

Ardewir

14 WRITERS ON THE ANITA BLAKE, VAMPIRE HUNTER SERIES



Edited by Laurell K. Hamilton

With Leah Wilson



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The vampire as a racial metaphor has been something people have traced in my books from the beginning, but it was not on purpose from my point of view. The vampire represents the other, but that is a lot more than just race. As a Wiccan I can tell you that religion divides you from the mainstream, and will make people look at you as very other. I wasn't Wiccan at the beginning of the series though, so that wasn't what I was thinking at the time.

One of the things Mikhail Lyubansky puts at my door is the lack of non-white characters in my books. Since I get a lot of Hispanic fans loving the fact that Anita is half Hispanic, I could argue that, but that she looks white seems to be his point. That I can't argue with. I find it interesting that he leaves out Jamil, who is African American and one of the main dominants of the local werewolf pack, and Shang-Da, who is Chinese, the other main bodyguard and dominant. Would he argue that they are subservient to their Ulfic, their Wolf King Richard? Maybe, but that he leaves them out entirely is interesting. One thing I decided early on but have never had on stage was that just as the gene that gives you sickle cell anemia, which is more prevalent in the African American population, turns out to also help fight malaria, I'd decided that it would be cool if it also meant people with sickle cell couldn't "catch" vampirism. It is a cool idea, but I've never managed to get it on stage.

I have debated on whether to share the real reason that there are not more African American or dark-skinned vampires in my books. I can't decide if its politically correct to say it here. The truth is that all vampires are paler as a vampire than they were as live people, thus someone of African American descent would be paler. But how pale? I was pretty sure that if I had characters that were African American but paled them all out that I'd be accused of trying to literally white-wash them. Was I over-thinking it? Maybe, but at the beginning of the series I was very aware that I was white bread as far as I knew, and didn't have any experience here to draw on. I was in my early twenties and I just couldn't

figure out a way to ask the question of someone without sounding stupid, or racist, or both. I'm actually planning to grab that particular politically correct dilemma by the horns soon, but because of my own uncertainty early in the series we have a shortage of non-white vampires.



—*Laurell*

Are the Fangs Real?

Vampires as Racial Metaphor in the Anita Blake Novels

MIKHAIL LYUBANSKY, PH.D.

They're physically powerful and capable of unusual speed. They're sexually seductive, in a forbidden sort of way, and dangerous—even the well-mannered, law-abiding ones are, at their core, perilous. They may look human, but they're not. They're monsters, ever ready to prey and feed on human fears, if not their lives. Vampires? Of course. But vampires have never been *just* vampires. As vampire literature expert Elizabeth Miller¹ points out, “the vampire always embodies the contemporary threat.” Sure, the Anita Blake novels can be read as light, escapist fiction, but intended or not, the vampires within represent a number of marginalized groups that are perceived as a threat by mainstream society, particularly immigrants and racial minorities. This essay brings this racial metaphor to the foreground.

It All Starts with Dracula

It doesn't, of course,² but Dracula is the most famous vampire of all. More than 200 films have been made featuring the Count, and the

¹ As quoted in S. Rupp's “The Boy's Got Bite: Why people are vamping it up again, a century after ‘Dracula.’”

² Before Bram Stoker's 1897 *Dracula*, there was Sheridan Le Fanu's lesbian vampire in

estimate of films that reference Dracula is in the 600s. And that's just film. The Anita Blake series is part of an entire genre of vampire novels (all undoubtedly influenced by Dracula) that now numbers more than a thousand. Perhaps not quite the way the good Count intended, but Dracula did indeed sire an entire universe.

Stoker's novel was itself part of a literary movement called "invasion literature," a genre that included more than 400 books, many bestsellers, in the period from 1871 to 1914. Invasion literature was driven by anxiety about hypothetical invasions by foreigners (H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* is the prototypical and best known work), an anxiety that Stoker deliberately (pardon the pun) stoked with his tale of Dracula, who polluted the English bloodline both literally and metaphorically. Indeed, what distinguished Dracula from his vampire predecessors is that his attacks involved not only the possibility of death but the actual loss of one's identity, in particular one's racial identity. As John Stevenson observed in "A Vampire in the Mirror: The Sexuality of Dracula," blood is not just food, semen, and a means to eternal life, but also a "crucial metaphor" for racial identity. Dracula's threat, Stevenson argues, is not mere miscegenation (the mixing of blood) but deracination, for Dracula's sexual partners become pure vampires, with loyalties to Dracula, not Britain.

