *against* it per se, but...”¹⁷²

“Never forget that what we’re really fighting for is the most basic kind of justice: that books do what they’re supposed to – tell the truth.”¹⁷³

“because when we say, “We Need Diverse Books’ we’re really saying “We Need Books That Don’t Lie To Us About Who We Are Or Whether We Exist”¹⁷⁴

“because we do indeed exist and will continue to, despite what the spectacularly undiverse (read: dishonest) YA dystopias will tell you.”¹⁷⁵

“we are indeed protagonists, not just clowns and sidekicks and villains. Not cannon fodder, despite what US history will try to tell you.”¹⁷⁶

Older juxtaposes the truth-telling capacity of fiction with political and historical narratives that erase and demonize people of color. He is implicitly connecting erasure in fiction to erasure in political and historical narratives meant to support and maintain white supremacy and its institutions. I talk about this more in the context of “privilege maintenance” in the following sections of this chapter, but for now it is instructive to consider some of the reactions of readers to *Shadowshaper* as Older has received them, in order to understand the significance of representation in media more broadly but in speculative fiction especially. Older Tweeted:

“Two Black women in the past day have told me reading SHADOWSHAPER felt like Home and really, that’s the best thing in the world to hear.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷¹ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, August 24, 2015, 12:40 p.m.

¹⁷² Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, August 24, 2015, 12:41 p.m.

¹⁷³ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, August 24, 2015, 12:42 p.m.

¹⁷⁴ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, August 24, 2015, 12:46 p.m.

¹⁷⁵ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, August 24, 2015, 12:48 p.m.

¹⁷⁶ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, August 24, 2015, 12:49 p.m.

“been talking a lot this week about *not* writing for everybody. Especially b/c certain folks always get to feel at home in fantasy lit”¹⁷⁸

“this brings me to a related point – writing *for* some people doesn’t automatically mean excluding others.”¹⁷⁹

“But it’s framed that way often when we’re writing to a non-white audience. The expectation being POC have to learn to translate, whites don’t”¹⁸⁰

Here Older reports the feeling of women reading a sense of home in *Shadowshaper*, a feeling of seeing themselves in a character’s story and situation and self-understanding. This opens up the question to Older of who gets to see whom in fiction; he invokes a long-standing critique of white-washed literature in which authors of color have to write for white audiences, or “translate” such that white audiences can see and place themselves in the literature, whereas white authors can write the so-called universal “human experience” without having to translate or write “for” diverse audiences. This framing calls to mind Barbara Christian’s comments in her article “The Race for Theory,” in which she discusses the refusal of academic institutions to recognize and legitimize black forms and modes of theorizing. “The minds of the world lived only in the small continent of Europe,” she was taught, and, as a scholar, “I was supposed to know *them*, while they were not at all interested in knowing *me*.”¹⁸¹ That is, academically, Christian was expected to read and engage with white theorist’s work and canons, but there was no reciprocal relationship there; white scholars were (and still are) largely uninterested in non-white theory, especially when it takes forms like fiction and poetry that challenge and exceed the

¹⁷⁷ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, February 15, 2016, 7:53 a.m.

¹⁷⁸ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, February 15, 2016, 7:55 a.m.

¹⁷⁹ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, February 15, 2016, 7:59 a.m.

¹⁸⁰ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, February 15, 2016, 8:00 a.m.

¹⁸¹ Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory” in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. by Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 16.

traditional conventions of “theory” and “theoretical” writing. Christian further connects writing, in its various theoretical functions, to survival:

I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally. For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know *is*. It is an affirmation that sensuality is intelligence, that sensual language is language that makes sense....My readings do presuppose a need, a desire among folk who like me also want to save their own lives. My concern, then, is a passionate one, for the literature of people who are not in power has always been in danger of extinction or of cooptation, not because we do not theorize, but because what we can even imagine, far less who we can reach, is constantly limited by societal structures.¹⁸²

Literature, to Christian, functions to ground her in reality, to affirm her perceptions of the world when white supremacy and white thinkers want to control the conversation and bend its contours to suit the maintenance of the status quo—a status quo that kills and perpetuates suffering.

Writing, literature, and theory, then, function to save, revitalize, ground, and help marginalized people to endure. It speaks back to those who would control and silence conversation and language.

Older recounts similar effects of literature reported to him from readers of *Shadowshaper*, and from his and his students’ experiences reading Octavia Butler’s sci-fi and fantasy literature:

“Someone asked me who I write for, and of course it changes, but this book [*Shadowshaper*] more than any other is written to/for girls and women of color”¹⁸³

“There are a lot of reasons for that. 1 is that very few books are written directly to women of color, and of those even fewer are magical.”¹⁸⁴

“I had been teaching and community organizing for a few years, and most of my kids were black and brown girls in Bushwick and BedStuy.”¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Ibid., 21-22.

¹⁸³ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, June 9, 2015, 11:02 a.m.

¹⁸⁴ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, June 9, 2015, 11:04 a.m.

¹⁸⁵ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, June 9, 2015, 11:05 a.m.

