

## Catastrophic Transculturation in *Dracula*, *The Strain* and *The Historian*<sup>1</sup> Johan Höglund

This is a war where we're fighting tough people, smart killers, who hide in dark caves or who kind of slither into shadowy recesses in large cities and parts of the world and then send youngsters to their suicidal death.

George W. Bush,  
 Remarks by the President at South Bend, Indiana,  
 Sept. 5, 2002

### Introduction: The Imperial Gothic and Catastrophic Transculturation

During the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of British novels began describing the potential of a reverse form of colonialism where either the subaltern or a competing European power decide to invade the green isle. In particular, the late nineteenth century – the period of the most intense British imperial expansion but also the time when the Empire begins to crumble – is fraught with these images. The bed-time story of the British Empire is thus one of the Empire breaking down under the forces of degeneration, socialism, universal suffrage, Oriental witchcraft or the vengeful imperialist scheming of the Chinese, the French, the Egyptians, the Germans, the Japanese or, as in H. G. Wells' famous novel, the Martians. These texts have been the subject of several studies, including I. F. Clarke's *Voices Prophesying War*, Cecil Eby's *The Road to Armageddon* (1987), and Patrick Brantlinger's *Rule of Darkness* (1988). Brantlinger importantly organises many of these narratives as belonging to the genre of 'the imperial gothic' and stresses their obsession with 'apocalyptic themes and images', with 'individual regression or going native' and with 'an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism'.<sup>2</sup>

In this way, the imperial gothic insists that the encounter with the other in its various guises results not in a cultural merger, but in a Darwinian struggle for survival. When the empire and the other meet, the choice they both face is frequently between assimilation and annihilation, between cultural hegemony and a gothic apocalypse. The meeting of cultures, the hybrids that appear or do not appear as a result of this, and the vision of a looming apocalypse that the imperial gothic traces, speak overtly and covertly about empire in its various forms. These meetings are, of course, also the focus of transcultural and transnational studies. According to Pratt's well-known definition, contact zones are 'spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination'.<sup>3</sup> In 'Arts of the Contact Zone' Pratt further explains how the meeting of disparate cultures in these contact zones give rise to hybrid cultures and subjects through the process of transculturation.

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *The Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1988) 227.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Narrative and Transculturation* 1992 (New York: Routledge, 2008) 7.

Transculturation, she explains, refers to ‘processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture’.<sup>4</sup> The process of transculturation is then assumed to produce hybrid cultures and subjectivities as these marginal and metropolitan groups invent new subjectivities, new languages and new modes of interaction and behaviour in the contact zones.

It should be noted here that while many texts have used Pratt’s concepts of transculturation and contact zone in a celebratory way, she does not suggest that all forms of transculturation produce good results. As Vassil Prodanov argues, transculturation entails the destruction of ‘some ethnic culture’.<sup>5</sup> In addition to this, meetings between dominant and subordinate cultures are often described as dangerous in literature, art and film precisely because transculturation occurs. In fact, the possibility that both British and subaltern culture could transform in the contact zones that colonial practice created was a potential threat to the way that the imperial project was understood by the British. After Darwin and the biological turn, imperial ideology generally assumed that the British were inherently different (more civilized, more able, more fit) from those whom they set out to rule. ‘Englishness’ was understood to be not simply a set of cultural practices, but the result of evolution, the heritage of what Kipling calls a ‘breed’ in his poem ‘Recessional’. From this perspective, transcultural change could be construed as frightening evidence that there was little difference between coloniser and colonised, that Englishness could and would be invaded, infected and transformed in the colonies. This is why many gothic texts from the period envision the meeting between East and West as catastrophic, producing a corrupted, unpredictable and monstrous hybrid. This hybrid is not only aggressive and dangerous; it is also frequently infectious and transformative. It is this infectious nature that makes the gothic hybrid especially dangerous. It becomes a walking contact zone able to derail European modernity as such. In other words, much late-Victorian gothic imagines transculturation as a form of apocalypse.

