

LOVE AND DESIRE IN THE POST-MODERN ERA: *THE GILDA'S STORIES* OR
HOW BLACK FEMINISM CHALLENGED GOTHIC LITERARY TRADITIONS
*AMOR Y DESEO EN TIEMPOS POSMODERNOS: THE GILDA STORIES Y DE CÓMO EL
FEMINISMO NEGRO HA RETADO LA TRADICIÓN GÓTICA*

Virginia Fusco
Universidad Carlos III, Madrid

RESUMEN

En este artículo intentaremos dar cuenta de la originalidad de la propuesta de Jewelle Gomez presentando su texto *The Gilda Stories*. La autora subvierte los *topoi* clásicos de la tradición vampírica encarnados en la figura de la lesbiana perversa y amenazadora. Gilda, una vampiresa afro-americana reinventa su estar en un mundo donde los vampiros son mucho más benignos que sus temibles antepasados. Promueve el intercambio de sangre como medio para la supervivencia y una «sexualidad queer» como vehículo de cariño y afecto.

La narración representa una crítica aguda a nuestras ideas sobre la sexualidad y las relaciones amorosas.

Palabras clave: Jewell Gomez, *The Gilda Stories*, feminismo negro, vampiresa, tradición gótica, erotismo.

ABSTRACT

In this article we will attempt to account for a challenging contribution to the gothic literary tradition presenting *The Gilda Stories* of Jewelle Gomez. The author subverts the traditional *topoi* of the female gothic tradition incarnated in the perverse and threatening figure of the lesbian vampire. Gilda, a black American vampire re-invents her presence in a world where vampires are significantly more benign than their scary ancestors. She promotes bloodletting as a means to survival and a «queer sexuality» as a 'symbolic' vehicle of care and affection. The narrative represents a sharp critique of our ideas concerning sexuality as much as our understanding of love relations.

Keywords: Jewell Gomez, *The Gilda Stories*, Black Feminism, female vampire, Gothic Literary Tradition, eroticism.

SUMARIO

1.-«Blackness» in context. 2.-The Gothic Canon and Female Heroines. 3.-Female Vampires go to America. 4.-A new Self: Lesbian feminism confronting the Gothic Tradition. 5.-On Vampirism: reflections on nurturing and devouring. 6.-Conclusion. 7.-Bibliography.

There are only inadequate words to speak for who we are. The language is cruel, the history false. You must look to me and know who I am and if the life I offer is the life you choose. In choosing you must pledge yourself to pursue only life, never bitterness or cruelty.

Louisiana, 1850

In 1991, Jewelle Gomez, a completely unknown African-American writer belonging to the militant Gay and Lesbian Community of San Francisco, was awarded the Lambda Literary Prize for a collection of neo-gothic short stories named *The Gilda Stories*. Since then, she has established herself as an influential author and a reference for Gothic Fans thanks to several adaptations of two episodes of her, by now, well-known book which recounts the adventures and misfortunes of an African-American vampire.

We meet the Girl, our future Gilda, in 1850 after she has successfully escaped from a cotton plantation she was working on with her mother and the rest of her family. Lonely, desperate and in need of help she meets with Gilda, a young looking white woman that takes her in and teaches her how to survive in a world where being black and young condemns you to a bleak future of marginality. Gilda reveals herself as a vampire that freely chooses to abandon this life and pass on her wisdom to one of the women that constitutes her small resilient community. Girl, at the death of Gilda, adopts her name and starts a new life as a newborn vampire with Bird, a Native American woman, that will be her companion for over a century. We meet Gilda again in 1890, in Yerba Buena, after a long journey she had to undertake in order to discover how life can be lived being a vampire looking for affection and intimacy in an ever-changing world. In this episode, she meets with Eleanor, an old desperate creature and resists the temptation of turning into a living-dead thirsty for power and overwhelmed by desperation and solitude. In 1921, she lives in a farm in Missouri surrounded by pious people, falling in love with Aurelia and having to face the dilemma of turning someone into a vampire or respect her real needs and dreams in an act of self-sacrifice. Then again, via

beauty parlours, clubs, bars and theatres, we follow her through the most significant moments over the past 150 years of American history.

