*Vampires and the between-ness of man-made creatures* by Kathy High

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An alternate title for this talk would have been the name of the larger project I am working on "The Vampire Study Group" – coming soon…

The figure of the undead, *the vampire*, a liminal body, is suspended between life and death. This suspension between two states of being is also synonymous with laboratory animals, cell lines, tissue cultures, and their sustained existence as living organisms created and kept alive for scientific research. The vampiric acts of sucking and feeding are metaphors for the biomedical industry's economic exchange, the exchange of body materials, and the ability to subsist on other living bodies.

This talk will discuss issues such as man-made animals, transgenics, and tissue and blood banks – all technologies occurring behind closed doors and with bodily materials separated from their original source. The idea of immortality is a driving force behind all of these technologies – the idea is to not die, to stay alive, even if only barely, but to desperately hang onto life. Where are these technologies leading us, built on the backs of the bodies of the undead, the neo-dead, trafficking materials under the label 'benefit to all'?

I suppose that one could say I came of age with vampires by my side. At the age of 12 and 13, just as I was beginning to bleed with my period/menses, there was a very popular afternoon soap opera on television in the United States called "Dark Shadows." This series

began in 1966 and ran until 1971. About a year into the series, a central and compelling character was introduced to the soap opera - the intriguing and mysterious Barnabus Collins, a nearly two-hundred-year-old vampire (played by the theater actor Jonathan Frid). I was not really allowed much television time growing up. So I had to sneak to watch this program. "Dark Shadows" was kind of lurid and suggestive to a prepubescent teen – with lots of illusions to weird sex practices, blood sucking, sleeping in coffins and "living" forever. At the same time I also read Bram Stoker's "Dracula" at the encouragement of my father who said it was the only book that actually terrified him! So vampires have been "in my blood" for many years.

But vampires have been a part of *all* our histories for a very long time –pinning the discarded and forgotten as the 'vamp.' In fact as Laurence A. Rickels put it in The Vampire Lectures: "… Vampirism can be followed (bouncing-ball style) as the other history or the history of the other – as a psychohistory of projection." (Rickels 2)

Mass culture vampirism became popular at the end of the nineteenth century when there was also a convergence of technical media (such as the rise of print media and later photography and film). An early example of this was the negative media press about "Vlad the Impaler," the Transylvanian fifteenth century Prince of Walachia (known as the Impaler because he would impale his victims on large stakes!). Bram Stoker traced lineage from Vlad to his book's charter Dracula … The Prince of Walachia was battling with the invading Saxons who were trying to take over his domain of Eastern Europe. He was

painted in the German and other Western European press as a threat and also a "monstrous Eastern European subhuman."

In 1611 another weirdly related vampiric incident was also given much press. The Hungarian Countess, Elisabeth Báthory was said to have discovered the secret to staying youthful. To restore her skin she bathed everyday with human blood. "She caused, all in all, the death of 650 girls…; for murder and bloodshed became her necessity." (Rickels 12)

And since Bram Stoker's "Dracula" was published in 1897 there has been a rash of vampire films, books, and television series beginning in the early twentieth century. Besides vampires being murderers and rather ghoulish, themes in all this vampire media have included sexuality, immigration, colonialism, postcolonialism,- and later civil rights and gay rights. This is not to mention the obvious suggestive reflections on blood letting, immortality and our own relationship to death and dying.

Early feature films were rampant with vampire themes: *Les Vampires* 1913, F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* 1922, *Dracula* with Bela Lugosi 1931, Carl Dreyer's *Vampyr* 1932, and so on …

Vampires have been very present in the US media during my lifetime. Besides "Dark Shadows" in the mid-70s, Anne Rice began her now famous "Vampire Chronicles" with her first book of the series published in 1976, "Interview with a Vampire". She not only

made the vampires charming and complicated characters (heroic in fact), she also made us aware in great detail of their physical needs for blood and various ways to obtain the fluid.

