Maude Lapierre

Fanged Nationalisms
Vampires and Contamination in Suzette Mayr's *Venous Hum*

In a review of Suzette Mayr's *Venous Hum*, Mridula Chakraborty laments that the Alberta novel, which satirizes a number of assumptions concerning racial, sexual, regional, and national identities, is ruined by Mayr's "unexpected, and completely unnecessary, horror pin" (36). While *Venous Hum* operates as a high school reunion novel that revisits the impact of homophobia and racism on the protagonist, Lai Fun, Mayr's novel also deploys vampires and cannibals. Despite Chakraborty's mention that the intervention of these monstrous figures prevents the full development of the satire, I argue that Mayr's use of magic realism is central to the novel because it intensifies her thorough critique of Canadian nationalism. It is true that vampires and cannibals usually intervene as gothic or horror literary figures, but I read their presence in *Venous Hum* as magic realist because they are not terrifying. As Christopher Warnes advances, magic realist narratives sometimes resemble works of horror fiction when the latter make "coherent use of codes of the natural and the supernatural" (2). Yet, this juxtaposition is a "source of anxiety" in horror fiction, while magic realism "normalizes the supernatural" (3, 4). Mayr's use of vampires and cannibals in *Venous Hum* corresponds to this definition, since for her, magic realism is "just a further extension of the real" (*Why* 168). The novel features two vampires: Lai Fun's racist and homophobic teacher, Mrs. Blake, and Lai Fun's mother, Louve. According to Andrea Beverley, these characters are vampires "for very different reasons" (275). They represent two seemingly competing forms of nationalist fervour. On the one hand, Louve and her husband Fritz-Peter are enthusiastic supporters of the government's multiculturalism policy

(1971), because it validates their status as Canadian, rather than immigrant, subjects. Mrs. Blake, on the other hand, is threatened by the introduction of multiculturalism and bilingualism, because the presence of non-white, non-British subjects destabilizes her conception of Canada as a homogenous nation. While the text appears to favour Louve and Fritz-Peter's vision of Canada as a multicultural utopia, the connection *Venous Hum* draws between their vision and that of Mrs. Blake hints that Mayr takes a critical stance toward national narratives because they ultimately serve to manage and normalize identities. The similarities Mayr draws between Mrs. Blake and Lai Fun's parents can be detected in the effects of the coercively imposed vision of Canada on Lai Fun. But it is the fact that Mayr turns both Mrs. Blake and Louve into vampires that best demonstrates how both women are the targets of Mayr's destabilizing critique of any attempt to establish an all-encompassing national narrative. The presence of vampires and cannibals in *Venous Hum* acts as a strategy of literary contamination, where the novel's explicit condemnation of Mrs. Blake as a vampire contaminates the metaphorical implications of Louve's vampirism. For that reason, the critiques which explicitly apply to Mrs. Blake can be extended to Louve's seemingly benign nationalism. Literary contamination in *Venous Hum* allows the novel to function as a thorough critique, since neither Mrs. Blake's nor Louve's version of Canada can establish itself as a master narrative of Canadian identity.

I read the inclusion of vampires and cannibals in *Venous Hum* as a strategy of literary contamination because such figures are connected to racial anxieties that have long influenced the literary representations of racially mixed characters. Historically, as Robert Young notes, the word "contamination" was used to describe early colonial anxieties towards children of "mixed" unions, or hybrid subjects, whose existence was viewed as contaminating both race and culture (54). This biological interpretation of the hybrid as a form of pollution has led to the literary representations of "mixed" offspring as suspicious, threatening, or tragic. George Elliott Clarke mentions that "the catalogue of treacherous Creoles . . . is so long as to be almost convincing" (213).[1] Another persistent literary convention was that of the "tragic mulatto," which betrayed a general discomfort towards people of "mixed heritage" because their ability to transcend categorization entailed that they could neither belong to white nor black communities (212). As Mayr has noted, these characters were often eliminated from the text because they could not be fixed; they were inevitably "doomed" by their blackness

("Vampires" 332). The concern over purity that generated the notion of contamination is a manifestation of biological anxiety that is often revealed in the literary representation of "mixed" characters. It is a tradition against which Mayr writes and which she challenges in *Venous Hum*.