“They read PARABLE of the SOWER and their eyes went wide. Sci-fi! With brown people! We made it to the future! Ayyyyyy!! It was a revelation”¹⁸⁶

“and it echoed a revelation of my own, years and years earlier, when Mrs. Inez Middleton, my 7th grade English teacher took me aside...”¹⁸⁷

“and gave me Octavia’s BLOODCHILD. Like, just handed me her copy. No real explanation, no idea why she did that, she just gave it to me.”¹⁸⁸

“Yes, it blew my mind, but it really took 2 decades before that seed blossomed, when I was trying to figure out what to do with my life...”¹⁸⁹

“how to get off that ambulance and live some kinda creative life. And I remembered Octavia. And then I devoured EVERYTHING she’d written.”¹⁹⁰

“and something clicked – here, power and fantasy and race and gender and magic all crashed into each other. A terrible, beautiful collision.”¹⁹¹

Here, we see that SFF literature transforms lives; reading Octavia Butler generated a creative drive that started Older’s writing career. These comments also drive home the importance of representation to marginalized communities; reading science-fiction novels “was a revelation” that showed kids they actually “made it to the future”—contrary to urban, national, political and cultural forces that strive to keep people of color, especially the young, in dead-end, low-wage jobs, or in the school-to-prison pipelines, and contrary to institutions and forces that strive to strip the future, its possibilities, and even hope from marginalized people. But *truthful* stories disrupt these forces and institutions, they speak back, they give hope and meaningful

¹⁸⁶ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, June 9, 2015, 11:05 a.m.

¹⁸⁷ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, June 9, 2015, 11:06 a.m.

¹⁸⁸ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, June 9, 2015, 11:07 a.m.

¹⁸⁹ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, June 9, 2015, 11:08 a.m.

¹⁹⁰ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, June 9, 2015, 11:09 a.m.

¹⁹¹ Daniel José Older (djolder), Twitter post, June 9, 2015, 11:11 a.m.

representations that show readers there can be a future and that survival is revolutionary. Perhaps this is one reason mass-market SFF literature is so often derided as trashy, low-culture, mindless, escapist entertainment; this material is deeply powerful, it is unwieldy, unpredictable, and dangerous to the status quo. It facilitates survival and engenders the capacity to dream and imagine. Like Emma Bannon, and like Sierra's spirits, *it lives*.

Salvific Literature: The #YAsaves Phenomenon

I turn now to analyze similar discourses about the power of fiction and its capacity to challenge what I call “privilege maintenance” in Young Adult (YA) literature. Here we will see how vulnerabilities associated with age intersect with gender, race, and class in concerns surrounding the power of literature. YA literature is a rapidly growing, enormously popular genre of fiction directed at young readers aged twelve to seventeen.¹⁹² YA has a long and complex history, but sales have exploded since the end of the twentieth century thanks to widely-read books like the *Harry Potter* novels (1997-2007), the *Hunger Games* series (2008-2010), and the *Twilight Saga* (2005-2008).¹⁹³ YA novels feature adolescent and teenage protagonists and cover multiple genres, such as science fiction, fantasy, adventure, romance, mystery/suspense, and horror/supernatural genres.¹⁹⁴ *Publishers Weekly* reported in July 2014 that across all genres, adult and YA, the top selling books (for both print and e-readers) of the year so far were predominantly YA titles.¹⁹⁵ It is important to note that although YA literature is intended for teen

¹⁹² “New Study: 55% of YA Books Bought by Adults,” *Publishers Weekly*, September 13, 2012, accessed December 11, 2014, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/53937-new-study-55-of-ya-books-bought-by-adults.html>

¹⁹³ S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) is commonly considered the first YA novel.

¹⁹⁴ Jim Milliot, “Children's Books: A Shifting Market,” *Publishers Weekly*, February 24, 2014, accessed December 22, 2014, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/61167-childrens-books-a-shifting-market.html>.

¹⁹⁵ These titles include Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series and *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green—both of which were adapted into films and released in early 2014. Clare Swanson, “The Bestselling Books of 2014 (So Far),”

readers, *Publishers Weekly* also reports that 55% of buyers of YA books are over 18, and of those buyers, 78% purchase the books for themselves, rather than for teen readers.¹⁹⁶ The genre runs the gamut from light-hearted romance to dark and gruesome horror, while supernatural stories featuring vampires, witches, shapeshifters, and other magical beings are immensely popular at this cultural moment. Stories of dystopian futures and other- or underworlds are also popular, and issue-oriented novels that take up problems such as drug addiction, sexual assault, abuse, suicide, self-injury, terminal disease, and eating disorders are also commonly published. This recent swing toward “dark” themes, characters, and worlds has drawn the ire of some critics and commentators who question the appropriateness of violent subjects for teen readers.

On June 4th, 2011, one such critic, Meghan Cox Gurdon, published an editorial on the state of YA literature titled “Darkness Too Visible” in the *Wall Street Journal*.¹⁹⁷ In the editorial, Gurdon argues that YA literature has grown far too dark and gruesome for teen readers and urges parents to show caution and oversight in their children’s reading choices. Contemporary YA fiction, Gurdon argues, is “so dark that kidnapping and pederasty and incest and brutal beatings are now just part of the run of things in novels directed, broadly speaking, at children from the ages of 12 to 18.”¹⁹⁸ She recognizes that, for books like Jackie Morse Kessler’s 2011 novel *Rage* or Cheryl Rainfield’s 2010 novel *Scars*, both of which chronicle a teen girl’s struggle with self-injury, “the argument in favor of such novels is that they validate the teen experience, giving voice to tortured adolescents who would otherwise be voiceless. If a teen has been abused, the

Publishers Weekly, July 4, 2014, accessed December 11, 2014, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/63195-ya-tops-nielsen-and-kindle-lists-for-2014-so-far.html>

¹⁹⁶ “New Study: 55% of YA Books Bought by Adults.”

