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*Humanizing the Nazi? The Semiotics of Vampirism,  
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A Novel of War and Survival*

Jamil Khader

One of the most contentious problems in post-Holocaust artistic and literary production has been the ethical implications of representing acts of radical human evil, or more specifically, the (in)humanity of the Nazi Other.<sup>1</sup> If “It is barbaric to continue to write poetry after Auschwitz,” as Theodore Adorno exhorted (85), then it is perversely blasphemous to engage in any aesthetic representation of the humanity of the Nazi perpetrators. For Adorno and many other critics, as Erin McGlothlin correctly points out, “writing about the Holocaust is synonymous with writing about the suffering of the survivors and victims, and the ethical questions of artistic representation of the Holocaust are thus exclusively a matter of how one might portray the experience of pain and anguish” (210). Anything else is construed as the ultimate betrayal of the memory of those who perished in the Nazi industrial genocide. As such, the perpetrators are excluded from imaginative artistic and literary production about the Holocaust and are generally constructed as absolutely, and incomprehensibly, evil. For David Hirsch, for example, the Germans were evil not only because they “extirpated the victims’ inherent moral sense,” but because “they, too, have lost their moral bearings, and are lacking in the moral dimension that would have made them human” (94).

Framing the problem of the Other and evil, the Other as unequivocally evil, in terms that were drawn from pre-Holocaust ethics, however, proved to be insufficient in a post-Holocaust world. As John Roth argues, post-Holocaust ethics must be typified by an openness to the Other, even though Roth himself restricts the Other specifically to the defenseless and vulnerable victims (xv). But there is no imminent justification for excluding the perpetrator from the site of Otherness. Indeed, the topos of the Other in post-Holocaust ethics is not by all means exclusive to the victims; it has been extended to include the perpetrators as well. Primo Levi, for instance, reconfigures the radical alterity of the persecutory Other in what he calls the “gray zone,” that

ambivalent site where the slippages and convertability between persecutors and victims are continually re-enacted. In this zone, Levi suggests, “the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge,” allowing for the sharp, Manichean distinctions between persecutors and victims to collapse and the boundaries between them to blur. Moreover, in the ambiguous moral topography of the concentration camp, it becomes even imperative to acknowledge and recognize the perpetrators’ humane acts, the undying spark of their humanity. Levi, for example, mentions Muhsfeld, an SS man, whose “single, immediately erased moment of pity” also places him, “although at its extreme boundary, within the gray band, that zone of ambiguity which radiates out from regimes based on terror and obsequiousness” (58). For Levi, human behavior, let alone human action in extreme situations, is so complex and unpredictable that moral judgment should be suspended. Similarly, Tzvetan Todorov maintains that “nothing about the personalities or actions of the authors of evil, apart from this behavior, allows us to classify them as pathological beings—in other words as monsters, whatever definition of the terms pathological and normal” (121).

The aporia of transmuting the humanity of the Nazi Other in post-Holocaust imaginative artistic and literary production has significant implications for young adult literature of atrocity. In the context of the increasing application, and interrogation, of trauma theory to children’s literature, for example, the emphasis again is on narratives of human pain and suffering, especially “under-represented histories and repressed sites of violence and suffering” (Capshaw Smith 116). Although trauma critics of young adult literature of atrocity seem to agree that children should be exposed to the evil of the Holocaust, they still represent evil, in Elizabeth Baer’s words, as “nameless, faceless, and of obscure origins” (384). Both the evil and its perpetrators remain incomprehensible, outside the limits of human representation and understanding.

Ironically, a central theoretical site in trauma theory—redefining the Self and the Other and the relationship between them—seems to have escaped these trauma critics of children’s literature. After all, trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth have played a major role in redefining the perpetrator’s Otherness by tracing the slippages between Self and Other, victim and perpetrator, and noting even the reversibility of their subject positions as the perpetrator becomes a victim, and the victim becomes the vehicle through which the perpetrator can articulate the trauma that he can never fully know (8). Ultimately, though, there is

no reason why the perpetrator's narrative perspective cannot take a more central role in young adult literature of atrocity. For Baer, for instance, a post-Holocaust text ought to contextualize the historical events of the Holocaust in their complexity, without shirking "from making clear human agency in these events" (384). The ambiguity of the subject of human agency here makes it ostensibly possible not simply to assign diabolical motives to the perpetrators but to examine their behavior in its complexity and, to use Hannah Arendt's words, in the banality of its evil.

