The Puissance of Variation: Othering the Miscegenated Subject in Stephen Norrington’s *Blade*

In Jeffrey Weinstock’s *The Vampire Film: Undead Cinema*, he states that “a characteristic of vampire movies is that they do the saying themselves” (Weinstock 1). This statement implies that vampire cinema is a form of media that is inherently self-aware or meta—that is, simultaneously about vampires and/or vampirism and commenting about the nature of vampire cinema itself. Assuming that this is true, I will be examining Stephen Norrington’s *Blade* (1998) and the implications this film raises as a text that aims to comment on the nature of vampirism and vampire cinema, particularly through the lens of racial minorities. In “Minority and Becoming-Minor in Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling*,” Chuck Robinson references Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, where they differentiate minor from major: “minor [is] defined [...] by the power (puissance) of variation” (Robinson 486). I argue that in *Blade*, representations of racial minorities are explicitly concerned with the movement towards increasing variation in the form of miscegenation. Vampires present an optimal vehicle in which Otherness is negotiated; while *Blade* cannot and does not wholly empower a category of minoritized people, the film instead negotiates miscegenation as a positive progression, and the miscegenated subject as one that inhabits a realistic and justified position in society.

Miscegenation, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is the “mixing or interbreeding of (people of) different races or ethnic groups” (“Miscegenation”). When examining the intersection between vampires and miscegenation, it is important to consider the critical framework provided by Donna Haraway, referenced by Carroll Hamilton in “Vampire Capitalism: Globalization, Race and the Postnational Body in *Blade*,”: Haraway pinpoints the vampire as “a figure that both promises and threatens racial and sexual mixing” (Hamilton 383). I will be taking apart this statement and exploring how vampires fit or challenge both ends of this claim: both the promise and the threat. In “Vampires, Anxieties and Dreams: Race and Sex in the
Contemporary United States,” Shannon Winnubst references Eric Lott, who names Dracula as “a sort of one-man miscegenation machine” (Winnubst 7). Miscegenation is a necessity to the nature of vampires and what they have to do to sustain their survival. Lott elaborates on this mixing as an inherent aspect of the vampire figure: “He sucks blood, transferring an illegitimate and disavowed substance, transforming his ‘victims’ from the living to the undead, giving birth without sex, trafficking in the strange and unruly logics of fluids, mixing and spilling and infecting blood” (7-8). By sucking blood from various victims, the concept of ‘mixing’ becomes both literally and figuratively a part of the vampire, as a physical body and a concept, respectively. As vampires move on to consecutive victims, each individual’s blood will be added into the mix, and the vampire becomes more mixed over time. And since each individual will be of varying race and sex (i.e. biologically male or female), the vampire can be interpreted as becoming more miscegenated—that is, mixed of people of different races—over time. In this sense, the vampire figure promises this mixing as an inevitable result of their means of survival.

On the other hand is the claim regarding how vampires threaten racial and sexual mixing; I argue that instead, the traditional vampire figure contributes to racial and sexual mixing being seen as threatening. If vampires inevitably become more miscegenated over time, then the language around their continued sucking, transferring and mixing of blood is significant. Referring back to Lott’s statement, the diction used surrounding this process includes, ‘illegitimate,’ ‘disavowed,’ ‘strange,’ and ‘unruly.’ Blade highlights issues of legitimacy that arise when something—or, rather, somebody—is deemed unpure, or, in other words, miscegenated. In the House of Erebus, council meetings consist of solely ‘pure-bloods’—vampires who were born vampires—except for Deacon Frost, who is a human-turned-vampire. When Deacon attempts to talk about his plans for vampires to rule over humans, his opinions are
disregarded; he is rebuked by the leader, Dragonetti, who says to Deacon, “you are not even a pure-blood [...] you were merely turned” (Norrington, *Blade*). As a result of his mixed status (that is, being of both human and vampire race), Deacon is viewed as an illegitimate vampire. Dragonetti’s use of “not even” and “merely” explicitly places mixed vampires as lower on the social hierarchy in comparison to pure-blooded vampires. In this way, he is disavowed by the pure-bloods, since not only do none of them support him in his movement, but none of them even deign to listen to his plan. Deacon becomes categorized as unruly and strange because his way of thinking goes against the currently established social order, where vampires and humans live together in society, feeding but blending in. As a result, these connotations of illegitimacy, unruliness and strangeness become associated with the miscegenated subject.

