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Jennifer Dawn Whitney

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JENNIFER DAWN WHITNEY

INTRODUCTION

In a selfie posted to Instagram, influencer and reality star Kim Kardashian gazes back at her millions of followers with a placid but bloodied face. Set within a clinical backdrop, this now infamous portrait initially was shared as promotional material, advertising a 2013 episode of *Kourtney and Kim Take Miami* – a spin-off series of the E! television network's long-running *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. While generating viewer interest as intended, the gory post had another significant effect. Labelled with the hashtag '#vampirefacial' (2013) Kardashian's selfie inaugurated a new beauty trend into Western popular consciousness. Administered by a dermatologist or cosmetic surgeon, the vampire facial is an outpatient procedure that involves micro-needling and a platelet-rich plasma mask made from the patient's own blood. Stimulating collagen production, the procedure promises to rejuvenate facial skin although the effects are temporary. 'I love trying anything that makes you look and feel youthful' (2013) states Kardashian, prior to undergoing the procedure for the programme's omnipresent cameras.

The effectiveness of the vampire facial has been disputed by clinicians and patients, as well as by Kardashian herself.¹ Nonetheless, following the star's Instagram post there was a profound uptick in consumer and critical interest (Google Trends 2022), including a 25 per cent increase in the procedure from 2015 to 2020 (American Society of Plastic Surgeons 2020). Over the last decade, headlines like 'I got the Kim Kardashian Vampire Facial' continue to circulate, affixing the star to this form of cosmetic intervention in Western beauty culture (Frelander 2014). Inspired by the journal's critical enquiry into the performative nature of blood, this article investigates the enduring association between

Kardashian and the vampire facial in the popular imagination. Kardashian's presence as a social media influencer and the performative nature of beauty work therein are both key to my analysis. Critical to this research is Judith Butler's theory of performativity, where the 'stylization of the body' in the form of 'repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame' naturalize and normalize specific characteristics of embodiment and subjectivity (1999 [1990]: 33). Butler's take on the performative, as Aaron C. Thomas helpfully explains, can be viewed through the lens of ideological theatricality that has 'hold of the actor and not the other way around' (2021: 17). Considering this theoretical approach, the first section of this essay provides an examination into Kardashian's social media performance, and how it reiterates a set of established rules for beauty in the West. At the crux of this assessment is how these rules reinforce the notion that the female-presenting body is a site for domination and (visual) consumption.

Given its affiliation with the consumptive, the Western beauty ideal is always already infused with a vampiric flavour. The visible blood of the vampire facial and its corresponding selfie make this vampiric hint all the more saporific. It is my assertion in part two of this essay that when Kardashian's performative beauty work commingles with the linguistic labelling of 'vampire' a complex set of markers and meanings underpinning her celebrity are revealed. Indeed, from her wealth to her white-adjacent feminine identity, popular perceptions of the star seem informed by vampire tropology. In what follows, I argue that this Gothic symbolism functions to regulate Kardashian's performative femininity, aiming to secure it as a 'site of containment' (Munford and Waters 2013: 5). Despite this essay's focus on rules, tropes and regulatory practices, as Michel Foucault writes, the Gothic

¹ Soon after posting the selfie, Kardashian distanced herself from the vampire facial. She went on to file a lawsuit against a practitioner who used her image in advertisements for the procedure.

is 'always excessive and deficient' (1980: 65). As such, it is also my objective to show how the blood of the vampire facial selfie, and the beauty work to which it is a constituent, might provide 'fleeting and less permanent' (Thomas 2021: 22) moments of leakage that exceed and blur such regulatory demands.

