Joseph Laycock

Vampires Today

The Truth about Modern Vampirism

VAMPIRES TODAY

This page intentionally left blank

VAMPIRES TODAY

The Truth about Modern Vampirism

JOSEPH LAYCOCK

PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut
London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Laycock, Joseph, 1980–
Vampires today : the truth about modern vampirism / Joseph Laycock.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978–0–313–36472–3 (alk. paper)
1. Vampires—United States. I. Title.
BF1556.L39 2009
398'.45—dc22 2008051652

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2008051652
ISBN: 978–0–313–36472–3

First published in 2009

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881
An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.
www.praeger.com

Printed in the United States of America

The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

This page intentionally left blank

Preface

One of the earliest books about vampires is *Dissertatio de Vampiris Serviensibus,* written in 1733 by John Heinrich Zopft. Zopft was a theological student in Leipzig, and his book was a serious academic dissertation on a vampire panic then occurring in Belgrade, Serbia.[1] Since Zopft, an ocean of ink has been spent writing about vampires, and it has become increasingly harder to discern books about actual vampires from works of fiction. There are novels and role-playing games in which vampires masquerade as humans and there are true-crime books in which humans act as vampires. When I tell colleagues that I "study vampires," they assume I am one of numerous scholars in the fields of English, folklore, and psychology analyzing the cultural implications of vampire fiction. When I say that I study "real vampires," this may imply that I am one of several specialists working to interpret historical accounts of vampires using modern forensics and medical knowledge. Among all of these assumptions, it is important to explain exactly what sort of book this is and why it was written. First, this book is not primarily concerned with the vampires of fiction and folklore. Compilations of vampire novels and movies have been written before and written well. There are also numerous other books that catalog the myriad vampire-like entities that appear in the folklore of almost every culture. Nor is this book primarily concerned with analyzing demented criminals who drink blood. When a criminal does something so heinous that the media labels him "a vampire," it is rare that the perpetrator actually embraces this label.

This book is about "real vampires" and the communities they have formed. Many people have a dim awareness that somewhere in the world there are people

who consider themselves vampires. Beginning in the 1990s, several nonfiction books and documentaries appeared that featured interviews with real vampires. In 2008, the success of HBO's series *True Blood* and the film *Twilight,* both based on popular vampire novels, caused an intense media focus on this community. The History Channel show *Monsterquest* aired an episode entitled "Vampires in America," in which they exposed self-identified vampires to a gamut of scientific tests. Vampires also consented to appearances on *The Tyra Banks Show* and even *Sean Hannity's America.* The animated series *South Park* aired an episode called "The Ungroundable" in which children, under a spell of consumerism created by *Twilight* and the store Hot Topic, had begun to dress as the undead and call themselves vampires. Despite increased media attention, the vampire community remains poorly understood. Television interviews, often accompanied by ominous music, work to portray self-identified vampires as completely other. The reality is that vampires are all around us and that their subculture is a product of our mainstream culture. If we can look past the sensationalism, vampires pose compelling questions about how we define ourselves and the world around us in the twenty-first century. These are issues that cannot be explored without a deeper understanding of what real vampires are.

What exactly is a "real vampire"? A real vampire is first and foremost a self-designated label. This separates real vampires from the creatures of myth and folklore as well as from various criminals who have been labeled as vampires by the media. Monsters receive the vampire label from others; real vampires adopt it as an identity. Other than being self-designated, there is currently no universal definition of a "real vampire." Some drink blood to sustain their health and some do not. Some describe a sensitivity to sunlight while others enjoy the beach. Many compare vampirism to a medical condition with tangible health needs while others dissent. For some, vampirism is a religion or a spiritual path while others ascribe no religious meaning to it. It is amazing that a community has formed at all considering the many different ideas of what a vampire is.