Interestingly, the tendency of the imperial gothic to imagine hybridity as monstrous, and western society as facing imminent apocalypse is not confined to the late-nineteenth century. In the wake of neo-colonial efforts and a new wave of imperial sentiment, a great deal of modern gothic film and literature should also be termed imperial gothic as they threaten their audience with similar imagery, often, in fact, retelling the old late-Victorian gothic stories. With this in mind, the present article suggests that the late-Victorian and modern imperial gothic can effectively be discussed by modifying the notion of transculturation into catastrophic transculturation. Essentially, this term refers to a transcultural meeting that is seen as producing monstrous forms of culture, physiognomy and subjectivity, forms that then threaten the very existence of western modernity. The article will examine this concept through a reading of three gothic texts: the late-Victorian gothic novel *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker and two modern versions of the same narrative: Elizabeth Kostova’s *The Historian* (2005) and Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan’s *The Strain* (2009). Although separated by time, these novels engage with empire in similar ways, engaging in discussions and descriptions of invasion, degeneration,

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, ‘Arts of the Contact Zone’ in *Mass Culture and Everyday Life*, ed. Peter Gibian (New York: Routledge, 1997) 65.

<sup>5</sup> Vassil Prodanov, ‘Ethnic Identity, Nationalism, and Culture’ in *Hermeneutics and Inculturation*, eds. George F. McLean, Antonio Gallo and Robert Magliola (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2003) 97.

cultural and physical transformation, otherness, modernity, transculturation, and apocalypse.

The tendency of colonial fiction to portray transculturation as problematic has been discussed by other writers, most pertinently by Albert J. Rivero who observes in 'Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and the "Blank Spaces" of Colonial Fictions' that 'cultural hybridity' is sometimes a recipe for disaster, leading to the 'transformation of highly educated men ... into savage monsters who must be destroyed to repair the fragile and porous boundaries between civilization and barbarity'.<sup>6</sup> While *Oroonoko* is a seventeenth-century text, it operates in very much the same way as the late nineteenth-century gothic invasion narrative. As will be apparent, the late Victorian and the modern imperial gothic also insist that the monstrous hybrid produced by cultural encounter must be destroyed.

### **Empire in the Twenty-first Century**

The concept of the contact zone as put forward by Pratt refers essentially to an actual space where 'peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict'.<sup>7</sup> Pratt's important point is that the 'interactive, improvisational dimensions' of colonial encounters often have been ignored by previous scholarship and she wishes to rectify this by showing how both coloniser and colonised were, in fact, transformed within these sites of contact.

Pratt's own focus of study is travel writing, a genre that is, of course, overtly concerned with contact zones. While much European travel writing was involved in trying to dismiss the possibility of interaction and improvisation within contact zones, the genre remains a testament to these processes. Travel writing is not the only genre preoccupied with presenting and representing the colonial other. Pratt suggests that 'much of European literary history'<sup>8</sup> is obsessed with the colonial periphery and Robert J. C. Young, writing from a similar theoretical and political perspective, concurs in *Colonial Desire*. In this book, Young traces the hybrid states of culture and identity that cultural encounter produces and observes that it is 'striking how many novelists not only of today but also of the past write almost obsessively about the uncertain crossing and invasion of identities'.<sup>9</sup>

The step from travel writing to the gothic is notoriously short. A number of the most famous gothic novels are loosely disguised as travel narratives and the imperial gothic that Brantlinger discusses consists almost exclusively of travel stories. In this way, the imperial gothic is obsessed with the contact zone and what occurs at this site of interaction. Of course, the gothic does not need to pretend a scientific or documentary interest (although it sometimes does) and is free to imagine the process of transculturation as inherently problematic, even, as I have already suggested, catastrophic.

From this perspective, it should be noted that in the wake of the terror attacks of 11 September 2001, the notion that the west in general and the US in particular are involved in a struggle that is properly described as colonial or imperial has received new currency in historiography, political science and postcolonial studies. The US invasions of

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<sup>6</sup> Albert J. Rivero, 'Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and the "Blank Spaces" of Colonial Fictions' in *SEL: Studies in English Literature* 39.3 (1999) 444.

<sup>7</sup> Pratt, *Imperial* 6.

