Sullied Blood, Semen and Skin: Vampires and the Spectre of Miscegenation

FROHREICH, Kimberly

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Reference


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translations of Virginia Woolf and is the author of *How Does it Feel: Point of View in Translation* (Rodopi 2007). Her work now focuses on the dubbing and subtitling of films and television series in France (Audiovisual Translation). She has written on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Marilyn Monroe* and is currently working on a new monograph on performance and dubbing entitled *Uncanny Encounters: Characterisation in Translation* (Peter Lang 2014).

**Address for correspondence**

Charlotte Bosseaux, University of Edinburgh, Old College, South Bridge, Newington, Edinburgh EH8 9YE, Scotland. Email: Charlotte.Bosseaux@ed.ac.uk

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**Sullied Blood, Semen and Skin**

**Vampires and the Spectre of Miscegenation**

Kimberly A. Frohreich  
University of Geneva

**Abstract**

This article explores the trend in contemporary vampire media to highlight racially-charged issues, demonstrating a consciousness of the way the vampire has been used in conjunction with racial stigmatisation. While the traditional figure of the vampire spoke strongly to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century white American fears of miscegenation, I argue that some contemporary vampire narratives, such as *Blade* (1998), *Underworld* (2003), and *True Blood* (2008–), rewrite the figure in order to question and/or undo the link between 'monstrosity' and racial otherness. Central to this task is not only the repositioning and characterisation of the vampire, but also – considering that the female body was once perceived as the locus for racial purity – that of the heroine.

**Keywords:** Sullied blood, semen, and skin: vampires and the spectre of miscegenation, vampire, *Underworld*, *True Blood*, *Blade*, race, miscegenation, disease, hybridity

This article explores the ways in which contemporary vampire narratives rewrite the figure of the vampire in relation to race and miscegenation. The traditional vampire has always threatened binaries, such as dead/alive, animal/human, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, and has often functioned as a destabiliser of the category of race. Donna Haraway writes, 'for better and for worse, vampires are _vectors of category transformation in a racialised, historical, national unconscious_. The vampire is 'a figure that both promises and threatens racial and sexual mixing',1 Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* miscegenates – he mixes blood with white English women and uses their bodies to ‘reproduce’ other vampires. However, this practice is part of what makes him ‘threatening’ and ‘monstrous’, contributing to his characterisation as the ethnie and/or racial Other. Indeed, Stoker’s novel illustrates Western European anxieties regarding Eastern European immigrants and the potential loss of supposed racial and/or ethnic purity. Judith Halberstam

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[1] "For better and for worse, vampires are “vectors of category transformation in a racialised, historical, national unconscious.” Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* miscegenates—he mixes blood with white English women and uses their bodies to ‘reproduce’ other vampires. However, this practice is part of what makes him ‘threatening’ and ‘monstrous’, contributing to his characterisation as the ethnie and/or racial Other. Indeed, Stoker’s novel illustrates Western European anxieties regarding Eastern European immigrants and the potential loss of supposed racial and/or ethnic purity. Judith Halberstam"
suggests that Dracula's portrayal as the monstrous other involves Stoker's use of scientific discourses that were frequently used to stigmatise the Jew. Dracula's characterisation as degenerate, sexually perverse, and pathological were 'monstrous' traits that he would then pass on to his victims. So while it can be said that the traditional vampire destabilises racial boundaries, the figure has also played into stigmatising definitions of the racial Other in relation to white normativity.

Both film and literature have propagated the image of the frightening vampire, contributing to the anxiety or fear of the racial Other and racial mixing. And they not only drew from scientific discourses — vampire narratives also drew from legal and political discourses. Indeed, with regard to US racial discourses, the origin of the term ‘miscegenation’ (as well as the term itself) can be seen to parallel the rise of the nineteenth-century vampire figure. The term was coined in David Goodman Croly's 1864 American political pamphlet and was designed to scare white male voters into believing that a blending of races would inevitably occur if slavery were abolished. 'Miscegenation' was thus a fearful word, originally a spectre, used to prohibit sex between individuals of different races, in much the same way that the vampire had been used in earlier literature. The multiple anxieties that this word evoked for Croly's Victorian readers — sexual desire between white women and black men, the loss of racial purity and of white supremacy, and eventual racial degeneracy — are surprisingly similar to those evoked by the traditional vampire.