KEEPING IT IN KONTEXT: KARDASHIAN AND PERFORMATIVE BEAUTY

Doled out across contemporary Western fashion and beauty media is 'a plethora of advice ... on how to perform the "right kind" of feminine self-presentation' (Elias *et al.*, 2017: 35). In this setting, the 'right kind' of feminine self-presentation must attempt to follow a very narrow set of Western markers of beauty, which include whiteness, affluence and youthfulness, and that insist upon containment, modesty and submissiveness. As Butler argues, gendered performances of this kind, which are repeated vis-à-vis a strict code or model, 'congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (1999 [1990]: 33). Thus normalized as the expected mode of feminine ritual and enactment in the West, this 'right kind' of beauty 'communicates the ideology of the ruling class', as well as a dominant 'aesthetic hierarchy' (Jarrin 2017: 4). The typical Kardashian selfie is in keeping with Western beauty ideology. Beauty is her business model, after all. The following section provides context for the Western rules of beauty and their performative attributes before exploring how the blood on display in Kardashian's vampire facial selfie both reinforces and blurs beauty's boundaries.

Like many current cultural structures of power in the West, the rules of beauty came into focus during the Enlightenment. At the time, the effort to lasso reason became pervasive. As Ronald S. Love writes, 'the rationality of the physical universe became a standard against which the customs and traditions of society could be measured and criticized' (2008: xiiv). Systems of order were organized with an air of humanistic authority, and rationality was the guiding force embedded in European cultural institutions. A lasting effect of this is what

Foucault asserts as 'the Biopolitics of the population' (1990: 139). Revolving around the idea that cultural institutions create an 'entire series of interventions and regulatory controls', Foucault's concept of Biopolitics speaks to how the ubiquity of classification leads to the monitoring and policing of bodies (*ibid.*). In turn, such regulatory practices get taken up, reproduced and performed in everyday life.

One attempt at the rationalization of the body lies in the Western philosophical concept of the beautiful. In his 1757 treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins or Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Edmund Burke sets out beauty's parameters. For Burke, beauty was to be found in that which is small, smooth and delicate, as well as recognized in that which is pleasing to the (authoritative masculine) eye (1990 [1757]: 102–3). This system for ordering the beautiful was applied to objects as well as to female-presenting bodies, effectively conflating the two.² Burke's rules were observed in, and offered as a standard for, the European upper classes, especially within an Anglo-dominant context. By formalizing 'the category of the beautiful', Burke 'constructed the image of the ideal woman' in the West (Mellor 1993: 108). She was Anglo-European and wealthy, as well as petite, delicate and young – a passive object of desire. As a result, as Anne Mellor illustrates, 'Burke's aesthetic classifications participated in, and helped to support, a powerful hegemonic sexual politics' (*ibid.*), wherein the rules of beauty became a script to follow. Burke acknowledges the performative quality of beauty when he writes that he observed women 'learn[ing] to ... counterfeit weakness' to be perceived as submissive and, thus, desirable (137).

The definitions and enactments of beauty within Burke's immediate cultural milieu have made ongoing impact across its spheres of influence. A critical example of such cultural repercussions can be found in Laura Mulvey's foundational essay on the 'male gaze', written more than two hundred years after Burke's *Enquiry*. Mulvey confirms in her analysis that the modern Western visual landscape is one 'ordered by sexual imbalance', where 'pleasure in looking has been split between active/male

² The Burkean model of sex and gender is explicitly binary. My use of gender descriptors is imperfect, but reflects the strict standards laid out with the Burkean framework.

and passive/female' (1975: 11). The 'passive/female', she explains, is 'simultaneously looked at and displayed', fulfilling the role of 'sexual object' (ibid.). Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze' makes plain that Burkean ideals of beauty and desirability continue to dominate twentieth-century visual representations of the female-presenting body. Additionally, her analysis of the effects of objectification conveys its significant behavioural reach. The heteronormative visual exchange implicit in the 'male gaze' cumulates in what Mulvey calls '*to-be-looked-at-ness*' (ibid.). The 'male gaze' is instructive: the woman under 'the gaze' is aware that she is being observed and performs the 'right kind' of beauty rituals to fulfil the Burkean ideal – just like her eighteenth-century counterpart.