<sup>8</sup> Pratt, *Imperial* 6.

<sup>9</sup> Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire. Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (Routledge, 1995) 2.

Afghanistan and Iraq have been termed imperialist projects by a great many writers.<sup>10</sup> Noam Chomsky is one of many who have forcibly argued that America should be considered an empire and that the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, along with many other global US interventions, can only be referred to as colonial enterprises.

Interestingly this claim has been echoed by neoconservative historians, such as Niall Ferguson, Paul Johnson and Max Boot. Boot has actually claimed that American imperialism is the only practical way to amend the global turbulence supposedly caused by rampant Islamic extremism, unchecked Asian economic growth and old European arrogance, describing American imperialism as 'the greatest force for good in the world during the past century'.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Ferguson argues that 'America is the heir to the [British] Empire' and that no other nation is likely to be able to shoulder this burden.<sup>12</sup>

The resurrection of imperial ideology in the west allows for a number of comparisons between what Hobsbawm has referred to as the Age of Empire and our own time. Indeed, there are many similarities between the late Victorian period and the current historical epoch. Jonathan Schell has argued that 'any student of imperialism will be struck by the similarities between the old style of imperialism and the new: the gigantic disparity between the technical and military might of the conquerors and the conquered; the inextricable combination of rapacious commercial interest and geopolitical ambition and design ... the appeal to jingoism on the home front'.<sup>13</sup> These similarities extend not only to current imperial practice, discourse and ideology, but can be perceived also in the concerns of modern gothic culture. As I have already observed, the recent turn to empire seems to have spawned a gothic revival in literature, film and computer games, a gothic revival that frequently resembles that of the late Victorian imperial gothic. This new imperial gothic can be perceived not only in novels and Hollywood movies, but also in computer games, news broadcasts and even political statements.

To explore this further, I want to first examine the usefulness of the term catastrophic transculturation in relation to Stoker's *Dracula*. This is a text that meets all the criteria of the imperial gothic as defined by Brantlinger. Furthermore, it illustrates eminently well how cultural encounter leads to catastrophic transculturation and monstrous hybridity. Finally, *Dracula* is a story that, since its inception – an inception that was in itself a reiteration of previous vampire tales – has continued to haunt western consciousness, and the two other novels that are discussed in this article retell Stoker's novel in various ways.

### ***Dracula***

At the beginning of *Dracula*, the solicitor Jonathan Harker is travelling to the Carpathian Mountains to discuss London property with Count Dracula. The region he moves through

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<sup>10</sup> See: Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003); Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004); Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton, and Jed Esty, 'Beyond What? An Introduction' in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005) 1-38; and Neil Lazarus 'Postcolonial Studies after the Invasion of Iraq' in *New Formations* 59 (2010) 10-22.

<sup>11</sup> Max Boot, 'U.S. Imperialism: A Force for Good' in *National Post*, 13 May 2003. 1 Nov 2011 [http://www.cfr.org/publication/5959/us\\_imperialism.html?id=5959](http://www.cfr.org/publication/5959/us_imperialism.html?id=5959).

<sup>12</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003) x.

<sup>13</sup> Schell quoted by Neil Lazarus in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011) 17.

is hostile and essentially pre-modern and Harker's impression is that he is 'leaving the West and entering the East'.<sup>14</sup> Harker has studied his destination at the British Museum, discovering that it is 'one of the wildest and least known portions of Europe' (D 2). Once there, he is surrounded by natives that, although fundamentally unaggressive, appear to be in dire need of some sort of (British) modernity.

Dracula is, of course, another matter. Harker finds the Count to be at the same time both more alien and more civilized than the superstitious peasants that surround the castle. Dracula is learned, his extensive library is full of English books and newspapers and Dracula himself claims that he, through this literature, has 'come to know your great England, and to know her is to love her. I long to go through the crowded streets of your mighty London, to be in the midst of the whirl and rush of humanity, to share its life, its change, its death, and all that makes it what it is' (D 19).