Furthermore, the notion of the vampire as 'miscegenator' positions the figure not only as the ethnic or racial Other, but also as male, with the white female body as the locus for racial purity. The stigmatisation of African-Americans as hypersexual and animalistic simultaneously explained the white man's transgressions with black women while it positioned the black man as the threat to racial purity and white supremacy. As Martha Hodes writes,

> Southern patriarchs ... devise[d] a rationale by which they could retain their power of sexual exploitation over black women while claiming that sex between black men and white women would destroy the white race.

As the embodiment of racial purity, the white woman needed to be protected from the black man and his 'aggressive' desires as well as from her own sexual attraction to the black man, just as Mina's and Lucy's bodies must be persistently fought over and protected from their own increasing desire for Dracula as much as from the vampire himself.

This article will examine contemporary vampire media in which many of the problematic (racialised) renditions of this figure are rewritten. These elements of racial (and gender) stereotyping and racial purity versus mixing have mostly been covert elements in early vampire narratives, while the texts that I discuss contain more overt references to race and miscegenation. In much the same way that the spectre of miscegenation permeated the white American conscious, the vampire is now a major cultural presence through which America's changing perceptions of the category of race and race relations are articulated. Indeed, contemporary vampire fiction recycles early fictional tropes and consciously incorporates the scientific and legal discourses as well as the social practices that have surrounded the cultural construction of race, questioning the link between the racial Other and the monstrous Other. In particular, Stephen Norrington's _Blade_ (1998), Len Wiseman's _Underworld_ (2003), and the first season of HBO's _True Blood_ (2008), attempt to rewrite early racist (and sexist) vampire narratives. The plotline of each text revolves around the struggles to define and control bodies that threaten the racial binary and thus the white heterosexual male norm. Despite differences in the positioning and characterisation of the vampire in relation to the racial Other, each text consciously points to the way the vampire has been written in relation to the category of race. And in rewriting the vampire, these texts suggest that the bodies that have been used to define racial otherness can also be rewritten.

**Blade**

Admittedly, Norrington's _Blade_ does present the traditional figure of the vampire. As James Holt notes, 'Blade is a throwback to an earlier vision of the vampire as a bloodthirsty monster that looks on humanity as simply a source of food.' Indeed, these vampires do not displace the stereotypes of the racial Other but rather appear to reinforce them. The very first scene of the film portrays them as violent, bloodthirsty and sexually 'perverse' with multiple (and same-sex) partners. However, the narrative complicates this straightforward 'throwback' to earlier vampire figures by positioning these more violent vampires in relation to another, more peaceful group of vampires and distinguishing the two in terms of race; the latter group are 'pure blood', born from other vampires, and the former are those that were once human and have been 'turned'. This mere biological distinction suggests that vampirism is a disease, a stigmatisation that is also part of the way in which the two vampire groups are characterised. For instance, Karen Jensen, a doctor specialising in blood, tells Deacon Frost, the leader of the turned vampires, that they are no more than a 'sexually-transmitted disease.' Sander Gilman writes of the 'white American notion that blacks, being inherently different, have a fundamentally different relationship to disease ... leading to the horrors of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment.' As syphilis and AIDS are both thought of as primarily contractible through sexual transmission, the stigmatisation of the black body as hypersexual, and unable to control sexual desire, allowed for further identification of these diseases with racial otherness. So while _Blade_ does not undo or blur the link between the traditional figure of the vampire and the racial other, it uses the figure to highlight the problematic depiction of the vampire and the distinction between racial purity and mixing.

Not only does the film complicate the vampire/human binary with its two groups of vampires, but it also appears to rewrite this 'either/or' process of identification through the character of Blade, a half-human and half-vampire, whose mother had been bitten by a vampire before giving birth. Through Blade, the narrative makes a direct reference to miscegenation and to the mixed-race subject...
as well as to the threat that they pose to racial binaries. However, Blade believes the vampire is fundamentally evil and 'animalistic' as well as abject, and thus, his attitude towards himself is one of self-hatred. In his article on the film, Hamilton Carroll writes, 'The vampire does not solely inhabit a position as other to the subject but stands as the abject the subject expels to constitute itself'. While Carroll shows that the abject Other is always part of the subject, this process of identity formation is double-layered for Blade as the Other is literally a part of his body. Blade tells Karen: 'I have spent my whole life looking for that thing that killed my mother and made me what I am. And every time I take one of those monsters out, I get a little piece of that life back.' Aside from the desire to protect humans, killing vampires allows Blade to feel that he rejects his vampirism and regain more of his 'humanity'.