No place is the 'culture of the male gaze' and '*to-be-looked-at-ness*' more evident today than on social media (Oliver 2017: 454). And no one is more influential on social media than Kardashian. Always the skilful selfie-taker, Kardashian applies filters to blend and soften skin, poses to accentuate slimness and uses lighting to enhance the appearance of delicacy in her photos. In the script of the ideal selfie, Burke's regulatory discourse of the small, smooth, delicate and contained, indeed, reigns supreme. Moreover, each of Kardashian's digital and in real life (IRL) adjustments can be read as 'repeated acts' of 'stylization', reinforcing the centuries old Burkean ideal to the point that they appear effortless, which in turn naturalizes the female-presenting body as a compliant sexual object. When pressed in an interview in 2015, the star admits that 'she objectifies herself through her selfies' (Hodgson 2015). In so doing, Kardashian confirms a dissolution or a flattening of self for the purposes of performing the 'right kind' of beauty in her online presence.

Performative beauty, in general, and Kardashian's online enactments of the Western beauty ideal specifically, suggests that objectification may be interpreted as its own vampiric act. Within its heteronormative framework, the 'male gaze' is understood to enrich masculine subjectivity while dominating the feminine. With the objective of producing a 'mental state of relaxation' (Battersby 2007: 7), beauty sates the masculine observer.³ He is

comforted and replenished by encountering a beauty that is easily mastered and consumed. In turn, the object of the 'male gaze' (i.e., Kardashian) must invite objectification into her self-presentation to be seen as pleasing and desirable – an exchange that is difficult to resist. In an ongoing cycle of uploads, shares, follows and likes, social media followers devour images and objectification endures. This is a transaction that promises eternal beauty and adoration while repeatedly draining Kardashian of her subjectivity.

Upon examination, the tenets of performative beauty by way of '*to-be-looked-at-ness*' and objectification are even evident in the vampire facial selfie. In this example, Kardashian looks doe-eyed at the camera with an upturned pout. She has photographed herself in soft light and at a gently elevated angle to create an effect that is 'feminine' and 'vulnerable', the attributes 'equated with being more attractive' (Soranzo 2021). Thus, Kardashian's bloody visage may be read as complementing the beauty work integral to idealized femininity. When perceived as a whole, the vampire facial selfie, its visible blood and the word 'vampire' alongside 'facial', recalls the simple yet potent adage that 'beauty is pain'. The visible blood in the selfie represents a twenty-first century manifestation of the learned discomfort Burke identifies, while, as Kardashian still manages to look pretty in the image, she confirms the inseparable '*to-be-looked-at-ness*' therein.

Yet, blood has a way of seeping into meanings, revamping first impressions. As notes Aspasia Stephanou, 'blood is subversive and conservative, maintaining the economy of the same, but also challenging it' (2014: 1). While Kardashian's vampire facial selfie seems to adhere to the rules of beauty, beauty work and its corresponding objectification, its bloody representation also engenders contradiction, taking beauty out of bounds. '[C]haracterized by blood and bleeding' (Groom 2018: 150), women in the West have a messy, mysterious and potentially monstrous relationship to blood that cannot be overlooked. As such, the blood of the vampire facial may awaken latent anxieties about femininity as unruly. Provoking discomfort in the viewer (rather than 'relaxation'), the blood

³ As with the feminine ideal, the masculine subject is that which is defined as ideal within the dominant culture: white and Anglo/European, affluent, heteronormative, Protestant, able-bodied and so on.

in the vampire facial selfie makes the image, as well as the purveyor of it, difficult to digest. Disrupting the flow between the object of desire and the 'male gaze', the vampire facial selfie denaturalizes the active/passive relationship at the heart of Western performative beauty and, in turn, confronts the gendered hegemony and beauty hierarchy. In so doing, it also exposes the performative labour of the 'repeated acts' of 'stylization of the body' to be just that. No longer read as natural, the bloody work of the vampire facial selfie reveals the constructedness of beauty – and, likewise, femininity – laying it bare. Moreover, Kardashian's vampire facial selfie conveys that within the best beauty performances, there persists the possibility of a monstrous undoing.

