Giselle Liza Anatol

The Things That Fly in the Night: Female Vampires in Literature of the Circum-Caribbean and African Diaspora. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015. xv + 295 pp. (Paper US\$32.95).

This study by Giselle Anatol is remarkable in a number of ways, from the sophistication of its social, cultural, and theoretical analyses to the ways in which it links both historical and metaphorical representations of the vampire trope—through the Caribbean *soucouyant* figure—to forms of exploitation of colonized peoples. In readings that range from folktales to contemporary narratives, Anatol seeks to unveil “the constraints to female empowerment and mobility that are inherent in most ‘vampire’ tales,” while highlighting “how some contemporary writers ... shift power dynamics” in order to valorize “more explicit depictions of women’s bodily sovereignty” (p. 2). This creative combination, which appropriates folkloric and mythic representation to expand the boundaries of women’s subjectivity and agency, makes her analytical readings even more valuable. Focusing on cultural flows rather than the (re)creation of a center, Anatol probes themes ranging from European vampire stories, through women’s sexuality and same-sex desire, to vampiric inflections in the contradictory ideas of citizenship faced by the black Caribbean diaspora in various metropolitan centers. Critical factors of class and race are brought into play as well.

Chapter 1, “The Soucouyant Story in Folktales, Fiction, and Calypso,” is a sort of historical survey of this figure’s appearance(s). While its earliest recorded references were oral, in African-Caribbean plantation tales, its presence—and particularly the counter to its threat, sprinkling salt or rice so that the figure had to stop and count each grain—subsequently became pervasive in multiple languages and cultures, generating anxieties that “reinforce[d] ideas of limited mobility for women in circum-Caribbean culture,” and establishing what Anatol calls a “soucouyant network that crosses space, culture, language, and time” (p. 49). Chapter 2, “European Vampire Stories and Configurations of the Demonic Black Woman,” melds Caribbean syncretism with the vampire legend, positing “the colonial Caribbean as a cultural crucible for the generation of a new form of the legend” (p. 87). Interestingly, key moments of slave self-liberation, from Tacky’s Rebellion and the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica, in 1760 and 1865 respectively, to the Haitian Revolution of 1793–1804, were inscribed in their metropolises within a framework of bestiality and blood lust, validating and extending existing stereotypes. Anatol also describes how Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) initiated “the rhetorical move that invokes the race of the foreign Other as frightening and aggressive” (p. 108).

Chapter 3, “Draining Life Rather than Giving It,” looks at some of the ways in which *soucouyant* stories are used to control women’s behavior. Anatol examines works by several authors, including Audre Lorde, Nalo Hopkinson, Edwidge Danticat, and Octavia Butler, to show how they make use of a variety of themes and techniques in order to foreground the importance of folklore and to place new value on the role of foremothers. Chapter 4, “Vampirism and Women’s Sexuality,” surveys the myriad ways in which, as Anatol puts it, “battles for patriarchal control have often been fought for and on women’s bodies” (p. 159). Here her study turns to authors who challenge colonial hegemony “through depictions of homoeroticism and other expressions of transgressive, or ‘queer,’ sexual desire” (p. 160). Her careful readings of works by such contemporary Caribbean women writers as Jamaica Kincaid, Marie-Elena John, and Dionne Brand challenge inherited European and middle-class social norms that limit women’s mobility.

In Chapter 5, “Reconstructing a Nation of Strangers: Soucouyants,” Anatol looks at specific works by three authors who use the figure of the soucouyant “to challenge designations of national subjects in the Global North as White, ‘natural,’ and possessing an inherent belonging” (p. 190). Her readings of Tessa McWatt’s *Out of My Skin*, David Chariandy’s *Soucouyant*, and Helen Oyeyemi’s *White is for Witching* make use of the eponymous figure to specifically interrogate Canadian claims of “a national identity that is cumulative, plural” (p. 196), but which problematizes a place for its migrant citizens of color, and a Britain where scenes of violence and estrangement work to “emphasize the gruesome nature of White British xenophobia” (p. 211). Finally, in Chapter 6, “Playing with Notions of Racial Intransigence,” Anatol reads “the issue of skin in the soucouyant tales as critically tied to notions of racial identity” (p. 223), thereby aligning themes of vampirism with the “‘socially dead’” through the trope of the removable skin (p. 224).

This remarkable volume is unique in its appropriation of traditional Caribbean folklore to extend the cultural and theoretical range of regional criticism, especially with regard to women’s writing and women’s subjectivity. By engaging effectively with long-occulted praxes of black women’s oppression, and by showing how negative stereotypes of sexuality and contamination can be subverted and overcome through concerted and creative writing strategies, Anatol’s impressive addition to the critical canon extends established tenets of diasporic thought even as it encourages us to rethink long-held notions of slavery and race, as well as gender and social structure.

H. Adlai Murdoch

Department of Romance Languages, Tufts University, Medford MA 02155, U.S.A.
h.murdoch@tufts.edu