Blade's capacity to identify with one side of the human/vampire binary is further complicated by his relation to his mother's body. Indeed, Blade's desire to hunt and kill vampires in order to reject his vampire self is paralleled with his need to find and kill the vampire that bit and murdered (or so he believes) his mother. As Blade and his mother are black, the film rewrites the female body that is in need of protection as black rather than white. While Blade's human father is absent from the story, we learn towards the end of the film that his vampire father is none other than the main villain, Deacon Frost. With a white vampire, that bites monsters out, I get a little piece of that life back.' Aside from the desire to protect humans, killing vampires allows Blade to feel that he rejects his vampirism and regain more of his 'humanity'.

Blade's mother challenges her depiction as victim and propagates the stigmatisation of African-American women, in particular, as 'monstrous'. Blade discovers towards the end of the film that his mother is 'alive, a vampire dwelling by Deacon's side, who claims ownership of her. He tells Blade to 'give ... up [the fight]. She belongs to me, buddy.' In addition, Blade's mother appears as a ready and willing sex-slave when her bed/coffin opens as if it were operated by remote-control. Blade's portrayal of vampirism as disease in relation to the racial Other is further highlighted through the characterisation of Blade's mother when, at the film's climax, she alternately attempts to seduce him and kill him. Her perverse sexual desire and pathological behaviour might again remind the spectator of the syphilitic. Gilman writes:

The association of the black, especially the black female, with the syphilophobia of the late nineteenth century was ... manifest. Black females do not merely represent the sexualised female, they also represent the female as the source of corruption and disease.22

In this light, it appears as if Blade's mixed-race (or half-human, half-vampire) identity is not due to the infection of vampirism from the vampire who bit his mother, but rather due to the perhaps already 'corrupted' nature of his black mother.

Evidently, the loss of Blade's mother to vampirism threatens his ability to rely on his human identity and to link humanity to blackness. Yet Blade kills her in the end, saying, 'I must release you', a remark that is reminiscent of a slave-owner to a slave and that usurps Deacon's power over her. While the implications of racial otherness, disease, and the gender dynamic of this scene remain problematic, the narrative suggests that the mixed-race individual claims power over the white slave-holder.13 If one considers Blade's murder of his mother as an actual liberation, his action repositions the black female body and undoes the connotation of disease and hypersexuality. Certainly, the character of Karen assists with this rewriting as she functions as a replacement for Blade's mother's body throughout the narrative. Indeed, if Blade's mother is demonised for miscegenating, Karen valorises both Blade's human and vampire identity — she allows Blade to help her conserve her human identity and she also allows him to bite her in order to use his vampirism to win the fight against Deacon and his mother. Nevertheless, in either case, the female body is central to the way in which Blade relates to his human/vampire or mixed-race status.

Underworld

Len Wiseman's Underworld (2003) rewrites the vampire by using some elements of the traditional figure while erasing others. Vampires retain their aristocratic associations with their Gothic castle and manner of dress. They also appear as more 'civilised' when compared to their racial enemies, the werewolves, or Lycans. The latter dwell in an underground subway and sewage system and are more 'animalistic' in their form and behaviour — they are at one moment scolded by their leader for acting like a 'pack of rabid dogs'.14 Evidently, class connotations are used in the distinction between the two species, or races, and this becomes even more explicit when the spectator eventually learns that the Lycans were once the slaves of the vampires. In Underworld, then, vampires are rewritten as a metaphor for the other side of the black/white racial binary. While the Lycans continually disprove the vampires' stereotyping of them, demonstrating scientific and technological intelligence, the vampires fight to retain their 'superiority' by waging a genocidal war against the Lycans. And the vampires' 'superiority' relies on the notion of racial purity.