As a place where the East and the British intersect, Dracula's castle is in many ways a contact zone. It is in this place that Dracula meets Britain through Harker, and where Harker is confronted with the specific otherness of Dracula. What ensues is a form of catastrophic transculturation producing two monstrous hybrids. Dracula's access to Harker and all manner of British literature, from political tracts to Bradshaw's train schedule, makes him into 'an "Occidental" scholar' as argued by Stephen D Arata.<sup>15</sup> The pre-anglicised and pre-modern Dracula, while perhaps more dangerous than the natives that surround his castle, would arguably be unable to cross the boundaries separating Transylvania and Britain. Now, learned in the ways of the British, modernised through his reading of Bradshaw and other seminal British texts, Dracula has in fact become a monstrous hybrid able to embark on his invasion project; an essentially abject being in many ways more terrifying than the comparatively timid Near East that spawned him.

Importantly, Dracula is not only a transcultural monster, a self-styled anglophile killer who drinks the blood of human beings and discards the remains. In *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Judith Halberstam makes the crucial point that the vampire actually also transforms his victims. Halberstam therefore refers to Dracula as 'a technology of monstrosity' who purposely infects the hapless English with a host of monstrously alien qualities.<sup>16</sup> In this way, Dracula is not only a monstrous hybrid, but also an agent of monstrous hybridization. His immortality and his unique transformative powers allow him to change any space into a gothic contact zone.

Harker's transformative process is different from that of Dracula. The confrontation with the other does not transform him into a vampire – Dracula never bites men in the novel – but it does change him into a weak, impotent, feminine and ultimately un-English creature, subjected to will of the women that seek to embrace him at night.

The rest of the story is arguably part of modern, collective consciousness. Dracula moves his abode to London where he sets up shop at an ancient mansion. This site becomes the centre of a new and insidious contact zone from where Dracula can continue his project of catastrophic transculturation, a project that ultimately aims at a gothic apocalypse where all of London should become a realm of the undead. Harker observes

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<sup>14</sup> Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: Grosset & Dunlap, 1897) 1. This reference will henceforth be abbreviated as D.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen D. Arata, 'The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonisation,' *Victorian Studies* 33.4 (1990) 634.

<sup>16</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) 88.

that 'for centuries to come he might, amongst its teeming millions, satiate his lust for blood, and create a new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless' (D 48-9). Thus, while Dracula professes to be impressed with the gaslights, trains and modern mind of London, it seems to be his intention to change its current historical trajectory, to make London more like the castle in Transylvania he inhabits. Furthermore, much has been written about *Dracula* as expressing the fears of degeneration and atavism that embraced British and European society at the time of its publication (see Ernest Fontana<sup>17</sup> and Kelly Hurley<sup>18</sup>). The gothic apocalypse Dracula tries to accomplish must be understood as not only one of reverse colonisation, but also of reverse evolution. In this context, it should be noted that the vampiric bite, the aggressive agent of this monstrous hybridity, changes both the body and the mind. The vampiric body in Dracula is suspended between life and death, dead but still animated. The vampiric mind, meanwhile, is insatiable. It hungers for blood but also for euphemistic kisses.

Dracula's apocalyptic project is eventually thwarted by the combined power of a group of European men who first recover the women that Dracula has bitten. This is done, famously, through a form of symbolic group rape where the men together drive a stake through Lucy then cut her head off. This defers her monstrous hybridity, her otherness and reclaims her for Britain, for Christianity and for modernity. This done, the men chase Dracula back to his castle and kill him. This prevents the gothic apocalypse that Dracula has planned from occurring, obliterates the vampiric contact zone in London, reinstates the Pax Britannica that formerly reigned and thus restores the former trajectory of British modernity.

### ***The Strain***

*The Historian* and *The Strain* are two modern gothic novels that explore the ideological and cultural landscape of Bram Stoker's novel in different and interesting ways. While both celebrate the original to some extent, they also try to reinvent the vampire narrative, deviating from the original plot of Stoker's tale. Most importantly, for the purposes of this article, these reiterations of *Dracula* also describe the phenomenon of catastrophic transculturation and present the reader with an apocalypse that, as in the original story, threaten the imagined trajectory of Western (rather than simply British) modernity.