KEEPING IT KONTAINED: THE GOTHIC AS REGULATORY DEVICE

Despite her influence, Kardashian is not universally adored. Rather, while her performative femininity typically confirms to the Burkean beauty ideal, she still prompts push-back in popular culture. Often chastized as 'fake', 'slutty' and 'trashy' (Tullo 2016), much of the criticism that surrounds Kardashian reiterates the Western beauty standard of restraint by identifying its opposite in the celebrity: she is 'too much'. Through a rhetoric of excess, Kardashian is deemed to have too much body (booty), too much filler, too much cosmetic surgery, too much media exposure, too much sex, too much money – the list goes on. With the bloody enactment of the vampire facial selfie, Kardashian provides another example of 'too much' wherein she challenges the restrictive ideology of the Western beauty ideal, albeit with ambivalence. Such an engagement in excess has the potential to be productive. However, with the pressure of the Western beauty standard, accusations of excess can be used as a threat to contain wayward femininity.

It is my contention here that the 'vampire' of the vampire facial selfie arouses associations with excess through the discursive tools of the codified Gothic tradition in the West, deployed for centuries to enforce 'strict policing and/or maintenance of the [female-presenting] body

and its borders' (Munford and Waters 2013: 25). When likened to the figure of the vampire, Kardashian's influence as a beauty icon is at stake. In the following section of this essay, I explore how the symbolic value of blood, and its sticky association with Kardashian by way of the vampire facial, functions as a retributive reminder of excess and containment for the influencer, within the biopolitics of beauty. Recalling the abject, the dangerous, the violent, the vulnerable, the decadent and the Other, the Gothic tropology imbued within the bloody vampire facial, moreover, awakens heretofore semi-conscious anxieties about the influencer present in Western popular culture.

Since its inception in the post-Enlightenment period, the Gothic literary tradition has concerned itself with Western unease around 'cultural limits and boundaries' (Botting 1996: 2). These found general expression through the genre's abundant tropes, symbols and archetypes. Responding to the breakthroughs made in the 'investigative sciences of the eighteenth-century', Gothic narrative tropology specific to the vampire got its start (Groom 2018: 4). The era's accelerating notion of humanistic progress, along with the hazards of an ever-expanding modern world and the human's role within it, spoke to larger existential issues that the vampire came to symbolize (ibid.). Additionally, as Nick Groom writes: 'Vampires came into being when Enlightenment rationality encountered East European folklore' (4–5). Similar to the folktales and fables that preceded it, the Gothic vampire narrative alerts readers to the possibility of cultural or moral upheaval. At a convergence of old and new, West and East, the vampire paces and polices. It is a figure of excess that shows the reader the pitfalls of taking on 'too much' change by turning borders into frightening spaces of permeability, human connection into contagion and wealth into decadence.

Notoriously vampiric, the story of Erzsébet Báthory is quintessential to the narrative structure and signification of the Gothic literary tradition, and vampire tropology therein. Hers is 'a unique case in which the fictional elements of vampire and witch folklore combine with true historical facts to create the quasi-mythical