Contamination has also been resignified positively in Canadian literature. Lola Lemire Tostevin reconfigured it as an empowering literary device in order to explain her bilingual poem *'sophie*. For her, contamination suggests that "differences have been brought together so they make contact" and prevent the solidification of an illusionary sense of authenticity (13). Diana Brydon draws on Tostevin's argument in her article "The White Inuit Speaks" in order to emphasize what Canadians might share with colonized peoples (97). She specifically challenges Linda Hutcheon's assertions that there has been no creolization in Canada and that only Indigenous writers speak from a "true" postcolonial perspective (Hutcheon 76, 78). Brydon is right to point to Tostevin and the Métis as examples of creolization (98), but her argument that Hutcheon's article constitutes a "cult of authenticity" (98) from which First Nations have nothing to gain (99) is misguided. For Brydon, white writers who incorporate Indigenous spirituality in their works are producing a creole text (99). However, the imbalances of power between Indigenous peoples and Euro-Canadians entail that these texts often contribute to ongoing oppression, such as stereotypical and homogenizing representation, and appropriation of voice, instead of instigating dialogue. In the context of *Venous Hum*, unequal relations of power are crucial to the operations of contamination, as it is those with the power to impose their interpretation of Canada on others who see their visions contaminated. For these reasons, contamination should not be perceived as a tool through which *others* can be understood. Instead, contamination functions as a device which draws connections between ideas that appear to be in stark opposition to each other. The creation of this connection subsequently subverts exclusionary visions characterized by the attempt to coercively assert a single narrative of identity.

In *Venous Hum*, literary contamination is most evident in Mayr's use of vampires and cannibals because the novel draws on the literary and colonial histories attached to these figures to articulate its critique of the competing versions Louve and Mrs. Blake hold of Canada. Vampires, for instance, have long been employed in literature to convey fears of contamination. Critics of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* have argued that the text betrays these fears through its anti-Semitic and homophobic sentiments (Halberstam 337; Craft 111).[2] These interpretations point to the threatening and contaminating role of

vampires whose acts of blood-sucking challenge norms and result in undesirable mixings. According to Christopher Craft, Dracula is "a border being who abrogates demarcations" (117), and while this skill is clearly a threat in Stoker's novel, it is one which Mayr seems to value in *Venous Hum*.[3] For Judith Halberstam, gothic fiction does not merely demonize the other, but simultaneously reveals "the mechanisms of monster production" through its generic instability (349). In other words, the presence of monsters does not generate a stable category of monstrous otherness, but rather demonstrates the extent to which monsters are created with a certain function in mind. The cannibal exemplifies this monster production. Indeed, William Arens' "Rethinking Anthropophagy" triggered a spirited debate in anthropology because it disputes the idea that cannibalism was ever practiced (41-45).[4] Instead of examining cannibalism as a social practice, some studies now look at the accusation as an attempt to differentiate civilized Europe from "uncivilized" peoples as Maggie Kilgour advances (239). Like the vampire, the cannibal blurs the distinction between the eater and the eaten through incorporation (Kilgour 240), but Diana Fuss warns that the two practices should not be conflated. According to her, both monsters incorporate alterity, but the vampire reproduces itself through this act of assimilation, since vampirism is "both other and self-producing" (730). In other words, vampirism is an act of contamination, since what makes Dracula terrifying is that, as Gerry Turcotte notes, "we" will become like "him" (77). Examining the vampires and cannibals in *Venous Hum* then requires paying attention not only to what they eat and why, but also to what is produced through the act of incorporation.

In *Venous Hum*, the vampiric and cannibal presence is connected to the competing forms of nationalism that emerge following the introduction of the multiculturalism policy in 1971. This policy, enacted as the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988, proposes that while Canada has two official languages, "it recognizes the importance of preserving and enhancing the multicultural heritage of Canadians" (*Multiculturalism Act*). Referred to as "multiculturalism within a bilingual framework," official multiculturalism emerged out of the Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission. Official multiculturalism seeks to encourage Canadians of all ethnic backgrounds to maintain their cultural heritage, while increasing their participation within the Canadian state through the acquisition of one of Canada's official languages (*Multiculturalism Act* 3c, 3i). For Sunera Thobani, the policy enabled a reconfiguration of Canada from a settler colony into a liberal-democratic society (144). Similarly, Will Kymlicka notes that the adoption