Louise Murphy's *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel: A Novel of War and Survival* (2003) is such a text, engaging with the problematic of the perpetrator's humanity and Otherness in the context of the traumatic events of the Holocaust. In this fairy tale rewrite, Murphy reframes her retelling of the Brothers Grimms' best-known fairy tale, "Hansel and Gretel," within a post-Holocaust ethical project that aims at rethinking the (in)humanity and radical evil of the Nazi Other, without situating the Nazi Other outside the limits of human thought and discourse as completely incomprehensible and unthinkable. Although Murphy's book can be considered a cross-over narrative, it purportedly was written and marketed with young adults in mind. Indeed, in an interview appended to the end of the novel, Murphy states that she set this novel in Poland during the German occupation not only to "show the horrors of war against children and civilians," but also to teach "our young adults" to "reject racism and war," by showing them the "darkness of the Holocaust" (6, 8). Regardless of whether young adults do in fact read it or whether it is taught to them, it must be emphasized that, as Helen Nixon and Barbara Comber argue, YA literature has increasingly engaged in subject matter that until recently was considered taboo for this particular audience. Nixon and Comber also make it clear that global marketing plays a major role in redefining the traditional parameters of the genre. Nonetheless, they insist on the complex positioning of young adult readers in relation to such books, because they are completely "aware of the practices of teachers, parents, and publishers in matching books with people" (58).

Addressing graphic sexual and violent themes in a historical context, the novel nevertheless is centered around children's (traumatic) experiences, and is a renarrativization of a quintessential classic fairy tale for children—whose subtext, however, is no less sexual and violent. Targeting YA audiences therefore has tremendous implications for Murphy's choice of the fairy tale as the narrative structure of this

retelling. In part, this choice of genre can be attributed to her desire to save the children, or more precisely, to preclude the possibility of dispatching them into the realm of death and destruction: "When I finished the writing, I realized that I had not killed a single child in the novel. You hear of children dying, but you don't see it" ("Interview" 7). While such a narrative choice can serve as an objective correlative for her wishful desire to offer a happy ending, it nonetheless fails to establish any alternative ideological position from which to interrogate what Lawrence Langer elsewhere calls a particularly "American vision of the Holocaust," one which tries to parlay an illusory sense of "hope, sacrifice, justice, and the future into a victory that will mitigate despair" (214).

In Murphy's retelling, Magda—who symbolically performs the function of the witch in the original tale—adopts and saves the anonymous Jewish children, known only by the German names that their stepmother gave them on their escape route from the Nazis. While Nazi ideologues used the figure of the witch and the Jew interchangeably, transferring the terrors of the former onto the latter in their anti-Semitic propaganda (Szasz 97), Murphy turns Magda the alleged witch into the symbolic expression of both the mother in her absolute goodness and, in Vladimir Propp's morphological terms, the donor or the magical fairy godmother. She not only adopts and cares for these children, but with the help of her brother Father Piotr—the priest and Nazi collaborator turned Nazi-killer—also fabricates baptismal certificates for them, thereby giving them new Christian names and identities that protect them from persecution. In a metafictional and ironic twist, however, Gretel twice mistakes Magda for the witch from the original fairy tale, assuming that she is going to devour them both: first, when Magda tries to cure her pneumonia by "cheating death" (she burns a stick doll to fool the "dark spirits" into thinking that Gretel is dead) (110); and second, when she hides both children from the Nazi soldiers in a warm oven (237).

Needless to say, the children survive only due to Magda's ingenuity and willingness to sacrifice herself in order to save them. As the Third Reich intensifies its occupation policies of appropriation, ghettoization, and resettlement of the Jews in Poland and the implementation of the Final Solution against them two years after the invasion, Magda is subjected to a double exclusion and marginalization—as both Roma (Gypsy) and Jewish, groups that were seen as asocial parasites and hereditarily inferior—from the provenance of *völkisch* national sub-

jectivity. She is arrested, deported, and ultimately condemned to the gas chambers in Birkenau, where she perishes with thousands of other victims of the Nazi genocidal regime.

In this novel of war and survival, Murphy revises the Brothers Grimms' fairy tale by reconfiguring the evil Other they had embodied in a child-devouring, demonic witch. In her post-Holocaust retelling, Murphy recodifies the original text's symbolic evil by transpositioning it onto the figure of the Nazi official, the nameless Oberführer, a typical Nazi party member who by 1932 had become an established rank in the S.S. (the Schutzstaffel, or Gestapo). She thus endows this villain with the destructive aspects of primitive orality, perverse sexuality, and cannibalism that Bruno Bettelheim associates with the witch signifier in the Grimms' version (see Bettelheim 159–66). As such, Murphy represents the Oberführer as thoroughly megalomaniac, depraved, and perversely sadistic. In responding to her interviewer's question about this character typifying the Nazi as an "incarnation of evil," Murphy confesses that despite finding it difficult to "understand the psychotic desire to control, torture, and kill that the Oberführer represents," she still tried to humanize him, by exploring his psychological complexity and moral ambiguity (6). Hence, in the novel, she occasionally tries to ground his pathology in his unresolved Oedipus complex and castration anxiety. For example, while hunting wild boar in the forest with Major Frankel, the Oberführer fantasizes that his father "would have laughed at him, trying to kill a boar with a handful of children and the deformed Major" (*True Story* 169).