figure' (Santos 2016: 132). Báthory – or the Bloody Countess – was of Hungarian nobility. She lived during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and was purported to have bathed in the blood of young victims to 'replenish the youthfulness of her skin' (143). As Cristina Santos recounts, while '[b]lood and beauty are wedded in [Hungarian] fairy tales, folk sayings, and conventional wisdom' (4–5), with Báthory there was a murderous over-identification. As a result, she became a model of vampiric excess. Yet, vampiric excess depends not only on narrative content, but on 'an aggregate of race, class, and gender' (Hallberstam 1993: 334). Taken together, the relentless and bloody quest for youth and beauty by a wealthy, powerful and Eastern European woman (at the expense of others around her), provides ample material for a Gothic cautionary tale. As twenty-first-century popular culture continues to 'instrumentalise gothic tropes' across a range of media to reveal current social, scientific and political apprehensions (Waters 2012: 34), the figure of the vampire likewise lingers across the themes of existential and bodily excess. Could Kardashian be the twenty-first century's reimagining of Báthory? The popular discourse that surrounds her warns against excess through similar thematic aggregates, drawing out a striking resemblance.

Pivotal to both Báthory's and Kardashian's relationship to the vampire is the role of blood. In the Gothic literature that the Bloody Countess mythology informs, Groom explains:

The vampire embodied the contradictions of blood: it obscured distinctions between the living and the dead, the human and the nonhuman, even between psychological stability and physical metamorphosis. (Groom 2018: 20)

At the peak of Gothic storytelling in the nineteenth century, where Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (2003 [1897]) and Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Carmilla' (2020 [1872]) loom large, the vampire's relationship to blood is culturally incisive, highlighting a discomfort around the experimental Victorian practice of the blood transfusion.⁴ Like the puncture of the vampire's bite, the injection of blood could bring about life anew or hasten a painful death. The Gothic topology of the vampire thus speaks to blood's

'vital role in sustaining life inside the body and its ability to flow outside of the boundaries of the body' transcending life itself (Stephanou 2014: 5). Presenting readers with the pressing eternal questions of human life in the modern age, the blood-sucking Gothic vampire indicates a tension between medicine and alchemy, and the potential for hubris when interfering with metaphysical unknowns. Given this background, connecting the symbolic blood of the nineteenth-century vampire to Kardashian's contemporary vampire facial via its colloquial nomenclature makes cultural sense. While no longer a fluid replete with the mystery of Victorian lore, blood – and especially its revelatory relationship to both disease and genetics – remains a culturally meaningful life source. Tampering with its properties for the vanity of an eternally youthful glow puts Kardashian alongside the fictional vampires that came before her.

As Báthory's narrative demonstrates, the historical and cultural depths of blood's signification both pre-date and stretch beyond Victorian medical apprehension. When applied to 'independent femininity' (Botting 1996: 145), the symbolism of bloody excess inherent to the vampire is whetted. Perceived as both mysterious and powerful, traditionally female bodily processes such as menstruation and childbirth have been recognized as threatening to the patriarchal structure in which they have been framed. In response, Western cultural traditions attempt to control the seemingly uncontrollable, codifying regulatory interventions in institutions and in narrative. Per Gothic fiction, the blood-lusting feminine vampire is made specifically 'grotesque and abject' (Hurley 2007: 137). The abject, as Julia Kristeva affirms in her essential work on the topic, is constructed to be a 'confrontation with the feminine' and is determined to provoke feelings of disgust (1982: 58.). Disgust (or worse still, monstrosity) is used to set the parameters between acceptable and unacceptable feminine embodiment and display, with the female-presenting vampire revealing the consequences of boundaries crossed. Considering that Kardashian performs her bloody beauty ritual despite these delineated cultural borders, she suffers for her transgression. The blood on display in her beauty routine and subsequent selfie marks

⁴ Throughout the nineteenth century blood transfusions remained risky as blood type classification did not come into focus until 1901. As such, this potentially life-saving practice brought with it a sense of foreboding. Similar apprehensions connected to blood, infection and illness were again fleshed out in popular culture during the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, when Count Dracula and his ilk were resurrected in cinematic adaptations.

her out as abject, instead of beautiful, and further establishes the connection between the influencer and the trope of the vampire.