Just prior to the release of "Interview with a Vampire" in 1972 the popular children's television program, "Sesame Street," released a character "Count von Count" who "looked and sounded like Bela Lugosi, but he had the heart and soul of a friendly teacher."[1] At the same time General Mills released a new kids cereal – chocolate flavored with sugar marshmellows (yum) – called "Count Chocula". This period in the 1970s-80s was the beginning of the normalization (or 'Disney-fication') of vampires perhaps.

Queer themes in vampire films have also been really common – such as the infamous film "The Hunger" made in 1983 starring Catherine Deneuve, David Bowie, Susan Sarandon. And then we find the teen vamp films such as: "The Lost Boys" 1987, where two teens battle with vampires; and then another teen movie "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" (1992) which also became a hit television series from 1997 on. In 2005, the teen vampire romance novel "Twilight" was released (an the film version in 2009). In 2008, "True Blood," HBO's hugely successful television serial had its first broadcast season (adapted from book The Southern Vampire Mysteries). 2008 saw the release of the new literary mash-up novel by Seth Grahame-Smith called Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Slayer about Lincoln's fight against slavery – which in this book is synonymous with vampires. ("Mash-up" is a new

[1] "Vampires, Why Here Why Not?" by Tom Alderman, Huffington Post blog (last accessed 6/4/10) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tom-alderman/vampires---why-here-why-n_b_282099.html

fashion of writing to encourage kids to read books – Grahame-Smith's other book includes Pride and Prejudice and Zombies).

Why all this about vampires…? I think there are parallel histories here with the biotech industry and its growth in the last 50 years. To me these vampires and the changes they exhibit over time reflect a cultural understanding of the advances of science – particularly around issues of mortality. The early twentieth century was a moment when "fundamental reconfigurations of ideas of space and time" occurred "in concert with new time-keeping, transport, and optical technologies." (Landecker 93-94) Vampires represent (perhaps) a public mirror of the psychohistoric (hysteric) implications of these changes. (And these are both histories of my lifetime so perhaps this explains my urge to tie these threads together.)

Allow me to briefly point to some examples of important discussions in the scientific community that thematically overlap here. Let me start off with discussing cell culturing and the notion of immortalization. Hannah Landecker commented in Culturing Life: How Cells Became Technologies, "While human cells generally have a finite capacity to divide, they can occasionally be made to divide without limit, usually by restoring telomeres through the protein telomerase. Cells that divide without limit are said to be immortal. The process of transforming a mortal cell to immortality is immortalization." (Landecker 79)

In her book Culturing Life, Landecker wrote extensively about Alexis Carrel, a French surgeon, biologist and eugenicist, who had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1912 for his methods developed around reconnecting human arteries and

veins, and surgical grafting methods. Carrel was working with embryonic chicken heart tissue in 1913, research conducted at the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research. He was able to successfully passage the embryonic chicken heart cells 109 times. Disconnected from the chicken body the heart cells still produced a pulse, like a heartbeat, but Carrel found that the pulsating stopped after 104 days. Even so, the cells continued to grow and proliferate. Landecker discusses chicken cell culture research and says that "after the chicken heart culture had lived longer than the life span of the average chicken, the final terminology shift was made from permanent or indefinite life to immortality…" (Landecker 79)

And Carrel himself wrote: "If these metabolites are removed at short intervals and the composition of the medium is kept constant, the cell colonies remain indefinitely in the same state of activity. They do not record time qualitatively. In fact, they are immortal." (Landecker 79) (Carrel in fact developed the laboratory processes and the tools for tissue culturing – growing tissue in a petri dish, feeding medium, etc. But all this also this relates back to the timeless status of the immortal vampire – as long as "the medium is kept constant" and blood is provided…)