Nevertheless, Murphy admits that her efforts to endow the Oberführer with a credible psychology were unsuccessful: "Humanizing him was like saying that 'after all, Hitler loved his dogs.' No humanizing can explain and forgive such evil" ("Interview" 6). Murphy wants her young adult readers to "remain haunted by his return, as evil always returns to haunt us" (8). In these times of transition in Holocaust studies, when breaking the discursive taboos on the representation of the Nazi Other are becoming more (uneasily) acceptable, Murphy ventures into the more ambiguous and uncharted territory of reconfiguring the Otherness and humanity of the Nazi Other, and she makes it clear that such a post-Holocaust ethical project remains inherently difficult.

In the remainder of this article, I shall argue that Murphy's difficulty in representing the radical alterity of the Nazi Other is best seen in her appropriation of a system of vampiric signs and codes. Her reliance on what I refer to here as the semiotics of vampirism includes

the following characteristics: paleness; obsession with blood; energy draining; unrestrained incorporation; occult fantasies; preying on children and women; sadistic power relations; delusions of immortality; and spectrality. Capitalizing on the ubiquitous image of the vampire in contemporary popular culture as an ambivalent ethical trope and the ultimate object of desire—whose *jouissance* forever eludes us but which we must possess—Murphy deploys the semiotics of vampirism in order to effect a limited space of identification with the Oberführer. In this way, she allows her young adult readers to reimagine his humanity otherwise, without either turning him into a site of erotic investment, as his companion Sister Rosa does, or turning themselves into willing collaborators in their own victimization.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, I will examine the ways in which Murphy utilizes the semiotics of vampirism to underwrite her representation of the Nazi Other and her engagement with the Nazi anti-Semitic ideology. First, she uses vampiric tropes and metaphors to implicitly inscribe the Oberführer as an archetypally evil, repulsive, and abject vampire. I will demonstrate that the Oberführer's obsession with revitalizing both his body through coercive blood transfusions with local women, and the fascist body politic through abducting Aryan-looking children, is predicated upon vampiric metaphors involving blood consumption, deracination, dissolution of identity, and assimilation into the Nazi fantasy of *völkisch* nationalism. Second, Murphy appropriates the semiotics of vampirism not simply to reverse the typical Nazi symbolic overdetermination of the Jews as vampires—the *Nosferatu*—but more importantly, to reveal the projective displacement inherent to the demonization of the Jews in Nazi racial ideology. While some critics may object to Murphy's use of images of alterity as an obfuscation of the possibility of justice at the level of fantasy, I nonetheless maintain that the semiotics of vampirism makes it possible to unravel the Nazi denial of their own exploitation and bloodsucking of other races and nations as vampiric, and their projection of it onto the Jews.

Central to Murphy's appropriation of the semiotics of vampirism is the myth of the infinite regeneration of the vampire at both the private and collective levels. Individually, the vampire's fixation on blood is evident in the Oberführer's revitalization of his body through coerced blood transfusions with subjugated women. This revitalization of the private body foregrounds the established association between vampires and perverse sexuality, as well as the deployment of vampirism as a displacement of a matricidal fantasy at the heart of Nazi gender ideology.

Even though Murphy's psychological experimentation seems on the surface to present the Oberführer's Oedipus complex as the grounds for his humanization, the real unresolved conflict here is his repressed desire to eliminate his mother.<sup>3</sup> Collectively, the vampire's threat to turn his victims, as Count Dracula threatens to make his would-be slayers "mine" through their women (Stoker 267), is embodied in the Oberführer's efforts at regenerating the fascist body politic through the abduction of Aryan-looking children and incorporating them into German *völkisch* nationalism. In his inability to engage in any sexual intercourse, consequent upon his castration, he thus deracinates and assimilates new blood into the Aryan race through asexual reproduction and propagation.

The Nazi project of revitalizing both the private body and the fascist national body politic was fundamental to the reproduction of the Third Reich and its awakening from its presumed spiritual paralysis, demise, and chaos. While national regeneration required preserving the unique racial mission and qualities of the Aryan race through excising the body politic of foreign elements and avoiding not only biological contamination from inferior races, but also the exchange of corrupt ideas, individual revitalization necessitated strict corporeal practices of Spartan self-discipline, care of the Self, and racial hygienic practices in order to produce perfect bodies and souls. In this scopophilic fascist culture that centered around visual spectacles, special emphasis was placed on the male body as the aesthetic site of the production of the Aryan superman—beautiful, healthy, and racially fit (Linke 49), as Sister Rosa perceives the Oberführer's spectacular body to be.