Gothic warnings of sanguineous transgression are not limited to the immediacy of the physical body's inclination towards rupture and overflow. Rather, they can equally portend concerns around blood's 'ability to transmit or reflect the essence of the family, clan, lineage, people, nature, race, or ethnic group' (Meyer 2007: 8). As the example of the Bloody Countess elucidates, Eastern European folk and fairy tales informed the Western Gothic, while the East remained a space rife with unease. '[F]oretelling of "peoples migrating from the East"', nineteenth-century Gothic narratives were dominated by mysterious and vampiric figures 'of 'uncertain origin' (Botting 1996: 146).⁵ Signifying the 'fear of moving beyond what is familiar' (Groom 2018: 55), such figures appeared at specific moments of heightened cultural alarm, cautioning against potential cultural, financial or bloodline contamination. Indeed, the vampire's first acquaintance with the West has been attributed to 'fears of the Plague, thought ... to have emanated from the East' (ibid.). When these specific and unwarranted concerns dissipated, others remained, however, with xenophobia left to simmer and flare. During 'the high point of Victorian imperialism', writers thus 'projected the darkness of Gothic fears and desires' onto the East (154). Throughout the twentieth century and into the present day, popular Gothic re-imaginings of the vampire continue to harken back to these 'fears and desires'. For Kardashian, whose ethnic heritage is Armenian, the effects of this tropology are multi-pronged, intersecting and deserving of closer inspection.

In its travels from East to West, the vampire of Gothic literature becomes a harbinger of Anglo/Western fear around immigration, bloodline contamination and financial corruption – instructing readers to take heed of enigmatic Eastern influences. It is with regard to financial corruption that anxieties around Kardashian re-emerge to find their teeth in the popular sphere. In the Gothic tradition, Western class-based suspicions involving wealth, decadence and the corruption of 'old money' (Botting 1996: 346) manifest in the figure of vampire from the East. This figure 'interferes with the natural ebb and

flow of currency, just as it literally intervenes in the ebbing and flowing of blood' (Halberstam 1996: 346). As J. Halberstam demonstrates, the formidable Count Dracula was written not only as a threatening outsider, but one who was a 'monster/master parasite', feeding 'upon English wealth and health' (340). Just as Count Dracula (and the Bloody Countess) before her, Kardashian, too, has been designated to represent a presumed contamination of wealth and class status as a figure of 'new money' with Eastern European origins. Dominating criticism of the influencer suggests that her fame and fortune are unearned, with the most common slight deriding her as 'famous for being famous' (Heintz 2022). Kardashian is not beyond reproach: her vampire facial signals the depletion of a resource that was already siphoned off in disproportionate measures, calling attention to issues of class-based medical (in)access and inequality within American culture. However, it is crucial to note that the influencer is often singled out as emblematic of 'monster capitalism'. In criticisms of Kardashian's approach to wealth and work, there is an alert and a policing of the bounds of (self) worth and financial scruples in the neoliberal landscape.⁶

While Kardashian is situated within the scope of the fear-driven characteristics outlined above, there is also a suggestion of desire in her popular conceptualisation, which Fred Botting identifies as crucial to the East/West dichotomy of Gothic literature. The notion of 'exotic' Orientalism informs this framework. Constructed through a Western lens, Orientalism creates an Other against which the West can define and affirm itself through contrast (Said 1980: 9). '[S]ince antiquity', explains Edward Said, 'the Orient' has been known to the West as 'a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences' (ibid.). The people and bodies existing as Other within this construction have taken on similar symbolic meanings to the place: they are seen as a 'new delight', counter to the 'normal ways of doing and feeling' (hooks 1992: 21).⁷ Inherent within this structure is a discourse of submissiveness that echoes and intersects with desire by way of objectification. Orientalism sees the 'exotic' place and the 'exotic' Other as languishing, ripe

⁵ In 'Technologies of monstrosity: Bram Stoker's "Dracula"' (1993), J. Halberstam makes the point that this is a specifically antisemitic anxiety.