The heterogeneous nature of vampire identity has led some outsiders to ignore the existence of the vampire community and instead study real vampires strictly on a case-by-case basis. This approach typically draws on psychoanalysis and often posits some event or pathology that caused the individual to identity as a vampire. An opposite approach has ignored the experience of individual vampires entirely and instead approached this community as a monolithic and sinister group. Dawn Perlmutter, director of the Institute for the Research of Organized and Ritual Violence has portrayed the vampire community as a network of cults that uses the Internet to "recruit lonely, alienated kids."[2] Both of these frameworks are inadequate: The former ignores wider cultural phenomena in the production of identity, while the later fails to consider the agency of individual vampires. Sociologist Nancy Ammerman describes identities as emerging,

"at the everyday intersections of autobiographical and public narratives. We tell stories about ourselves (both literally and through our behavior) that signal both our uniqueness and our membership, that exhibit the consistent themes that characterize us and the unfolding improvisation of the given situation."[3] Vampires do not form their ideas about vampirism in a vacuum, nor are they ideological automatons that follow the doctrine of a particular vampire culture or sect. To understand modern vampires, it is necessary to consider both the experience of the individual vampire and the context of the larger vampire community.

Vampires arrive at their identities through two collective entities that are here termed "the vampire milieu" and "the vampire community." The vampire milieu is the sum total of ideas about vampires, real or fictional, that can be found throughout public discourse. The vampire community is an identity group consisting of the sum total of vampire institutions and social networks. For individual vampires, the vampire milieu determines what enters their concept of vampirism, while the vampire community informs how these elements are interpreted. The vampire milieu will be mapped out in detail in Chapter 3. It includes the vampire of folklore as well as over two centuries of literary and film vampires. But it also draws much of its substance from occult and Neopagan traditions, parapsychology, and complementary therapies such as qigong and reiki. Individual vampires as well as vampire groups may draw on any of this raw material to construct their own bricolage of vampirism. The vampire community, the subject of Chapter 5, does include formal vampire groups and even vampire religions. These institutions, however, are only a small portion of the community. More important are the networks by which various groups and individual vampires communicate ideas. These networks also provide the criteria by which ideas from the vampire milieu are either accepted or pushed to the periphery.

Many of the books currently available about real vampires rely almost entirely on interviews. Interviews can give insight into the experience of an individual vampire, but not the greater context of the community at large. Understanding the community as a whole requires observation. The most ambitious work of participant observation with vampires is Katherine Ramsland's *Piercing the Darkness: Undercover With Vampires in America Today.* To research this book, Ramsland donned prosthetic fangs and infiltrated the New York vampire scene as her alter-ego "Malefica." She describes having to decide whether to drink blood, offer her own blood, or use drugs in order find what she is looking for.[4] While this made for exciting reading, I am neither trained as a journalist nor a master of disguise. My training is in religious studies, and I negotiated entry into this community in the same way that I have contacted Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Pagan groups in America: I tell them that I am a researcher and politely inquire if they are willing to speak to me. Typically some groups are eager to speak to me, others are more cautious, and a few tell me that they are not

interested. It happened that the Atlanta Vampire Alliance (AVA) was willing to work with me.

For over a year I gathered ethnographic data with the AVA. I ate with them, I went to their business meetings, I attempted to manipulate subtle energy with them, I drove with them around Cleveland looking for a good Irish pub. I also conducted interviews and discussed the ways their community has been represented by academics and the media. I found that many of the problems described by vampires were the same issues I encountered while working with Atlanta's Muslim community—"The media portrays us as violent criminals" and "people judge us by the way we dress" were mutual complaints. The AVA introduced me to other vampires throughout the country and throughout the world. As word spread about my research, more vampires were willing to tell me their story.