of multiculturalism entails that "Canada will never again be viewed as a 'white' and 'British' country" (57). Multiculturalism can then be interpreted as a policy with radical intentions, since it requires a re-imagination of the nation. *Venous Hum* opens by stating that when this policy was adopted, "Trudeau sported a long, flowing haircut. Canada's hair has been disheveled ever since" (11). This comment encapsulates both the enthusiasm and the anxiety that accompanied this new conceptualization of the Canadian national identity, as the adoption of multiculturalism elicited a strong polarization of viewpoints. Both Arun Mukherjee and Thobani argue that people from many diasporic communities found the policy empowering and responded positively to it (Mukherjee 69; Thobani 144). This attitude is encapsulated in the message of welcome *Venous Hum* emphasizes, where the text understands multiculturalism as signifying that "those who never felt comfortable suddenly were *home*" (11). Yet, multiculturalism has also faced numerous critiques. Perhaps most famously, in his controversial book *Selling Illusions*, Neil Bissoondath writes that multiculturalism goes too far in its reconceptualization of the nation (71). Conversely, critics such as Smaro Kamboureli and Thobani disagree that multiculturalism has radically altered the fabric of the Canadian nation, especially since "multiculturalism within a bilingual framework" reasserts the dominance of French and English cultures, and therefore maintains the status quo (Thobani 145; Kamboureli 98).[5] This debate is relevant to *Venous Hum*'s representation of the impact of multiculturalism on the Canadian nation because the novel draws connections between the policy's opponents and its enthusiastic supporters. Although these two positions appear diametrically opposed, their views need to be critically examined because, as numerous critics point out, multiculturalism did not have the "dishevelling" impact they imagined.

Supporters and opponents of multiculturalism are indeed similar in that they share a belief that Canada and the Canadian identity were transformed following the adoption of official multiculturalism. In *Selling Illusions*, Bissoondath criticizes multiculturalism because he believes that it has eroded any sense of "centre" to Canadian identity (71), and that Canada, once a "homogeneous" country, is now fragmented and segregated (25). Yet, as Kymlicka observes, empirical evidence suggests that immigrants now integrate "more quickly and effectively today than they did before the adoption of the multiculturalism policy" (8). Kymlicka's statement troubles the assumption that multiculturalism has rendered Canada more heterogeneous, as it implies that the nation is now more cohesive. Those who

view multiculturalism as empowering do so because they interpret the policy as proof that Canada "was on a cusp of change" (Mukherjee 69). Kamboureli contradicts this argument, as she maintains that multiculturalism accepts differences only to manage them more effectively (82). In other words, multiculturalism does not modify Canada, but rather contains differences within a manageable framework: for instance, Kamboureli notes that the Ministry of Multiculturalism manages differences by only encouraging projects rooted in "folklore" (106). Difference is hence managed because it is rendered static. In addition, Kamboureli and Thobani argue that multiculturalism does not amount to a policy of anti-racism (Kamboureli 103; Thobani 162). The *Multiculturalism Act* does acknowledge the existence of racial discrimination, as it states that the minister is meant to "assist ethno-cultural minority communities to conduct activities with a view of overcoming any discriminatory barrier," such as racism (5g). Yet, in addressing the role of racism, this clause suggests that it is those who suffer from discrimination who must work with the government to overcome this barrier, and not racist Canadians who must abandon their discriminatory behaviour. The idea that multiculturalism radically altered Canada can therefore be questioned, as the wording of the act does not destabilize prior attitudes. Mayr's novel participates in this debate by presenting both staunch opponents and enthusiastic supporters of multiculturalism, yet insisting that both sets of characters use their interpretation of it in order to manage identities. In *Venous Hum*, multiculturalism is inextricably bound to nationalism, as it shapes the different manner in which Louve and Mrs. Blake understand who belongs within the nation. While official multiculturalism seems opposed to an imagining of the Canadian nation as homogenous, in this novel, both these nationalist visions ultimately prove coercive. In that way, Mayr generates a thoroughly destabilizing critique of nationalism, as neither Louve's nor Mrs. Blake's interpretation of Canada is allowed to occupy a privileged position in the text.

In its representation of Mrs. Blake's and Louve's understanding of Canada, *Venous Hum* explores how multiculturalism is mistakenly constructed as having reconfigured Canada. For Mrs. Blake, the introduction of multiculturalism threatens her sense of centre because she constructs Canada as a homogenous, that is, white and English-speaking, nation. As a racist, classist, and homophobic elementary and high school teacher, Mrs. Blake's actions towards some of her students emphasize her desire to control and contain identities within what she considers to be the norm. Beverley

argues that the character functions as a parody of racist ignorance (247) because she forces Lai Fun to draw herself with a black crayon (99) and requests that Lloyd, an Indigenous student, demonstrate to his classmates how feathers should be worn (98). However, these requests signal what some critics see as the consequence of multicultural policies, which do not generate anti-racism, but require the performance of an "authentic Other" deprived of substance (Kamboureli 106). By forcing Lai Fun to draw herself with a black crayon, Mrs. Blake shows that she perceives Lai Fun as "black,"[6] even though Lai Fun's own sense of identity is more fluid since her father's "skin is pink and white" (101). Similarly, she assumes that Lloyd knows how to wear feathers because of his ethnicity, and thereby requests that he perform her understanding of his heritage for the class. Mayr has her character manage the students' identity in a way that conforms to societal expectations, which can only see Lai Fun as black, and Lloyd as a homogenized representative of Canada's Indigenous population. This desire to control identity expression points to her fear, similar to Bissoondath's concern in *Selling Illusions*, that official multiculturalism threatens Canadian identity (71). For Mrs. Blake, multiculturalism does not reflect the changing nature of the Canadian population, but is "shoved down honest, Canadian throats" (95), a statement which underlines the threat official multiculturalism represents for her.