¹⁹⁷ Meghan Cox Gurdon, “Darkness Too Visible,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 4, 2011, accessed October 13, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303657404576357622592697038>.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

logic follows, reading about another teen in the same straits will be comforting.”¹⁹⁹ But Gurdon contends that there is a risk to graphic depictions of the struggle with self-injury:

it is also possible—indeed, likely—that books focusing on pathologies help normalize them and, in the case of self-harm, may even spread their plausibility and likelihood to young people who might otherwise never have imagined such extreme measures. Self-destructive adolescent behaviors are observably infectious and have periods of vogue. That is not to discount the real suffering that some young people endure; it is an argument for taking care.²⁰⁰

In other words, Gurdon fears that depictions of graphic violence, trauma, and suffering risk normalizing “pathological” responses to trauma and abuse. Such “lurid” depictions of self-injury, suicide, eating disorders, sexual violence, and substance abuse may encourage, naturalize, and even glamorize the behaviors in teen readers. Gurdon acknowledges that “reading about homicide doesn’t turn a man into a murderer [and] reading about cheating on exams won’t make a kid break the honor code,” but she contends that dark YA cultivates a particular taste and aesthetic sensibility in teen readers which is not conducive to fostering “a child’s happiness, moral development and tenderness of heart.”²⁰¹ Her article then singles out several authors whose recently published YA novels are emblematic of this “darkness too visible,” including Andrew Smith, Jackie Morse Kessler, Cheryl Rainfield, Lauren Myracle, and Sherman Alexie.

In the days following the publication of Gurdon’s essay, authors and readers took to social media vociferously decrying the assertion that dark themes and graphic depictions of violence in YA normalize and encourage “pathological” behavior. Several authors named by Gurdon, including Sherman Alexie, Cheryl Rainfield, and Jackie Morse Kessler, blogged their responses, and thousands of readers and writers took to Twitter to contest Gurdon’s claims using

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

the hashtag #YAsaves. According to *Publishers Weekly*, YA author Maureen Johnson was the first to use the hashtag.²⁰² Her Tweet asked, “Did YA help you? Let the world know how! Tell your story with a #YAsaves tag. And copy the @wsj for good measure.”²⁰³ *Publishers Weekly* reported that “within hours, #YAsaves got 15,000 responses from regular readers and from such big-name writers as Judy Blume and Neil Gaiman.”²⁰⁴ At present, use of the hashtag is dwindling, but it remains active with a handful of weekly Tweets. Below is a sample of the things readers—both adult and teen—had to say about how YA literature saved them:

@decemberviolet: “I was 16 and a cutter. Reading helped me realise I wasn’t as alone as I thought and that there was a light in the darkness. @wsj #Yasaves”²⁰⁵

@jlewenda: “Books helped me realize that it wasn’t my fault for being raped. #Yasaves @wsj”²⁰⁶

@markokloos: “The darkest, most violent book I read as a kid was the one we read in Sunday school. The stuff from the library didn’t come close. #Yasaves”²⁰⁷

@livtompkins: “Reading of any kind was always my savior and it was YA lit that saved me from losing myself to grief after losing loved ones. #Yasaves @wsj”²⁰⁸

@sickcuriosity: “YA helped me stay alive when an abusive home and being gay made me not want to be anymore. #Yasaves”²⁰⁹

@GalliGillyPuff: “without ya, I would have committed suicide in 8th grade. Ya gave me HOPE and a REASON to keep going through my darkness. #Yasaves @wsj”²¹⁰

²⁰² Karen Springen, “Are Teen Novels Dark and Depraved—or Saving Lives?” *Publishers Weekly*, June 9, 2011, accessed December 7, 2014, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/47570-are-teen-novels-dark-and-depraved-or-saving-lives.html>.

²⁰³ Maureen Johnson (maureenjohnson), Twitter post, June 4, 2011, 7:52 p.m. <https://twitter.com/maureenjohnson>.

²⁰⁴ Springen, “Teen Novels.”

²⁰⁵ Care (decemberviolet), Twitter post, June 4, 2011, 8:55 p.m. <http://twitter.com/decemberviolet>.

²⁰⁶ Jessica Lewenda (jlewenda), Twitter post, June 4, 2011, 8:57 p.m. <http://twitter.com/jlewenda>.

²⁰⁷ Marko Kloos (markokloos), Twitter post, June 5, 2011, 9:50 a.m. <http://twitter.com/markokloos>.

²⁰⁸ OT (livtompkins), Twitter post, June 4, 2011, 8:58 p.m. <http://twitter.com/livtompkins>.

²⁰⁹ neolutionist jerk (sickcuriosity), Twitter post, June 4, 2011, 9:28 p.m. <http://twitter.com/sickcuriosity>.

@JoKnowles: “Teen me needed novels @wsj describes not b/c I was “troubled” but b/c they made me more compassionate & changed how I treated others #yasaves”²¹¹

Of the thousands of responses, the general sentiments shared were that YA novels taught readers to have empathy for people who were different from them; to give support for LGBTQ friends who came out; and to have hope and endurance when they were an LGBTQ teen who had no support. Reading YA also gave suffering readers a coping mechanism for the experience of suicidal thoughts, self-injury, and eating disorders; a safe (or as safe as can be) place to escape domestic abuse, divorce, or the loss of loved ones; and someone to tell them they were not at fault or responsible for being raped, molested, assaulted, or bullied.

Readers also took to personal blogs and online media to challenge Gurdon’s argument. “Emma,” who runs the blog *Booking Through 365*, describes herself as “a teen who loves books with a passion, and loves analyzing them even more.” On June 5th, she posted a letter to Gurdon titled “There Are Whole Lives In These Bookshelves,” which is worth quoting from extensively:

With all due respect Ms. Gurdon, if you honestly believe that the darkness is too visible in teen literature, then you have never truly seen the teen perspective.

I have seen YA books expose darkness, reveal depth, find flaws, give hope, change minds, break hearts and then repair them. Good literature rips open all the private parts of us – the parts people like you have deemed too dark, inappropriate, grotesque or abnormal for teens to be feeling – and then they stitch it all back together again before we even realize they’re not talking about us. They’re talking about their characters.