Vampires are not just lurking in goth clubs in New York City; they are all around us. I have met vampires in the fields of social work, medicine, information technology, and law enforcement. Vampires cannot be studied as simply other than and isolated from society at large. To study real vampires is to study the state of the modern world. One of my goals in writing this book is to stimulate and inform a discussion of how groups like vampires may be understood by outsiders and by scholarship. Despite the public's fascination with vampires, the same two questions are repeated over and over: Are these people crazy and are they dangerous? (The answer to both these questions, for all intents and purposes, is a simple "no.") If we set these questions aside, the real vampire community challenges us with serious questions about identity, religion, and the search for meaning.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens has argued that "high modernity," a state in which social traditions have become disembedded and replaced with radical doubt, fosters and shapes emerging mechanisms of self-identity.[5] In premodern societies, most aspects of a person's daily life were determined by the culture in which the individual was born. Today, the individual is faced with an overabundance of options. Since the Enlightenment, we no longer have faith in experts who traditionally worked to restrain and limit these choices.[6] To adopt a narrative of identity prescribed to us by political leaders, family, or clergy may seem puerile or even irresponsible within a modern, Western culture. All of this produces a state of anxiety over essential questions such as "Who am I?" and "What should I do?" This anxiety compels us to create our own narrative of self in order to make sense of our world.[7]

The theory espoused in this book is that the vampire identity, as it appears at the dawn of the twenty-first century, is a particularly radical emerging mechanism of self-identity as described by Gibbons. The vampire identity is the product of a modern world in which even one's status as an ordinary member of the human species is subject to doubt.[8] By linking vampires to modernity, I do not

mean to cast vampires as other or as "a horror of the modern world." Instead, I hope to emphasize that both vampires and non-vampires share the same modern anxiety and the same search for self. The vampire community and their quest for meaning reflects our quest for meaning. In short, by studying vampires, we study ourselves.

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgments

This book marks the end of three years working as an inner-city high school teacher by day and an independent scholar by night. Independent scholarship is a thankless task but a necessary one. Were it not for independent scholars there would be only dependent scholars whose research is beholden to the institutions that patronize them. Only those with nothing to lose are free to study whatever they want. Of course, no one is truly independent and this book could not have been produced without the aid of colleagues who smuggled resources to me from Emory University and Agnes Scott College. I extend a very special thanks to everyone who helped in this capacity, especially Kati Newburg.

I must also thank the vampires and vampirologists who provided materials and interviews without which this book would not have been possible: Merticus, Zero, Maloryn, Soulsplat, Eclecta, Kiera, Michelle Belanger, Father Sebastiaan, SphynxcatVP, Stephen O'Mallie, Daemonox, Lord Alistair, Nicholas, Vyrdolak, Lady CG, Martin Riccardo, Stephen Held, J. Gordon Melton, and others.

This page intentionally left blank

CHAPTER 1

What Is a Vampire? or, The Varieties of Vampiric Experience

Probably a crab would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean, and thus dispose of it. "I am no such thing," it would say; "I am MYSELF, MYSELF alone."

—*William James,* The Varieties of Religious Experience.

Jan L. Perkowski, in his treatise on Slavic vampirism, writes that the vampire's origins "are known to no one."[1] While belief in vampires can be traced to Eastern Europe, he suggests that the Slavs may have received the idea from the Middle East. Perkowski points to historical and philological evidence linking the vampire to a series of pre-Christian dualist cults that made their way into Europe from Iran. However, almost all cultures have stories of vampire-like creatures. The fear of the dead returning to life may have begun as soon as humans were able to comprehend death. In the summer of 2008, a "vampire grave" dating back to the early Bronze Age was discovered in the Czech Republic. The grave contained a 4,000-year-old skeleton pinned beneath two large stones: one on its head and one on its chest. Archaeologists believe this burial was intended to make sure the corpse remained in the grave.[2]

Vampirologist Eric Nuzum points out that although much of the folklore associated with vampires comes from Greece, Hungary, Turkey, and the Slavic countries, the term "vampire" does not originate in any of these places. The earliest recorded uses of the word appear in French, English, and German literature describing vampire panics in Eastern Europe. According to Nuzum, "The word