*The Strain* by del Toro and Hogan is the name both of a trilogy of vampire novels and the first instalment of this trilogy. It describes the first stages of a vampiric apocalypse that beset present-day New York. The novel's marketing slogan, the first thing to be presented on the novel's elaborate website, makes the connection to the concerns of the imperial gothic eminently clear, telling the visitor that: 'They have always been here. Vampires. In secret and in darkness. Waiting. Now their time has come. In one week, Manhattan will be gone. In one month, the country. In two months – the world'.<sup>19</sup>

The novel does not begin in modern-day New York, however, but in Romania in Eastern Europe during the early twentieth century. This first sequence of the book is simultaneously a travel narrative and an attempt at situating the main vampire, here referred to as Jusef Sardu, geographically and historically. Sardu is pictured as ancient, but in the first novel, his personal history is conflated with the horrors of the Holocaust, where

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<sup>17</sup> Ernest Fontana, 'Lombroso's Criminal Man and Stoker's *Dracula*' in *Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics* ed. Margaret L Carter (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.thestraintrilogy.com/>

the vampire feeds off the Jews and dissidents interred in concentration camps throughout Eastern Europe. In this way, Sardu is an overtly political vampire, feeding parasitically from the cruelties of the war, his victims conveniently burnt to ashes in the ovens of the camps before turning into vampires.<sup>20</sup>

The actual invasion project begins with the image of a gigantic airplane, stranded and quiet at the JFK airport shortly after landing. Upon opening the still airplane it is discovered that, with the exception of four apparently comatose people, all passengers are dead. This calls for the presence of the novel's main protagonist, the recently divorced Ephraim Goodweather, head of the disease control project Canary. The many casualties on the plane suggest to all those involved that the occurrence is part of a terrorist attack and Goodweather begins to research the incident along with his assistant Nora Martinez, soon to be joined by the vermin exterminator Vasilij Fet and the aged and seasoned vampire hunter and holocaust survivor Abraham Setrakian, the novel's replacement for Van Helsing. These four find themselves pursuing and pursued by a host of tremendously aggressive vampires that threaten to quickly overrun the entire world. Charting only the first few days of this vampiric invasion, the apocalypse is not concluded in this first instalment of the trilogy.<sup>21</sup>

From this brief plot summary, it can be noted that those who resist the vampiric invasion of New York have a varied background with roots in Eastern Europe and South America. It would be wrong, however, to assume that these characters are less American because of this. All four are firmly integrated into New York society, and the novel thus appears as a homage to the American 'melting pot' rather than an attempt to queer the notion of a fixed American identity. In other words, the East still appears as the other in the novel, a place of confusion, darkness and dangerous secrets that may explode into the face of Western society and thus derail the current direction of (American) modernity.

The relationship between vampirism and political terrorism is overt in *The Strain* and closely tied to the descriptions of catastrophic transculturation and apocalypse that appear on its pages. Although Sardu is certainly not identified as a militant Muslim in the novel, he is closely associated with the fear of Islamic terrorism as destructive practice and infectious ideology. This connection is emphasised by the fact that Sardu chooses Ground Zero, the crumbled remains of the World Trade Center, as his lair. This site then becomes the primary contact zone, the centre of the catastrophic transculturation that spreads through New York.

The transformation that takes place in this contact zone is overtly ontological in nature. The catastrophic transculturation that occurs at the meeting between the vampiric terrorist other and the American subject in *The Strain* produces an utterly monstrous, hybrid body. After the initial infection, the vampiric body is pale and blue-veined, hairless, hot to the touch while the pharynx is transformed into a 'stinger', a vampiric feeding and infection device. The entire vampiric body thus becomes nothing but an instrument of feeding and transformation. In *The Strain*, the transformation even suspends sexual desire as the body of the vampire loses its sexual organs, leaving only a smooth patch of skin in its place. In effect, this means, of course, that the male and female sexual organs have been replaced by the retractable, phallic stinger, turning all vampires male in the sense that they are able to aggressively penetrate and transform the human population. In this way, catastrophic transculturation transforms even desire, turning intercourse into

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<sup>20</sup> Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan, *The Strain* (New York: William Morrow, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> In the consecutive novel that continues the trilogy, this apocalypse is completed. In the final instalment, however, a small group of resistance fighters manage to reverse the catastrophe.

an exclusively predatory and parasitic activity.