In the publication "Revenants: The Visible Human Project and the Digital Uncanny" Catherine Waldby speaks about Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny" as she discusses the "Visible Human Project," where slices of an executed male prisoner from the US were displayed on-line. Waldby was interested in the "Visible Human Project" as "an important subset of the uncanny - instances where life and death exist in an ambiguous mixture... In

each case the sense of the uncanny is produced by something familiar which takes on an alien aspect and stalks or haunts the subject."[2]

Of course, we have come to understand such hauntings with science: while human and non-human cells can be immortalized, the donors are certainly mortal, and are often unacknowledged. We have seen with the infamous HeLa cell line derived from Henrietta Lacks's cancer cells. For over fifty years the HeLa cell cultures have fueled science research and been a stable tool in the lab, but at the same time the cells are also "entangled" in "kinship, mortality, affect and bodily relations." (Michael Callon 1998)

Cell lines, tissue banks, and blood banks all house bodily materials that become mediums to feed the scientific, medical and pharmaceutical research communities. Much like vampires feasting on human and animal blood for the sustenance to nourish the vampire into eternity. In the book, Tissue Economies: Blood, Organs, and Cell Lines in Late Capitalism, Catherine Waldby and Robert Mitchell discuss the ways that gifts of body tissues can become immortalized (in this case with embryo donations): "Each cell line perpetuates the donor couple's joint genetic material, and as an immortalized line, this genetic material can remain viable long after both members of the donor couple die. It is immortalized but they are not. So a donated embryo may be the start point for an unknowable, infinitely branching network of cell lines, propagating the donor's DNA, with no specific destination and no time horizon." (Waldby/Mitchell 77)

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[2] http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/VID/Uncanny.html#Heading4 (last accessed June 7, 2010)

Not only have cell lines become immortalized, biomedical research has also turned towards actual human immortality. Michael West, the former CEO of a biotech company Advanced Cell Technologies in Boston, Massachusetts has worked on research on aging, cancer, stem cell and cloning since 2001. West, author of the book "The Immortal Cell" and at the center of the human cloning debate in 2001, wants to find a "cure" for human aging. He mused that he wants to discover an "immortal life, life free of the debility of disease and death, has always been the dream of mankind." Back to immortality again – at whatever cost! Interestingly the new biotech industry grew very rapidly in the US beginning in the mid-1970s into the 80s, with new entrepreneurial businesses popping up all around the country. Genetic engineering in biotechnology stimulated hopes for a better bioengineered future, as the new capital of the 1980s fed the new sciences.

In 1980 this biotech industry produced the first bioengineered animal to be patented in the US. Donna Haraway described the OncoMouse, a mouse bred with human tumors to be used for cancer research: "Above all, OncoMouseTM is the first patented animal in the world. By definition, then, in the practices of materialized refiguration, s/he is an invention… Crafted through the ordinary practices that make metaphor into material fact, her status as an invention, who/which remains a living animal is what makes her a vampire, subsisting in the realms of the undead."[3] To me, the most demanding frontier is how we are manipulating animal bodies and tissues. The vampiric acts of sucking and feeding are

[3] Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium...

interpretations of the medical industry's economic exchange, the exchange of body materials, and the parasitic ability to subsist on other living bodies.

Now in the art world theories of the "semi-living" were put forward originally by artists such as Eduardo Kac, and Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr with Tissue Culture and Art projects.[4] Catts/Zurr, also the directors of the Australian research facility SymbioticA, have been producing Tissue Culture and Art projects for a number of years using cultured cells as a basis for their sculptures. Their theory is that these tissue cultures, these living organisms, manipulated and created in the lab and for their art, are by-products of the biological laboratory, of modern science. Tissue cultures they demand our attention as a life form separated from its source (a body). Catts and Zurr question our understanding of the creation of life by looking at the ethics behind the existence of the 'semi-living.'[5]

