

The Monstrous Return of the Commodified Female: How *Zombie Strippers* (2008) and *From Dusk Till Dawn* (2014) Transgress Foundational American Cultural Values

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Abstract: This article examines how the film *Zombie Strippers* (2008, dir. Jay Lee) and the first season of the series *From Dusk Till Dawn* (2014, created by Robert Rodriguez) deploy the Gothic mode to stage monstrous transgressions of commodified females in the American historical and cultural contexts of the home front and the borderlands. By transforming into monsters, the erotic dancers in the two films above challenge the patriarchal foundations of their culture by subverting their objectification, literally consuming the bodies of male consumers. I further explain how their rebellions reference the frontier history of America, which provided Western horror cinema with tropes of evil “otherness” that blend stereotypes of Native Americans with Gothic fantasies of excess. My readings cite canonical theories from the fields of cultural and literary studies, but also more recent scholarship on the philosophical paradoxes of the eternal zombie condition or the sexually transgressive dimension of vampirism.

In this paper, I analyze how the film *Zombie Strippers* (2008) and the first season of the series *From Dusk Till Dawn* (2014) deploy the Gothic mode, specifically the tropes of zombieism and vampirism, to explore how the figure of the monstrous female challenges those American cultural values that are rooted in foundational patriarchal and frontier fantasies that denigrate “others.” In response, the monstrous, commodified females here presented are shown to transgress the typical notion of “otherness” that is foundational to and developed throughout the horror genre in film and TV. Furthermore, I identify the opposites constituting the Western

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trope of feminized savagery versus the “virtues of male aggressiveness and competition” that recur throughout these two narratives, and thereby allude to those cultural foundations that are derived from the national frontier mythology (Cawelti 87). That is to say, a mythology that refers to the thesis of renowned historian Fredrick Jackson Turner, who identified an “us-versus-them” spirit that is culturally foundational since the advent of the European expansion into occupied North American spaces (139).

In my discussion of *Zombie Strippers* and *From Dusk Till Dawn*, I argue that the prevalent feminization of monstrous violence has the potential to challenge and revitalize the dichotomy that Amy Kaplan, for example, charts. Kaplan notably argues that America’s international conflicts tend to be imagined as the military business of men, unlike the domestic concerns of the nation, which are associated with spaces of feminine interest (16). Such an interpretation matches Edward W. Said’s reading of 19th century French scholarly portrayals of the Middle East as a feminized space that is receptive to Western implementations of administrative, scientific, economic and moral standards, because it is imagined as lacking the same kind of discursive authority seen in the West (219-220). The implication of Kaplan’s and Said’s discussions of the rhetoric of Western imperial endeavors is that it becomes constructed as the interest of the “othered” peoples and those awaiting the “redemptive” arrival of Western men, to remain docile and receptive to the latter’s “civilizing” strategies. This is precisely the attitude that the monstrous female characters of *Zombie Strippers* and *From Dusk Till Dawn* vociferously reject. As a result, throughout this paper, I critique the patriarchal aspect of such colonialist ideologies that these “othered” female monsters are shown to transgress, arguing that such cultural values are the cause of violence in the respective plots of these narratives.

Kieran Murphy traces the beginning of the Haitian zombie to the system of colonial plantation slavery which was resisted through “Vaudaux” dancing rituals of African religious origin that were outlawed due to their subversive potential (xiii). Consequently, the passive corporeality of the zombie continues to embody enforced historical amnesia in the Caribbean context (Murphy xv). At the same time, the figure of the easily disposable zombie has become associated with the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and mass consumerism since its appropriation by Hollywood cinema (Murphy xvi). Analogously, Susan Chaplin observes that the significance of vampirism has shifted towards tragic social isolation since the 1970s (2). In addition, excessive violence rather than blood sacrifices have come to constitute their sustenance since the 1990s, parallel to the decreasing significance of the sacred in Western societies (Chaplin 38).

While both zombies and vampires thus reflect the state of their contemporary societies, David R. Castillo attributes a socio-critical function to monstrosity in general and draws on the etymological relation of the word “monster” to the Latin words “‘monstrare’ (to show)” and “‘monere’ (to warn)” (40). Yet, while historical interspecies creatures indeed visualized the result of transgressing the laws of nature (Castillo 40), Castillo poses the question why vampires and zombies are the most popular monsters in the current moment (39), especially in light of the unappealing carnal abstinence and captive passivity of the original Afro-Caribbean zombies (46). At this point, it is helpful to mention James J. Ward’s reflection on the commercial failures of erotic zombie films such as *Zombie Strippers* (217). In Ward’s interpretation, hunger-driven zombies are incapable of strategic seduction and rather remind global audiences of the inconspicuous terrorist subjects who were stripped of their humanity when they were brutally tortured in the prisons of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay (208). In this cultural context, he argues, any sexual attraction of viewers to the dirty, rotting bodies of zombies would be either inconceivable or testify to a deranged state of mind (Ward 216-217). In contrast to Ward’s focus on the aesthetic quality of zombified strippers, this article prioritizes how they, along with vampiric showgirls, actively deploy their hypersexualized bodies in order to enact revenge against the same patriarchal structures that objectified them in the first place. The cultural texts these figures appear in could further be seen to subversively deploy the highly popular Gothic mode to critique U.S. mainstream society through a postcolonial feminist lens.