Because of the relentless thirst experienced by the monstrous and vampiric body, the first steps towards this gothic apocalypse are not clandestine as in *Dracula*. Instead, the newly born and zombie-like vampires stagger through the dark streets of New York, inserting their stingers into the panicking humans they encounter. The monstrous body has taken complete control of the mind, entirely suspending all intelligent thought processes. In this way, the nineteenth century fear of degeneration is echoed with a vengeance in *The Strain*, imagining a completely atavistic or 'native' mind that has been stripped of all forms of human civilisation and emotion and reduced to a single perverse, cannibalistic desire.

Furthermore, the monstrous hybrids produced by the process of catastrophic transculturation are the instruments of the apocalypse that Sardu initiates. Obviously, Sardu's project will completely disrupt the current progress of American modernity. This is made clear in many ways in the novel, but perhaps most immediately through a series of passages that describe the destruction of the family in the wake of the vampiric transformation of husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, sons and daughters. The first victim of this gothic apocalypse is the nuclear family, arguably the touchstone of American modernity. In connection with this, it should also be noted that situating the novel in New York rather than in any other major city also relates to the way modernity is thwarted in the novel. Like the late Osama Bin Laden, Sardu perceives New York as emblematic of American modernity, and therefore the first and most obvious target when initiating his attempt at reversing American modernity.

### ***The Historian***

Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian* was published in 2005 and thus predates the *The Strain* by four years. In addition to this, *The Historian* primarily takes place during the early and middle twentieth century. Despite this, Kostova's text appears a more modern novel in many ways. Essentially, it tells the story of how a number of historians from different generations, and connected through various family ties, are confronted with the reality of the Dracula myth and have to both try to escape the vampire and hunt him down. This novel is best described as a modern gothic travel narrative as it takes the reader through a series of journeys in Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria during the 1930s, 1950s and 1970s. These nations are situated on the borderlands between East and West and they are also places where the historical conflict between Vlad Tepes or Vlad the Impaler (the historical person upon which Dracula is presumably based) and the Sultan Mehmed II was acted out. This brings the main characters into constant contact with a host of different cultures, and the novel is concerned both with the liminal state of the characters and of the ancient conflict between Islam and Vlad the Impaler's brutal brand of Christianity. Interestingly, and in contrast to Stoker's novel and arguably also to *The Strain*, these cultures not only collide but are sometimes actually able to interact, merge and transform in non-catastrophic ways in *The Historian*.

This is one of the greatest differences between the three novels discussed in this article. The process of transculturation is not always catastrophic and gothic in *The Historian*. The main characters frequently find themselves in cultural contact zones and learn not only how to appreciate the different food, customs and thinking of the cultural other, they actually manage to span the divide between self and other, to some extent displacing the very notion of cultural normativity in the process. The cultural 'self' of the text is thus not necessarily located in the urban west, as it is in *Dracula* and *The Strain*, but



distributed over a much wider geographical and intellectual terrain. This can be partly attributed to the fact that the cultural and national identities of the main characters are much more unstable than those of Stoker's novel. In fact, the novel's female narrator discovers that her mother, and therefore she herself, is a descendant of the house of Vlad Tepes.

At the same time, the confrontation with what can be called 'vampire culture' in the contact zones of Eastern Europe still triggers catastrophic transculturation. This process results again in monstrous hybrids whose bodies and minds change. Here, the similarities with Stoker's original text and with *The Strain* are many, but there are differences between the novels also on this level. To begin with, the otherness that the vampire is associated with in *The Historian* is not intimately tied to an imagined Orient or to any other specific culture. Instead, the vampire is the other to the people of Istanbul as much as to the Oxford scholars, so that coming into contact with this vampire is not necessarily to confront the East as such, as is the case in Stoker's novel.