This distaste towards racial mixing, and this mindset of purity as the ideal state of being, is, of course, not new. In “Sullied Blood, Semen and Skin: Vampires and the Spectre of Miscegenation,” Kimberly A. Frohreich explains the origins of the word ‘miscegenation’ as a word that was created in time alongside the nineteenth-century vampire figure (34). She elaborates on the reason for which it was coined:

“The term [...] was designed to scare white male voters into believing that a blending of races would inevitably occur if slavery were abolished [...] The multiple anxieties that this word evoked [such as] sexual desire between white women and black men, the loss of racial purity and of white supremacy, and eventual racial degeneracy are surprisingly similar to those evoked by the traditional vampire” (34).

The increase of miscegenation has been correlated with the decrease of racial purity, creating a problematic binary where to be pure is to be good, and to be miscegenated is to be bad, in addition to the connotations of illegitimacy, unruliness and strangeness mentioned previously.
Since they raise the same set of anxieties, vampires and the miscegenated subject become aligned—in fact, Weinstock argues they are one and the same. Weinstock states, “The source of vampirism in the popular imagination is always elsewhere [...] the vampire thus is derived from different racial stock and is defined by different blood” (98). In vampire fiction and cinema, there is the trope of the vampire originating from a land distant from the one he currently inhabits. This trope makes vampires the optimal vehicle to negotiate Otherness—especially in vampire cinema, which speaks both for and about itself—since the vampire is always the Other, distinct by race and blood. Therefore, if vampires always originate from a different race, and then travel to new lands with different races and different blood to feed, this only supports the notion that they become more miscegenated over time; the vampires are the miscegenated subjects. The term ‘miscegenation’, then, being inextricably tied with fear and anxiety, forces the miscegenated subject—the vampire—to be tied to the same fears and anxieties.

This concept is supported by Weinstock, who proposes that, “cinematic vampires are inevitably products of their historical moment. [...] The expression of underlying fears and desires concerning sex and race [...] is always local—culturally specific and time-bound” (3). It makes sense for the anxieties surrounding miscegenation to match the anxieties surrounding the nineteenth-century vampire figure; these anxieties are culturally and socially contingent, and both term and figure were created in the same time period within which these anxieties were prevalent. On the surface, it seems as though Blade promotes this idea of the miscegenated subject as representative of the anxieties and fears previously listed by Frohreich. In her article, “Vampire Capitalism: Globalization, Race and the Postnational Body in Blade,” Hamilton explores how “Blade’s body is a site of monstrosity, conforming to every racial stereotype of the hyper-physical, hyper-sexualized, African-American male body” (380). This monstrosity
becomes emphasized when Blade is juxtaposed with the pure-blooded vampires, or even Deacon himself—who, despite also being a miscegenated subject, represents the vampire side of the battle, while Blade represents the human side. Blade, being half vampire and half human, is a complex object of study: he represents the vampire as the miscegenated subject, but his choosing to fight for the humans aligns him with the human anxieties that surrounded the coining of the term ‘miscegenation.’ While both deigned ‘impure’ by the pure-bloody, Deacon and Blade are physical opposites: “Blade is hugely muscled, sinewy, glisteningly black, and hyper-masculinized; while Frost is pale to the point of translucence, extremely thin, and excessively gaunt” (380). Since the anxieties of the time, as stated by Frohreich, are explicitly concerned with sex, racial purity and degeneracy, Blade’s muscles, hyper-masculinity and Blackness seem to neatly package those anxieties into one compact body.