Zombie Strippers (2008) is an American film loosely based on Eugène Ionesco’s absurdist play *Rhinoceros* (1959), with a slight difference, as the transformed characters pose an active threat to their environment (Barker 123). The more recent exploration of the trope of monstrous transformation targets the American counterterrorist containment of social issues, unlike Ionesco, whose beasts condensed his critique of fascism and consumerism, particularly its aspects of public conformism on individual levels (Haney 57-58). In *Zombie Strippers*, a zombie-virus is unleashed by the authorities on an unsuspecting population, and in the fictional town of Sartre, Nebraska, the contagion reaches an underground strip club whose dancers contract the virus and, in turn, begin to kill without mercy until a military force must step in to contain the situation. *From Dusk Till Dawn* reinterprets the plot of the cult 1996 horror/comedy/slasher film of the same name, but (importantly) allows the vampires to survive and partially collaborate with the fugitive Gecko brothers, Seth and Richie. Far from yielding themselves merely to demonization or objectification, the monstrous females of these narratives, including the zombie stripper Kat (played by Jenna Jameson) and the pole-dancing

vampire queen Santánico Pandemonium (played by Eiza González), perform their gender in complex ways, at the intersection of Gothic horror and masculine fantasies of violent brutality and female commodification. Inspired by this establishment of fearlessness, impulsiveness, total ruthless efficiency, and a drive beyond “desperation” as requirements of both the ideal soldier and stripper in the film, my studies of the rhetoric of these subversive narratives consider the tropes of zombie-ism and vampirism (or more accurately, “*culebra*-ism,” a reference to a race of demonic semi-reptilian vampires that descend from an Aztec snake deity) as critical to the construction of a horrific frontier between opposed identities (*Zombie Strippers*, “Culebras”). These dichotomous identities are characterized as the following: the acceptable and the “othered,” civilized and monstrous, and, importantly, masculine and feminine.

In its introduction, the film *Zombie Strippers* parodies War on Terror rhetoric with its overt sanctification of American global dominance. Its official website introduces the viewer to a world in which George W. Bush remains president and the nation is embroiled in so many wars that Dr. Chushfeld’s secret laboratory in Sartre, Nebraska must create a virus to reanimate fallen Marines, so that they can be redeployed (Barker 123-124). Here, Gothic fantasy allows the film to voice criticism of contemporary War on Terror culture, which tends to contain social disputes by centering depictions of combat zones on the traumatized subjectivity of American soldiers (Barker 98-99). By employing the figure of the zombie in the film’s sublimation of contemporary social anxieties, *Zombie Strippers* automatically conjures an association with a more familiar imperial history of exploitation: the zombi/e, a product of Haitian folklore, traditionally embodied the indigenous slaves’ nightmare of subjugation beyond death and the fantasy of transgressing bondage in spirit, if not in corporeal life (Lauro and Embry 97-98). Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry attribute ambivalence to the cinematic zombies that “cannibalized” this cultural icon of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), since Hollywood’s interpretation of the monster overwrote the symbolism of eternal labor with that of relentless consumerism driving the creatures to proliferate via the bite instead of depending on the help of voodoo magic as in the original legend (97-99). *Zombie Strippers*, however, ascribes a particular relevance to the zombie condition in the context of gender politics, as Dr. Genet announces that the chemo-virus “stays more pure from woman to woman.” She also describes the chemo-virus’s effects as creating a “fearless, uninhibited [...] take-no-prisoners soldier” with “a raw survival instinct,” words later echoed by Kat in her professional advice to a new colleague. Drawing influence from Ionesco’s absurdist stage play, the virus’s effect of subjugating infected strippers to monstrous drives only partially helps them transgress

commodification and unveils the limits of Jean-Paul Sartre's (their town's namesake) paradigmatic existentialist assumption of individual autonomy (Haney 58–59). Since *Zombie Strippers* and *From Dusk Till Dawn* are American productions, the cultural legacy of the North American frontier as a metonymical battleground for Christian values and patriarchal norms is reconfigured according to the genre conventions of the Western and the horror film to which they relate (Miller and Van Riper xii-xiii).