We witness the abolition of slavery, the constitution of a black community for the improvement of the living conditions of coloured people, both in the country and in towns. We watch the emergence of an educated black middle class concerned with the representation of blackness in the public sphere and finally we hold our breath while she tries to escape persecution in the near future, in the Land of the Enchantment in 2050. Thanks to Gilda's movements in time and space, Gomez suggests a clever new historiography for blacks and leaves our imagination wondering about how we can feel part of a community and how we identify with others. I would argue the book represents a brave attempt, although not entirely successful, to reinvent and imagine a fantasy world where vampires are less brutal and removed from the beastly world dominated by violence that has characterised the Gothic literary production of the past.

In this short article, I will account for the originality of Gomez's stories looking at them in context. I will in fact consider the powerful influence of «blackness» as opposed to whiteness as an encompassing element of this new approach to vampirism and I will note its significance in the American Literary Tradition as it has been described by Toni Morrison in her illuminating essay *Playing in the dark*. Through a close look at the lesbian feminist counter-cultural movement with its emphasis on sexuality as a place for resistance to a domineering «heteronormative», I will explain its impact on how Gomez redesigns the symbolic and transforms her narratives into potential guides for action, to conquer a more egalitarian future. Replying to a dystopian present, Gomez imagines a future where we can still hope for multi-ethnic communalism and for a society based on the respect of mutual differences.

1. «Blackness» in context

It just looks like the people in town might talk in some kinda way. You know they got nothin' better to do but think on color folks' business. And you know white people think we're all trash no matter who's husband was a minister or a farmer or such like.

Rosebud, Missouri: 1921

Gilda accounts for several transformations that have had a huge impact on American society after the Civil Rights Movement, the Cultural Revolution of the 60's and the Reagan era that followed. These transformations manifest themselves in a variety of ways in the text and I will try to account for the most significant ones in this short article.

To start with, Gilda is a black character and a figure of power in her own right.

Toni Morrison, in her *Playing in the dark*, states that «blackness» has been essential to the development of American cultural history over the past few centuries, despite the fact that a wide number of critics and authors are convinced that Africans and African-Americans play no part on the origins and development of their national literature. According to Toni Morrison's critical analysis, the presence of «blackness» manifests itself both in terms of black characters key to the evolution of the plots and as a series of language metaphors related to colour that «can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive "othering" of people» (Morrison, 1991: X). The social marginality of blacks and other «people of colours» does not reflect as absence in a literary tradition dominated by white male views, genius and power; on the contrary, she states, it is «central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination» (1991: 5).

In her terms, the very existence of a coherent American literary tradition is the result of codes and norms of the symbolic exclusion of a part of the population perceived as unsettling and unsettled due to the social position it has historically occupied. Thanks to the constant marginalisation of blacks in the symbolic realm, America has been able to create an *ideal-typus* of itself, an ideal self-image and has succeeded to a certain extent in designing an imagined safe territory where the Other as black coincides at times with the *monster* or with the *freak*. In other words, blackness is either a synonym of danger and corruption or of savage naivety of those in need of protection and guidance.

If this is true, one should question how the emergence of an African-American consciousness has become part of the literary imagination and how the historical role of black characters, ontological Others, has been modified by it. The critique to such a complex racialized discourse has been recently approached both in terms of academic writing on the matter and through the creation of new literary figures that account for a variety of experiences and emotions. Black academics, have now worked for decades on a militant critique to the negatively stereotyped notion of black Others as non-humans or sub-human that has dominated the popular imagination. At the same time, some feminists have successfully deconstructed the all-too-familiar images of black people and black women in particular as serviceable and over-caring *mammies* that have so seriously impaired several generations of black women in the States (Hill Collins, 2000: 69). All these authors have stressed the importance of understanding the American discourse on blackness in context. In order to be able to account for its persistence and success, we need to understand its historical roots: precisely the existence of an economic and social system –slavery– based on the constant and

massive exploitation of the population of colour, guaranteed by its theoretical and symbolic exclusion from the category of «people».