You must not have met the anorexic, the self-injurer, the rape or bully victim, the child who has to deal with their parent’s alcoholism, the teen with a gay or mentally ill parent, the teen who is discovering their sexuality, learning about their culture, recently been victim of a hate crime, fallen in love with the wrong person, the right person at the wrong time, the traumatized, the abused, the scarred.

And what I find most insulting of all is that you think their voices will *hurt* teens who are only being exposed to their words.

²¹⁰ Gilly Marauder (GalliGilliPuff), Twitter post, June 4, 2011, 8:55 p.m., <http://twitter.com/GalliGilliPuff>.

²¹¹ Jo Knowles (JoKnowles), Twitter post, June 5, 2011, 6:15 p.m. <http://twitter.com/JoKnowles>.

Teenagers, contrary to popular belief, are not stupid. And I have not seen a YA writer in all of history who would want to leave their readers thinking that self injury – the example you give in your essay – is a *good* coping mechanism. We have minds with thoughts in our heads, as the friend I discussed your article with said last night. We can easily understand that authors are trying to prevent us from going down unhealthy paths, or redirect the path we're going down already.

And I fiercely believe with every part of me that the teen you mention – the one with a healthy home and school life who is entirely different from the scarred protagonist of the YA book they opened – will only be less judgmental, more open, educated and informed by the time they close the very same novel.²¹²

Like the Tweets tagged “#YAsaves,” Emma’s letter attests to the idea that reading about protagonists struggling with issues like self-injury, eating disorders, and violence at home and school can function to save hurting teens and generate empathy in teens who do not experience trauma and tragedy. Emma challenges the idea that dark literature is “infectious” and transmits harmful behavior, arguing instead that it transmits understanding, empathy, and information. Dark YA, to Emma, makes the world a better place. She finds Gurdon’s concern over the communicability of darkness patronizing, insulting, and excessively privileged, and she is not alone.

Sherman Alexie, famous author of both adult and YA fiction, shares similar sentiments with Emma. Alexie’s 2007 YA novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (which Gurdon notes is, according to the American Library Association, one of the top twenty most frequently challenged books in America²¹³) was also named in Gurdon’s piece as an exemplar of the darkness too visible in YA fiction. On June 9th, 2011, five days after Gurdon published her critique, Alexie published his own editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*, titled, “Why the Best Kids

²¹² Emma, “There Are Whole Lives In These Bookshelves,” *Booking Through 365*, June 5, 2011, accessed December 12, 2014, <http://www.bookingthrough365.com/2011/06/there-are-whole-lives-in-these.html>.

²¹³ Gurdon, “Darkness.”

Books Are Written in Blood.”²¹⁴ Alexie finds a problematic notion of salvation operating in Gurdon’s argument, and like Emma, he questions exactly whom it is Gurdon seeks to save when she asks for more “taste” and “beauty” in YA fiction. He notes that the teens already experiencing self-injury, rape, eating disorders, pregnancy or abortion, violent homes, and violent communities are not going to be traumatized by dark YA—the “hell” they already live through is what traumatizes them. He draws on his childhood experience as a Native American youth with adults who wanted to save him, noting:

Of course, all during my childhood, would-be saviors tried to rescue my fellow tribal members. They wanted to rescue me. But, even then, I could only laugh at their platitudes. In those days, the cultural conservatives thought that KISS and Black Sabbath were going to impede my moral development. They wanted to protect me from sex when I had already been raped. They wanted to protect me from evil though a future serial killer had already abused me. They wanted me to profess my love for God without considering that I was the child and grandchild of men and women who’d been sexually and physically abused by generations of clergy.

What was my immature, childish response to those would-be saviors?

“Wow, you are way, way too late.”²¹⁵

To Alexie, his “would-be saviors” focused on the wrong cultural influences, naming media and popular culture dangerous rather than the people, institutions, and social conditions that he points to as causing true harm. He argues that teens do not need saving from dark and gritty books, but rather from the social conditions that, first, cause teens to seek out dark fiction as a resource or coping mechanism, and second, are the actual source material of the literature’s dark themes and subjects in the first place. Then Alexie questions precisely whom it is Gurdon seeks to save in her push to purge YA literature of “lurid” and “pathological” darkness:

²¹⁴ Sherman Alexie, “Why the Best Kids Books Are Written in Blood,” *Wall Street Journal: Speakeasy*, June 9, 2011, accessed December 7, 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2011/06/09/why-the-best-kids-books-are-written-in-blood/>.

²¹⁵ Alexie, “Written in Blood.”

When some cultural critics fret about the “ever-more-appalling” YA books, they aren’t trying to protect African-American teens forced to walk through metal detectors on their way into school. Or Mexican-American teens enduring the culturally schizophrenic life of being American citizens and the children of illegal immigrants. Or Native American teens growing up on Third World reservations. Or poor white kids trying to survive the meth-hazed trailer parks. They aren’t trying to protect the poor from poverty. Or victims from rapists.

No, they are simply trying to protect their privileged notions of what literature is and should be. They are trying to protect privileged children.²¹⁶

Alexie argues that people who have already been traumatized by violence and suffering are not the ones Gurdon wants to protect. Rather, Gurdon and those who would whitewash or censor teen literature are trying to protect a privileged, sheltered class of teens from the ugliness of the real world, from the “hells” their peers live through. Where does that leave the teens currently living through hell? He concludes:

As a child, I read because books—violent and not, blasphemous and not, terrifying and not—were the most loving and trustworthy things in my life. [...] I became the kid chased by werewolves, vampires and evil clowns in Stephen King’s books. I read books about monsters and monstrous things, often written with monstrous language, because they taught me how to battle the real monsters in my life.