However, I argue that this film actually directly challenges the positive correlation between the loss of racial purity and degeneracy; this is done by promoting miscegenation through both Deacon and Blade. One could argue that Deacon is actually not a miscegenated subject at all, because he was transformed from one race (human) to another (vampire). Karen, the haematologist, says he is even less than that: “Vampires like you aren’t a species. You’re just infected—a virus” (Norrington, Blade). To Karen, Deacon does not occupy a miscegenated status at all, but instead, is more like a human who has been manipulated by a virus to become a virus himself, infecting other humans. However, the way in which he is disavowed and seen as illegitimate by the pure-bloody, in combination with the constant undermining of his ideas because of his status, aligns him with the miscegenated subject. Even the name of the people who subject him to Othering—the ‘pure-bloody’—imply that since he is not one of them, he is impure; his blood is tainted, or mixed with something else (perhaps something inherently human)
that restricts him from attaining the same status that they possess by being born vampires. While in the grand plot of the film Deacon is seen as the villain, in his own point of view he is making his own attempt to empower his people; he views the vampires as having been suppressed by the humans for too long, and he acts with the hopes of changing that dynamic.

In this light, Deacon’s motives do not seem that different from the motives of Blade. Blade views humans as having been victimized and used by the vampires for too long—especially since he believes his own mother passed away at the hands (and/or fangs) of a vampire. He, too, acts with the hopes of changing that dynamic. In both their cases, being miscegenated is the propelling factor that drives them to accomplish what they have thus far. Being racially ‘impure’ is what gives them an advantage: Deacon gains the support of the other human-turned-vampires, while Blade gains strength and regenerative abilities. When Karen is in the process of making a serum that Blade needs to survive in replacement of actual blood, she succeeds in making a working version—with the premise that if he takes it, he will become wholly human. She specifically tells him, “You will lose your strength and your ability to regenerate” (Norrington, Blade). After this, Blade refuses the serum, because he acknowledges that as a miscegenated subject, he has traits that are significantly advantageous in battle. There are two battles going on here: one is the physical battle between Blade and the other vampires, and the other is the battle the film is trying to fight as it pushes to assert miscegenation as a positive progression, rather than a progress of degeneration. The film uses initial representations of Deacon and Blade to acknowledge and play with the expectations and stereotypes of the miscegenated subject, but ultimately attempts to undermine them by showing miscegenation as a positive aspect of their characters.
If the anxieties surrounding the miscegenated subject are explicitly concerned with sex and race, then it is important to consider not only the black male body, but the black female body as well. One of the anxieties supposedly evoked by miscegenation is the “sexual desire between white women and black men” (Frohreich 34). In Blade, this relationship is flipped to reflect the slave narrative—an often repressed, but very real, history. Hamilton elaborates, saying, “The threat to the reproductive order of white heterosexuality Blade imagines is [...] the repressed history of the sexual and reproductive logics of plantation slavery” (379). Deacon hosts parties and is seen engaging in sexually perverse acts with multiple partners—however, one black woman is separated. This woman, revealed to be Blade’s mother, is separately encased in a bed-box contraption inside Deacon’s private quarters. Miscegenation is clearly evoked when Deacon is revealed to be the one who bit Blade’s mother: Deacon is a white man who bit a black woman—and this woman gave birth to a child who, while black, is mixed in race in terms of vampire and human. In this sense, and in Lott’s terms, Deacon gave ‘birth without sex’ to Blade (Winnubst 7). This relationship echoes the slave narrative, where the white man, claiming ownership over the black female slave, permits himself to engage in sexual acts with her. Frohreich explains that the fear of miscegenation serves to mask and explain “the white man’s transgressions with black women while it positioned the black man as the threat to racial purity and white supremacy” (34). The threat to the reproductive order of white heterosexuality is the white man himself; however, due to the negative connotations of miscegenation, the blame can be shoved onto the black man, abolishing the white man of guilt or shame. This slave narrative is further evoked when Blade announces that he must “release” her before killing her. At first, it seems as though Blade’s mother shores up the stereotype of the hypersexualised black woman (especially as she seductively approaches Blade while he is tied up). However, since the entire
The premise of Blade’s narrative is to avenge her, and he ultimately achieves that while also releasing her from Deacon, the film becomes a homage to, and an acknowledgement of, a history that is often repressed.