Like Blade, Underworld's plot also centres on racial purity versus racial mixing, with the Lycans positioned as 'vectors of category transformation', as Haraway would suggest. Indeed, the Lycans' main strategy in the racial war against the vampires is to prove that the two races can be mixed or combined. In other words, they fight to miscegenate, to create a half-vampire, half-Lycan, or mixed-race being. The vampires, on the other hand, maintain a belief system in which this mixing would not only be an 'abomination', it would also be impossible. Indeed, for Viktor, one of the vampire elders, vampires and Lycans are not separate races,
but are separate species. Through his character, the film stages one of the nineteenth-century debates over racial difference, the monogenetic versus polygenetic argument. Robert Young reports:

The monogenetic argument was that the different human races were descended from a single source ... The polygenetic argument, on the other hand, that the different races were in fact different species, and had been different all along, allowed the argument that they would and should continue to be so. Not surprisingly ... this was the idea cherished by ... apologists for slavery in the American South.15

As a previous slave-owner, and the image of a Southern plantation patriarch, Viktor believes in the polygenetic origin of the two 'species' and rejects the belief in the 'sons of the Corvinus clan, one bitten by bat, one by wolf', claiming it is merely 'a ridiculous legend'. In contrast, the Lycans depend on this monogenetic origin, or this 'legend', in their attempt to create a mixed-race subject.

In addition to the debate regarding the origin of the two races, both vampires and Lycans fight to control or to reveal their version of history. As one of the means through which history is shared is through blood, this is also a way in which racial purity can either be maintained or threatened. Indeed, in Underworld, the body literally becomes a locus for writing one's narrative, or version, of historical events; and these are narratives which also serve to define race and race relations between vampires and Lycans. When the human Michael is bitten by the Lycan Lucian, he inherits the latter's memory of the Lycans' enslavement by vampires. Adam Knee writes,

Once one is a Lycan or vampire ... one not only shares some of the (transformative) physical attributes of that group but also partakes of some of its thoughts and memories, no matter what one's own history is; thus, everyone of a given clan or race automatically shares a certain dimension of consciousness and cannot escape a certain race memory.16

In other words, the film suggests that being part of a race involves sharing a common history, one that in turn defines the racial group. While the Lycans are able to recruit humans to their cause, the vampires' genocide of the Lycans appears as a strategy to maintain their own version of history. Indeed, the vampire rulers limit the sharing of blood, and thus of history, to themselves. As the spectator discovers with the vampire Selene, the character through which the narrative is focussed, the history recorded in writing is false, while other past events were never recorded. Because Selene does not initially know that the Lycans were once the slaves of the vampires, and because she (wrongly) believes the former to be responsible for the murder of her human family, Selene (along with the spectator) originally sees the vampires as the victims of the violent, animalistic, and bloodthirsty Lycans rather than the reverse. The film, therefore, highlights how historical discourse is used to define the racial Other through the falsification and erasure of past events and memories, or the prevalence of white male history over the voices of the other.

One of the missing histories that Selene later discovers is Viktor's execution of his daughter, Sonia, for her miscegenation with Lucian, a narrative that marks the beginning of the war between vampires and Lycans, and that also defines Michael's and Selene's bodies. Indeed, the Lycans' goal in mixing the two races appears to come from Lucian's desire to replace the child he would have had with Sonia as well as to 'bring an end to the war'. As the Lycans succeed in creating a half-vampire, half-Lycan being with the body of Michael, his body is meant to serve as a unification of the two races on several levels. Biologically, his body demonstrates that the genetic fusion of Lycan and vampire DNA is possible, while he also helps to undo Viktor's notion that such a being would be an 'abomination'. Indeed, with Michael's strength as a 'hybrid' being, the narrative suggests that he is far from degenerate. Historically and socially, his body resolves the source of the racial conflict by becoming a replacement for Lucian's and Sonia's child. And, as he inherits the histories of each race through their blood, the narrative suggests that he can help bring the two sides together and help them co-exist. Michael begins this strategy with Selene.