And now I write books for teenagers because I vividly remember what it felt to be a teen facing everyday and epic dangers. I don’t write to protect them. It’s far too late for that. I write to give them weapons—in the form of words and ideas—that will help them fight their monsters. I write in blood because I remember what it felt like to bleed.²¹⁷

Reading fiction, dark or not, is more than just an opportunity to step into another person’s world and learn to empathize with them. It is more than just a safe space, a space of learning, and a space of escape. According to Sherman Alexie, books provide weapons that actively aid the teens lost in the dark, the teens fighting to survive. To readers and authors, Gurdon seems to have picked the wrong side of the battle—instead of fighting social conditions and institutions that

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

perpetuate victimization, she silences the victims, citing reasons of “taste.” If books function to “arm” these lost, bleeding teens, no wonder Gurdon feels so uneasy in the dark.

Central to this conversation about dark fiction, then, is the idea of what literature *does*. Does literature have the capacity to transmit harmful behavior? Does it create an insatiable taste in teen readers for the graphic and obscene? Or does literature cultivate empathy and understanding? Does it offer readers a safe place to escape or find means of healing from trauma and tragedy? Gurdon wants to protect teens from a communicable darkness riding popular media, while readers and writers like Emma and Alexie say the darkness in literature functions to arm teens with “weapons” of empathy, endurance, and hope. Another concept circulating in this conversation is privilege. Readers and authors are arguing that Gurdon speaks from a position of privilege and seeks to protect other privileged children from the horrors of the dark. Emma and Alexie both raise the point that the only people helped through this degree of censorship and the call for rigid parental oversight are teens who have not experienced trauma and tragedy; moreover, Gurdon’s call for taste and care silences the experiences of those who have lived and are living through violence and trauma. Dark YA fiction, then, functions for readers as a site of amplification for the voices of those who suffer violence and trauma, and the thousands of Tweets and blogs that argue YA literature saves collectively function as a massive social critique of victim silencing, privilege maintenance, and obliviousness to the social institutions that sustain a status quo in which victimized teens are considered acceptable losses.

As the comments of Sherman Alexie and @markokloos indicate, readers and authors point to religious institutions as one of the social forces that purports and attempts to save, but misses the mark by the standards of suffering individuals. While religious groups *attempt* to save teens, writers and their books *actually* save teens. In this conversation, the salvific power of

literature is explicitly juxtaposed to “would-be” religious saviors. As so many of these novels that function to save readers today take as their subject religious, supernatural, or paranormal themes, it will be productive to connect this narrative of salvific literature to other scholars’ work on the significance of supernatural pop culture, and to contextualize depictions of graphic YA violence within that body of work.

When the Supernatural Saves

One of the most popular sub-genres of YA literature is supernatural fantasy fiction. These novels are exemplified by Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight Saga*, Rachel Mead’s *Vampire Academy* series, Lauren Kate’s *Fallen* tetralogy, and, of course, J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. This category of YA fiction features magic and superpowers, vampires and werewolves, fallen angels and sexy demons, and even brain-eating zombies redeemed and transformed back into humanity through the power of romantic love. A pervading theme runs throughout this supernatural fantasy literature which posits that the old religious order—where good and evil were clearly delineated, where agents of good (angels, God) always defeated agents of evil (demons, monsters), where social threats come from the outside—is dead or broken, and humans or supernatural humans are on their own in the struggle to survive against evil forces. An integral component to this theme is the narrative of a human protagonist discovering a secret supernatural heritage, or being unexpectedly transformed into a werewolf, vampire, or other supernatural being.

Author Jackie Morse Kessler’s *Riders of the Apocalypse* tetralogy is an exemplar of this transformation trope. In the first three of Kessler’s novels, a struggling teen is given the opportunity to become a Rider of the Apocalypse: in *Hunger* (2010), seventeen year old Lisa struggles with an eating disorder and becomes the black rider Famine; in *Rage* (2011), sixteen year old Missy struggles with self-injury and becomes the red rider War; in *Loss* (2012), fifteen

year old Billy is bullied relentlessly at school and becomes the white rider Pestilence. (In *Breath* (2013), rather than a teen, the immortal personification of Death, the pale rider who assigns each teen their office, struggles with the desire to die by suicide.²¹⁸ *Rage* was one of the too-dark novels named by Gurdon, who had this to say of the story:

In Jackie Morse Kessler’s gruesome but inventive 2011 take on a girl’s struggle with self-injury, “*Rage*,” teenage Missy’s secret cutting turns nightmarish after she is the victim of a sadistic sexual prank. “She had sliced her arms to ribbons, but the badness remained, staining her insides like a cancer. She had gouged her belly until it was a mess of meat and blood, but she still couldn’t breathe.” Missy survives, but only after a stint as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.²¹⁹

Kessler responded swiftly via blog post to Gurdon’s article, arguing that, “to suggest that *Rage* effectively glamorizes self-injury is both insulting and stupid. The entire purpose of the book – indeed, of all of the Riders of the Apocalypse books – is to raise awareness of issues such as self-injury and eating disorders and bullying.”²²⁰ Kessler then links to statistics about teen self-injury, eating disorders, and bullying, citing atrociously high numbers, and arguing that “issue novels” are consequently

urgent for the young, and for their parents....With numbers like ‘1 in 10’ and ‘10 million females/1million males’ and ‘1 million kids,’ it’s crucial that kids and teens—and adults—understand that when they’re suffering with conditions or disorders that might otherwise lead them down a path of no return, *they’re not alone*...Ignoring ugly truths doesn’t make those truths go away. Silence is never the answer. Granted, there may be those who will always advocate censorship rather than frank discussion. But the more that people insist on limiting the books we read, the more those books need to be read.²²¹

²¹⁸ Jackie Morse Kessler, *Hunger: Riders of the Apocalypse* (New York: Graphia, 2010); *Rage: Riders of the Apocalypse* (New York: Graphia, 2011); *Loss: Riders of the Apocalypse* (New York: Graphia, 2012); *Breath: Riders of the Apocalypse* (New York: Graphia, 2013).