Films such as Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*) played a major role in popularizing the ideology of racial regeneration, ennoblement, and the ideals of the healthy and beautiful Nazi body. As David Welch argues, the film represented the triumph of self-realization, as both the national triumph of a strong Germany and the triumph of the will of the Leader, who "has come from the sky to kindle ancient Nuremberg with primeval Teutonic fire, to liberate the energy and spirit of the German people through a dynamic new movement with roots in their racial consciousness" (129). Underlying this ariosophical (wisdom of the Aryans) occultist ideology of revitalization and regeneration was, as Gilmer Blackburn states, "the mystical bond between 'blood and soil' as the regenerative force of the race" (178), for the blood and the soil were the sources of all vitality and value.



The Oberführer's revitalization of his body through blood transfusions functions as a site for identifying him as a radically evil vampire. The "*pale and beautiful*" Oberführer (160; emphasis added) performs these transfusions in extreme secrecy with Nelka, Magda's great-niece, to "help get rid of the tiredness [he has] felt for the last few weeks" (161). He lies down on a mattress, setting a chair over his body so that Nelka can sit on the seat. Then, he orders her to move her buttocks forward and to spread her legs wide, exposing her "sex," that "strange rose" (161–62). As his assistant, the voyeuristic Sister Rosa, connects him to the fearful Nelka by a "cord of blood" for twenty minutes, he is sexually aroused. He then informs her that she will help him stay strong and that her "blood will refresh [him] and serve a higher purpose," promising her that he

[. . .] won't take too much. Just enough for a beginning. You can do this again in two weeks. You are giving service to the Reich. The highest thing a Polish woman can aspire to is giving service to the German people. [. . .] You are a chosen one, Nelka, and I am chosen also. But there is a difference. You are the giver. Your duty is to be *drained* of all you have to serve your masters. (163; emphasis added)

The semiotics of vampirism is clearly played out in this memorable scene. The Oberführer is represented not only as pale—one of the most common characteristics of the Western vampire—but also as a predator who preys on local Slavic women in order to drain them of their blood and energy.

In his biopolitical colonization of women's bodies, the Oberführer embodies imperial conquest and domination, predicated upon the ethnoracial fantasy that alleged differences in blood among racial groups are rooted in biology, and that Aryan blood possesses supernatural and spiritual powers. His vampirism thus symbolizes the reproduction of the imperial power of the Third Reich and the consolidation of its racist anti-Semitic laws.<sup>4</sup> Suspecting that Nelka does not have a pure Slavic heritage, the Oberführer threatens not only to deport her and her baby to the concentration camps, but also to unleash his murderous revenge fantasies (200–02). In this way, Murphy's representation of the Oberführer inverts the traditional representation of the vampire in, for example, Stoker's *Dracula* as a metaphor for fears about the decline of empire and racial enervation (Arata 465). Moreover, the Oberführer views himself as a master and a superior being, framing

his hematological colonization of the female body within a religious discourse that not only codifies his predatory act within a rhetoric of service to a higher power, but also as a true vampire inverts Christian theological iconography. In his narcissism and megalomania, he perverts the image of Christ as a “chalice,” engaging in psychotic delusions about his own supposed divinity.<sup>5</sup>

Murphy’s representation of the Oberführer as an evil vampire is further established through the common association between vampires, gender, and sexuality. First, the Oberführer is engendered feminine, for he feminizes himself as the “receiver,” and he is always to be found in the company of women.<sup>6</sup> He has a female companion, Sister Rosa, who is erotically invested in him, and he preys mainly on women for his blood transfusions. As Stephen Arata argues, there is an undeniable “affinity, or even identity, between vampire sexuality and female sexuality,” suggested by the fact that the vampire reproduces through women’s bodies only (468).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, while he is sexually aroused by these women, in his castration the Oberführer is completely incapable of sexual intimacy and intercourse with them. In part, he lacks the energy and robustness that make the Undead healthier, more virile, and more fertile than the living. Indeed, he seems to suffer from chronic exhaustion, and consequently, his attacks fail to reinvigorate his victims the way it perversely does for the victims of the classical vampire. What he is after, therefore, is power over and domination of these women. As he stares at Nelka’s sex, for example, the Oberführer reminisces about a fearless Dutch woman whose blood he had drained:

When he had taken all of her blood that he wanted, and the needle had been taken from his vein, he ordered that the needle stay in the woman’s arm. The rest of the woman’s blood ran out of the tube and made a puddle under the chair where she sat. Even when the puddle wet her feet, and she was dying, *the fear never entered her eyes*. Only a final glazing over before she fell off the chair. He’d shot her then. (162; emphasis added)

This scene exposes the sadomasochistic relations that evolve from the conditions of involuntary mimesis and identification between the Nazi vampire and his native female victims. At the same time, Murphy aptly removes any hint of the victim’s complicity with, or erotic and aesthetic investment in, the predatory vampiric Other, making sure that her readers’ identification with this vampire remains limited.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the only character who heaves and pants in his presence is Sister Rosa.