Some of the animals used in laboratory research I see as prophets and seers of this 'semi-living' present and future. In my installation *Embracing Animal*, 2005-06, I enriched the living situation for three transgenic laboratory rats. I worked with these particular transgenic rats because they were created to develop pharmaceutical drugs to treat autoimmune diseases from which I suffer- (is autoimmunity perhaps being a self devouring act, sucking one's own resources?) The rats became the focus and the story of the installation for the public. They were transgenic, infused with human DNA, causing them to be sick like me, but they were manufactured to mirror my diseased body – they were

[4] http://www.tca.uwa.edu.au/
[5] http://bridge8.wordpress.com/2008/12/09/moma-kills-modern-art/

liminal bodies, suspended between life and death.[6] In the gallery the rats' queer bodies, naked, seen as strange outside the lab, females all living together (3 retired breeders), were watched by the public as they slept, nuzzled, wrapped themselves around each other for comfort, and also played, adapted and expanded into this extended habitat, perhaps making their lives, research and lab situation empathetic to the general public. The lab subjects were taken home after the exhibition to live out their life without demands. The rats were revealed as another staple fuel for research, created, manufactured and as Haraway said Subsisting in the realms of the undead."

Back to vampires - Vampires have the capacity to pass on identity –intentionally choosing living human victims who are occasionally created into new vampire companions, as opposed to simply using the human for food. In a ritualized and sexualized procedure of killing the vampire "creates" other vampires. This is the only sense of inheritance vampires have. This "transaction" of inheritance relates to the generations of transgenically inscribed animals produced for lab use. From a report called "Human Inheritable Genetic Modifications: …": "Recent advances in animal research are also raising the possibility that we will eventually have the technical capacity to modify genes that are transmitted to future generations. This report uses the term inheritable genetic modification (IGM) to refer to any biomedical intervention that can be expected to modify the genome that a person can transfer to his or her offspring."[7]

Artist Adam Zaretsky researches notions of evolution and states in his manifesto:

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[6] http://www.embracinganimal.com

[7] Frankel, Mark S. and Chapman, Audrey R. "Human Inheritable Genetic Modifications: Assessing Scientific, Ethical, Religious, and Policy Issues." *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, 2000, 10. http://www.aaas.org/spp/dspp/sfrl/germline/main.htm (Oct 2, 2008)

"If we are in the process of engaging in auto-evolution, then diversity, the inherent biological love of difference, implies that the human genome should be engineered with as wide a range of genre humans as there are art movements and swanky tastes in the world." Choosing to design new animal companions for the future and to work with "mutagenesis in an art as research position," Zaretsky injects plasmids into avian embryos to further "qualitative knowledge of artistic avian embryology and mutagenesis research."

In his project the *Transgenic Pheasant Embryology Art* Zaretsky (and students) work through ethical dilemmas surrounding these debates. Here is his description of the process from the Transgenic Pheasant Embryology Art and Science Laboratory taught by Zaretsky at the University of Leiden.

"The lab gives students the tools and skills they need to interact through the humanities with their four day incubated and windowed eggs. The students are offered microsurgical, teratological and naked plasmid injection as developmental embryology tinkering tools. In this lab the students are given a chance to make their first transgenic vertebrate, an embryonic pheasant. Held at the University of Leiden, this lab cleared both the Animal Experimentation Committee and Recombinant safety. *It appears that avian embryos are not considered animals by definition in the EU as they are not 'free living beings.' They are also not considered a Recombinant Safety Hazard because they are incapable of reproducing.*" [author's italics for emphasis] Zaretsky closely comments on the ideas of "humane sacrifice and the ritual roots of sacrifice by designing some conflicting schemas for ending an embryo's life" allowing students to chose how to "kull" their avian embryos at the end of the experiment.

