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Raw as life

the Queer, the Goth and the Gothic in *Lost Souls*, by Poppy Z. Brite

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Abstract: Goth subculture is market by a performative distinctiveness relating to sexuality, body and gender, which functions as a background that supports the performing of queer identities. Poppy Z. Brite is one of the few authors who in fact relates Gothic literature to Goth Subculture, and such association adds interesting nuances to the critical reading of *Lost Souls* (1992) as we consider Nothing and his "death chic" or Zillah's androgyny. The Goth scene background in *Lost Souls* seems to escape criticism, once its characters are usually referred to in a generic way as punks, alternative and son on. In this essay I analyze Nothing in terms of character development taking in consideration Judith Butler's theory of gender and the aesthetics of the Goth scene.

Keywords: literary criticism; contemporary US literature; gothic subculture; gender theory; gothic fiction.

1. Introduction

In the spring of 1992, the author Dunja Brill (2008) had her first contact with Goth Subculture. At Ballhaus, a venue at downtown Bonn, Germany, she remembers that she had listened to odd electric guitar sounds and hoarse and low vocals amidst the dry ice fog permeating the place. There were figures enveloped in velvet with elaborate makeup and flamboyant hairstyles on the dance floor. She mentions a lean girl in pale makeup and black lipstick dancing apparently alone. It took more than a minute for Brill to realize that *she* was actually *him*. This feeling of uncertainty regarding the androgynous figure on the dance floor motivated the author's study about gender and sexuality on Goth Subculture, *Goth, Culture, Gender, Sexuality and Style* (2008). Brill's study it is one of my main references to

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this essay, since it offers the required support to the analysis I propose here. More important, Brill identifies herself with Goth Subculture, which is also my case. David Punter and Glennis Byron mention that Goth Subculture should be approached more frequently in Gothic studies, but the authors also comment that the scene can prove itself a difficult field of study and that "the problem will only be resolved for Gothic studies when more young scholars who are already positioned to some degree within the Gothic scene begin to do academic work" (2006: 62).

Poppy Z. Brite is a transgender author of Gothic fiction. His work flirts with horror and gore and his fictional landscape is commonly inhabited by gay or bisexual characters, and graphic descriptions of sex, death and violence are not uncommon. I approach Brite's literature by the lens of the Gothic Studies, and I read it as Southern Gothic, a subgenre of American Gothic that may be characterized by some sort of disillusioned vision of the world (França 2017). Southern Gothic became an exponential subgenre in North American literature since the second half of the 20th century, and works of this kind explores themes commonly attributed to the region – racism, violence, gender, class, and the decay of family lineages. Brite is one of the few authors who in fact relates Gothic literature to Goth Subculture; since Goth subculture is market by a performative distinctiveness, which is consonant with Judith Butler's theory of gender (2019), this relation adds interesting nuances to the critical reading of *Lost souls* (1992) as we consider Nothing and his "death chic" or Zillah's androgyny. At some levels, the Goth scene background in *Lost Souls* seems to escape the criticism, once its characters are usually referred to in a generic way as punks, alternative, trash punks and son on. In this essay I analyze Nothing in terms of character development taking in consideration Butler's theory of gender and the aesthetics of the Goth scene.

2. The "fantasy of genderlessness": Goth subculture and gender as performance

Goth subculture emerged amidst the cultural effervescence of the 1980s and 1990s from the post-punk scene, mostly in Great Britain (Gunn 1999). There is no concordance about when or why the term "Goth" – in some cases "Gothic" – was associated to the scene. Goth Subculture is a "music-based subculture" (Brill 2008: 147), that is to say, grounded in the musical aesthetics of the bands; there are other relevant sources of (sub)cultural

capital an individual might explore, such as fashion, literature and cinema, but those are secondary. The primal Goth bands are as well post-punk bands such as Bauhaus, Siouxsie and The Banshees and Joy Division; those bands are characterized by a strong musical experimentation, by the relevance of the bass, by echoing sounds – which sometimes seems to flirt with dissonance – and profound vocals commonly low and hoarse (Reynolds 2019).