Numerous recent horror films, as Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper argue, are shown to promote ideological conformity among national audiences when they reimagine foundational frontier conflicts as a timeless opposition between monstrous, “othered” hordes and individualistic citizens defending the status quo (xiii). *From Dusk Till Dawn* accordingly introduces us to Kate, who first appears as a devout Christian and who, when she witnesses the attacks of the *culebra* dancers on the bar guests, for example, turns to the scripted Lord's Prayer (“Pandemonium”). However, at the end of her battle with the monsters and narrow escape from being sacrificed, she agrees to kill her own father, who was bitten by a *culebra*, and transgresses the patriarchal foundations of her faith, stating that God “doesn't live in the pages of some book” but “in each and every one of us” (“The Take”). Her turn away from standardized religious discourse to a holistic conception of divinity that inheres within every human being is reminiscent of Santánico's statement that she is in Richie's soul since she hypnotized him and signifies that Kate's individualist creed was strengthened by her encounter with the repressed Native American *culebras* (“Place of Dead Roads”).

A historical example of the “othering” of non-institutionalized, indigenous spirituality inhered in official attempts to subdue the Native American ritualistic “Ghost Dance,” which appealed to “the spirit host,” dead ancestors to advance “with the new earth” where the past “shall live again” (Mooney 53). Practiced by various tribes since the 1870s, these performances interwove fantastic and historical storytelling by envisioning undead, invulnerable forefathers magically reclaiming colonized territories (Bergon and Papanikolas 20). Because of its subversion of the trope of resurrection, I liken the symbolism of the Ghost Dance to the murderous parody of the lap dance that *Zombie Strippers* stages despite undeniably differing in content and context. Another subversive symbolism lies in the scene where the stripper Lillith rips open the jaw of a customer to devour his tongue (*Zombie Strippers*). This gesture is informed by the same castration anxiety that underlies Western fantasies of vampirism, since it permanently foregrounds the source of their monstrous danger and sexualized appeal: their mouths which are invested with the power of non-heterosexual reproduction and the potential

to overthrow the patriarchal status quo (Foster 495). For instance, Count Dracula's (1897) vampirism compels his female slave Lucy Westenra to defy Victorian ideals of maternity when, instead of reproducing heterosexually, she feeds on children without any metaphysical aspiration beyond hunger (Foster 484). In *From Dusk Till Dawn*, Santánico's monstrous identity as the ancient mother of *culebras* allows the group to be recognized as the "other" of Christian and patriarchal discourses. This is evident, for example, when a transformed dancer first sniffs and then swallows the crucifix of the Gecko brothers' hostage Pastor Jacob Fuller and then strips another survivor nicknamed Sex Machine of the revolver he carries on a belt upon his crotch with nothing but her extended tongue ("Pandemonium").

In one particular scene of *Zombie Strippers*, Lillith is described by the bouncer and Ian Essko as "the dark queen of the underworld" due to her emo-punk style and they advertise a lap dance with her as an exploration of "the essence du Goth." Her association with the Gothic is rooted in typical Gothic connotations of the irrational, the violent, and the spiritually void, or "other" that seek to cross a boundary and infiltrate or impose themselves on supposedly moral and/or sanctified peoples and societies (Kendrick 147). Lillith's Gothic transformation and zombification is preconceived as an ambiguous transformation by this link of her figure with the term "Gothic." James Kendrick traces the etymology of the word to the Scandinavian rivals of medieval Christian Rome, and to the later 18th century Graveyard Poets who, in opposition to Enlightenment materialism, sought to revitalize religious discourses by demonstrating the mortality of all flesh (148-149). Like the zombie's original state of suffering, their Gothic imagery has superficially been appropriated in voyeuristic Hollywood horror cinema (Kendrick 151), where, instead of grief, Lillith's death evokes destructive impulses summoning the "restless [...] energy" of the American frontier spirit (Turner 138). This dynamic stems from the central role of violence in both Western and horror cinema that Miller and Van Riper point out and which also reflects Turner's ideal of Euro-Americans absorbing the survival mechanisms of frontier inhabitants in order to expand their own social order (xiv-xv).