²¹⁹ Gurdon, “Darkness.”

²²⁰ Jackie Morse Kessler, “Making the Darkness Visible,” *Jackie Morse Kessler Blog*, June 5, 2011, accessed December 12, 2014, <http://jackiemorsekessler.com/blog/2011/06/05/making-the-darkness-visible/>.

²²¹ Kessler, “Visible.”

Kessler argues that her *Riders* series functions to raise awareness and understanding of problems like self-injury, rather than to glamorize and normalize it. A close reading of *Rage* will thus shed light on how such novels depict darkness and what readers find to be salvific in them.

Missy Miller is practiced at burying her pain deep down. She keeps a lockbox with a small blade and blood-soaked cloth buried at the bottom of her closet, and her body is covered in self-inflicted scars. “To Missy,” Kessler writes, “pain was a blessing. It was a moment of crystalline purity, one that made everything somehow bearable, if only for a little while.... Pain was her salvation; seeing her blood on her skin was like seeing God.”²²² After an ex-boyfriend plays a vile sexual prank on her, Missy is overwhelmed by pain and humiliation, and in her desperate attempt to control raging emotions and find numbness through cutting, she accidentally slices an artery:

And maybe it was because her fingers were slick with blood, or maybe it was because she was exhausted and wretched and in excruciating pain, but for whatever reason, her next stroke—her final stroke—slipped, and she opened up an artery. The spray hit her eyes, her cheek, her chin. [...] And then the blade slipped from her hand and she sank to the ground and she watched as her life leaked out of her in thick streamers of red.²²³

The personification of Death shows up while she is bleeding out and offers her another chance: if she accepts the office of the Red Rider of the Apocalypse, she will heal and live. Missy picks up the symbol of her new identity—another blade, a sword this time—and the life floods back into her body. With it, however, comes “the eternal spirit of aggression,”²²⁴ War:

Missy closed her fingers around the handle and lifted the Sword free from its box. Emotions slammed into her, riding her body and screaming along her skin. Anger in its various forms took her first, chewed her up and spat her out: fury, scalding and insistent; jealousy, a gnawing hunger; hatred, cold enough to freeze her blood. Happiness, then, had its turn, soothing her where rage had left scorch marks: joy, blissful and light;

²²² Kessler, *Rage*, 46.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 47.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

kindness, a warm balm; the giddy touch of glee; a tickle of contentment. Love washed over her in a gentle rain, only to burn her as it transformed into lust and, hotter still, ecstasy. On its heels came the soft chill of vulnerability, and the wrenching emptiness of shame.

All of that and more, all in the space of one breath to the next.

Missy's body jittered as the elations and sorrows of every living thing jolted through her like lightning. She tried to scream but couldn't do more than grit her teeth against the tidal wave of sensation.²²⁵

Missy's transformation into a supernatural being functions throughout the novel as a metaphor for her struggle with self-injury. The cutting is depicted as helping her control and channel emotions that otherwise overwhelm her. But with her transformation into the Red Rider, Missy now embodies the spirit of War, and the wild, raging emotions inside her increase by an order of magnitude. Death knows from the beginning that her struggle with self-injury will be linked to her struggle to control War's spirit:

Control, Death whispered in her mind.

Control? That was a bitter joke. Proof of that was tattooed along her arms and legs and stomach.

You cut yourself in reaction to an abundance of emotion, Death said, unflappable. *Act instead of react. Control.*

Tears squeezed from her eyes as she pushed against the Sword, against the surge of emotion. It was like trying to hold back an avalanche with her fingers. She couldn't do this.

"Of course you can," Death said aloud. "You have before."

She thought of the glass jar of her heart, how it would bottle her rage and sorrow and aching embarrassment and allow her to swim through her life without being pulled under.

Of *course* she could do this. She had been doing it for months.

Snarling, she pushed once again, shoving the emotions back into the Sword. They flowed off her like wasps washed away in a sudden storm, stinging her even as they rushed past. By the time she was done, she was shaking like a junkie.

And damn if she didn't feel *good*.²²⁶

Once Missy manages to wrangle the spirit of War under control, Death gives her War's red steed and his characteristic directive: "Thou art War. Go thee out unto the world."²²⁷ Missy's steed,

²²⁵ Ibid., 52-53.

²²⁶ Ibid., 53-54.

whom she names Ares, flies her across the world, where she discovers that if she does not control her emotions as the spirit of War, she spreads chaos, violence, bloodshed, and death in her wake. Over the course of the novel, she finds she can attain balance and control and create calm by *consuming* rather than radiating bloodlust. The spirit of War, however, thirsts for carnage and is almost too powerful for Missy to rein in, until the story's climax—an internal battle in which Missy accepts that War is a part of herself, embraces all of her emotions, and teaches War that it is a tool to be controlled and wielded by Missy. This acceptance comes with a moment of refusal similar to those we saw from Dante, Emma, and Miranda:

God, I am completely terrified, so scared that I feel like I'm dying. But deeper than the terror is my rage.

She wants to hurt everyone in my school, *everyone*, saint and sinner alike, wants to shred them like confetti and toss their souls upon the wind.