The official abolition of slavery after the Civil War did not coincide with the progressive inclusion of blacks in the mainstream cultural entourage (Davis, 2004). Nevertheless, we can rightly argue that the new access to cultural resources guaranteed by an easier entrance into the education system and, later, into consumerism of cultural artefacts created the preconditions for a public heavy questioning of the Master's narratives with their emphasis on blacks' hypersexualization, charms, laziness, naivety and a supposed propensity to sexual violence.

In this complex setting that shows the emergence of Black consciousness, black consumerism of cultural items and of a lively middle class struggling with its own self-image, Gilda could be considered as one manifestation of this recently acquired public consciousness. In fact, to the stereotyping of black people and to their historical marginality both in the political scene and in the literary realm, Gomez's work opposes a black character who struggles to establish herself as a free woman in a small community to which she is bound by affection, communion and a desire for care.

2. The Gothic Canon and Female Heroines

There are those of our kind who kill every time they go out into the night. They say they need this exhilaration in order to live this life. They are simply murderers.

Louisiana: 1850

We follow Gilda through a series of episodes that take place in America over a period of 150 years, we celebrate her transformation from a young slave to a *Madame* in a brothel and, while she holds our hand, we navigate the difficult situations she encounters being a lesbian and a black in contemporary and near-future America.

I decided to work on the book *The Gilda Stories* because, Gilda is a revolutionary character in relation to the Gothic canon that has emerged in the works of white male authors in the West since the end of the XIX century. Here, I am essentially referring to the novels *Dracula* of Bram Stoker and *Carmilla* written a few years earlier by an Anglo-Irish journalist, Le Fanu. Both texts have left a powerful legacy for vampire fiction; in fact, they have turned into *topos* of the genre. These two books, thanks to the different cinematic adaptations, have heavily conditioned or even determined the way we think about vampires and have created a mould that most authors have adhered to when faced with the challenge of generating new vampire figures.

I will briefly consider the influence of Dracula's prototypes first and then I will take into account Le Fanu's example that exemplifies our notion of lesbian vampires.

Bram Stoker's preoccupation with sexuality and perversion constitutes a key element to understand his construction of female protagonists, Lucy Westenra and Mina Murray. We are faced here with two different aspects of femininity that were perceived as seriously disturbing by the vast majority of male authors of the Victorian period. On the one hand we have Lucy, a splendid young lady that is incapable of deciding which suitor she should marry. She is a sleepwalker and according to the male-biased medical knowledge of the period, somnambulism was a mark of an unsettling sexuality that in her case is exemplified by her uneasiness and opposition to monogamous courtship (Showalter, 1980). On the other hand, we have Mina that, already engaged with Jonathan, is showing clear signs of resistance to the rules regulating/controlling the entrance of women in the public sphere (Wicke, 1992) and to heterosexuality as the overwhelming norm of feminine sexual orientation. Lucy and Mina share a bond that qualifies as homoerotic. Even if it would be hazardous to read it as a clear description of a lesbian relationship, the text suggests that their union represents the perfect match between elected souls. The multiple lines in which the two characters show attraction and tenderness towards each other contrasts with the almost total lack of passion in other «legitimate» heterosexual unions such as the one shared by Mina and her fiancé. In both cases, Stoker manifests great horrors towards illegitimate sexual desire exemplified in the text by the homoerotic tension between the two female characters and by the unions of Dracula, the prototypical outsider, the foreign-Other, with Lucy or Mina, his females of choice. In both cases these feelings constitute a threat to middle-class values; in Dracula's passion for English young ladies we can read a menace to endogamy or, in anthropological terms, the conflictive need to share a limited number of sexual resources (Spenser, 1992; Signorotti, 1996).