In addition to this, monstrous hybridity in *The Historian* is epistemological in nature rather than ontological. While the vampiric bite suspends the body between life and death in this novel too, the corporeal transformation is not as pronounced. Skirting the sexual subtext to some extent, Dracula bites both men and women in the novel and the vampires produced after a number of such encounters can still pass for human in most cases. Furthermore, unlike in *Dracula* and *The Strain*, the vampiric mind appears to retain some vestige of reason even after its monstrous transformation. Rather, the epistemological transformation that those bitten go through is characterized by a different perspective on knowledge, a change in the way the new vampires understand the past and the present. It is this transformation that truly frightens the historians that simultaneously pursue and escape Dracula.

The crucial nature of knowledge and understanding is stressed in many ways in Kostova's text. In fact, the first contact between the vampire and the characters of the novel is not a vampiric bite but books that Dracula leaves them. These are ancient and hand-produced texts that contain a single image of a dragon in the middle. All other pages are blank. These books apparently cannot be given away as they always return to the person Dracula gave them to. The menacing nature of the book is an obvious threat, a warning, while the uncertain origin and the blank pages encourage the receiver to start his or her historical research, to locate its origin and fill the blank pages. Furthermore, the confrontations with the vampiric other in the contact zones of Europe occur most often in private, public or monastery libraries. Indeed, the most relentless of all of Dracula's henchmen in the novel is himself a librarian. In short, the contact zones of this novel are typically places of epistemological storage and contention.

This is made even more explicit when the reader finally gets to meet Dracula in person through the remains of a tattered diary kept by one of the main characters, Professor Rossi. This particular historian has been kidnapped by Dracula and taken to the vampire's abode below ground. Dracula's lair proves to be not a slaughterhouse or even a tomb, but a remarkable library containing a wealth of unique texts. Furthermore, Dracula's plans for Rossi are not primarily to consume the scholar, but to turn him into his librarian. Rossi has been taken by Dracula because of his unwillingness to cease his historical investigation into Dracula's history. Now that Dracula has captured Rossi and begun turning him into a vampire, he wants to make use of his skills to catalogue his immense library.

This is tempting to Rossi who is utterly fascinated by Dracula's collection. At the

same time, he knows Dracula to be an evil and dangerous creature and he has no wish to serve him. Rossi is torn between his love for this wealth of knowledge, his own pending transformation that is already beginning to manifest itself through an insatiable hunger, and his historical knowledge of Dracula or Vlad Tepes. Rossi, like the other characters in the book, fears Dracula's vampiric state, but even more he fears what he knows about Dracula's pre-vampiric cruelty. The unnamed narrator, researching the bloody history of Vlad Tepes, comes across a description of his habit of impaling friend and foe, of his countless cruelties, and she observes that 'the thing that most haunted me that day, however, as I closed my notebook and put my coat on to go home, was not my ghostly image of Dracula, or the description of impalement, but the fact that these things had – apparently – actually occurred'.<sup>22</sup>

Rossi's fear of vampiric transformation in the hands of Dracula has much to do with the fact that, as a vampire, he may come to accept and embrace this historical cruelty, losing his historical objectivity, his ability to properly understand the past, in the process. Thus, the threat and allure of Kostova's Dracula is epistemological rather than ontological, although the two aspects are always interrelated. Dracula's distribution of ancient books rather than corpses indicates most importantly an intimate relationship with the historical past. In this way, Dracula is the Historian the title refers to not only in the sense that he knows about the past; he is the Historian because he is of the past, even someone who may be able command the pasts, and thus generate new presents and futures.

From this perspective, it is obvious that Kostova's Dracula also hopes to generate a form of gothic transformation of society, but this transformation appears less apocalyptic and markedly different from that which Stoker's and del Toro and Hogan's vampires aim for. Kostova's Dracula has seen the world change and can see it changing further: "The world is changing and I intend to change with it. Perhaps soon I will not need this form" – he indicated with a slow hand his mediaeval finery, the great dead power of his limbs – "in order to accomplish my ambitions" (TH 608). Although these ambitions are never spelled out, Dracula obviously has dreams of a new historical trajectory, of the world changing, and of his changing with it so that his present, medieval form may become unnecessary.