I plant my feet and stare her in the eye as I say it again, the one small word that changes everything:

*No.*²²⁸

The moment Missy refuses, embraces, and then vanquishes War is narratively connected to the moment Missy finds the strength to stop cutting herself:

It hit her in an epiphany, shattering her and rebuilding her all at once: it wasn't about bottling her emotions or fighting them for dominance, or slicing herself when it was all too much. She couldn't control what she didn't trust.

Trust.

She kept her rage within and then cut to let it out. Could she trust herself enough to release her rage without the blade?

Yes, she thought, a smile blooming on her face. Trust. It was stronger than power, subtler than influence. She could simply let herself feel, acknowledge the bad and embrace the good—and between the two, come to an acceptance.

She could learn not to merely survive but to live.

Melissa Miller, sixteen and a self-injurer, looked upon the embodiment of her rage. "I accept you," Missy said, opening her arms wide. "I accept *me*."

With a savage roar, the Red Rider pounced.

Missy, unafraid, closed her arms around the knight and embraced her, embraced herself as a torrent of emotion flooded her. Violence and hatred and loathing and

²²⁷ Ibid., 65.

²²⁸ Ibid., 191.

bitterness and too many other feelings to name hammered her, ravaged her...and washed over her without dragging her under. She felt them all, and let them go.

How does one stop war? By offering peace.²²⁹

The spirit of War vied for control over Missy's body and will, but Missy beat War back by accepting the rage as part of herself, one part among many parts. Missy gives herself a measure of compassion and trust and thereby finds the strength to tell her parents about her struggle and get help. Resolution, in this novel, comes through supernatural transformation in which the eternal spirit of War is a metaphor for the rage and sorrow Missy feels so deeply. The experience of harnessing and tempering War according to Missy's will and wishes provides Missy with the confidence to overcome her struggle with self-injury.

It is notable that Kessler does not offer the reader a quick, trite victory over self-harm. While the climax of the novel is Missy's individual conquering of War, the last pages of the novel describes Missy reaching out to her family and school counselor for help. As part of her healing, she also volunteers to work for a crisis hotline: "In truth, Missy didn't know why she did it. But the few time she spoke with other kids who hurt themselves, she was able to help, a little. And that made her feel good."²³⁰ Finally, the last words of the novel are written in present tense:

Melissa Miller hasn't cut since the day she accepted War within her. The lockbox is still in her closet, buried under her soccer equipment, gone but not forgotten. There may come a time when she once again reaches for the blade within. But every day that goes by that Missy doesn't cut, she considers a victory.

And if there's one thing that motivates War, it's victory.²³¹

Kessler concludes Missy's story in the present tense deliberately, writing in the Author's Note that "*Rage*, like *Hunger*, doesn't end easily. There's a reason the last paragraph is in the present

²²⁹ Ibid., 199-200.

²³⁰ Ibid., 208.

²³¹ Ibid., 209.

tense. Not an easy ending, no. But, I hope, an honest one. Missy still struggles to keep control. I'm rooting for her."²³²

While the novel's depictions of Missy in the act of cutting, not to mention her accidental near-death, are graphic and disturbing, the novel attempts to faithfully recreate the experience of an individual driven to self-injury and show how deeply harmful bullying and humiliation are to the psyche. Kessler wrote in her blog response to Gurdon's "Darkness Too Visible" that her aim in writing the Riders of the Apocalypse series is to raise awareness of each novel's issue, to educate people about the issue, and to convey to those struggling with the issue that they are not alone.²³³ Interestingly, it is wielding a supernatural power that allows each character to forge the strength, endurance, and compassion needed to overcome their struggle. The transformation into a supernatural being who can inflict starvation or fullness, bloodlust or compassion, disease or health on the global population at will, who can fly across oceans and continents on a mind-reading super-steed, also effects a transformation in the form of personal healing and the courage to seek help.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analyzed three different calls for better fiction to understand how supernaturalism in literature and spiritual narratives of transformation and evolution interact with stark socio-political power inequalities. Both Gurdon and Kripal are wary of darkness and terror in genre fiction. Kripal wants literature that helps us "flip over" from experiences grounded in sacred terror to experiences that approach forms of sacred communion, fearing that literary terror hobbles fuller, more robust experiences with the unknown and the impossible. Gurdon wants

²³² Ibid., 213.

²³³ Kessler, "Visible."

literature that creates “tasteful” worlds of beauty and joy that edify readers rather than expose the innocent to the “pathologies” and “depravity” and “ugliness” of suffering. Older wants better fiction that tells the truth about both urban environments and the existence of people of color; to him, better stories embolden readers’ imaginations of the future and of survival. These conversations about “better” fiction—whether better young adult literature, better, non-exclusionary, more truthful representations of the diversity of identity and experience, or better horror so that we may have better impossible experiences—all expose social anxieties about the power of literature, the power of stories. This power is social, in that it can reveal or conceal oppressions and suffering, and it can build representational regimes that refuse to dehumanize or symbolically annihilate marginalized communities. Older reminds us that this annihilation can be power over life and death for some communities. The power of stories is also religious and spiritual in that it helps shape and author and interpret profound spiritual possibilities, as we saw with Strieber and Sadovsky.