This perceived racial threat to Britain is the subject of Stephen Arata's "The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization" in which he describes vampirism as "a colonization of the body" and "the biological and political annihilation of the weaker race by the stronger." At a time when British global influence was waning, unrest in its colonies rising, and concerns about the morality of imperialism increasing, Dracula, according to Arata, represented

Carmilla (1872), who combined terror with eros, and before that, James Rymer's *Varney the Vampire* (1847), which first introduced many of the standard vampire conventions, including fangs (which leave two puncture wounds in the neck), superhuman strength, and hypnotic powers. Indeed, the modern vampire novel can be traced back as far as 1819, when Lord Byron's physician John Polidori took up Byron's challenge, during a small gathering of friends, to write a ghost story. Polidori's *The Vampyre* was not only the first English-language vampire story but, in the words of cultural scholar Christopher Fraying, also "the first story successfully to fuse the disparate elements of vampirism into a coherent literary genre." It is worth noting that this gathering was also the birth of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Byron's own epic poem "Mazappa."

“deep rooted anxieties and fears” of reverse colonization, of civilized Britain “overcome by the forces of barbarism” in the form of immigration from Eastern Europe.³

But there was yet another perceived racial menace in nineteenth century England: the Semitic threat. Unlike the “barbaric” East Europeans, at the end of the nineteenth century, European Jews were relatively literate and overrepresented among the bourgeois class. They were nonetheless resented, distrusted, and disliked, perceived as the racial other, an “alien” nation even within their own native England. Dracula embodied this threat too. As Judith Halberstam observed in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and Technology of Monsters*, Dracula “exhibits all the stereotyping of nineteenth-century anti-Semitism” including anti-Semitic physiognomy such as a hooked nose, pointed ears, and claw-like hands, not to mention blood (a measure of racial status and purity) and money, both central features of anti-Semitism. Thus, Dracula is a hybrid of the racial other—the barbaric immigrant from without and the alien Jew within. As such, he posed a double threat to British nationalism and to British women in particular. In Halberstam’s words, “he is a monster versatile enough to represent fears about race, nation, and sexuality, a monster who combines in one body fears of the foreign and the perverse.”

The American Vampire

By the 1950s, the United States had replaced Britain as a superpower, and the threat of immigration and Semitic hegemony had given way to the racial threat posed by “negroes.” Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend*⁴ integrates this new political landscape into the vampire

³As just one example of the novel’s overtones of racial threat, consider the Count’s taunting comment to Van Helsing and the rest of the vampire hunters at the conclusion of an unsuccessful (from the hunters’ perspective) confrontation: “You think to baffle me, you—with your pale faces all in a row, like sheep in a butcher’s.”

⁴Some readers may be familiar with the 2007 film of the same name, though inexplicably the film replaces the novel’s vampires with zombies and depicts Neville as an African American (Will Smith). Film fans may also recall two previous film adaptations of *I Am Legend*: *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) starring Vincent Price, and *The Omega Man* (1971) starring Charlton Heston. Given the discrepancies between book and film, it is necessary

mythology, with Black Americans, as Kathy Davis Paterson puts it in “Echoes of Dracula,” taking on the role of the metaphorical “monstrous Other that threatens the dominant society . . . from within.”

The plot of *I Am Legend* consists of a solitary man of English-German stock, Robert Neville, trying to survive in a post-apocalyptic world in which a terrible plague has turned the rest of humanity into vampires. The vampires have no obvious racial markers, but Neville consistently associates them with blackness. For example, he describes the vampires as “something black and of the night” and despairs that “the black bastards had beaten him.” But Matheson’s use of vampires to discuss race goes far beyond these relatively subtle racial labels. Like Stoker’s *Dracula*, his vampires provide a window into the racial dynamics of the time. Neville’s alcohol-induced internal dialogue is telling in this respect and as such is worth a close examination:

Friends, I come before you to discuss the vampire: a minority element if there ever was one, and there was one.

But to concision: I will sketch out the basis for my thesis . . . : Vampires are prejudiced against.

The keynote of minority prejudice is this: They are loathed because they are feared. . . .

At one time . . . the vampire’s power was great, the fear of him tremendous. He was anathema and still remains anathema.

Society hates him without ration.

But are his needs any more shocking than the needs of other animals and men? Are his deeds more outrageous than the deeds of the parent who drained the spirit from his child? . . .

Really, now, search your soul; lovie—is the vampire so bad? All he does is drink blood.

Why, then, this unkind prejudice, this thoughtless bias? Why cannot the vampire live where he chooses? Why must he seek out hiding places where none can find him out? Why do you wish him destroyed?