In the film, Lillith "others" the zombies herself when she describes her experience of this condition: "It's like the snow and stars. [...] I remember once lying in the snow under a clear blanket of stars. And there were so many stars. I couldn't comprehend what it was like ... that vast and noble void. But now ... I understand it. I feel I'm a part of it. That infinite nothingness" (*Zombie Strippers*). Here, she identifies with the environment in a manner associable to the Native American cultures that resisted absorption by the "dominant individualism" of the frontier's pioneers, with reference to Turner's depiction (138). Due to their colonial history,

zombies by definition sacrifice their interiority to a monstrous inversion of their abuse for eternity, as Lauro and Embry point out in order to explain the universal relatability of these figures as a metaphor for both the economic exploitation of “others” and the dependency of First World citizens thereon (99-100). By staging the act of human bodies devouring fellow human bodies, which represents “ultimate possessiveness,” the film automatically sets the monstrous female against multiple backdrops of nationally relevant exploitation (Russell 118). Cannibalism, as Lorena Russell explains in her discussions of *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977; remade in 2006) nightmarishly warns that, when relatable middle-class citizens venture beyond the boundaries of privileged urban spaces, they are not immune to the revenge of rural “other” Westerners whose existences were scarred by military histories including, in this case, Cold War nuclear tests (114-115). *Zombie Strippers* voices a similar critique of the impact of counterterrorism and ongoing sexism for the female dancers who are exploited by diverse forces: the government, the scientists, and neo-capitalists like Ian Essko, who conceals the undead strippers’ danger by locking their victims away in the cellar. Finally, masculine desire proves the fourth and most exploitative force and the transformed dancers’ main target in their rebellion, which points to the gendered rhetoric in the cultural construction of American horrific frontiers.

If *Zombie Strippers* imagines the monstrous female as a challenge to the American cultural-imaginary division between homeland and “othered” combat zone, then *From Dusk Till Dawn* envisages the Mexican borderlands as the battlegrounds of communal identity from which the commodified woman launches her attack on the *status quo*. Unlike the 1996 film of the same title, the series allows for a larger contextualization of the erotic dancer Santánico’s monstrosity as the consequence of an ancient Mayan curse (“Pilot”). To the female dancers that she presides over, Santánico embodies an authority that revises the functions of demi-goddess/succubus ascribed to her by the so-called Nine Lords of the Night. In one scene, Santánico sacrifices her reign in a ceremony during which her new “prince,” Richie Gecko, lets the serpent (containing her human blood from her transformation) return it into her again, causing the temple walls to shake and the intruding sunbeams to burn her “girls,” who want to “return [...] to the earth” (“The Take”). Unlike the zombie strippers, Santánico requires Richie to desire her bite and attributes ennobling powers to their existence as *culebras*. Since her transgression of social norms is not tied to her monstrosity (which is rather an aspect of her commodification by indigenous men), but instead to the ideal of an autonomous future, her character’s involvement with the borderlands generates the kind of cosmopolitan critique that

Kaplan praises this place for producing in its blend of European and Native American cultures which resists metropolitan hierarchies (16-17).

This particularity of Latin America, Carlos Fuentes also argues, stems from the fusion of the religions of the Spanish missionaries and the indigenous peoples who, while obligated to adopt the belief in the Virgin Mary, projected traits of their earth goddesses upon her and thus retained aspects of their nature-based faiths (25). Fuentes further suggests that Latin Americans should enlist their inherent cultural diversity in projects of transnational unification to resolve regional conflicts around economic and social inequalities (9-10). Santánico, however, signifies the repressed arising for vengeance, as an immortal Native American demi-goddess who actively resisted being absorbed by the Spanish colonizers' Christian mythology when her temple was discovered by the missionary Carlos Madrigal and she transformed him in exchange for its treasures ("La Conquista"). Although he removed from her the chains of the lords, Carlos' worship of Santánico in effigy at a candle-lit shrine mirrors the patriarchal fantasy of her captors when they cursed her, so that she would eternally receive the human sacrifices she previously rejected for moral reasons ("Self-Contained"; "Pandemonium"). While her performance is loaded with references to the Aztec mother-goddess Coatlicue, when she first appears onstage wearing a feathery crown with her bejeweled bra and panties, she is denigrated to the task of pleasuring her audience and luring in new victims ("Place of Dead Roads"). In an allusion to the goddess's original mythical rape (Fuentes 99), in the episode "Mistress," it is an obsidian knife like the object Coatlicue was impregnated with that must first pass into Richie's hands before he is able to receive visions of her through a bullet-hole in his left hand. Once inside her temple, her act of pouring liquor down her foot, which she perches in his mouth as part of her show, anticipates and inverts his later rebirth as a *culebra* through her consumption of his blood ("Pandemonium").