Brill mentions that "song lyrics revolved around the dark recesses of the human soul: death, suffering and destruction as well as unfulfilled romance and isolation, but also the more arcane, taboo aspects of magic and mythology (e.g. ancient rituals, vampires)" (Brill 2008: 03). Even though "dark recesses of the human soul" is clarifying as a metaphor, I consider necessary to unfold this matter in order to exemplify the Goth aesthetics. Goth bands' lyrics usually draw from literature and cinema, though not necessarily from Gothic fiction. The English band Joy Division is considered one of the precursors of Goth, and its lyrics have a strong relation to modern literature, the fragmentation as in the style of James Joyce and William Faulkner, and the fractured images of T.S. Eliot. Gothic fiction demonstrates a disposition for rendering social anxieties, which is also distinguishable in the aesthetics of Joy Division. The recognizable sensibility in sound and lyrics reveal a political point of view that rejects the values of late capitalist modernity, and Joy Division extensively explores themes such as alienation and isolation (Joy Division 1979); the recurrent use of alien elements to music, such as the empty spray can on recording the track "She's Lost Control" (1979: track 1, side two) as well as mix effects like reverb may be listened as metaphors to erasure of meaning and loneliness. As Punter and Byron (2006) points out, Ian Curtis' lyrics not only explore the alienation from the self in a post-industrial England but suggest something distinctive to Gothic fiction: the numbing and fracturing of the self by facing the machinery of hegemonic society. This brief presentation of Joy Division gives a good example of the Goth Subculture's aesthetic, its inclination for reflection upon self-assertion and self-awareness as well as the articulation of a political point of view.

Fashion as an element of integration and at the same time of individualization and self-assertion exerts notable relevance in the scene. Such authors as Elizabeth Wilson (1992) and Gwendolyn O'Neal (1999) mention that Goth aesthetics draws from post-punk movements, especially from the aesthetics of the late 1990s, and it is possible to distinguish features such as

extravagant hairstyles, teased hair dyed with colors like pink, green or blue; fishnets stocking; leather and velvet jackets; accessories such as pendants, crosses, rings, chokers and harnesses – the Christian iconography is predominant here, and these elements are essentially the same to any gender.

Punter and Byron (2004) question what the large-scale commercialization of Goth items and garment represents to a subculture that invests a lot (of cultural capital) in the notion of authenticity and individualization. Of course, the commercialization of products aligned to the aesthetics of the scene might raise other issues towards authenticity, making Goth a bit more palatable to the hegemonic culture. But the existence of "Goth goods" doesn't imply that the scene's members consume indiscriminately such products. The commercialization of a "Goth style" has begun with the dilution of the subculture's borders, particularly in the turn to the 2000s, when a variety of analogous themes started being merged with the nascent Goth, such as electronic and industrial music, BDSM aesthetics and subgenres deriving from German music, such as EBM and Gothic metal – the latter not very well accepted in the subculture. There was wave of new influences relating to dress code: tight clothes with military aspect, accrue from EBM, electronic and industrial rock; leather, vinyl and PVC from BDSM aesthetics; velvet, lace, clothes with anachronistic cut and aesthetics, inspired on an idealized Victorian past and on romanticized mythical figures, such as the vampire. However, Goth aesthetics is still pervaded by a notion of "do it yourself" and of experimentation with clothing. That is why Brill mentions that it would be possible to state that Goth subculture is a "conglomerate of overlapping subgroups, which differ considerably in style and music despite displaying a relatively strong collective distinctiveness vis-à-vis general culture" (Brill 2008: 04).

The scene's distinctive practices are grounded on music and fashion. Selection of materials, creation, combination and exhibition of pieces – clothes, accessories, hairstyle variations – are a central activity in the scene. A good example of how those instances intertwined is "Bela Lugosi's Dead" by Bauhaus. The song is considered a "Goth anthem" and addresses Bela Lugosi's death, the actor who played Dracula in the 1931 silent movie. Lugosi had toured through Europe performing in a theatrical adaptation of Bran Stoker's work, and had become a sensation due to his dark beauty and his singular performance. Punter and Byron mentioned that Lugosi has become a fundamental source figure concerning the clothing style and

aesthetics of the scene, and that the image of Dracula and of the actor seems to merge into his figure as if there was no distinction between them. This counterfeiting act permeates the whole subculture, and is one of the most approached subjects when someone intends to approximate Gothic fiction to Goth subculture.

Joanne Eicher and Mary Higgins (1993) suggest that Goth dress practices and codes may be read as "body modifications" in the case of tattoos, piercings, makeup and hairstyles, and "body supplements" in the case of clothes, jewelry, shoes, and accessories; both instances have equivalent importance to the maintenance of status within the scene's micropolitics. Although clothing practices are mostly related to one's experience on going to clubs (and nowadays also social media), it is common for Goths to use a softened version of this aesthetics in their daily routine. Brill describes these practices as it follows:

> aestheticising and re-mystifying modern life. The aesthetic appropriation of everyday life and surroundings – e.g. through decorating one's body, flat, car and favourite hangouts as elements of a sacred 'dark microcosm' – is set against the pragmatic and functional profanity of the modern world. (Brill 2008: 10)