More importantly, the murder of this Dutch woman suggests the perverse, sterile sexuality of the Oberführer and his deeply rooted hatred of women's sexuality. While in Stoker's *Dracula* blood transfusions are used to displace homoeroticism, here they displace the impotence that results from the Oberführer's failure to resolve his Oedipus complex and end his castration anxiety, as evident in his fantasy involving his father, hunting, and the imperfect forms of masculinity with which he surrounds himself. Consequently, he remains abnormally attached to his mother, for whom he nonetheless develops ambivalent feelings of desire and hostility, love and hate, pleasure and pain. The mother thus functions simultaneously as both object of forbidden desire and castrating figure. Moreover, in his relationships with these women who substitute for his mother, the Oberführer tries to seduce and dominate, even kill, them if they do not show fear of him. To this extent, the sexual tension underpinning the blood transfusion scene reflects the deeply rooted matricidal fantasy at the heart of Nazi gender ideology.<sup>9</sup> The semiotics of vampirism here thus reflects what Julia Kristeva calls abjection, the process by means of which subjectivity and collective identity are constituted by excluding anything that threatens the borders of the Self and/or the *völk*, especially the dependence upon the maternal body. But in representing the Oberführer's radical evil in terms of the semiotics of vampirism, Murphy risks reconfiguring radical evil as a feminine sexual threat.

The Oberführer's assault on the integrity of women's individual bodies in order to regenerate himself is implicated in the Nazi national project of regenerating the fascist body politic in order to, as Sister Rosa tells Nelka, create "the new world that is coming" (161). As he moves to Poland, the Oberführer subverts the integrity of Polish national identities by dissolving, deracinating, and reincorporating them within the new fascist body politic.<sup>10</sup> If the individual is incapable of reproducing sexually, and thus fails to ensure the survival of the nation, the body politic must then survive, like the vampire, by asexual means. Hence, the Oberführer is fanatically committed to implementing the *Eindeutschung* (Germanization) campaign, resorting to abducting healthy, Aryan-looking Polish children to revitalize the fascist body politic with new blood. Nelka's boyfriend Telek explains to her that the Nazis "steal children that look German. They've stolen thousands, maybe twenty or thirty thousand. The underground says they give them new names, and tear up all the identification papers" (192–93). Later on, the Oberführer informs her that her child, the "only perfect

Aryan child in the village of Piaski,” will be “taken to Germany to live as a free man in the new world we are building” (200–01), and Sister Rosa assures her that her child “would become a true German” (201).

In his fanatic commitment to Germanization, the Oberführer easily overlooks the contradictions in the Nazi racial ideology, taking Hansel and Gretel to be Aryan enough even though Hansel is circumcised and his eyes have “a touch of the Tatar,” though his nose is almost perfectly Aryan, and his lips are not “simian and thick” (195). Gretel, on the other hand, looks like a perfect Aryan specimen; the Oberführer and Sister Rosa remark that she is “A beautiful example of how the Aryan blood comes out even in the worst dung heap” (196), observing a few times that “she’s quite perfect” (196–97). He is not even discouraged by Gretel’s insanity, despite the orders to exterminate the “mentally defective.” Such an act of national revitalization is vampiric par excellence, because it seeks not only to perversely reproduce and proliferate the Aryan race, but also to symbolically deracinate the victims, dissolve their identities, and assimilate them into the Nazi fantasy of *völkisch* nationalism.

The semiotics of vampirism allows Murphy not only to foreground the radical evil of the Nazi Other, but also to reverse the typical Nazi demonization of the Jews as vampires, and more importantly, to reveal the projective displacement inherent to this demonization. The trope of the Jew as a vampire, the blood-sucking *Nosferatu*, occupied a central position in the anti-Semitic Nazi racial ideology. In “Race and the People,” the eleventh chapter of *Mein Kampf*, Adolph Hitler contrasts Aryan nomadism with and against Jewish rootlessness and parasitism, claiming that “[The Jew] is and remains a parasite, a sponger who, like a pernicious bacillus, spreads over wider and wider areas.” He concludes that “The effect produced by his presence is also like that of the vampire; for wherever he establishes himself the people who grant him hospitality are bound to be bled to death sooner or later” (262). For Hitler, as Lawrence Birken has demonstrated, the “Jews were a ghost people who artificially and vampiristically lived off the economy—and the libido—of living states” (70). Hitler believed that the essentially individualistic Jews were not a “genuine race-in-itself” but a “race-for-itself,” a “kind of vampire” that managed somehow to survive by “injecting themselves into the social body of productive peoples everywhere” (Birken 70). The very rootlessness of the Jews, for Hitler, seemed to violate the fundamental laws of nature, especially their alleged inability to work and to be creative in exploiting the territory in