This argument is however contested in the novel, since the enthusiastic response to multiculturalism by Louve and Fritz-Peter demonstrates the willingness of some people conceptualized as Other to be incorporated within the nation. For Lai Fun's parents, multiculturalism validates their "Canadianness." As Beverley mentions, Lai Fun's parents do not fall under the category of diasporic subjects (242): their origin is assumed to be elsewhere, but its precise location is never detailed. They identify solely as Canadians, as being from "here," or from Ottawa (89), thereby defusing claims that their roots lie outside the nation. The repeated assertion that they are, first and foremost, Canadians (89, 93, 106, 107, 176) points to their idealist interpretation of multiculturalism even as it challenges those who refuse to view immigrants as "Canadian." In other words, Louve and Fritz-Peter do not wish to erode, or even alter, the Canadian identity, as they operate within the logic of Canadian identity formation. They send Lai Fun to French immersion school because "they do not want Lai Fun to become . . . the status quo" (89), but their idealized dream for a "special" (89) child "of all Canada" (93) merely corresponds to the new, state-sponsored status

quo, which defines Canada as multicultural and bilingual. Their relocation to Alberta and their decision to become vegetarians are also linked to this desire to normalize their relationship with the nation, to "live normal, boring suburban lives forever" (179). For Beverley, Lai Fun's parents have wilfully assimilated (280), a decision that is empowering for *them*. Louve and Fritz-Peter's endorsement of multiculturalism then entails that *Venous Hum* does not present multiculturalism as having altered and radicalized the fabric of the country. In fact, Louve and Fritz-Peter's assimilation challenges the automatic assumption that multicultural subjects necessarily wish to preserve their heritage.

The novel does not, however, deploy Louve and Fritz-Peter to celebrate multiculturalism. Instead, *Venous Hum* deepens its critique of the national narratives it contains by emphasizing the coercive potential of both Mrs. Blake and Lai Fun's parents' versions of Canada. Mrs. Blake's imagined Canada is coercive because it can be associated with institutional racism. Her behaviour in the classroom demonstrates that she is not solely concerned with fostering her students' learning skills, since

> she is the kind of teacher who notices the cut and the cost of her students' clothes. Who is a judge's kid, who has a single mother who works at a discount clothing store. Which kid has salon-cut hair, which is ruined by a hare-lip, bulgy eyes. What colour the kid's skin is. What the kid's name is: Hadleys fare better than Lai Funs, and Johns excel over Ozzies. (104)

This passage describes the systemic discriminatory practices under which Mrs. Blake operates as she categorizes her students through visual markers that prescribe how she will treat them. Mrs. Blake also claims a permanent status within the education system when she jokes that she has "been teaching at this school since before the school board opened it" (100). She further boasts that despite her bigotry, she cannot be fired because "I've been teaching here forever. I'm going to keep on teaching forever" (211). She is unavoidable and omnipresent, as she moves from being Lai Fun's elementary school teacher to being her high school teacher, and in the process controls most extracurricular activities (110). Mrs. Blake is "everywhere," "always watching them," and even returns from the dead (110, 105). As in Mayr's novel *Moon Honey*, *Venous Hum* constructs racism as a systemic issue rather than as simply a personal matter, and uses Mrs. Blake's permanent institutional status to that effect.[7] Though she might fear that increased immigration threatens her Canadian identity, Mrs. Blake's institutional status demonstrates the extent to which the dominant interests she champions

cannot be so easily destabilized. Because the Multiculturalism Act states that its goal is to increase participation in the nation (3c, 5d), it is not constructed as challenging the nation but as expanding it. For Thobani, this clause discredits the role of institutional racism because it implies that diasporic Canadians need to suppress their differences in order to integrate (156). In *Venous Hum*, Mrs. Blake functions in a similar fashion: she claims that her acts of discrimination against Lai Fun "prepare her for the real world" (104), because they teach Lai Fun when to express, and when to repress, her differences. Although Mrs. Blake does not embrace the argument for multiculturalism, her behaviour and prejudices—while not directly associated with this policy—continue to operate as she manages Lai Fun's identity within a Canadian framework. Mrs. Blake's nationalism then proves dangerous, because it is inextricable from racism. Multiculturalism cannot destabilize her construction of Canada as homogenous or the institutional racism she enacts on her students.