Ah, see, you have turned the poor guileless innocent into a haunted animal. He has no means of support, no measures for proper education, he has not the voting franchise. No wonder he is compelled to seek out a predatory nocturnal existence

Robert Neville grunted a surly grunt. Sure, sure, he thought, but would you let your sister marry one?

In this relatively brief passage, Matheson quickly establishes the parallel to Blacks (a minority element) and then accurately represents the racial climate of the time period, in which Blacks were “prejudiced against,” “loathed because they were feared,” and irrationally hated. But Matheson takes the metaphor even further. He notes that the vampires (Blacks) cannot live where they choose (legalized segregation under Jim Crow), must avoid the mainstream community in order to survive (lest a White person make a false accusation), and lack the means to both education and political efficacy. Neville, like many White people of the 1950s, cannot but be aware of the injustice, and there is a part of him that questions its necessity. One gets the sense that he usually keeps such feelings at arm’s length, as one must to go along with an unjust system, but on this occasion the whiskey allows him to actually contemplate the system’s fairness, to not only recognize the injustice but to attribute the undesirable behavior (a predatory nocturnal existence) of the “minority element” to the injustice of the system rather than to an inherently evil and uncivilized nature. It’s a perspective that none of Dracula’s hunters could have ever considered and was remarkable even for its day. But it’s a fleeting sentiment, one clearly produced by the whiskey, and Neville quickly dismisses it with a question reflecting an anti-miscegenation ideology that was characteristic of both late nineteenth century England and mid-twentieth century United States.

Jean Claude et al

The vampires that populate the Anita Blake universe are direct descendants of Dracula and the rest of the vampire lore. This is established in the first book, *Guilty Pleasures*, when we are first introduced to Jean Claude, who “looked like how a vampire was supposed to look,” as well as by occasional references to Dracula himself, as when, in her showdown with the master vampire Nikolaos, Anita remarks, “all we need is the theme from Dracula, Prince of Darkness, and we’ll be all set.” However, just as the sociopolitical landscape changed significantly from Dracula’s time to the time of *I Am Legend*, by the time Anita Blake gets into the vampire hunting business, the sociopolitical Zeitgeist had undergone another substantial shift. By the early 1990s, the multiculturalism movement had given rise to the possibility that immigration and racial diversity might be valued as well as feared, and mainstream sensibilities had begun to reject explicit racism and xenophobia, even if both often brewed not far below the surface. It is no surprise then that the vampires of the Anita Blake novels have made similarly great strides in this regard since *I Am Legend*, so much so that the Supreme Court’s fictional ruling in *Addison v. Clarke* “gave us a revised version of what life was, and what death wasn’t” (*Guilty Pleasures*). The upshot of the Court’s decision is that vampirism was legalized in the United States, giving vampires legal status along with certain rights. The extent of those rights was still being debated, but *Addison v. Clarke* made the murder of vampires illegal without a court order of execution. Immigration of foreign vampires was still regarded as a threat, but both *Addison v. Clarke* and the vampire suffrage movement signaled a clear growing acceptance of domestic (i.e., American) vampires. As such, Hamilton’s vampires may be monsters, but they are no longer aliens.

Not surprisingly, given the sociopolitical changes described above, Hamilton’s vampires bear none of the physical markings of their ancestors.⁵ They are, however, still a racial threat. They are still

⁵ This is actually true of most modern vampires (e.g., in the *Buffyverse* and the *Twilight* series), who don’t have hooked noses, pointy ears, clawed hands, or unusual amounts of body hair, as did their ancestors. Even the fangs, the vampire’s most recognizable

feared and distrusted, even hated by many (most?) humans, including at first Anita, who quips in *Guilty Pleasures*, “I don’t date vampires. I kill them,” a sentiment reminiscent of Neville’s previously discussed contempt for human-vampire relationships.

The Times, They Are a Changing

What distinguishes the Anita Blake novels from *Dracula* and *I Am Legend* is that Hamilton’s novels comprise a long-standing series rather than a single book. At the time of this writing, there are seventeen Anita Blake books, spanning seventeen years. Such a time period allows change, both psychological and political, and Hamilton does not disappoint. The Anita Blake of the later novels is vastly different from the young woman we met in *Guilty Pleasures*.

One of the ways in which Anita changes is that she learns to recognize and value some of the vampires’ distinctive characteristics. For example, whereas the vampires’ power to heal was mostly an obstacle she had to overcome in the early novels, by *Cerulean Sins* she is able to also see its advantages. “One of my favorite things about hanging out with the monsters is the healing,” she says. “Straight humans seemed to get killed on me a lot. Monsters survived. Let’s hear it for the monsters.”