The same preoccupation with abnormal sexuality or female «closeness» could be perceived in Le Fanu's work. His main character, Carmilla, appears as a threatening monster that seduces her pure, innocent victim, Laura, taking advantage of her need to share her days with someone her age and the desire to have a companion. If Dracula was pictured as a foreign stranger, the Countess was already familiar with her newly found companion. They have experienced each other's presence in dreams when they were little; they have known each other in a world dominated by affectionate mothers and intimate conversations. If Dracula's sexuality pointed at an external thread, a possible corruption of purity through the vampire as a source of contamination, Carmilla gives voice to a more subliminal hostility towards a desire conceived as primordial, linked to an age of innocence, to an everlasting memory of care and familiarity. The duplicity of lesbianism, source of terror and desire for a voyeuristic

male gaze (according to feminist critics), is rooted in this unbreakable bond we all share in the womb with the creator, the Mother, that men envy, desire and fear at the same time, being an autonomous sphere of self-definition that cannot possibly be subjected to their gaze or power. Laura and Carmilla are entangled in dreams and desires that constitute their very essence. As Nina Auerbach expresses it: «Carmilla comes home to share not only the domestic present, but lost mothers and dreams, weaving herself so tightly into Laura's perceptions' that the effects of this bond on Laura would ideally be endless» (Auerbach, 1995: 45).

In both works we can trace a strong homophobic feeling and a hostile reaction to the emergence of women's bonds of affection and complicity outside the traditional family environment. We should point out how the economic independence of women guaranteed by new property laws was perceived as a danger to male ownership and to social control, exercised by male members of families and guaranteed by women's limited access to economic power and resources. This recently acquired independence can be read as the materialistic origin of this type of symbolic representation of strong-willed women as ontologically evil.

Almost a century later, this canon of vampire Gothic fiction has been questioned by the emergence, in American Literature, of new female figures such as Gilda that have tried to break through the everlasting oppression of a mode of literary creation where female and «otherness» coincide and generate a disturbing and malevolent idea of femininity. In fact, femininity or being a female in the male vampire gothic tradition inspired by Dracula's narrative, was defined as either a threat to heterosexual and reproductive sexuality as the accepted norm or as a danger to the figure of the *Angel in the House* as a representation of the only legitimate role for women in capitalist societies modelled on values promoted by the growing middle class.

Considering these terms of the question posed by the Gothic Literary Tradition and by Vampire Literature in particular, Gilda constitutes a focus of resistance to a variety of elements that define the tradition itself.

3. Female Vampires go to America

In our life, we who live by sharing the life blood of others have no need to kill. It is through our connection with life, not death, that we live.

Louisiana, 1850

In Gomez's fiction, the lesbian vampire is pictured in *humanist* terms. It is far removed from the stereotypical figure of the predator and the monster that was so characteristic of the

previous works I have mentioned (Teti, 1994). She is a lovable creature; she embodies the opposite idea of «otherness». She trespasses the nineteenth century projection of our own shadow turning from our negative alter-ego to the embodied version of our will to change. If the Other in colonial narratives was in Said's terms, the alter-ego of Western civilization (Said, 1995), Gilda stands for the recognition of our own Otherness, the acceptance that what we cannot define our Selves in opposition to monstrous Others but that we need to look at our own monstrosity, our culturally manufactured Selves with their ambiguities and hybridity, in order to engage with the notion of social transformation.

If the ancient vampires we are familiar with were creatures that did not hold on to their humanity and were overwhelmed by primordial instincts that transformed them in dangerous imaginary figures, Gilda is an all-too human creature. Despite the fact that the character herself could still be perceived as alien, her proximity to us as readers is highlighted by the affection she shares with her «prey»; affection that inevitably marks her as human. Her humanity constitutes what we can still identify with, even through deranged notions of *time* and *space* present in the novel. If the previous vampires were thirsty beasts, as the newborn Lucy, Gilda, on the contrary, shares blood and gives back care and pleasure. Her prey are in fact companions rather than hapless victims, in this long journey through time, through atrocities such as slavery or through beautiful times when the main characters can enjoy a freedom well beyond our natural human reaches.