In contrast, although the nationalism of Louve and Fritz-Peter appears benign, its coercive potential is implicitly criticized once they impose their bilingual and multicultural vision on their daughter. For Beverley, Lai Fun constitutes a "test-case" for Trudeau's multicultural and bilingual Canada (239): her parents support bilingual education "because the Canada they want, the daughter they want, is special and bilingual" (89). Yet, Lai Fun is more than a test-case, since she is often equated with Canada, particularly when she is portrayed as her parents' "glorious Canadian Proclamation" (93). Louve and Fritz-Peter always affiliate Lai Fun with the national rather than with the regional. They state that "even though Lai Fun was born in Western Canada, she will be a child of all Canada, of leaf-bright autumns and spring coastal rains and Great Lake boating and Newfoundland ice storms" (93). Through the characters of Louve and Fritz-Peter, Mayr projects one version of a national vision, where Canada is defined as multicultural and bilingual. However, Lai Fun ultimately resists her parents' attempt to make her embody their version of Canada. Lai Fun's education was supposed to prevent her from becoming "one of *them*" (89), a phrasing that, for Louve, describes a unilingual and monocultural subject such as Mrs. Blake. However, Louve is forced to recognize that her now teen-aged daughter has become "*one of them*" (130). This repetition stresses that Louve understands her vision of Canada as being in direct opposition to the one Mrs. Blake espouses. Yet, because her teacher and her parents continuously seek to manage her identity, Lai Fun responds by attempting to subsume her differences. Instead

of fostering the development of an empowered bilingual/multicultural identity, the combination of Louve and Mrs. Blake's competing nationalisms results in a desire for sameness, which Lai Fun expresses in her longing "to be like other people" (128).

Lai Fun's need to subsume what makes her different is most explicitly enacted on her name. In elementary school, Mrs. Blake transforms the name "Lai Fun" into "Lou Anne" (93) because she believes that this "black girl with a Chinese name" (94) should have a "Canadian name" (93).[8] Later, a teenaged Lai Fun demonstrates that she has internalized Mrs. Blake's views: "I'm going to change my name! . . . A name people think is normal. Like Faith or Patience. Everyone thinks I'm some sort of fucked up Chinese woman!" (129). She even goes so far as to ask her friend Daisy to call her "Jane" (149-50). The name Lai Fun, given to her because it is her father's favourite type of noodles (129), also illustrates the problematic aspects of Louve and Fritz-Peter's nationalism. It reduces Lai Fun to an "ethnic" food item, and functions as a non-threatening marker of her "diversity." While Lai Fun becomes embarrassed by her request to be called "Jane" (149-50), the fact remains that her upbringing led her to wish for a "normal," anglicised name. Similarly, Lai Fun withdraws from the choir in the school production of *The Mikado* "because it would be fucking unbelievable for a brown girl to dress up like she's Japanese" (115). In *Venous Hum*, the production of *The Mikado* certainly emphasizes the role of racism at Lai Fun's school (Beverley 254), not only through Lai Fun's reaction, but also because "no one has the guts to tell Lloyd that it's a little bit weird that a Native kid is pretending to be Japanese" (Mayr, *VH* 119). While Lai Fun's decision to withdraw from the play seems like an act of resistance, it is not based on an opposition to the play's racist overtones since she does not view her white classmates' racial appropriation as ridiculous.[9] What *Venous Hum* demonstrates through Lai Fun's desire for sameness is that it is not only Mrs. Blake's acts of discrimination that have a negative impact on her identity formation, but also her parents' insistence that she is "special" (89) like Canada. Each version of nationalist fervour has a different aim. Mrs. Blake wishes to separate "difference" from the dominant culture, while Lai Fun's parents want to incorporate their difference into the dominant culture. However, Lai Fun resists both in her own desire for invisibility.