which they lived. In their “herd mentality,” Hitler surmised, the Jews would turn into a “horde of rats, fighting bloodily among themselves” (259). Like the vampire, therefore, the Jew in Hitler’s cosmology was an unnatural bloodsucker and vermin, the “embodiment of death,” whose radical individualism would eventually lead to the extinction of the human race (Birken 73). Moreover, in this racist Aryan ideology the Jews proliferated by seducing Aryans through miscegenation and rape. Hitler rails against the “black-haired Jewish youth,” who “with satanic joy in his face [. . .] lurks in wait for the unsuspecting girl whom he defiles” (280). Hitler’s Jew is thus, as Birken points out, a true vampire, since he “not only defiles his victims by contaminating them with his blood, but also robs them of the divine gift of life itself” (79). For Hitler, the Jew’s vampiric ontology nonetheless will be the cause of his downfall, for the “death of the victim must be followed sooner or later by that of the vampire” (Hitler 281).<sup>11</sup>

Appropriating the semiotics of vampirism to represent the Oberführer, Murphy unravels the defenses of denial and projective displacement underpinning the Nazi demonization of the Jews. She implies that the Nazis can no longer blame the Jews for being bloodsucking vampires; rather, it is the Nazis themselves who drain other people of their energy, blood, and life. The Nazis, in Slavoj Žižek’s words, “must recognize in the properties attributed to ‘Jew’ the necessary products of [their] very social system; [they] must recognize in the ‘excesses’ attributed to ‘Jews’ the truth about [themselves]” (128). At stake here is the symbolic position of the “Jew” as an ideologically overdetermined figure that, as Žižek points out, can then be related “to ‘what is in Jew more than Jew’—what he calls the “impossible real kernel” (97). As a social fantasy or fetish, the Jew disavows and embodies, masks and discloses, the fundamental (structural) impossibility (void or blockage) of the closed, organic, and homogenous totality of the Third Reich. For Žižek, there is a supplemental meaning produced here about the Jews as both master signifier and *objet a* that makes Jewishness different from itself, for any attempt at designating the Jew will necessarily leave something out. Hence, the Jew becomes a symptom (the repressed Real, a figure that resists symbolization) that displaces the immanent social contradictions of the Nazi ideological system, serving as “the point at which it becomes obvious that society doesn’t work” (143). As such, the figure of the Jew serves as a source of pre-ideological enjoyment that embodies and denies the structural impossibility of an organic, racially pure *völkisch* totality. The Jew, in short, allows the Nazis to “escape a

certain deadlock in [their] desire" (48). Turning the tables on the Nazis through the semiotics of vampirism, Murphy thus identifies them with the same symptom, the Jew, that they disavow and displace—thus becoming their own bloodsuckers. To this extent, Murphy removes the screen of distortion from the Nazi unconscious, forcing them to confront their own image in the mirror—if, given their vampirism, it can be seen at all.

Ultimately, Murphy represents the *Oberführer's* radical evil as immutable, imminent, and spectral. When the war is over and the children go back to the ghetto in search of their father, they are pursued by the fugitive *Oberführer*, disguised now as a Polish peasant—he is terrified that the truth about his blood transfusions will be revealed. Luckily, he is arrested by a group of Russian soldiers, who promise Hansel that they will send him as a "birthday gift to Papa Stalin"; in response, the *Oberführer* hysterically shakes his fists, swearing that "I'll never die. You can't kill me" (293). In her interview, Murphy also describes the *Oberführer* in his evil as a ghost that will "always return to haunt us" (8). In his delusions of immortality and potential spectrality, the *Oberführer* is encoded as a radically evil vampire who will continue to possess and terrorize the human imagination. But this realization that evil can never be undone does not spare the *Oberführer* his life. In fidelity to the fairy tale structure of the novel, Murphy dispenses with the *Oberführer* in an effort to restore, as she says in her interview, a sense of "moral balance" and justice (6).