The fact that Blade has the power and/or ability to release his mother speaks to his power as a miscegenated subject; it is his human side that drives his goal of avenging and saving her, while it is his vampire side that enables him to do so by giving him traits he would not have as a full human. Frohreich claims that, “[Blade] uses the [traditional figure of the vampire] to highlight the problematic depiction of the vampire and the distinction between racial purity and mixing” (35). I argue that Blade does more than just that. Rather than just using the figure of the vampire to point out the binary where purity equals good and mixing equals bad, Blade uses the vampire as a vehicle to negotiate a position within society for the miscegenated subject. The film empowers a miscegenated subject—namely, Blade—while presenting him with his own problems as a result of his miscegenated status; ultimately, this posits the miscegenated subject in a position that is both realistic and justified within society. It is important to establish that the film does not present the miscegenated subject as perfect. While Blade is strong, muscled and has regenerative abilities, he is often seen struggling with his thirst—he is enslaved by his need for serum, because he does not wish to drink the blood of humans. It is the way in which he relies solely on serum that renders him susceptible to being captured and used as a human sacrifice by Deacon. The film establishes a realistic representation where to be miscegenated is not to be perfect; instead, there is a progression away from the previously established notion that to be miscegenated is to be corrupt, impure and monstrous. Miscegenated subjects are not perfect in the eyes of society—but they belong there. This way, the miscegenated subject is negotiated such that they can inhabit a realistic and justified position within society.
So far, we have been progressing under the assumption that the miscegenated subject—by being seen as socially inferior by society for their mixed nature, by being associated with negative traits, and by being representative of culturally and socially contingent anxieties—is the Other. However, Winnubst poses an interesting dilemma, revolving around Lacanian theory:

“The infant’s reflection of himself in the mirror is the doorway into subject-formation for Lacanian psychoanalysis. More broadly, this mirror reflection becomes the site at which a subject begins to form ideas of wholeness and self-consciousness—crucial characteristics in virtually all western notions of subjectivity. The vampire, in lacking a mirror reflection, does not even register on the radar of identity-formation: he does not have the necessary condition for the possibility of becoming a subject. But, consequently, nor can he be fully abjected, nor can he be caught, labeled, categorized, and expelled as the Other” (8).

In Lacanian theory, the mirror is essential in order for an individual to build a concept of self and subjectivity. Since a mythicized aspect of vampires is that they have no reflection within the mirror, Winnubst argues that vampires are unable to form that concept of a self, and as a result, do not have an identity with which to be Othered. *Blade* does not explicitly address whether the vampires within the film have mirror reflections or not. However, even if we assume that they do not, I argue that vampires establish self-relations through other means, namely, reflection and comparison to those who subjected them to Othering. Blade is always comparing his miscegenated self alongside vampires. Since a vampire’s thirst caused the death of his mother, the thirst that is inherent to him becomes an aspect that he resents about himself; he admits, several times throughout the movie, to needing the serum. The whole reason behind which he needs to rely on serum is because he does not want to be like the other vampires that consume
human blood to survive. Blade establishes the position of the vampire, and then establishes himself against that position. This establishment of self-relations is also made possible by other humans like Whistler and Karen. There are characteristics innate to them as humans that Blade recognizes he does not have, such as the inability to regenerate, and this, too, helps him establish himself as a subject between vampire and human. Similarly, Deacon is constantly reminded that he is different—the pure-bloods remind him that he is and never will be a pure-blood, while Karen, a human, reminds him that he is not truly human either, or even a species; he occupies a position marked in between states. As a result, Deacon and Blade can still establish self-relations and therefore, be miscegenated subjects of Othering, despite not having a mirror reflection.

While the protagonist and eventual hero of the film is a miscegenated subject, Blade does not and cannot empower any particular category of minoritized people. Instead, the film uses vampires and vampirism to emphasize the way in which the fear of miscegenation is manipulated, and to evoke the repressed history of the slave narrative. The film ultimately situates the miscegenated subject not as a perfect ideal, or a wholly powerful subject, but rather, as a subject that can and should inhabit a realistic and justified position within society. Robinson claims that “when we determine the being, the status, the identity [...] of something, we reduce it; we restrict its productive livelihood” (488). Rather than the determination of status being the issue, I suggest it is the restriction to either side of an extreme that is problematic. Vampire cinema, being a commentary on vampirism and vampire cinema itself, emphasizes the importance of acknowledging a spectrum, and the ability of a subject to move along this spectrum. It is this movement—this ability to progress and evolve—that is essential to both the vampire and the vampire genre, because they encapsulate the culturally and socially contingent
anxieties of the time, and thus, they must be able to evolve and change alongside the anxieties of the present.

Works Cited