Such practices of "aestheticising and re-mystifying modern life", by which an individual stylized their identity, are directly related to gender and sexuality. Goth's dressing aesthetic is based on what is hegemonically considered "the feminine" – one of the interviewees of Brill's ethnographic study even mentions that Goth Subculture is rooted into "the feminine" (Brill 2008). Besides this, the scene generally demonstrates good acceptance of practices and themes considered taboo, such as BDSM, fetish and gender play; Goth subculture is also very accepting towards non-hegemonic sexualities, which might encompass a simple homoaffective flirt in clubs or social media or the consolidation of non-conforming genders. Moreover, eroticized gender performances are highly accepted in the subculture, since they are also sources of a distinctive amount of (sub)cultural capital. Of course, the relation between clothing and power is an intricate and conflicting one, and frequently contradictory. As Wilson mentions, clothing practices are "a powerful weapon of control and dominance… with simultaneously subversive qualities" (1992: 14). In general, the theories differ, but this dual aspect – clothing as control, and clothing as subversion – is

recurrent. While some authors state that fashion contributes to the maintenance of the capitalist regime through the admission of the clothing's political sphere into the sphere of consumerism (S. Ewen, E. Ewen 1992), there are others who see subversive potential in the specific appropriation of some elements of the mass or popular culture (O'Neal 1999).

Such a "feminine" aesthetics pervades Goth subculture rhetoric, engendering what Brill calls "fantasy of genderlessness", a performative act directly associated to androgyny. This characteristic also appears associated to self-assertion and equality in the subculture. The "fantasy of genderlessness" is expressed through some sort of theatrical distinctiveness, and finds its foundation in the theory of gender proposed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, published in 1990. Butler questions the maintenance of the notion of "woman" as the subject of feminism in order to approach a broader and variable conceptualization concerning identity construction. For the same reason she rejects the essentialist notion of identity, that is, of an internal truth to the subject, the existence of a coherent structure that would regulate sex, gender and sexuality; to her, the essentialist notion is a presumption born from the compulsory heterosexuality, a precept imposed by the institutions of power, that being the hegemonic discourses. For Butler, there is no natural prerogative to the body and the body is a construction receiving meaning through regulations and negotiation with institutions of power. For that reason, Butler conceives gender always in relation to the subject, to negotiated practices and values, in an attempt of not excluding any possibility of representation from the political field. Butler understands gender as a fiction; it is performed, it is always a state of becoming, and as a discursive practice it is always in a process of construction: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal overtime to produce the appearance of substance" (Butler 2006: 45). Thus, there is no internal truth referring to gender; it is a counterfeit trait attributed to, but never limiting, the body; it is an endless and uninterrupted stylization, a product from a desire always in change. In this regard, "genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (Butler 2006: 186). The reality of gender, created as a performative act, suggests that the notion of a gender, of an essential or true masculinity and femininity is also a construction. Butler also remarks the pertinence of considering the political practice of the

theories of gender. In this sense, the counterfeiting quality of the "fantasy of genderlessness" featured in Goth subculture may offer a possibility for transgressive identities and representations to rise. Since there is no distinction between feminine and masculine practices of clothing, when we consider members of the Goth scene who perform a gender – sometimes trying to perform the absence of it by performing androgyny – we may read this performance as a fictional counterfeiting act of the body which may unbalance and disorient hegemonic notions of gender.

Teresa de Lauretis (1994) understands gender as something produced by various discourses, practices and social technologies like cinema and fashion; this favors a view of the media, fashion, music, social practices and discourse that constitutes Goth subculture as forces which accommodate and disorient, deconstruct and reconstruct discursively and contradictory the gender identity of the members of the scene. Lauretis sees the possibility of constructing different gender representations at the fringe of the hegemonic discourse, as long as these representations are established by micropolitical practices, exactly like Goth subculture. According to her, "these terms can also have a part in the construction of gender, and their effects are rather at the 'local" level of resistances, in subjectivity and self-representation (Lauretis 1994: 18). It would be possible to argue that in Goth subculture the aestheticization of the body, the performative act, and the self-representation are rooted on a highly hyperbolic attitude. This becomes more evident when we draw a parallel between the subculture and the queer subject, which refers to "thinking and acting envisioning not the center nor desiring the center as reference; it is thinking and acting envisioning to defy the regulatory norms of society, accepting the discomfort relating to ambiguity" (Louro 2016: 7).

Brill (2008) defines two general clothing styles seen in Goth subculture. Brill mentions she would like to escape binarism in dealing with gender, but because the data collected from her interviewees, the author ends up defining these styles from binary hegemonic notions of gender: masculine androgyny and hyperfemininity. Still, these notions are interesting, particularly her thoughts about androgyny. What is interesting to note is that the ideas regarding "femininity": "femininity is highly valued in the aesthetic codes of the scene and, rather than claiming they are 'genderless' creatures, many male and female Goths explicitly align themselves with the feminine" (Brill 2008: 38).