In *From Dusk Till Dawn*, Santánico renounces mortal humanity for a spiritual dimension: "You'll be more than you ever were. Beyond fire and water, beyond light and dark, beyond dusk and dawn" ("La Conquista"). After reclaiming the words "dusk" and "dawn" from their place in the Titty Twister's slogan ("Open from Dusk till Dawn"), her advertisement of her own *culebra* identity resists her role as a commodified weapon of seduction for the Nine Lords ("Self-Contained"). This transgression of her status as a *culebra* slave of hunger plays upon and inverts the trope of female ravishment that Bataille criticizes in canonical Western erotic narratives for reflecting the repressed rhetoric of ancient rituals of human sacrifice but then condemning the consumed object of desire, the woman's body, as profane rather than according

aspects of holiness to its sexuality (24). With respect to commodifying representations of female sexuality in Western erotic literature, such as those of the Marquis de Sade, Georges Bataille recognizes how women's bodies are the object of masculine fantasies of passion bordering on violence that defile their corporeal integrity, but lack a spiritual context of legitimation (127). Since most of the monsters in *Zombie Strippers* and *From Dusk Till Dawn* are professional showgirls dancing for the erotic pleasure of men, these characters' transgressions of sexual commodification explicate the ambivalent symbolism of being undead and feeding on humans that Lauro and Embry discuss with regard to zombies. They argue that while zombies may possess mystical powers to turn on the group consuming their workforce, they can never stop perpetuating consumption themselves in the form of cannibalism (Lauro and Embry 89-90).

Santánico, for instance, transgresses her past worshippers' static conceptions of mythical mothers by assuming her role as "Mistress of the Macabre" to seduce Richie, but cannot overcome her servitude to male elites without relying on the same mystical powers these had assigned to her when they contained her ("Place of Dead Roads"). Like the British law-makers that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak indicts for criminalizing the Hindu ritual of widow self-immolation under the guise of protecting colonized women, Ian Essko and Carlos, figures of patriarchal oppression, legitimize the transgressive (albeit monstrous) identities of their captive females within their capitalist enterprises (93-97). In Spivak's argument, the consequence for such subaltern women who are predestined for discursive disenfranchisement due to the interplay of their gender, race, and class within colonial hierarchies is that corporeal self-destruction all the more comes to signify an undisputable assertion of individual freedom of choice to them (96). In the horror narratives discussed in this article, the convergence of the feminine and the monstrous in the female characters further underwrites the way that patriarchal societies objectify "others" to shield their owners against the threat of self-effacement which these subaltern women emanate as a form of resistance from within the roles that contain them. Laura Mulvey also attributes a sadistic force to the moment when narrative films direct the male gaze upon a sexualized female evading identification on the grounds of her gender and therefore incite the impulse to root for the relatable male hero to either possess or defeat her (840). Consequently, the zombie and *culebra* dancers' willful deployment of their erotic appeal and defilement of their male victims signifies a Gothic transgression of iconocentrism and of its patriarchal logic, inverting the gendered repression and commodification they typically experience.

For this reason, in *Zombie Strippers*, Sox assumes authority over the erotic signification of her body when she asks Kat to transform her, so that she too may be able to seduce her audience. “Take me. I want it. I want it now. I love you”, she states, to which Kat remarks that “love is dead,” before biting her neck (*Zombie Strippers*). Kat is thus elevated from her role as an objectified dancer: as a zombie, her intellectualism is demonstrated, particularly when she is shown reading the collected works of Nietzsche; she is also presented as a powerful and threatening physical presence to the patriarchy, as she devours organs signifying male domination, such as her customers’ penises and hands (“Making of”). In so doing, she reduces the male body from its self-privileged position to the simple use value of meat, just like the cannibalistic outlaws that Russell discusses do with unsuspecting travelers, thus metonymically devaluing their systemic oppression to the status of mere resources for their survival (118).

Thus, the zombified Kat subverts the archetype of the mindless, passive zombie who lacks the complexity that is required of protagonists of zombie fiction, according to June Pulliam (724). In Pulliam’s definition, over time, zombies have represented the human fear of inevitable death and bodily deterioration (724), the incapacity of white men to control white women’s sexuality (727), and the passively exploitable laborer (743) – but were always characterized by a lack of individual thinking and free will. Kat’s zombified condition, resembling Santánico’s vampiric identity, also challenges David Castillo’s and William Egginton’s temporal distinction between the vampire’s responses to the repressive Romantic era characterized by colonialism and early capitalism, on the one hand, and the zombie’s enactment of the loss of identity and destructive endless production in the wake of current global capitalism, on the other (Castillo and Egginton n. pag.). Instead of warning against the in-built threats to their society through their metaphorical monstrosity, these characters’ nihilism with regard to their terrifying bodies represents a posture of resistance against the foundational American ideology.