The novel's subsequent insertion of vampires and cannibals serves to intensify the connection between the nationalism of Louve and Fritz-Peter on one hand and of Mrs. Blake on the other. Vampirism enters *Venous Hum* both literally and metaphorically in order to contaminate interpretations

that would deem the parents' nationalism as preferable to Mrs. Blake's institutionally sanctioned racism. Mrs. Blake feeds on her "ethnic" students in order to affect their learning (103). For Beverley, she is metaphorically monstrous in the way in which she treats the children, which is why her being *literally* a monster constitutes "just a further extension of the real" (Beverley 274; Mayr, *Why* 168). In that way, Mrs. Blake's vampirism fits within a magic realist tradition rather than a horror one, because it allows Mayr to, as Beverley argues, "engage more deeply with the everyday" (273). More specifically, the vampire metaphor contaminates Mrs. Blake's acts of discrimination against the children, as it proves that they are more coercive than simple acts of ignorance. Her vampirism is also structurally constructed as belonging to two different types of metaphorical consumption. Mrs. Blake rations her appetite for ethnic children because "it's rare to find exotic out here on the edge of the prairies" (103). Her pleasure here denotes the metaphorical consumption of the Other, where the appropriation of ethnic otherness fulfills a desire for the exotic. Mrs. Blake also enacts this exotic fantasy in her decision to stage the controversial musical *The Mikado*. Beverley notes that Mrs. Blake's management of the play lacks any reference to its satirical intent, as the work of W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan uses a Japanese setting to comment on nineteenth-century Britain (253). Mayr mocks Mrs. Blake's play when a student of Japanese heritage mimics the students who participate: "Whenever Kim shows up, they do imitations. . . . and Kim has the prettiest voice of all imitating Hadley imitating an Englishwoman imitating a Japanese woman imitating an Englishwoman" (121). Through this multi-layered imitation, Mayr signals the appropriative tradition of the play, which her character is recreating. Mrs. Blake however affiliates herself with a different form of vampirism when Louve, the other vampire, confronts Mrs. Blake and accuses her of "feeding on children": "'I am just doing my job,' says Mrs. Blake. 'Assimilating them'" (219). This interpretation of vampirism as assimilation is justified by the character as allowing the Other to return as the same, but her behaviour throughout the text fails to permit any of the children to assimilate. In other words, Mrs. Blake prevents her acts of vampirism and cannibalism from becoming synonymous with incorporation and assimilation. Instead, she continues to view the children of immigrants as "invaders," "creeps," "bums," "monsters," and "freaks" (219). That is, as *contaminating presences*.

While Mrs. Blake's fear of contamination prevents her from assimilating the children on whom she feeds, Louve's desire to assimilate Canadian

identity contaminates *her*. Louve attacks Lai Fun's lover Thor, who has become enamoured with Louve. Thor's interest in Louve stems from his belief that she has mafia connections, and borders on harassment once he reads her novel and realizes the depth of her knowledge and experience (171). Once Louve drinks Thor's blood, she feels unwell because "she sucked back three bottles of wine, ten sucks at the asthma inhaler, and two breakfast marijuana joints with all that blood" (180). While Louve's nausea testifies to Thor's questionable lifestyle choices, it also points, metaphorically, to what Louve has absorbed through her act of incorporation. Thor stands for a certain type of Canadianness: he is an unoriginal writer with conservative, homophobic, and misogynist views. When Thor asks Louve "where do you really come from" (176), he triggers Louve's attack because, through this question, he constructs himself as a "legitimate" Canadian because of his whiteness, and therefore, as one who has the right to cast Louve as Other because of her blackness. Once she feeds on him, Louve absorbs this negativity such that her subsequent illness demonstrates the toxicity of Thor's identity. Because the consumption of Thor's body makes Louve ill, *Venous Hum* criticizes Louve's desire to uncritically incorporate Canadian identity.

While Louve's vampirism acts as a pharmakon, to use Jacques Derrida's term, where the blood that should feed Louve poisons her, it also points to the similarities between Louve's vision of Canada and that embodied by Thor and Mrs. Blake. If their Canada is poisonous, then so is Louve's. The subsequent cannibalization of Thor's body is juxtaposed with a celebration of multicultural Canada. The novel repeatedly insists on the excess of the feast, which lies in the amount of food that will be consumed (185-86), and this excess is meant to echo the enthusiastic response to multiculturalism of both Louve and Fritz-Peter. For instance, as she is cooking with Fritz-Peter, Louve refers to Canada as "the land of liberation" (186). Feasting on Thor's body allows Louve to celebrate and assert her own Canadianness, as though the feast marks the defeat of those who, like Thor, would undermine her sense of belonging on the basis of her skin colour. The feast also presents an unflattering portrait of "immigrants" feeding on the body of the dominant Canadian. Still, it works to legitimate their presence in the country, since this scene functions as an act of revenge against those who question their Canadian status through the use of the question "where do you really come from?" (176). Indeed, the feast actualizes the fear that immigration erodes the dominant Canadian identity. As Mayr notes, she chose to make Lai Fun's

family monstrous in order to embody the fears that immigrants "steal jobs" (qtd. in Andrew 37). In that sense, *Venous Hum* demonstrates the coercive potential of both forms of nationalisms, as the negative connotations of Mrs. Blake contaminate the metaphorical function of Louve's vampirism and cannibalism.