This performative act toward the "feminine" practiced by various subjects identified as Goth men, which the final goal would be to achieve via clothing and makeup an androgynous image, is also presented as a transgressive act, at least, compared to the dominant culture. "The androgynous male style codes of the subculture partly free Goth men from the shackles of traditional masculinity, enabling them to indulge in pleasures normally branded taboo or at least improper for men in our culture" (Brill 2008: 78). This quasi-obsession with androgyny is, for Gunn (2007), one of the main characteristics of the subculture, and it appears associated to other notion: the "death chic", a certain "death" aura, the cultivation of a lean pale fragile body. Brill considers that, in the scene, androgyny presents itself as a force "potentially liberating not only for men but also for women, because it can work to loosen up common gender stereotypes and to sever gendered sartorial signifiers from their rigid association with either femininity or masculinity" (Brill 2008: 73).

3. Gender performance and goth aesthetics in *Lost Souls*

Lost Souls (1992) is Poppy Z. Brite's first novel, a Southern Gothic narrative set partly in Missing Mile, a fictional city from North Caroline, and partly in the famous New Orleans, Louisiana. The work presents a complex plot, following the musicians Steve and Ghost, a troupe of wandering vampires constituted by Twig, Zillah and Molochai, and Nothing, the teenager protagonist who goes on a road trip to watch a *Lost Souls?* gig, Steve and Ghost's band. Nothing's narrative addresses identity, and his tale sets the novel's common thread. The character runs across the vampire horde that travels through the United States in a black van, and this fact sheds light on his process of self-discovery, once Nothing finds out himself to be a vampire.

Brite rereads the vampire literary myth in a rather secular way: all mystical and religious elements are excluded from the fictional game; crosses, holy water, silver, sunlight, none of it has mystical effect on Brite's vampires. The very fictional legacy seems to be relegated to a second role, since there are no mentions to blood heritage or vampire traditions, as in works like *Camilla* (1872) or *Dracula* (1897), or ethic-theological concerns in relation to the theme of evil as in *The Vampire Chronicles* (1974-present) by Anne Rice. In Brite's novel, vampires are not created as a corruption of the human paradigm; they are a race apart, reproducing through heterosexual relations, which always leads to the death of the mother.

Hogle (2002) mentions that Gothic fiction is marked by some sort of exaggeration related to its own fictionally as well as by the reinterpretation and renovation of its own constitutive features inside the tradition. Punter and Byron approach this counterfeiting aesthetic feature to trace a parallel between Gothic fiction and Goth subculture: "the insistent artificiality of Goth style might seem to suggest a continuation of the counterfeiting tendency which has characterized Gothic since the eighteenth-century" (2004: 62). The authors agree with Hogle when mentioning that this process engenders an erasure of the past in order to produce a fictional repository into which modern questions are projected and abject. Punter and Byron (2004) even wonder if, somehow, Goth subculture represents a type of aesthetics reception of Gothic fiction. I do not intend to answer this question, but my reading of *Lost Souls* is inserted in this interstice.

Nothing is portrayed as a typical Goth boy regarding his appearance as well as the theatricality he invests in his self-representation. In the beginning of the novel, Nothing writes a letter in front of the window facing his own reflection: "[t]he boy in the window had the same long sheaf of dyed black hair, the same pointed chin, the same almond-shaped dark eyes – but his smile was colder, far colder" (Brite 1992: 26). A moment later, "he pulled his quilt around his legs and touched his ribs and hipbones, liking how thin he was" (Brite 1992: 27). Nothing has all the desired features praised in Goth scene: the dyed-black hair and the huge dark eyes, besides the "far colder" reflection, which suggests a type of cool or ice-cold poise cultivated in the subculture, something highly valuable concerning (sub) cultural capital. Moreover, the pointed chin and the fact that he is skinny and having salient hipbones and ribs suggest that androgyny, which is one of the features most invested by (sub)cultural capital, manifests itself almost inherently on Nothing.

He has a sense of isolation and a strong need for connection and belonging. The character knows he is adopted and had grown up with this uneasiness in his chest, but the situation escalates when he finds a note affirming that his name is not Jason, like his parents call him, but Nothing. We see the *motto* for his intimate feeling of isolation in the beginning of the novel. In front of the window, the young lad notices the inclemency of the arriving autumn; the cold night is coming closer and darkness lurks behind the trees afar. His thoughts culminate in solitude: "every tree was alone out there. The animals were alone, each in its hole, in its thin fur, and anything that

got hit on the road tonight would die alone. Before morning, he thought, its blood would freeze in the cracks of the asphalt" (Brite 1992: 25). That is why he leaves his home in Maryland, in an attempt to find something more for himself in this world, and finding himself.