In *Zombie Strippers*, this subversion of the patriarchy negates Kat’s position as an object of desire, as she begins to dance voluntarily even outside the opening hours of Rhino’s, but Santánico’s performances of sexuality no less coalesce with her monstrous cravings in *From Dusk Till Dawn*. When she appears to Richie as a vision on a refrigerator door, whispering that she wants to drink him, she debases him in an allusion to her vampirism that shifts his self-image from subject to object of corporeal desire (“Pilot”). Here, Santánico fits Mulvey’s description of how showgirl characters are objectified in detective films where their first appearances are scripted outside the diegesis of the story and as a threat to the hero’s rationality, but then become the mystery that he must solve by uncovering their secrets (840). Santánico,

however, revises this narrative pattern by utilizing seduction to transform Richie into her slave, who, in an absurd logic, desires catering to her for eternity because, rather than the other way around, he has been conquered by her (an “other” of the frontier).

Appearing on the Western frontier in the original *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996; dir. Robert Rodriguez), vampirism, as Van Riper argues, serves as a metaphor for an “other” corporeality that challenges conservative sexual mores by defying the traditionally patriarchal institution of marriage and threatening to contaminate heightened numbers of individuals by means of the unnatural bite (101). In the American cultural context, this association of liberal expressions of sensuality with demonic evil stems from the nation’s colonial past rife with Puritan women who claimed to have been held captive by Native American tribes and recounted their experiences as tests to their faith, which, according to Richard Slotkin, helped to frame the Puritans’ expansion into the New World as a divinely ordained “redemptive” mission (94-95). Also allowing associations with linguistic deviance, the undead strippers leer at the living, reject their claim to subjectivity and invert desires as they only repeat the words “flesh” and “meat” out of two men’s statements about being “the god of love in the flesh” and being thrilled to “meet” them (*Zombie Strippers*). These words are uttered before the men are eaten by the women during a parody of a lap dance which equally reverses the traditional gendered hierarchies of subject and object of sexual desire.

Unlike the men in the film, who are killed during lap dances which are supposed to flatter them by playing on their simultaneous separateness from and proximity to sexualized females, the strippers can only be destroyed via injuries to their heads, which symbolize the ego-driven identities they have lost. This method of exterminating the undead presents a visual rhetoric equating “otherness” with irrational corporeality (Fellner 10). This also partially pertains to clichés of Latina femininity, as Astrid M. Fellner identifies a dichotomy between La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche (the Aztec translator and mistress of Hernán Cortés) that continues to relate the identity performances of women from the borderlands to their colonial history (13). *From Dusk Till Dawn*, unlike *Zombie Strippers*, constructs *culebras* that can be killed by driving a stake through their hearts in the manner of classical vampires, which is a misogynistic gesture signifying the success of patriarchy (symbolized by the phallic stake) over the irrational within every individual. At the same time, there is a *culebra* dancer who (during the bar fight following Santánico’s transformation and involvement into the Gecko brothers’ confrontation with Ranger Gonzalez) is sawed in half, literalizing her kind’s ambivalent, dual identity as part of the New World and the Old.

In *Zombie Strippers*, the destruction of the horrific “others” affirms the American cultural importance of the need to defend the community successfully, and at all costs, and is visually expressed during Marine Kwan’s fight with the zombies Lillith and Sox. They strip her of her camouflage jacket to reveal her feminine figure in a tight tank top and her long hair streaming down her shoulders until she appears as sexualized as they are, but she finally drives knives through their heads in an enactment of the phallic symbolism inherent in classic executions of vampires with a stake (Cawelti 92). Singular female conversions to brutality, as Cawelti points out, sanction the frontier heroes’ preemptive violence as compatible with femininely connoted pacifist values (87-88), while showcasing moral flexibility which interestingly, Turner praises in the American pioneers, as these worked “for good and evil” before resisting subjugation at the hands of their environment (138). In contrast, the strippers’ supervisor, Madam Blavatski, whose ostensible origins in Eastern Europe, the “old world,” made it impossible for her to realize her dreams of fame, suggests “peace talks” with the transformed dancers which “others” her character due to her incapacity to recognize the extent of their deviance (*Zombie Strippers*). It is no coincidence that in *From Dusk Till Dawn*, like in *Zombie Strippers*, it is an immigrant character who is directly deceived by the monsters: Scott, Kate’s adoptive brother from China who is separated from the group of survivors in the Titty Twister is tricked by Carlos, who transforms him and lies that he will return him to his family if he eavesdrops on Santánico and Richie to find out which man she prefers (“Boxman”). Scott, like Madam Blavatski, is portrayed as lacking the requisite American affiliation to, or belief in the foundational frontier ideology; this contributes to their victimhood.