At the same time, the feast allows Lai Fun to dissociate herself from her parents' excessive nationalism. As a "child of all Canada" (93), Lai Fun was made to embody her parents' nationalist vision. As an adult, she is also coerced into attending the dinner party, after her mother asserts that she must because "Lai Fun, it's your Heritage" (200). This "heritage" initially appears to refer to Lai Fun's diasporic heritage, but the novel systematically denies any diasporic connections. When Louve refers to her daughter's heritage, she rather echoes the concluding line of the "Canadian Heritage Minutes" television segments, broadcasted in both English and French in order to generate a common sense of national identity.[10] In other words, Louve reaffirms that the feast embodies her idealized version of Canada, even though she speculates that Lai Fun "will know Thor by the yellowy taste of nicotine under the shrimp-shell fingernails" (200). At the dinner however, Lai Fun only makes "a token nibble at a black-bean finger" (228). While Lai Fun is aware that Thor is being consumed, her refusal to eat is connected to her dedication to veganism, to her belief that "tofu is a little bit like heaven" (228). This reference to veganism complicates the feast further, since Louve and Fritz-Peter had abandoned cannibalism in favour of a vegetarian, later vegan, diet upon settling in Alberta in order to "put down roots deep into the earth" (179). Alberta is usually associated with meat eating, but veganism enables the family to settle in the region because their diet of human flesh meant that they had "to deal with hiding bodies and making up stories and moving to yet another shitty town in the boonies" (178). If their decision to feast upon Thor's body reconnects them with multicultural Canada, then it also severs them from their regional identity. In contrast, Lai Fun rejects her parents' nationalism in favour of regionalism—the latter being her chosen affiliation.

The fact that *Venous Hum* makes two seemingly different characters vampires also signals that Louve and Mrs. Blake might be more similar than they appear. Beverley suggests that Lai Fun's family and Mrs. Blake "are monstrous for very different reasons" (275). Yet, their literal differences cease to matter in their metaphorical implications. After all, both women are self-referentially identified as a "metaphor" (101, 178), and the use of the word in its singular form indicates that they must share some metaphorical

function. Louve attacks Thor when he comes to her apartment because he undresses while she is out of the room and intends to steal her ideas for a screenplay. Despite Louve's request that he "put [his] trousers on" (175), Thor remains half-naked until she bites off one of his fingers and starts sucking his blood (177). Beverley reads Louve's action as vengeful (277) because Thor had dared to ask "where do you really come from, Louve?" (176). However, Thor's predatory attitude before Louve attacks, coupled with Louve's difficulty "to resist a perfect vein" (177), casts her reaction as an act of self-defence enacted through her instinctual lust for blood. Similarly, Mrs. Blake does not construct herself as predatory, but as protecting dominant interests. Through her assertion that she is "just doing [her] job," Mrs. Blake trivializes her actions as being simply part of the system, as though she could not be held responsible for what she does. She thoroughly denies all accountability by projecting her monstrousness on Louve: "Who gets to feed on whom! Taking jobs away from people who deserve them and were here first. You're an invader" (219). Through this projection, Mrs. Blake constructs her acts of vampirism as self-defence against the "monsters" who are invading her country and stealing jobs.

Both Louve and Mrs. Blake also deceive others into thinking that they are, or could be, benign. Beverley argues that Mrs. Blake's appearance, described in the novel as "that creamsicle of a woman with her blonde, perfect page-boy," clashes with her racist behaviour (Mayr 98; Beverley 274-275). For Beverley, this dissonance indicates that Mrs. Blake "incarnates a metaphor for racism and discrimination that are both camouflaged and palpable" (275). Her name also recalls William Blake, a poet associated more with struggles for social justice than with institutional racism. The name seems redeeming, since Mayr could have called Mrs. Blake "Mrs. Kipling" or "Mrs. Conrad" had she wished to overemphasize her racism. By calling her Mrs. Blake, Mayr creates positive associations between her character and William Blake, which intensifies the shock that Mrs. Blake's behaviour creates. Similarly, Louve's name is strongly suggestive of her predatory instincts, as "louve" is the French word for a female wolf, yet her appearance as "a housewife wearing *tube socks*" (178) seems to be what bothers Thor the most as she sucks his blood. This juxtaposition between the monstrous and the benign, the homely which so suddenly turns unhomely, is also attributed to a man who simultaneously resembles Dracula and Trudeau: "the old man turns the corner . . . and his cape whips around like he is some kind of Dracula, like he is some kind of Pierre Elliott Trudeau" (76). Louve and Mrs.