Brill (2008) remarks that, like androgyny, bisexuality has a high value (sub)cultural capital in Goth subculture. Indeed, the subject of androgyny, which represents the uneasiness about gender and sexuality in the scene, seems to be attached to the affirmation/performance of divergent sexualities. The author highlights that being seen and recognized as bisexual, whether from public demonstrations of affection or from bisocial relations, is actively related to the individuals' performance of gender identity, and at the same time raising the individuals' status in the micropolitics of the scene.

This matter can be exemplified through the relationships that constitutes Nothing's social circle in Maryland. These young Goths use to gather at Laine's after school to smoke pot – Laine's bedroom, as well as Nothing's, is a haven decorated with items attractive to the subculture, like Laine's narguilé, inherited from his oldest brother, "an elaborate ceramic affair shaped like a skull with worms twining in and out of the empty eye sockets. You put your finger over one of the nostrils to hold the smoke in" (Brite 1992: 31). In the scene:

> He looked around the room. Several of the kids were groping each other ineptly, kissing each other with sloppy wet mouths. Veronica Aston had pulled Lily Hartung's skirt up and had two fingers inside the elastic of Lily's panties. Nothing stared at this for several minutes, dully interested. Bisexuality was much in vogue among this crowd. It was one of the few ways they could feel daring. Nothing himself had made out with several of these kids, but though he had tasted their mouths and touched their most tender parts, none of them really interested him. The thought made him sad, though he wasn't sure why. (Brite 1992: 31)

For Marjorie Garber (1999), bisexuality represents a realm of fluid desires that challenges and defeats any categorization. Such notion is similar to Maria Pramaggiore's, for whom bisexuality is "a practice that refuses the restrictive formulas that define gender according to binary categories" (1996: 3), possessing the capacity to subvert gender defining social mechanisms. Of course, such a realm of fluid desires, seen as practice, may suggest a type of celebration of bisexuality as a manner of overcoming the binary matrix, something that is also discussed and rejected by Butler (2019). However,

what Brite produces is a type of accommodation of bisexuality, something that assumes the value of naturalization, but presents itself clearly counterfeited, because bisexuality is originated in the yearning for "feeling daring". This accommodation does not mask the discussion about gender, and by "naturalizing" gender and sexuality Brite illustrates through narrative action how the characters *perform* their identity.

Such performative act exemplifies how the hegemonic discourse about sexuality is dismembered and displaced by Nothing and his friends; rooted on Goth subculture's aesthetics, they desire and search for transgression, achieving it in bisexual and homosexual experimentations. But this process, as it denounces the power of discourse over sexuality, also conceals its counterfeiting origin, as Butler (1990) states. In the scene's micropolitics with which Nothing identifies, the performance of sexuality, and consequently of gender identity, acquires the value of truth and value of naturalization, and although it may unbalance hegemonic notions of gender, it also hides itself specifically for possessing the value of truth and value of naturalization.

We also have a hint of free sexuality amongst the scene's members, since "Nothing himself had made out with several of these kids". However, Nothing was not able to establish a long-lasting connection, because "none of them really interested him". The craving for connection and belonging is shattered against the concreteness of his own wishes and experiences which brands his spirit with melancholy: "[t]he thought made him sad, though he wasn't sure why". This does not stop him from experimenting with his free or unrestrained sexuality. In this same scene, with a background of post-punk music, Laine and his girlfriend give demonstrations of eroticism; and they make a performance out of it: "someone put a Bauhaus tape on and turned it all the way up. Laine and Julie rolled around on the bed, pretending to make out" (BRITE1992: 31). But Nothing doubts about how much Laine likes girls, commenting on the fascination that the boy feels for Robert Smith, lead singer of the English alternative rock band The Cure. Nothing mentions that "Julie wore her hair wildly teased in all directions, and she favored lots of black eyeliner and smudged red lipstick. Nothing suspected that Laine liked her mainly because of her superficial resemblance to Robert Smith" (Brite 1992: 31). Besides the suggestion of Laine's homosexuality, there is Julie's androgyny, valued in the scene in aesthetic terms, adding to the performative act of identity.

When Julie leaves, Laine offers Nothing oral sex. Nothing questions him about his girlfriend, and Laine's answer suggests his acknowledgement of Nothing's status in the (local) scene: "'Julie doesn't turn me on much,' said Laine. 'I like you, though. I think you're really cool'" (Brite 1992: 33). Laine says that Nothing is "cool", something related to his theatrical dignity, some sort of distant and at the same time affective poise cultivated as a source of (sub)cultural capital. Their dialogue culminates in a rather comic statement from Laine: "'Seriously,' he said. 'I haven't given you a blowjob since August. I want to'" (Brite 1992: 31). Nothing sprawls on the bed and faces the poster of Robert Smith, entering into a homoerotic fantasy regarding the singer's mouth: "Nothing stared up at Robert Smith's magnified mouth. The singer's lush clotted voice surrounded him, making him feel again as if he were tumbling between those lips" (Brite 1992: 33).