Revital Cohen's project "Dialysis Sheep," from her series "Life Support" furthers a vampiric notion of trans-passing – sharing blood fluids. "Life Support" is a series that looks at repurposing animals for biomedical human assistance. Animals become more than work animals – rather therapy animals providing medical necessities to their humans. In Cohen's "Dialysis Sheep" "A patient suffering from kidney failure gives a blood sample to the lab, the scientists cut from the patients' genome the regions that code for blood production (bone marrow tissues), and immune response (the major histocompatibility complex). They then extract the genome from the nucleus of a somatic cell taken from a sheep and substitute the corresponding regions of the sheep's genome with the DNA cut from the patients' genome." A sheep is then bred to match their human's genetics. And the sheep's blood then feeds the human. "At night, the sheep is placed on a special platform at the patient's bedside. The transgenic sheep's kidneys are connected via bloodlines to the patient' s fitsula (a surgically enlarged vein). During the night, peristaltic pumps remove waste products from the patient's blood by pumping it out of the body, through the sheep's kidney (a natural, organic filtering system) and returning it, cleaned, to the patient."[8]

In another project by Revital Cohen called "Wish You Were A Bit More Like Me,"[9] the artist playfully proposes to further identification with your partner, your loved one. Rather than participating in typical marriage ceremonies, people undergo "a transplant wedding as a way for a couple to show their commitment to each other by swapping their hearts." In a kind of ultimate empathetic gesture of acceptance and exchange, couples trade organs

8 http://www.revitalcohen.com/index.php?p=15#show_slide (last accessed June 6, 2010)

9 http://ornamism.com/2010/wish-you-were-a-bit-more-like-me/ (last accessed June 6, 2010)

rather than rings, to better understand each other. Cohen's ideas are based on "Cellular memory… a theory which claims that human body cells contain clues to our personalities, tastes and histories. According to this theory, a fragment of an organ donor's personality can be passed on during transplant surgery."[10] Mixing blood, mixing organs! Cohens' projects are wise, hypothetical designs for our possible future.

I am currently also involved in a project about blood interaction and kinship. In this next year I am producing a project through SymbioticA called "Blood Wars" – a research project that looks at biological reactions of human white blood cells, and questions traits inherited through blood. "Blood Wars" will be set up as a competition in a simulated tournament, as a series of "play-offs," where different individual's white blood cells vie for dominance in the Petri dish. The cellular 'winner' of each round will go on to fight another participant. "Blood Wars" playfully engages with age-old debates about blood traits, bloodlines and engages in discussions of the powerful histories of blood. By participating in "Blood Wars", one will better understand the processes of blood cell division, cell staining, immune cells and the immune system functioning, using time-lapse microscopy and laboratory protocol – providing a kind of cinematic immortality to the "biological time." Anthropomorphization of cells and cell battles will allow an audience to identify with these cells and create a kind of narrative bond with the 'cells' as characters. (And selfishly, I will finally be able to test my own over active immune system against others – will I win and if so, what does that mean??)

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[10] Ibid

In conclusion I would propose we co-opt a new model of the vampire – become in harmony with the vampire- for example, with the Blood Wars I want to fashion a strong maternal blood bond with the players' blood - as we chose our victims, and honor their body materials, which will further leads in immortality research. We all want to be immortal (although I think we are a doomed species). Besides the economic disaster of actually creating human immortals (imagine the costs of sustaining – no wonder they need to 'off' others!)… I advocate an ethic of care where vampires adopt others (as vampires can) and care for them limiting the use of materials; and recognize that immortality is brought about on the back of others' deaths – thus we must acknowledge and honor each of those living who are dying for us.

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Because of time limits, I did not touch upon such groups as the Transhumanist Movement (with Natasha Vita-More) whose manifesto states: "Our aesthetics and expressions are merging with science and technology in designing increased sensory experiences. Transhumanist Artists want to extend life and overcome death. We are ardent activists in pursuing infinite transformation, overcoming death and exploring the universe."[11] Nor did I discuss practices of synthetic biology, cryonics, or mention other bloodsucking creatures such as zombies, etc. Those are still to come…

[11] http://www.transhumanist.biz/transart.htm