Blake function similarly, since, like Trudeau's multiculturalism policy, they evoke a threat cloaked in a seemingly harmless appearance. In other words, neither woman can be cast as a villain.[11] Instead, they highlight the dangers that lie in coercive world views because both women are encapsulated by the same vampire metaphor. In that way, the novel can use its explicit critique of Mrs. Blake to influence how Louve can be interpreted.

In other words, Suzette Mayr's *Venous Hum* does not constitute an uncritical endorsement of multiculturalism. Rather, it proves to be a thoroughly destabilizing critique of the nationalisms it contains as every position is criticized for its potentially coercive element. While the monsters the novel deploys may seem, on a first reading, to be surprising or "unnecessary" (Chakraborty 36), they are essential to Mayr's critique. The presence of vampires not only actualizes the dangers of racism and the fear of immigration, but also demonstrates that Mrs. Blake and Louve are metaphorically connected: both women are worthy of criticism because the condemnation of Mrs. Blake's actions is extended, through literary contamination, to Louve's behaviour. While this article only examines monstrousness in its relation to Mayr's critique of nationalisms, *Venous Hum* also operates within a high-school reunion genre where even the dead attend the event, while also exploring Lai Fun's dysfunctional same-sex relationship. As such, Mayr's novel destabilizes many narratives of identity formation, as it emphasizes the fluidity of racial and sexual identities through genre blurring techniques, intertextuality, and humour. Even though Mayr's *Venous Hum* has yet to attract the same kind of critical attention that her first two novels have received, it proves to be a rich text that challenges preconceptions regarding race, sexuality, Alberta, and Canadian nationalism. *Venous Hum* is similar to Mayr's other novels, as the genre bending techniques she mobilizes in all her texts, such as magic realism, enable her to articulate critiques of racism (*Moon Honey*), age discrimination (*The Widows*), and homophobia (*Monoceros*). In conclusion, Mayr uses her novels to criticize coercive worldviews and narratives, and in *Venous Hum*, literary contamination allows her to ensure that both of the coercive national narratives the novel represents are undermined.

NOTES

1 Mayr has, however, criticized Clarke's position on racial hybridity. By dedicating a separate chapter to biracial writers in his *Odysseys Home*, Clarke claimed biracial writers as black yet emphasized their difference from other African-Canadian writers through his insistence on their "zebra poetics" (Braz 446-47).

2 Halberstam makes her argument through Stoker's anti-Semitic connections as well as through the widespread belief in the "blood libel" at that time. Craft reads *Dracula* as betraying, while also displacing, homoerotic desires.

3 Mayr has mentioned that she loves vampires because "they work as a metaphor for just about anything having to do with being an outsider" (Dudek 334).

4 While Arens' position has been strongly criticized, his argument is particularly relevant to my own inasmuch as he is interested in the position it holds in the Western imagination, where it has been transformed into an absolute sign of Otherness (42).

5 Both Thobani and Smaro Kamboureli note that the policy's attempt to sever language from culture is unsuccessful. For Thobani, "multiculturalism within a bilingual framework" constructs English and French subjects as the nation's "real" subjects (145), while Kamboureli questions the possibility of effectively dissociating language from culture (98).

6 By categorizing Lai Fun as black, Mrs. Blake adheres to the "one drop rule," where those with a single black ancestor remain black regardless of their skin tone or identity affiliation.

7 All of Mayr's novels construct discrimination as an institutional matter. *The Widows* criticizes the way in which society marginalizes the elderly, while *Monoceros* examines how homophobia is inherent to a Catholic school.

8 Mrs. Blake here indicates that "Canadian" must be white, that it cannot be black, and cannot have a "Chinese" name. "Lou-Anne" is simultaneously exclusive and inclusive, since it is supposed to make Lai Fun more acceptable, yet implies that "Lai Fun" cannot be Canadian.

9 As Beverley mentions, *The Mikado* has "long been criticized for its stereotypical and shallow description of Japan, and contemporary productions often modify offensive lines" (253). In *Venous Hum*, only Kim, a Japanese-Canadian student, criticizes the play for being racist (118). Her voice of dissent within the novel, however minor, is significant in its very presence.

10 See http://www.histori.ca/minutes/default.do?page=.index.

11 Mayr states that she does not believe in villains: "different characters have different motivations for what they do, even when what they do seems malicious or evil" (*Why* 166).

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