However, the most telling change in terms of the racial metaphor was in Anita’s attitude toward interpersonal relationships with vampires. In *Guilty Pleasures*, she was not only unwilling to entertain the possibility of dating Jean Claude, she didn’t want to have any social relationship with him or any other non-human at all. This early anti-miscegenetic attitude was a product of both dislike and fear, with a little disinterest thrown in. “Did I really believe, what was one more dead vampire?” she asks herself in the opening pages of *Guilty Pleasures*. At that time, her answer to this question is “Maybe.” But hate is neither accidental nor coincidental. “We hate most in others what we fear in ourselves,” muses Anita in *Narcissus in Chains*. In her case, what she fears is her own monstrosity, her own power and

marker, are now discreet, hidden from view and only revealed at the vampire’s whim.

lust. Anti-miscegenation attitudes can be interpreted the same way: a fear of our own attraction to the racial other.

Unlike Neville, Anita manages to overcome this initial fear. By *Burnt Offerings*, she is sleeping with Jean Claude, albeit with some guilt:

Good girls do not have premarital sex, especially with the undead. . . . But here I was, doing it. Me, Anita Blake, turned into coffin bait. Sad, very sad. . . . You can't trust anyone who sleeps with the monsters.

If Anita's relationship with Jean Claude was just sexual, it could be characterized as racist, as a sexual objectification of the racial other. But, it clearly becomes much more than that, as evident in the following passage in *Blue Moon*:

But I did spare a thought for how that might make my vampire lover feel. His heart didn't always beat, but it could still break. That's love. Sometimes it feels good. Sometimes it's just another way to bleed.

Although their relationship is by no means monogamous, Anita clearly considers Jean Claude's feelings and labels her own emotional response as "love." Theirs is a relationship driven in part by sexual gratification, but it is not exploitative, not objectifying. Despite the age difference,⁶ Anita's growing powers allow her relationship with Jean Claude (and other non-humans) to be characterized by neither contempt (as when Dracula represents the East European immigrant) nor jealousy (as when Dracula represents the Jew). Unlike the vampire hunters who preceded her, Anita genuinely connects with the racial other. Changing times indeed.

Under the Surface

Yet, like in our own world, racial elements do brew underneath the surface and illustrate several problematic aspects of contemporary

⁶ In the Anita Blake universe, age equals power.

race relations. For one, there is the troublesome fact that Anita still identifies, in part, as a vampire hunter and consults regularly with the Regional Preternatural Investigation Taskforce (RPIT), a special division of the police department dedicated to protecting humans from non-humans. A police division targeting only the minority segment of the population is reminiscent of COINTELPRO, the FBI's top-secret Counter Intelligence Program that formally operated between 1956 and 1971. COINTELPRO was originally formed to disrupt the activities of the U.S. Communist Party but is best known for targeting Black nationalist groups ranging from the Black Panthers to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) through illegal surveillance, infiltration, psychological warfare, legal harassment, and illegal force and violence. In the case of radical Black and Puerto Rican activists, COINTELPRO's actions were so extensive, vicious, and calculated that, according to attorney Brian Glick, they can accurately be termed a form of official "terrorism." It's true, of course, that Dolph, Zerbrowski, and the rest of the RPIT squad all operate within the confines of the law, but it is nevertheless telling that the police department, an arm of the government, needs a special division to cope with the vampire threat.

Another indication of racial tension is the existence of several anti-vampire groups, such as the League of Human Voters and Humans Against Vampires (HAV), both of which purportedly work within the legal system to agitate against vampire rights. These groups are clear parallels to real-world organizations, such as the Council of Conservative Citizens (which promotes racial segregation and condemns interracial marriage) and VDARE (which advocates reduced immigration).⁷ A more extreme right-wing racial element is represented in the Anita Blake novels by the KKK-inspired Humans First,

⁷ It is worth noting that just as vampires are often metaphors for the contemporary threat in novels, so are they in non-fictional discourse. Consider as evidence the frequent online references to immigrants sucking the resources of the host community (e.g., Rojas) or the following "definition" of an ACLU attorney found in an online blog: "A soulless creature that cowers at the sight of a crucifix and lives by sucking money from the government. . . . Refuses to be seen in any media interview, since the glaring light of truth shone upon the world through an honest question is the ACLU Lawyers equivalent of a mirror" (from the blog *Ravings of a Mad Tech*).

a group that originated within Humans Against Vampires but uses violence rather than the legal methods preferred by HAV.