This type of character's development is not exclusive of Nothing. Teased hair and heavy makeup and leather and velvet clothes get coherence under an aesthetic spectrum that echoes the "fantasy of genderlessness" mentioned by Brill (2008). Christian, one of the novel's vampires, hunts in a Goth bar in New Orleans. The vampire himself could be identified as a member of the scene, once he relates to the same aesthetics: "Christian still wore a cloak, long and black and lined with silk, whenever he went out" (Brite 1992: 62). The same thing may be said of the young people that the character sees in front of the innominate bar where he hunts; they are kids "with eyes smudged black and ripped black clothes, little ghosts, like photonegatives of the dusky dancers" (Brite 1992: 62).

Christian remembers when that was still a Jazz bar, but soon enough he evokes the aesthetic of the scene by exploring nightly themes: "the music that drifted out of the doorway and up toward the moon was sparse and dark and strange, the anthem of all the lost children who began their lives at night, when the bars opened and the music began to play" (Brite 1992: 63). They are figures dressing in black, wearing heavy makeup and peculiar hairstyle, besides the atmospheric evocations about "all the lost children who began their lives at night". Here, the band Bauhaus is again mentioned: "Right now it was sainted Bauhaus, the pale long-boned gods of this crowd, doing 'Bela Lugosi's Dead.' The eyeliner eyes glazed and the black lipstick lips moved in time with the words, and the children danced slowly" (Brite 1992: 63-4). Christian ends up fleeing New Orleans and arriving at Missing Mile, where he finds the Sacred Yew, an alternative bar decorated

with posters and neon quotes on the walls, filled with the same "children in black" (Brite 1992: 69).

It is noteworthy that there is a homoerotic feature in Christian's feeding, which is related to queer sexualities present in the subculture. Christian leaves the bar in New Orleans accompanied by a lean and slightly androgynous boy. They walk through the dark streets on the margins of the Mississippi River, and then Christian feeds on the boy. The scene is evidently erotic, and such eroticism is frequently associated to blood and to the vampire in Gothic literature. When Christian kisses the boy, "their tongues melted together. The boy's spit was as sour and sweet as wine. Christian sucked at the boy's mouth, let the spit flow down his throat, warming him, awakening his hunger even more" (Brite 1992: 66). The tongues melted and there is an erotic emphasis to fluids such as "spit" and "sweet", which are compared to wine and to the night's flavors of the French Quarter, something that culminates in a hunger for blood.

Following, "Christian held the boy close, cradled him, kissed his throat" (Brite 1992: 66), and then the vampire finally penetrates his victim's tender skin. The act of feeding here is not only metaphorically linked to sexual experience, they interconnect, since while he feeds, Christian "slipped one hand beneath the belt of the boy's jeans and found molten trembling heat there. The boy's back arched; he made a low gasping sound" (Brite 1992: 66). The masturbatory act culminates in the victim's orgasm, represented in the novel as a sort of aesthetic delight related to Gothic style conventions (França 2017); this delight springs from the sublime communion between the pleasure of surrendering to the vampire, and the horror which arises from the awareness that this surrender is going to result in death.

The orgasm is rapturous also for Christian: "[t]he boy's sperm flooded warm over Christian's fingers. Christian brought his hand up to his lips and sucked at that too. The two tastes mingling in his mouth, creamy and delicate and bitter and salty, raw as life, were almost too exquisite to bear" (Brite 1992: 67). When the vampire consumes the blood and the sperm, Brite grants materiality to the metaphor, or better yet, incarnates the metaphor that associates blood to life into bodily fluids. Pleasures of this type, "raw as life", enraptures Christian and suggests that the vampire, in Brite's novel, may be read as a creature that catalyzes bodily experience. Brite's vampires still drink blood, as in the literary myth's tradition; on the other hand, they may go out during daytime, and indeed there are no significant

limitations to their existence. On that account, Brite's vampires would not be an allegory to the queer subject, but rather the very queer subject rendered into strange bodies to the hegemonic discourses and points of view.

Blood and blood consumption are Nothing's obsessions. He perforates his wrist with a quill feather and uses his own blood to retrace a postcard. After contemplating the wound, "he licked the blood away. It smudged his lips sticky, and he smiled at himself in the window's reflection" (Brite 1992: 26). There is an undeniable erotic relation to blood in such a scene, the blood which "smudged his lips sticky" and resonate Robert Smith's vibrant lips, that Nothing stares while he is given oral sex by Laine. His connection with blood makes him later devour Laine in company with Zillah, Twig and Molochai. This scene is represented in a visceral graphic manner – Nothing is seated on top of Laine, and surrounded by vampires he tears the boy's neck in a sloppy and feral bite, pouring blood inside the van. Despite being stricken with guilt, this scene marks a deep change in the character, and in sharing Laine's blood with his new family Nothing concludes that his loneliness has come to an end, once "he was actually drinking a life, swallowing it whole. He felt himself borne up by the mindless, agonized convulsions of the thin body beneath him and the churning guitar of the spiders from Mars" (Brite 1992: 158); and finally, the statement that "the taste of blood meant the end of aloneness" (Brite 1992: 158).