She still is a vampire that hungers for blood as her ancestors did, but the relationship she tries to build with her partners is now based on an understanding of each other needs and reciprocity. Her taking of blood appears as a *gift* in the anthropological sense given by Marcel Mauss to this practice across cultures. Far from been just a one-way transaction, Gilda takes blood but in exchange she infuses her people with warmth and a sense of belonging that is otherwise alien to them. Through her humanity, they can feel whole for the first time.

Through Gilda's example, I would like to stress the key relevance of the black movement in redefining a terrain of literary intervention that has been historically dominated by whiteness and stereotypical visions of blackness, in Morrison's terms, as subsidiary or altogether negative. Thanks to the new balance of power, the recognition of a black sensitivity and of an autonomous written and oral tradition worth disclosing, black authors have since engaged with the difficult task of giving voice to the otherwise repressed or marginalized black subaltern (Spivak, 1988). Gomez's narrative, enjoying the sudden rush of creativity generated by the Movement itself and the new freedom of speech for blacks and people of colour, constitutes a valuable assault on the vampire canon. She places a black vampire at the core of her narrative and she makes her a

lesbian, displacing two *topoi* of both the American tradition and the vampire one. In harmony with the countercultural production of the 60's and 70's with its abundance of films, fanzines and cultural items (Dubin, 1987), Gomez symbolically resists the discursive practices on blacks as marginal that define power relations between majority and minority groups in American society at that time. Thanks to her heroine, Gomez creates a place for *countercultural narrative* in the American and International literary scene.

4. A new Self: Lesbian Feminism confronting the Gothic Tradition

*It's to a timeless place I wish to return, to the place in your heart where I hope always to belong.
South End: 1955*

As I have stated before, Gilda questions the lesbian stereotype and suggests an economy of feelings where those patterns of behaviour that were previously recognized as malevolent or perverted, are seen as a generous attempt to communicate and share affection in an anti-hierarchical manner. If the vampire was *glamouring* us, taking away our free will and, therefore, betraying a desire to dominate and render us non-human (free-will understood as the distinctive and constitutive element of humanity), Gilda asks for blood and offers something in exchange. From a pattern of domination and submission we can see a clear shift in the direction of a more equalateral bond. Trying to break the dichotomy between submission and dominance, Gomez bet it all on a new way of reading and defining relationships. Her humanistic alternative is forged using care and affection as raw materials. It is no accident that the main characters of her novel are lesbians. In fact, if once more, we observe the cultural context in which the novel was first gestated, we can trace back its origins to the general debate that was, at that point, dominating the feminist movement and the lesbian one in particular.

Thanks to feminism and the growing emphasis on the «personal» as opposed to the «public», women demanded free access to *pleasure* and to a satisfactory sexuality that was not subordinated to reproduction or legitimated by the heterosexual dominant model. Embracing the modern advancements of science and technology, feminism promoted a new discourse on women as active sexual subjects that could not be bound to heterosexual and reproductive norms governing the family, perceived as a patriarchal institution based on the systematic exploitation of female work and body.