These parallels are intentionally drawn, but they are too obvious to be intended metaphorically. That is, Hamilton uses a variety of historical and contemporary realities to bring her fictional world to life. Indeed, one of the pleasures of reading the Anita Blake novels is the recognition of our own world, including its geographic landscape, its political structures, and yes, its hate groups. Unlike Stoker and Matheson, who seemed to intend their novels to be read on both literal and metaphorical levels, it is unlikely that Hamilton ever had such an intention. That the metaphor retains its meaning despite that is really a testament to the power of the vampire archetype developed in *Dracula* and built up over the past 100 years.

Beyond the Metaphor

We can, to be sure, step outside the metaphor and examine racial dynamics in the Anita Blake novels on a literal level. Anita of course is White. Sort of. Her mother's family emigrated from Mexico, but she was raised by her father's German family after her mother died and, for all practical purposes, she comes across as a typical (in a racial/ethnic sense) White woman.⁸ Also noteworthy in this regard is that all of Anita's friends and lovers (human or otherwise) are White too—this in St. Louis, a city that is over 51 percent African American according to the 2000 Census.⁹ There are, to be sure, a handful of non-White characters, including her mentor Manny Rodriguez,¹⁰ but other than Manny, none have prominent roles and only Luther,

⁸ I actually must confess that I missed Anita Blake's Mexican background entirely in my own reading and was alerted to this by this book's fine editor, who also generously shared with me her inspiration for Anita's full assimilation into Whiteness.

⁹ It is also worth noting that, like many U.S. cities, St. Louis was historically segregated, with north St. Louis being primarily African American and South St. Louis City primarily white. It is not evident from the books' description whether the Vampire District is located in the north or south.

¹⁰ Others include Yasmeen, a master vampire (*Circus of the Damned*); Vivian, a wereleopard (*Burnt Offerings*, *Narcissus in Chains*); Rashida, a werewolf (*Circus of the Damned*); and Jamison Clarke, a fellow animator at Animators, Inc. (*Guilty Pleasures*, *The Laughing Corpse*).

a human bartender who works the day shift at Dead Dave's,¹¹ is ever essential to the plot.¹² As such, Luther can be seen as the series' symbolic representation of the racial other, in general, and blackness, in particular. Indeed, unlike other non-White characters, Hamilton takes some extra effort to establish his blackness. In *Guilty Pleasures*, Luther is not merely Black; he is "a very dark black man, nearly purplish black, like mahogany." But apart from his Blackness and his friendliness with Anita, we know nothing about Luther's inner world or even what he does away from work.

Luther thus may offer a final window into how the Anita Blake novels represent contemporary race relations. White Americans have mostly rejected the explicit racism and anti-Semitism found in *Dracula* and have mainly turned away from the anti-miscegenation attitudes personified by Robert Neville in *I Am Legend*. It's probably not a stretch to say that the majority of White Americans, like their Black counterparts, honestly want a racially just, egalitarian society. No doubt Hamilton falls squarely in this camp. What the character of Luther reminds us is that true racial justice also requires racial intimacy, a deep knowledge and familiarity with those who are not part of the racial in-group.¹³ Without such familiarity, there is no real recognition and, therefore, no real opportunity to interact as equals. Hamilton clearly gets this, for Anita's prejudices against vampires waned as she got to know some of them intimately. But it is telling

¹¹ A bar in the district owned by a vampire and ex-cop by the same name. Luther was last seen working there in *The Laughing Corpse*.

¹² It is worth noting that in contemporary U.S. race relations, the Black-White paradigm is so dominant that other racialized groups, including Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans, are often rendered invisible. Despite over ten years of work in racial studies, I too am sometimes guilty of this and am grateful to BenBella's Leah Wilson for reminding me that Manny's personal and religious connection to the vaudun priestess in *The Laughing Corpse* was an integral and culturally significant part of the storyline. At the same time (and despite the recent anti-immigration sentiments directed at Americans of Mexican descent), it is Blackness that continues to be the primary representation of the "racial other."

¹³ It is important to note that this emphasis on recognition and valuing of cultural differences is a drastic departure from the ideology of most white conservatives who tend to locate racial justice in color-blindness, a way of interacting with non-Whites as though race had no meaning.

that, in our current racial fabric, many of us,¹⁴ like Anita, seem to have greater familiarity with vampires than with some of our human neighbors.



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¹⁴ I am speaking here as a part of the White racial majority.