As in traditional vampire narratives, the female body in Underworld is also fought over and depicted as in need of protection. However, the film also rewrites the (white) female body as vampire and as post-feminist 'girl power' model. Almost a daughter to Viktor, Selene is one of the elite female vampires who need to be protected from being 'tainted' by Lycans. Yet, Selene will not let anyone do battle for her or over her. Clothed from head to toe in black leather, she is immediately set apart from other female vampires who remain at the castle in extravagant dresses while she joins male vampires as a 'death dealer' in their hunt for Lycans. Just as Selene refuses to play the role of the stereotypical elite female, she also eventually refuses to assist other vampires in their fight for racial purity. As Viktor's replacement daughter, Selene follows her predecessor. Not only does she develop romantic feelings for Michael, a Lycan, but she also provides Lucian with a mixed-race 'son'. True to her replacement of Sonia, Selene bites Michael, thereby effectuating the final stage of his transformation into a half-vampire, half-Lycan or mixed-race subject. Selene then kills Viktor herself, demonstrating her rejection of his patriarchal rule and desire for racial purity. Because of Selene and Michael's potential relationship, Knee suggests that 'possible interracial futures are suggested here ... through Michael's newly multiracial identity (Lycan, vampire – and human as well)' and Selene as a vampire, 'a partial species-other'.17 With such a 'suggestion', Selene becomes a 'vector of category transformation' herself, both in turning Michael, miscegenating in the traditional sense of the vampire, and in a potential miscegenation through sexual reproduction.

True Blood

The HBO series True Blood rewrites the traditional figure of the vampire with perhaps the most blatant references to racial otherness, highlighting the connection between the figure and the identity category through legal discourse
and social practices rather than through 'monstrosity'. Set in the small Southern town of Bon Temps, Louisiana, the series makes an explicit alignment between the vampire and African-Americans through its depiction of vampires fighting for equal rights, or the ratification of the Vampire Rights Amendment. The opening credits contain a series of images reminiscent of the region's racial segregation, the Ku Klux Klan, and the 1960s civil rights movement. Vampires that trespass on what is considered 'human' property are promptly 'lynched'. Indeed, in addition to the vampires being positioned as the disenfranchised, as suffering from racism, they are also sometimes characterised as weak and vulnerable. Because vampire blood functions as a drug for humans, vampires are sometimes those that are hunted rather than those that hunt. The very first episode introduces the vampire Bill Compton, the series' hero, who, rather than attacking humans for their blood, is attacked by them for his. Similarly, the gentle and passive vampire Eddie is particularly vulnerable to those that hunt vampires for their blood and is later killed. As J. M. Tyrer notes, 'True Blood manages to broach an unusual kind of horror, that inflicted on and not by vampires'. By displacing the notion of 'monstrosity' from the figure of the vampire to the human, the series points to and questions the ways in which the racial other has been defined as 'monstrous'.

Unlike Blade and Underworld, True Blood does not present a hybrid or mixed-race vampire/human identity. Yet, the series also plays with the notion of the female body as the locus of racial purity. While the opening credits depict racial issues, they also illustrate white male desire to control the female body, whether black or white. The credits present shots of two rather stereotypical images of women - those that appear to be religious, moral, and virtuous, and those that appear to be sexually provocative and promiscuous. Shots of women being baptised or blessed by white male preachers suggest that this is one manner of controlling the female body. Other shots, as well as the narrative itself, suggest that 'immoral' women must be 'conquered' sexually if they are to be controlled. Indeed, in True Blood, it seems that women who are turned into vampires are less threatening to white males than those who engage in intercourse with vampires. The bite-mark of the vampire on a woman, then, is a symbol, not of tainted blood, but of tainting through sex with a vampire. The first time Jason Stackhouse encounters the mark (or brand) on one of his sexual partners, Maudette, menacing music can be heard in the background, illustrating Jason's fear of contact with this 'threatening' figure. Jason and Maudette then recreate the scene of aggressive S&M type sex as Jason simultaneously 'punishes' her for 'letting a dead man fuck' her, and plays the vampire himself ('It's too bad I don't have fangs. I'd rip your fuckin' throat out'). Sexual prowess with 'fangbangers', or those who have sex with vampires, then becomes a masculinity contest for Jason, an attempt to procure power over vampires through his use of the female body.