Nothing concludes that "they really are vampires, he thought. You've consigned yourself to a life of blood and murder, you can never rejoin the daytime world. And he answered himself: Fine. As long as I don't have to be alone again" (Brite 1992: 171). However, this first glimpse of acceptance has a rather bitter aspect to it. "Fine", he thinks, wishing only not to be abandoned. At this point of the narrative, Nothing still cannot relate well with Zillah, the group's leader, a (almost) hundred-years-old vampire, androgynous, sometimes sweet, sometimes wicked – Christian even mentions that perhaps Zillah have gone mad with the passing decades.

Zillah introduces himself as a pertinent figure in the narrative. Since the first moment they meet, he becomes Nothing's lover. Later, we also find out he is Nothing's father. In the novel's prologue, their group of vampires gets to New Orleans during the Mardi Grass and burst into Christian's bar. While Molochai and Twig share blood and passion with Christian, Zillah spends the night with Jessy. He gets her pregnant, and she gives birth, at the cost of her life, to Nothing. Christian takes the baby away to Maryland

hoping he never really becomes a vampire, since Christian understands that it would be best for the boy that he would never get in touch with a "world of blood" (Brite 1992: 228). But Nothing finds his way back, and when the group gets to the Sacred Yew, the bar where Christian works now, Christian reveals that Zillah is his father.

Zillah does not seem to pay much attention to the taboo of incest. He mentions "'Well,' said Zillah. He was paler than usual, but he held himself straight, and his eyes were fiercely happy. More than that, Christian realized. Zillah's eyes were proud. 'Well. That changes things, doesn't it? That makes things even better. Lovely'" (Brite 1992: 219). Nothing questions himself about the kinship, expending a furious train of thoughts about his relationship with Zillah. He states that "he had Zillah, his father, his lover. And he had Molochai and Twig and Christian. They would be there with him, alive" (Brite 1992: 226), what suggests a notion of family not only nonconforming, but distant from any hegemonic moral sense. He accepts, in a first moment, Zillah as father and lover. In fact, he elects all the vampires as members of his nightly family. Then there is a scene that mirrors an initial one, in which Nothing stares at his own reflection and sees only loneliness. Here, however, the transformation in Nothing's identity is clear:

> He had looked at himself in the bathroom mirror, still able to meet his own eyes, and he had told himself: *For a week now you have been fucking your own father. His tongue has been in your mouth more times than you could count. You've sucked him off... you've swallowed stuff that could have been your brothers and sisters!*
> But he could not disgust himself. He could not make himself ashamed. He knew these were things he was supposed to feel, things the rational daylight world would expect him to feel. But he could not force himself to feel them. In a world of night, in a world of blood, what did such pallid rules matter? (Brite 1992: 228).

His rupture with the hegemonic discourse becomes evident here, by the separation between the daily world and the nightly world. Moreover, he accepts to live a life at the fringe, and his decision relates to Laureti's (1994) remark about the queer subject. From this moment on, Nothing takes over control of his own narrative; he embraces himself as a marginal figure, searching for meaning at the margin. In a first moment, the narrative suggests a reprehensible sense to the relationship between Zillah and Nothing, implicit in "his tongue has been in your mouth more times than you could count". However, Nothing states that he could not demean or condemn

himself, and the key to his self-discovery is shown when he realizes that the world where he inhabits, a nightly world, has nothing to do with "the rational daylight world" and with the things that this world "would expect him to feel". Nothing performs a queer identity, and by inhabiting the fringe of hegemonic culture this fact frees him.

As the plot unfolds, Zillah is wounded by Steve, and by a lustful wish for revenge, he seduces Steve's ex-girlfriend and gets her pregnant. Ghost and Steve go to New Orleans with the intention to find and save Ann. They end up running into an exoteric store and into Arkady, a type of necromancer who possesses a remarkable amount of (very doubtful) information about vampires. Reluctantly they accept his help. Even so, Ann ends up dying giving birth to a stillborn. Steve is an irascible creature and this makes him mad. He goes out hunting vampires, which results in Zillah's death. And this is another moment in which Nothing's narrative changes.