True to the common desire to protect and shield young readers from evil and its horrors, Murphy can only resolve the problem of the radical evil and the (in)humanity of the Nazi Other within the typical ideological containment, the seamless closure of the happy ending, and the reassurance of redemption that typify the commodification of the Holocaust in American popular culture and academic discourse.<sup>12</sup> The novel's double resolution—the reunion between the fugitive children and their father, which mirrors the *dénouement* of the original fairy tale, and the final affirmation of infinite love through the disembodied voice of the dead "witch" Magda—transmute the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust into a mythopoetic narrative of infinite love, redemption, and the triumph of the human will over adversity. The utopian potentialities of the fairy tale affect an uncritical reclamation of an impossible and illusory pretraumatic subject, thereby disavowing the constitutive (structural) traumatic core of both subjectivity and disastrous events like the Holocaust. As U. C. Knoepfelmacher correctly

notes, the fairy tale's happy ending not only forecloses the "trauma of abandonment" (171), that originary traumatic experience the children endure, but it also engenders the trauma masculine, allowing only Hansel the pleasures of a felicitous "recognition" of the father at the reunion (182). Hence, the children, or at least Hansel, are able once again to reconstitute themselves; in Murphy's words, they "became, once again, themselves" (296). Love is reaffirmed, and redemption is made possible for the victims. One can only hope that the cumulative effect of the semiotics of vampirism on young adult readers will mitigate these utopian impulses and ground them in a more agonistic perspective of a world that does not always have happy endings and does not always promise redemption.

Psychologizing the perpetrators and problematizing their (in)humanity constitutes an important topos in any post-Holocaust ethical project; young adult literature of atrocity can serve as an important site for helping children and young adults rethink the principles of pre-Holocaust morality, the image of the Other and the relationship between Self and Other, and the politics of redemption in the aftermath of Auschwitz. Murphy casts no doubt on the existence of perpetrators such as the Oberführer, even within the relative moral space of Levi's gray zone. Indeed, she does not flinch from or abdicate what she refers to as the "responsibility of the artist [. . .] to try and find the truth" ("Interview" 8), in favor of some politically correct ending that refuses to condemn the Oberführer for his unspeakable acts of terror. Rather, Murphy is willing to clear a space for rethinking the radical alterity of the Oberführer, while at the same time insisting on foregrounding his evil and holding him accountable for it. Her attempt to produce a space of identification with the vampiric Nazi Other, however symbolic and limited, can work to encourage young adult readers to place the presumably incomprehensible Other within, not outside, the limits of human thought and discursive conventions. Her novel thus serves not only to help them shake off the traces of a pre-Holocaust Manichean morality, but also to put in historical context and perspective "the terror generated by what remains outside of our frame of the familiar and the knowable" (Gordon and Hollinger 2) as acts of the human imagination, however unimaginable and unspeakable they might be.

Whether the Nazi vampire will remain incomprehensible for Murphy's intended audience of young adult readers—an audience increasingly drawn into and mesmerized by hegemonic media representations of the vampire as defanged, inhumanely seductive, and alluring object

of desire—remains to be seen. But it is only by diminishing and bridging the abyss of terror, as embodied by the vampire, that the traumatic events of the Holocaust can be accounted for in their complexity, and an ethical responsibility for the Other developed.<sup>13</sup>

#### Notes

The author would like to thank Karen Kaivola, Eric Kurlander, and the anonymous readers for their valuable comments on the article.

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Cohen's overview of this theme of the Other in post-Holocaust philosophy in its Anglo-American, or analytical, and Continental manifestations. See also the different contributions to Roth, *Ethics After the Holocaust*.

<sup>2</sup>Indeed, since its inception the literary vampire has functioned as an ambiguous ethical trope. The complexity of the vampire figure is evident even in Bram Stoker's canonical novel, *Dracula* (1897). Despite the almost hysterical representation of the vampire's radical Otherness by Dr. Van Helsing and the Crew of Light, as a wholly different species that cannot presumably occupy the same specular space in the mirror as they do, Stoker's novel itself more subtly encodes Dracula as an ambivalent sign of Otherness (Hatlen 117–26). In fact, the vampire functions as a double for the other characters; John Paul Riquelme, for example, establishes the various ways in which all the characters in the novel are “in salient, surprising ways counterparts, or even collaborators” (561). For an interesting interpretation of the lure of the vampire to contemporary audiences, see Williamson.

<sup>3</sup>I'm indebted to Phyllis Roth's reading of the “fantasy of matricide underlying the more obvious parricidal wishes” in Stoker's *Dracula* (415) for this interpretation.

<sup>4</sup>Leni Yahil examines the Nuremberg Laws as an “essential prerequisite to the establishment of the Reich,” purified of any Jewish presence, “that would last for a thousand years” (72).

<sup>5</sup>On the ambivalent location of Christianity within the new pagan, anti-Christian, *völkisch* national religion which Nazism embodied, see Steigmann-Gall; on the role that the occult played in Nazi fantasies of world domination, see Ravenscroft.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Kriss Ravetto's discussion of the trope of the effeminate fascist in Bertolucci's *The Conformist* and 1900, Visconti's *The Damned*, and Rossellini's *Open City*.