However, this is not the only way to control human women within the narrative - another is death, or the elimination of their 'contaminated' bodies. The driving plot of the first season is focused on a serial killer, a human man, René Lenier, whose victims are fangbangers. The narrative thereby suggests that the threat to the female body is not the vampire or the racial other, but the white man. Significantly, René does not attack vampires (the racial other); nor does he attack human men who 'mix' with vampires. Indeed, for René (as well as other characters), the human female body seems to represent the boundary between races, one that can easily be 'breached'. While the murders are not directly condoned by the human population, Sookie Stackhouse's ability to read minds shows that many of the townspeople see these women as having 'brought it on themselves', thus reminiscent of views of rape victims as having provoked their aggressors. Yet here the critique and the violence against these women are not just 'due' to their sexually-provocative femininity, but also to their inter-racial (or inter-species) sexual relationships.

To some extent, Sookie, the series' heroine, is made to represent the 'boundary' between humans and vampires. As her romance with vampire Bill progresses, she finds herself viewed as a fangbanger. Looking like a contemporary version of the blonde Southern belle, Sookie is also initially a virgin and is therefore at the intersection of these competing races and masculinities. She is repeatedly fought over, protected, threatened, and marked (whether by bite or by beatings) by the vampire and human men that surround her. Yet Sookie attempts to resist having her body be read by those around her, whether human or vampire; and her character also makes it difficult for the spectator to categorise her. Indeed, she both plays into and escapes the stereotypes of the passive Southern belle. And, as the narrative hints at her being something other than human, she is also difficult to situate in relation to the human/vampire binary. In other words, as the main female character's body remains difficult to read, the series undoes the two stereotypes of women that the opening credits portray. Furthermore, Sam (Sookie's boss, originally in competition with Bill for her heart) and Bill's combined efforts allow Sookie to defeat René herself. As such, Sookie is able to bring a temporary end to the fighting between the two races.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, writers of contemporary vampire narratives seem to be conscious of the problematic use of the figure of the vampire in relation to racial otherness. Much contemporary vampire fiction has responded to this issue by rendering the figure less other, by highlighting the sameness of the 'monster', and thus to some extent, normalising the vampire. Narratives such as Twilight depict nice vampires that go to high school and live in a lovely upper-middle-class home. In such cases, the vampire loses its capacity to question racial (as well as other identity) categories, and, perhaps even more problematically, is 'whitened'. Indeed, where once the white make-up used to distinguish the vampire in Hollywood cinema was a sign of the 'ethnic buffoon', more of a 'clown' than a 'corpse', Robert Pattinson's white colouring in Twilight and the sequels has popularised white make-up.
Rather than making the Other less monstrous, the *Twilight* phenomenon appears to use the figure of the vampire to reinforce white superiority.

If one considers *Blade*, *Underworld*, and *True Blood* in relation to the rigidity of racial categories, as representative of their maintenance or their destabilisation, their rewriting of the figure of the vampire and its stigmatisation through racial discourses alone allows for the questioning of the racial binary. While the *Twilight* phenomenon erases the vampire’s link to racial discourses, thereby erasing the power of the figure to miscegenate, the various ways in which the above texts reposition the figure allow for a blurring of racial boundaries. Considered together, these texts maintain the miscegenating capacity of the vampire while they refuse to fix the figure on one side of the racial binary or the other. They demonstrate that the figure has been written and can be rewritten. And the way in which the figure has been used and is being used in relation to racial discourses furthe further demonstrates that the racial other and the female body are no more than constructions that can be rewritten to question rather than to reinforce white heteronormative hegemony.

Notes

5 Croly’s Chapter 8, ‘Love of the Blonde for the Black’, highlights this idea.
6 Here, I am referring to Stoker’s novel as well as the subsequent film adaptations, from Tod Browning’s 1931 film to Francis Ford Coppola’s 1992 version.
10 Despite the numerous ways in which these diseases can be contracted, they each retain strong ideological connotations to sexual promiscuity.
13 Indeed, one could argue that this scene is a black version of the scene in Stoker’s novel in which white Englishmen stave Lucy, an Englishwoman turned vampire.

Notes on contributor

Kimberly Frohreich is currently a Doctoral Assistant in American Literature and Culture at the University of Geneva, working on a PhD thesis that will focus on allegories of race in contemporary fantasy literature and media. Her recent conference papers and publications have looked at the ways in which fantasy film, television, and comic books (de)construct the relationship between ‘monstrosity’ and racial otherness through socio-politically charged themes such as miscegenation, passing, and segregation.

Address for correspondence

Kimberly A. Frohreich. Email: kimberly.frohreich@unige.ch