It is also interesting to note that Zillah exerts social pressure aiming to reinforce his dominance toward the troupe. He uses his intimacy with Nothing as well as Nothing's necessity for acceptance to manipulate him and having things as he pleases; he deliberately threatens Christian with exclusion if he doesn't comply with his terms. The interesting question here is if Zillah is really a monster. The answer is clarifying concerning the Goth subculture and Nothing's queer performativity. If Zillah is a monster, it isn't because he is a vampire, but because he does not allow the others to have a safe place. In other words, he uses his access to Goth subculture to predate on the marginalized queer subjects that integrates the scene.

In spite of the union between Zillah and Nothing, Zillah seemed to merge cruelty and love in the same measure; indeed, passion perhaps is a keyword to understand Zillah's representation, once everything he does, whether it is an act of compassion or of cruelty, is in the extreme limit of such feeling, spilling over with intensity. After the death of his father and lover, Nothing decides to leave with Molochai and Twig instead of seeking revenge; he takes over his father's place as protector and leader of the vampire group, no more belonging to the group as an object, when he was Zillah's object of pleasure, but taking over to him a role of protagonist. He is now able to constitute a family beside Molochai and Twig, or at least, "as much as a family as anyone could be, anywhere, ever" (Brite 1992: 83). This completes his path of self-discovery, and thus inhabiting "in a world of night, in a world of blood" (Brite 1992: 228) he sees himself as capable of tracing his own

ethical and moral set, living under the aegis of his own will.

4. Conclusions

In *Lost Souls*, the fact that Nothing is related to the Goth subculture influences his self-representation, mainly because Nothing has a queer identity. Goth subculture, as Brill (2008) mentions, is permeated by matters related to gender, body, style and sexuality; the scene is marked by performativity, sometimes manifested in a hyperbolic way, and by the tendency of accepting nonconforming identities; such characteristics may serve as a background for the rising of queer identities. Because he has inhabited a world at the fringe of the hegemonic culture, maybe this has prepared Nothing to search, also at the fringe, sense and resolution – or at least reconciliation – for his anguishes. Of course that the Goth scene is only one element in the Gothic machinery of Brite's work, and it deserves the due attention.

On the other hand, Brite's novel seems grounded on a homosocial dynamics. Practically all expressive characters are men, and female figures act, almost always, as an object of coherence for the male identities; this is Ann's case, Steve's ex-girlfriend, who assures him his hegemonic and safe role as a heterosexual man, protecting him from the erotic urgencies he feels toward his bandmate, Ghost. When the relationship ends, Steve's identity collapses. Furthermore, Zillah seduces and gets Ann pregnant by revenge. He does it solely because he knows the pregnancy will kill her. In Brite's novel, vampires are not created, but they are born from a heterosexual relationship. And this process always culminates with the death of the mother. Female vampires do not give consent to reproduce, so male vampires tend to turn to female humans as a valuable option. Brite inverts the notion that the vampire is a corruption from the human parading, such as in the works of Anne Rice or Bram Stocker, suggesting that it is the human blood which has been diluting the vampire blood. This allows the youngsters of vampires to drink, to eat, to have sex and to go out into the sun. Although Brite gave his vampires these features which would allow them to coexist with humans, they don't have the desire or the disposition to be absorbed into the hegemonic daylight world.

If we read the vampire as a metaphor for gender, Nothing's representation seems, at first glance, going against Butlers ideas (2019). In the beginning of the novel, the vampire nature seems to be presented as a type of essential identity (since it looks like there is something visceral that

motivates Nothing to flee home in search for truth, as well as Zillah's urges which impels him to madness and blood), what would suggest a type of essentialist notion to gender. We find some resolution to this matter in the connection that the vampire have with blood.

The thirst of Brite's vampires is associated with their libido. Besides, Nothing's libido is distributed amongst poetry, music and his poise, which is associated to the Goth subculture. We shall remind ourselves that Nothing makes use of a quill feather to penetrate his own skin, using blood to retrace the postcard he sends to Ghost – such a postcard that in a way represents his expectations for the future, as if Nothing had retraced his whole life with blood. This act clarifies the performative act of Nothing's gender identity, since it is a stylized act associated to the Goth scene.

When Christian takes baby Nothing away from New Orleans and leaves him at the door of strangers, he wonders that perhaps it would be possible for the baby to grow like a common child. That is, we could presume that even if someone is born to be a vampire, one becomes a vampire only if a determining identity frame is already an apprehensive constructed language mediating one's identity. On that account, how does one characterize Brite's vampire? Nothing becomes a vampire as he interacts and travels with Molochai, Twig and Zillah. It is from action, by a *performative act*, that he performs his gender identity. Consequently, the vampire does not present many distinctions of an individual belonging to the Goth scene. Here they have the same value. In fact, I would say that Brite's vampires are embodiment of queer subjects, and the Goth scene functions as a background which supports the performing of queer identities.

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