Orgasm and *pleasure* enter the arena of the public psyche and became the focus of much debate and theorizing from fields from Anthropology to Philosophy, a discipline

traditionally unable to define it as a specific field of enquiry. In fact, if we observe closely the existing relation between Philosophy and sexuality as a specific field of questioning, we will be surprised to discover that it has constituted itself as a difficult «object» for philosophical reasoning. We might well say that, until the 20th century, most of the theorizing on human behaviour has not been dedicated to exploring such an important aspect of human interaction and that, until recently, the existing bibliography on this matter has been scarce or non-existent altogether. Nevertheless, from the second half of the 20th century and thanks to the considerable contributions of female writers and critics during the 70s and the 80s (with the newborn philosophy of Gender and the critical enquiry into the social and political relations between the sexes) sexuality has finally been recognized as a key element to interpret human behaviour and has acquired a central status in the literary and symbolic reflections on human relations and loving ones in particular. Moreover, sexuality has been described as the *locus* of everlasting power struggles, understood as the embodiment of the existing dichotomy between domination and submission. In particular this dichotomy has been represented critically as a manifestation of patriarchy or a mode of social relations based on inequality and a hierarchical order wherein women are oppressed and men are the ever domineering subjects.

As a response to hegemonic *heteronormativity*, the problematic knot of gender domination and female submission, lesbianism became, politically, the only countercultural practice that could resist this dichotomy and establish a new realm where relationships were based on interchange and on this anthropological notion of *gift* that I considered earlier. For a vast proportion of radical feminist activists, homosexual relations between women were the only ones able to guarantee a real break with submission and dominance that characterized the family and the heterosexual world. In this respect, Gomez inherited this attitude towards homosexuality and lesbianism which characterised the feminist debate of the previous decades.

Gilda resists the Gothic Tradition that disqualifies female homosexuality as perverse or represents it as an abomination, and suggests a new horizon where it can be read as a tool for symbolic emancipation. Inheriting «radical feminists' focus on sexuality as an arena of victimization and oppressive inequality for women» (Berger, Searles & Cottle, 1990: 33), Gomez pictures a bucolic landscape where elective bonds of love and consensual sharing have replaced the tyrannical dichotomy. On the other hand, she interprets creatively the «libertarian feminists focus on sexuality as an arena of constructive struggle» (1990: 33) turning her characters into problematic self-questioning beings that use the sexual encounter as terrain for promoting a new ethical vision of human relations where passion almost disappears and it is replaced by a generic feeling of affection. Gomez acknowledged the influence of the feminist debate in an interview released in 1993 in which she stated that striking a balance between

the diffused patriarchal view of the female body as sexual property and the total abandon of sexuality as a legitimate field to create and enforce identity is somewhat tricky (Gomez, 1993). Criticizing Dworkin's emphasis on rape and exploitation as the ontological foundation of heterosexual encounters (Dworkin, 1979), Gomez hopes to create new «controlling images» of female sexuality in the symbolic. In this respect, writing fiction and erotica in particular, represent to her a contribution to the cause of sexual liberation in general.

Once again, her «game of reverse» is enchanting. In fact, if family was identified originally as one of the most powerful institutions that promoted gender inequality and domination over women, Gomez uses the word and the concept repeatedly in her alternative vampires' narrative subverting dramatically its understanding. From a «place» of domination, families become the only hope for establishing new non-hierarchical bonds. We have shifted from blood relations and kinship to a «matriarchal mode» –most characters are women– where each member feels attached to the others through this sense of elected community, a nurturing group that closely resembles the *countercultural commune* opposed to traditional ones named State, Church and Family. To the author, «family is more than a unit designed to uphold the idea of capitalism» (Gomez, 1993); it is a «foundation», it is what helps Gilda survive and what helps her to resist the ups and downs of being alive for more than one hundred years.

5. On Vampirism: reflections on nurturing and devouring

«Kill him! He'll haunt our every step if you don't.» Her urgency made her voice become more shrill. «How can we live if we don't rid ourselves of him right now?» [...] «How?» Gilda screamed at Eleanor. «I don't think we can live at all if we do this.»