Indeed, the character of Madame Blavatski shares her name with the polarizing spiritualist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, who was born in the Russian Empire and studied Eastern religions before founding the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875 (Keller and Sharandak 7-8). Her legacy inspired Western and postcolonial thinkers alike to pursue spiritual fulfillment and a universal ethic beyond Christian dogma (Keller and Sharandak 14-15). Considering that the life and work of the historical Madame Blavatsky represented a crossroads between Eastern and Western traditions, the inclusion of her name in *Zombie Strippers* could invoke a frontier where different cultures collided.

From Dusk Till Dawn’s Ranger Gonzalez, however, does succeed in surviving Santánico’s and Carlos’ attacks thanks to his genetic legacy as a descendent of a mythical Aztec line of *culebra* fighters. As revealed by Carlos, Ranger Gonzalez is immune to the *culebra* venom that would otherwise transform him and once he assumes his role as *rinche* (as the

culebras derogatorily nickname him), he aesthetically inverts and exposes their objectifications of him as their victim when he uses one monster as a body shield and then, advancing from his confinement holding another's severed head, is able to escape Carlos' torture and send the latter's trafficked women into flight ("Place of Dead Roads"). In order to survive, Ranger Gonzalez deploys violent tactics that would be considered genocidal and amoral if he did not use them on monsters. Analogously, Kaplan points out that the gendered discourse of American imperialism has always framed the suffering of "others" outside national borders as a military task instead of a domestic situation to be solved by feminine care (16).

In line with Cawelti, Van Riper, Russell, and others, I have argued throughout this article that *Zombie Strippers* and *From Dusk Till Dawn* catapult the ideology of the American mythical frontier into the present day through Gothic fantasies of monstrous transgressions of (neo-)colonial structures, whether patriarchal or capitalist. On the one hand, *Zombie Strippers'* play on names references the historical dispute that ensued after Jean-Paul Sartre accused Albert Camus of forsaking collective revolution by rejecting communism. On the other hand, characters are depicted as turning to zombie-ism as well as *culebra*-ism collectively, which could represent the social change desired by both Sartre and Camus. In *Zombie Strippers*, it is notable that it is Major Camus who is enlisted to save the town of Sartre, in sly reference to the philosophical dispute/debate that shaped the future of existentialism. Camus was branded an apolitical moralist by Sartre, who, being a communist, rejected pursuits of "eternal values" in favor of political revolts which the former, in turn, considered to be absurd and futile in their claims to superior justice (Ungar 975-976). Given that the plot ends with Camus abandoning Sartre after Dr. Chushfeld confesses to having conspired with Ian Essko to disseminate zombie-ism, the soldiers can be interpreted as defending a timeless, morality-observant position that privileges individual interiority, thus echoing the frontier individualism by virtue of the film's ties to the genres of Western and horror cinema (Ungar 975).

Zombie Strippers, with its inherent criticism of characters who are either morally careless about, or ideologically estranged from American foundational values, also locates Ian Essko on the uncivilized side of the frontier. Although his commodification of the women is not connoted as monstrous, his survival plan to "shoot everything that moves" distinguishes him from the film's heroic incorporation of Western values, Sassy Sue, who frames it as a mercy to put the transformed strippers' supervisor "out of her misery" (*Zombie Strippers*). Additionally, Ian Essko's name is a phonetic spelling of Ionesco that indicates a similarity in these two men's attempt to observe the transformations of their surroundings into subhuman monstrosity from

a rational position which is impossible to attain. This is evidenced by Ian Essko's inability to efficiently resist the "others" like Sassy Sue does precisely because she recognizes traces of humanity in the zombie. Her last elimination of a zombie further establishes her as a defender of mythical frontier ideology because her victim, the turned Madam Blavatski, is an immigrant who was bitten after a futile appeal to an undead stripper and in the classic pose of a vampire's victim who was conquered by monstrous "otherness." Ultimately, as the plots of *Zombie Strippers* and the first season of *From Dusk Till Dawn* illustrate in their endings, where no human survivors are able to eradicate the source of monstrosity, there is no possibility of becoming a zombie or a vampire and avenging objectification without becoming possessed by the need for corporeal consumption.

Meanwhile, the monstrous conditions of zombie-ism and *culebra*-ism mask larger evil conspiracies that elites attempt to repress. In *Zombie Strippers*, the American government exploits the military by first commissioning the zombie virus and then deploying soldiers to eliminate the infected. In *From Dusk Till Dawn*, the Nine Lords imprison Santánico with a curse and force her to forever dance to lure in human prey. Accordingly, she frames her own scheme to reclaim independence as an equalizing social revolution for all *culebras* in the following monologue: "Is this really where we belong? It's true, we put on a good show and we have a hell of a time, too. But is this really what we deserve? To crawl at the feet of our masters? We are so much more than slaves. We're brothers and sisters. We share the same struggle. And the truth is they are weak. And we're strong. Showtime" ("Pandemonium").