<sup>7</sup>It is important to note here that the vampire, as Franco Moretti argues, is innately female regardless of her or his apparent sex, and that “at the root of vampirism [. . .] lies an ambivalent impulse of the child towards its mother” (443). Therefore, when the vampire is a female, she affects “little distortion of the unconscious content,” in the sense that the child's ambivalent feelings toward the mother and his aggressive oral fantasies retain the sex of the source of perturbation, the mother (443–44). When the vampire is a male, as in the case of Count Dracula and the Oberführer, the unconscious source of the perturbation, the mother, remains hidden by another “layer of signifieds,” and a monster is invented to displace the original fear in order to “protect the conscious mind or more precisely keep it in a state of greater unawareness” (444).

<sup>8</sup>Murphy's careful recasting of the sadomasochistic relationship between the Oberführer and his female victims could be productively read with and against Liliana Cavani's 1974 film, *The Night Porter*, which is locked within the dialectic of perverse pleasure between the Nazis and their female victims in particular, consequent upon the sadomasochistic relations that evolve from the condition of involuntary mimesis and identification that develops between them. Unlike the Nazi officer in the film, however, the Oberführer's spectacular body and ideal beauty fail to become the site of any erotic or aesthetic investment as an object of desire and fantasy on the part of his victims.

<sup>9</sup>For a comprehensive analysis of Nazi gender ideology and the place of women within it, see Theweleit.



<sup>10</sup>The Germanization of Poland was executed by Heinrich Himmler, who was given a free hand by Hitler, as Jacques Delarue states, to “bring back into the Reich true Germans living abroad, ‘to eliminate the sinister influence of foreign sections of the populace presenting a danger to the Reich and to the community of the German people,’ and to form new German colonies” (187–88). Himmler interpreted Hitler’s orders not to mean teaching “the people there the German language and law, but to see that only the people of pure German blood live in the East” (188). Hence, Germanization is to be better codified as re-Germanization, “a matter of retrieving, regaining, or reclaiming what Himmler saw as having once been Germanic” (Poprzeczny 188).

<sup>11</sup>Hitler’s association of Jews with vampires manifested itself in the literal and figurative demonization of the Jew as a vampire in Nazi popular culture and the productions of the Propaganda Ministry. In these cultural and literary productions, the Jew-as-vampire trope was associated either with Murnau’s anti-Semitic *Nosferatu*, with its images of teeming rats and vermin echoing Fritz Hippler’s 1940 documentary *The Eternal Jew*, or with the more sophisticated (figurative) Dracula type that can seamlessly assimilate into foreign cultures and colonize them, as evident in Veit Harlan’s 1940 film *Jüd Süß*. In this film, which Goebbels considered “the first truly anti-Semitic film,” the Jewish Süß financially exploits the good, honest citizens of Wurttemberg, and rapes the beautiful Dorothea Sturm, who drowns herself in shame and despair. Süß ultimately is arrested and charged with “extortion, profiteering, trading in offices, sexual misconduct, procuring, and high treason” (Reeves 125). Reeves goes on to note that the Strasbourg Security Police reported that during a screening of the film, members of the audience shouted out: “‘Dirty pig Jew!’, ‘You Jewish swine!’, ‘Filthy Jewboy! . . . particularly from women; the rape scene, in particular, really outrages people. However, the expulsion of the Jews and the execution of Süß . . . is greeted with great satisfaction and relief (‘Serves him right, dirty Jew’, ‘They should all be hanged!’)” (114).

<sup>12</sup>Lawrence Langer, for example, offers a compelling critique of the exploitation of Anne Frank’s work to promote an “American vision of the Holocaust” (214). Berel Lang considers some of these issues raised in post-Holocaust studies, and Norman Finklestein offers a scathing critique of the Holocaust industry in the US and its commodification of Jewish suffering.

<sup>13</sup>For Emmanuel Levinas, whose work can be considered a response to the Holocaust as it affected him personally, the subject is formed through an ontological dispossession by and exposure to the Other, whose address precedes the formation of the subject and constitutes it. The subject, that is, is impinged upon by the Other, as it is given over from the start to language and signs. Levinas thus speculates that the subject is born into an ontological passivity, or a structural susceptibility, what he refers to as an ontological susceptibility to the Other. In “Substitution,” Levinas thus asserts that this structural susceptibility emerges “in suffering, in the *original traumatism* and return to self, where I am responsible for what I did not will, absolutely responsible for the persecution I undergo [. . .]” (qtd. in Butler 88–89; emphasis in original). As Judith Butler explains, “That which persecutes me brings me into being, acts upon me, and so prompts me, animates me into ontology at the moment of persecution” (89). As such, responsibility for the Other, regardless of how the Other impinges or acts upon the Self, is a matter of “making use of an unwilling susceptibility as a resource for becoming responsive to the Other” (91).

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