In this way, the real danger Dracula poses is not directly related to his vampiric bite, but to his aforementioned command and ability to manipulate and transform history. Dracula's power resides as much in this knowledge of history as in his ancient body, and it is through this knowledge that Dracula may be able to further his own form of societal transformation. There is an apocalyptic aspect to this possible future as well, since epistemological control is always related to ontological practice. To be able to manipulate or produce the historical past is to control the body in the present and the future. In other words, the societal transformation that Dracula seems to have in mind is one where the pre-modern habit of impaling and torturing friend and foe may take on a modern guise and become, again, an acceptable paradigm for imperial expansion and control.

### **Catastrophic Transculturation and Contemporary Empire**

While the three novels differ greatly in their portrayal of vampirism and the nature of a coming apocalypse, the use of catastrophic transculturation is largely motivated by past and present political climates. Thus, these novels are fundamentally allegorical, explaining the presumed stakes of empire with the aid of the gothic. From this perspective, *The*

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<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Kostova, *The Historian* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2005) 37. This reference will henceforth be abbreviated as TH.

*Historian* appears a more complex and less imperial text, refusing the simple identification of the vampire with the East. Meanwhile, *Dracula* and *The Strain* emerge as conservative narratives in the sense that they do not problematize the hegemonic power structures they rely on to any great extent. Instead, they appear to (re)inscribe otherness as Eastern. Even so, all three novels describe the confrontations between vampiric otherness and humanity as catastrophic. Similarly, the dangerous hybrids that are produced by catastrophic transculturation seem programmed to disrupt modernity, replacing it with a gothic apocalypse.

These images of catastrophic transculturation and monstrous hybridity are certainly not confined to these narratives. Countless novels and Hollywood movies describe the imagined meeting between (Western) explorer and the colonial frontier as a potentially catastrophic, even apocalyptic event. In the recent remake of the classic horror movie *The Wolfman* (2010), the wolf curse has been picked up in India from a 'feral boy'.<sup>23</sup> In the *Alien* franchise, exploration of outer space brings the human population into contact with highly aggressive predators who breed through what can only be described as the oral rape of the human host, turning the entire human population into a feminized vessel for the production of monstrous hybrids. These and other tales of the meeting between actual and metaphorical cultures, and the catastrophic forms of transculturation they produce, need to be seen as part of a wider discourse on empire and otherness. It can even be argued that the notion of catastrophic transculturation has been employed to structure the current American bid for global hegemony, tempered but hardly suspended by Barack Obama. George W. Bush's use of a positively gothic vocabulary to describe the hiding places of terrorists in the epigraph of this article is one of many examples. This short passage suggests a form of catastrophic transculturation, as presumably innocent and unwilling youngsters are turned into terrorists willing to reduce buildings into burning rubble and people into torn and charred corpses.

The point here is that it is important to understand the discourses that operate in the imperial gothic and beyond since many texts that belong to this genre encourage a blind support of imperial practice. In *The Strain*, the utterly brutish vampires must indeed all be exterminated, or they will surely infect the entire world and permanently derail western modernity in favour of their own gothic apocalypse. While less certain of cultural categories, *The Historian* also threatens a form of gothic societal collapse and its protagonists are quite prepared to murder those infected by the vampiric bite to stop the apocalyptic tide. In this way, the meeting between the vampiric other results in catastrophic transculturation where the merger of two cultures produces monstrous and infectious hybrids. The meaning of these transformations, their relation to empire and the nature of the apocalyptic projects that follow in the wake of continued infection differs from narrative to narrative, however. The reading of the late-Victorian and contemporary imperial gothic with the help of the concept of catastrophic transculturation does not suggest that all novels have to reproduce xenophobia or pit European modernity against a form of oriental, gothic apocalypse. What it does suggest, however, is that even modern gothic appears programmed to eloquently engage with these issues, and that what they say transcends the confines of the genre.

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<sup>23</sup> *The Wolfman*, dir. Joe Johnston, perf. Benicio Del Toro, Anthony Hopkins and Emma Blunt, Universal Pictures, 2010.