⁶ While beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that the difference between the two vampiric figures is their relationship to their source of blood. While Báthory was by all accounts murderous in her quest for eternal youth, Kardashian's bloodletting is superficially self-sustaining (albeit, not socially so). Tied to the cultural discourse of neoliberalism, this self-maintenance produces its own set of horrors.

⁷ bell hooks explores this relationship in a specifically American context and recognizes the vampiric qualities therein, with her essay entitled 'Eating the other' from *Black Looks* (1992). Moreover, this essay would be remiss if it did not mention Kardashian's own participation in the cultural appropriation of Blackness. For more on this, see Wesley E. Stevens's (2021) 'Blackfishing on Instagram'.

and available to consume. When combined with gender, the impacts of the objectification of the 'exotic' Other are manifold, producing a hyper-submissive ideal most evident in representations of the masculine vampire's feminine victims who appear as 'paragon[s] of passivity' (Groom 2018: 187). Thus, rather than a warning, the concept of desire for the 'exotic' at work in Gothic tropology produces a demand. The East, its occupants and its descendants must be submissive for the pleasure of Gothic storyteller and reader alike.

The Gothic demand for the passive 'exotic' Other persists in twenty-first-century popular culture. Informing Kardashian's celebrity, it sets the parameters of acceptability. Kardashian's 'not-quite-white' Armenian heritage, dark hair, olive skin and curvy figure insist that she perform as a mysterious, 'exotic', and submissive outsider in order to be desirable – and acceptable – to the white, Western, 'male gaze' (Sicardi 2021). While Kardashian's performance of femininity navigates through some of these expectations, she is not unequivocally passive. With more than three hundred million Instagram followers, Kardashian is persuasive and influential. As described in the introduction of this article, she has single-handedly caused the vampire facial procedure to trend across social media and fashion journalism for the last decade. Additionally, she has 'influenced waves of people to go under the knife', creating what one plastic surgeon calls the 'Kardashianization' of the younger people' (Roundtree 2021).

Kardashian's beauty is no longer peripheral – it has leaked into the mainstream, remaking the Western beauty standard through the bloody, messy and diligent labour of her intersectional performance of femininity. With her sway, Kardashian's is the changing face of beauty in the West. This change is profound, both in terms of aesthetics and in terms of politics. To flow from the 'exotic' margins to become an arbiter of the twenty-first-century beauty transgresses and potentially transforms the Western/Other dichotomy. As such, Kardashian does not follow the Gothic demands of Orientalism, and as this article has shown, she gets punished for it. With labels of 'too much', which equate her with the 'rapacious' feminine vampire, she is cast as dangerous interloper (Groom 2018: 187). When

aligned with the vampire, Kardashian becomes the proxy for the racist and misogynistic cultural concerns, which, in turn, pose as perilous to her celebrity and beauty icon status. As much as she resists and recalibrates, the Gothic is there to remind her of the repercussions of going too far. Just as beauty bites back, so does Western hegemony.

CONCLUSION

Kardashian's forays into the bloody beauty work of the vampire facial make visible anxieties that were always already present in the culture. The vampire facial selfie simply sharpened their focus. Indeed, independent femininity is consistently 'too much' in a culture that requires modesty and restraint, while independent femininity marked as Eastern Other is exponentially so – it must be contained within the Western tradition. The perennial tropes and symbols of the Gothic are there to oblige – with blood serving as the ultimate signifier. Blood's ability to leak, infuse and taint serves as a recurring and specific symbol of excess, transgression and contamination, which both preceded and outlasts its nineteenth-century specificity. Kardashian's performative vampire facial selfie – the visible blood and the regulatory reaction to it – indicates that the Gothic can be resuscitated as a significant tool of regulatory control centuries after its heyday. The popular grasping towards the symbols of the Gothic tradition may demonstrate just how close our current culture moment remains to Victorian unease. However, Kardashian's bloody beauty work may also precipitate an ideological last gasp.

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