Yerba Buena: 1890

In her short article «La madre vampira», Pilar Pedraza shares a new understanding of the complex genealogy of female vampires and their significance as archetypes of the Mother. Images of female vampires are so deeply rooted in our culture that we can find embryos of their presence in Greek mythology. They appear as phantoms, evanescent creatures that live in between worlds –ours and the land of the Dead– and are called *empusas*. Their power resides in their ambiguous nature and in their *liminality*. That ambiguity has allowed our imagination to turn them into horrid dead spouses, terrifying lovers, diabolical human-looking machines or devouring mothers. According to Pedraza, the most horrifying and abject representation of the female vampire is the devouring Mother. Moreover, she states that the lesbian element that we have analysed through Lucy, Carmilla, and finally Gilda, constitutes just a superficial aspect of

female vampirism or one of its many masks, but its real power as a metaphor of the feminine that resides in the double-faced archetype of the Mother as nurturer and destroyer.

The constant clash between normality and eccentric behaviour, between terror or unsettling aspects of the gothic narratives on one hand and a possible disappearance of threats on the other, constitutes the power engine that sustains the master narrative. If we consider Pedraza's contribution then, the disappearance of the destructive Mother and the emergence of a caring female figure such as Mina in *Dracula*, ends this tension and therefore brings the novel to an end. In effect, for the economy of the texts considered, the female figures that do not lose themselves to the nurturing aspect of their ambivalent natures, will end up killed or exterminated. I wonder though how we can place Gilda in this field of enquiry. She does not share this ambivalence; nevertheless we can still see how «motherhood» constitutes the core of the narrative. Gilda is portrayed as a caring creature, a self-sacrificing woman constantly preoccupied with the well being of those she is in charge of, or those she perceives as weak or in need of protection, her metaphorical children. In order to deconstruct the devouring aspect of the Maternal, Gomez embraces the most traditional, conservative and impairing aspects of femininity as it has been defined by the patriarchal dichotomical tradition. In her attempt to question the Gothic, Gomez portrays a woman that, without giving up her never ending life, will never constitute a threat to society as we know it or to its impairing stereotypes and gender roles. In fact, instead of collapsing this dichotomy, Gomez just embraces what she considers the positive side of it. Killing the demonic, abject aspect of the Mother understood as foundational to female identity, she stands with the nurturing, candid version of the angelical.

Paulina Palmer appears fascinated with Gomez's character. In response to Auerbach's critique of Gilda's lame and anti-antagonistic response to macho ideologies present in vampire texts, Palmer states that Gilda represents a queer narrative of transgression and tension that is still there in the form of internal and external difficulties in defining self-identity as transitional and performative (Palmer, 1999: 119-125). Nonetheless, if we had to place Gilda among the powerful female figures that dominate our imagination it would be a difficult task. In her struggle for identity she does not appear heroic. She is neither a fascinating monster nor a troubled being at the verge of the abyss. Being used to a mode of Gothic Literature dominated by patriarchal violence, one might not be capable of recognizing the power of Gilda as a revolutionary alternative to the canon. My feeling is that taking away terror and ambiguity and reinforcing therefore a traditional vision of femininity based on an economy of affection and love, Gomez impairs her character and makes her disposable. It seems to me that in order to subvert the canon we need a character that does not remove antagonism (I agree with Auerbach here) and who still retains a strong power of attraction.

6. Conclusion

As we have seen, Gomez attacks the patriarchal traditional Gothic narrative from several fronts. She creates stories where the main character is a black woman, breaking up with the invisibility and marginalization of blacks in the American literary imagination and with the Gothic canon in particular. Moreover, she takes away violence and terror fundamental to the vampire encounters and she replaces the tension forever present in the unsettling proximity of a non-human creature with a vision of vampires as the best embodiment of our desire for contact and love. In doing so, the Vampire, the Stranger, the Outsider, the immortal Seducer disappears and we are left with a marginal creature persecuted and isolated from civil society and overall unable to make a comfortable and secure place for itself. Gilda, despite her efforts to be recognised as a valid interlocutor, finds herself discriminated and on the brink of extinction. She ends up representing a species that won't even have enough force to fly to our windows at night and beg to be let in.

We are all safe.

I mourn my monsters.

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