Again and again, we have seen supernatural instincts tamed and tempered by the humanity of the character, in accordance with human morals and values. And again and again, we have seen that transformation in fantasy literature exceeds Kripal’s formulation of SFF as encoding paranormal experiences that society’s epistemological paradigms cannot countenance. We see that SFF and horror literature contains not just spiritual revolution, but political revolution as well, for refusal, survival, healing, and speaking back are necessarily revolutionary acts in a world of stark power inequalities. As Older summarized so persuasively, “here, power and fantasy and race and gender and magic all crashed into each other. A terrible, beautiful collision.” It is important to understand how narratives of transformation and the supernatural in SFF draw on contemporary socio-political issues of power, violence, and inequality *in order to*

articulate the salience of transformation. I suspect that Kripal's reliance on white, educated male theorists, authors, and artists of the impossible prevents him from accounting for the full power of SFF to not just challenge reigning epistemologies that foreclose profound dimensions of religious experience from people but to do so *through* and *while* critiquing the political dimensions that facilitate and engender the traumas that prompt transcendence. Kripal has long held that trauma and transcendence are painful, agonizing experiences, but *how* this is the case and how that pain effects transformation, and what transformation and power *means* differs depending on who the character is. Trauma is grounded and situated in particular experiences, and thus so is transformation and transcendence. We must get to that particularity in order to put literature to work envisioning futures that include all of us. I hold that it is vital to push Kripal's questions about human potential and SFF further into interrogating what stories are told or not told and what the political and social ramifications are of excluding women and people of color from stories of human evolution and consciousness.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This thesis project has striven to demonstrate the vital commentary urban fantasy and speculative fiction provides on the conjunction of power, gender, magic, race, class, and even age. My intent has been to push the scholarship of Jeffrey Kripal and Victoria Nelson further by weaving them together with feminist and critical race theories on popular culture, politics, and power. I demonstrated that urban fantasy is more than just an organizational label publishers slap onto the spines of novels to draw in the intended audience, more than just mindless, escapist entertainment produced by genre-hacks-cum-cogs-in-the-machine-of-the-culture-industry, and more than just de-fanged soft-core monster romance porn for sexually frustrated housewives. Urban fantasy is a site of extensive political commentary and critique on the nature of power and religion, power and gender, power and race, power and wealth, power and desire that swells past the page and cascades into the religious, sexual, and political lives of readers and authors alike.

The next step in this research is to sit down with enthusiastic readers of urban fantasy, especially readers of neopagan and metaphysical religious inclinations, to try to understand what influences the literature has had on the formulation of religious identity and imagination. Are there religious affiliation trends among the genre's readership? Does urban fantasy pick up where the epic feminine fantasy of Bradley, Fortune, and Paxson leaves off in terms of religious inspiration and imagery? What truths do readers see buried in the pages of urban fantasy fictions? How do they respond to romance and rape in the literature? Have these books helped them overcome traumas and implement healing in any sense? Do they identify with heroines' stories of survival and resilience? What kinds of possibilities and futures do these books

articulate for readers? It is clear that supernaturalism is a salient literary backdrop for the exploration of real-world experiences of trauma and the cost of survival. The most fruitful direction in which to take this work would be to analyze how readers connect to and identify with these stories both in terms of religion and spirituality, and violence and survival. Readers' #YAsaves responses demonstrate that this literature is understood to be salvific in its own right, that it can arm readers with weapons that allow them not just to survive but to fight forces of oppression and marginalization, that it arms them with dreams of the im/possible. The power of fiction steps in, readers say, when institutions and would-be protectors fail, and we should seek to better understand *how* fiction serves and saves readers and what needs are being met between the pages. But we could also look beyond the literature itself to how readers put this supernatural material to work in their own interests through the authorship of fan-fiction, in which they place themselves in the stories in direct communion with the vampires, witches, demons, and necromancers. What kinds of stories do readers-turned-authors want to tell about the supernatural? How do they repurpose the original author's work and what intimate relationships do they seek to explore with fictional characters? What needs and desires are being met in this work? Is it gendered? Raced? Classed? Why do readers cheerfully refuse to allow *The End* to be the end, and what does this say about the various functions of stories in contemporary culture?

We should also be pushing forward the interrogation of popular culture's erasures, stereotypes, and symbolic annihilations along intersecting axes of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and ability, especially as they intersect with religious studies scholarship on science fiction, fantasy, and horror literature. It is clear that readers and authors of speculative fiction are demanding better representation and better stories that tell the truth about the worlds we live in and the futures we want to envision. Much scholarship is dedicated to understanding how

speculative and supernatural fiction supplants and takes over the functions of orthodox and organized religious traditions for audiences; if this fiction influences the religious imaginaries and possibilities of people, it is important to understand how acts of exclusion and marginalization contribute to the construction of those imaginaries and possibilities. Who is left out of these new worlds? What religions are absent? Whose religions are appropriated? What effect does this have on readers belonging to those communities? Asking these questions of urban fantasy gives religious studies scholars more insight into the conjunction of religion and popular culture in the American context, and demonstrates again the crucial need for feminist analysis and criticism of pop culture.

I suspect the recent wave of criticism against SFF publishers and authors will open up a great deal for the urban fantasy genre, refueling its popularity and potential. Authors like Daniel José Older reanimate it, enlivening it with new characters who have new stories to tell, stories that have been dismissed by publishers' assumptions that the SFF audience is overwhelmingly straight white men with disposable income. Social media criticism and commentary shows the publishing industry that speculative fiction appeals strongly to the "Others" of society, Others who have always been weird and fantastic and a little bit monstrous. We are hungry for stories about ourselves, and the industry will respond to that hunger, if for no other reason than to profit from it. I suspect that drive for profit actually works in our favor in this instance, because fans are smart, they know what they want, and they're willing to roll up their sleeves and make it themselves if they can't find it elsewhere. Fans are skilled bricoleurs—or rather, mad scientists, Victor Frankensteins, stitching together creations of their own invention for their own needs. Thus my interest in looking closer at fan-derived fictions, spin-offs, and cultural products.

For whatever else this fiction does, much like Frankenstein's creature, *it lives*.

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