While bathing in blood and styling herself for her show with Carlos' assistance, she is first heard delivering this rallying speech off-screen and then repeats it during their banquet for their superiors who refuse to resist the *culebra* hierarchy ("Pandemonium"). Nevertheless, she never explicitly renounces the condition of being a *culebra* itself nor does she express any disdain for her role as a showgirl, because (like the zombie strippers who have no choice but to dance until their bodies decompose and the Haitian slaves who keep on laboring after their spiritual deaths) Santánico cannot terminate her servitude without remaining objectified. Her sexuality is the key to her freedom, as she lures in the Gecko brothers to return her human blood to her, blood which she must re-ingest in order to end her dominion over the *culebra* dancers encaged at the Titty Twister by the Nine Lords ("Boxman"). Despite her rejection of leadership, the series, like *Zombie Strippers*, ends with a threatening image for America when Santánico and Richie, in a shaded Porsche, follow a sign pointing them back to the border and her gloved

hand clasps his to aesthetically refer to her past as a commodified seductress whose monstrosity helped her escape direct patriarchal containment (“The Take”).

Toward the end of *Zombie Strippers*, the Z-Squad (enlisted to save Sartre from the zombies) abandon their mission after Dr. Chushfeld confesses his conspiracy with the transformed Ian Essko to disseminate the zombie virus as a means of securing social cohesion amid political instabilities. Therefore, both these men betrayed their national origins in the frontier culture that signified conquering the “wilderness” of the North American continent with the tools of its own “other” inhabitants rather than exploiting them as if they were beasts, although this is how the transformed individuals self-represent in Ionesco’s original *Rhinoceros*. By continuing repression beyond the point of the zombies’ humanity, Dr. Chushfeld and Ian Essko facilitate the ultimate triumph of the zombie condition, which, ironically, signifies a possibility for the strippers to resist sexism and challenge the patriarchy that had so obviously contributed to their “othered” state of being in the first place. By the end of *Zombie Strippers*, the previously devout Jessy (similarly to Kate in *From Dusk Till Dawn*) embraces her own subjectivity, making a logical decision to resist total absorption into the “othered,” un-American wilderness of her stripper colleagues’ monstrous condition. Sassy Sue, on the other hand, had actively agreed to work with Ian Essko in eliminating the zombies despite his corrupt morals, thus proving that her neutrality distinguishes her from the women who have been terminally “mastered” by the wilderness upon which their culture was built (Turner 137). She represents the feminine ideal that Cawelti cites as a moral sanctification for Western aggressiveness when it is practiced by virtuous women acting no differently than their male counterparts once the evil “others” of the mythical frontier threaten their identity (87-88). Here, as with regard to Major Camus’ decision to abandon Sartre, an individual’s ability to flexibly choose which aspects of their community’s identity performance they identify with is promoted as an important resource for survival in *Zombie Strippers*, despite its possibly opposite effects.

As demonstrated throughout this paper, both *Zombie Strippers* and *From Dusk Till Dawn* feature female characters whose commodification occurs on at least three interconnected levels. On the first level, they dance erotically in clubs that are run by capitalist men for male-dominated audiences. Secondly, their monstrosity is of symbolic value to contemporary structures of knowledge production (either scientific or religious). Finally, their subversion of objection through their cannibalistic behaviors is dependent on the gendered structures of exploitation they are trapped in, since they can never approach potential male victims on equal terms. A reason why these figures’ uprising against patriarchal oppression is still relevant

(although it results in no viable alternative system of communal organization) is implied in Santánico's rebuttal of Seth's skepticism over why he should help a monster escape the Nine Lords. She observes that this professional bank robber does not love the money, but the very act of stealing it as a personal "score" ("The Take"). Like the flesh-eating and blood-drinking dancers, she notes that, as a criminal bank-robber, he is not addicted to the money, but to the sense of power it gives him. Thus he, like the rebellious, monstrous females, repeats an existential logic that Camus praises for bestowing meaning to human existences beyond metaphysical contexts and he represents a perversion of Turner's idealization of the American pioneer spirit that sought to push the frontier further west. To conclude, I have shown that on the grounds of this ontological "otherness" of zombies and *culebras*, and despite certain details constituting their deviance, cultural productions like *Zombie Strippers* and *From Dusk Till Dawn* legitimize fantasies of the destruction of transgressive identities which are codified as feminine, inferior, and demanding of violent, militarized intervention to personify the enduring legacy of colonial ideologies for American audiences.

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