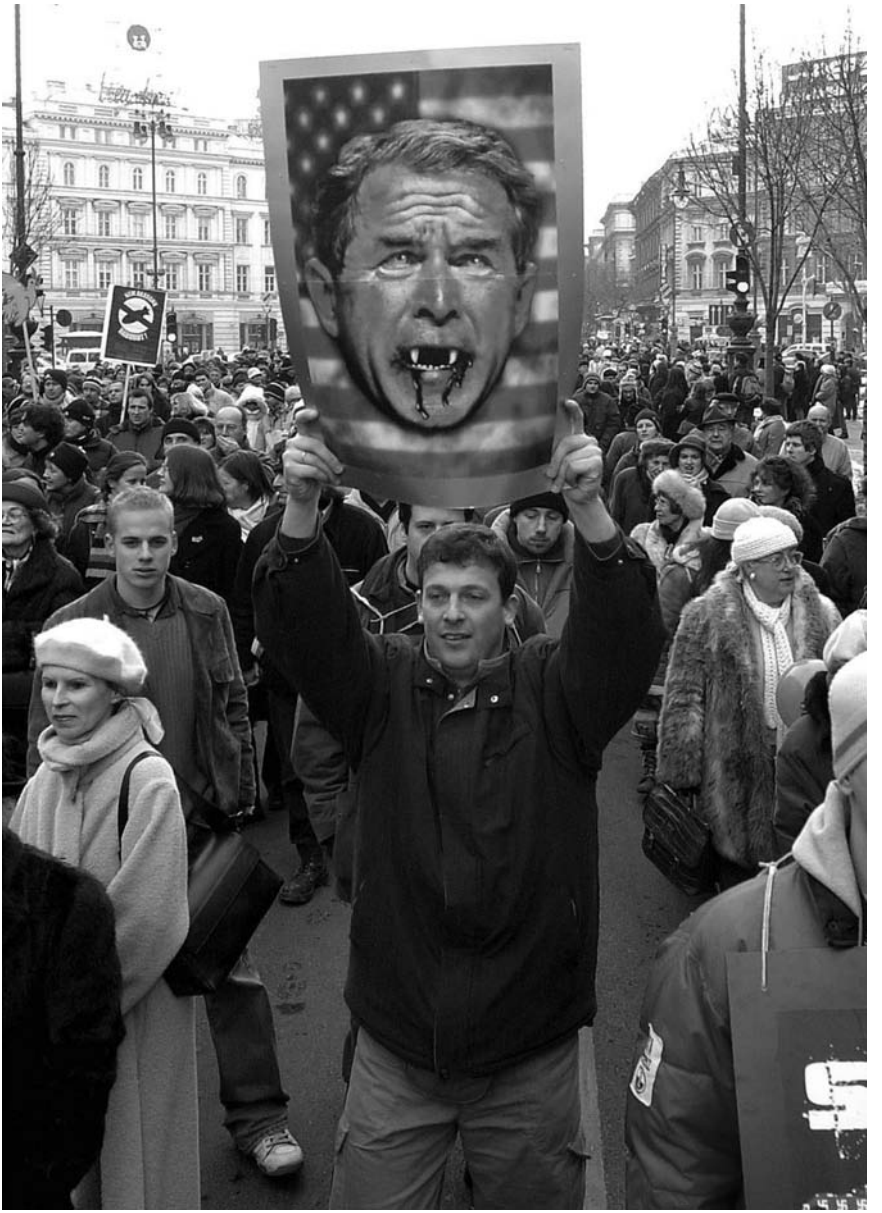
seems to have just appeared."[3] Nuzum has admirably tracked down the first use of the word in the English language to Charles Foreman's *Observations on the Revolution in 1688,* a text that was written in that year but not published until 1741. Foreman was not describing the living dead but used the word as a metaphor. He referred to a group of unethical traders as "Vampires of the Publick and Riflers of the Kingdom."[4]

The word "vampire" continues to refer to anything that exists parasitically—especially economic systems. In 1867, Karl Marx wrote in *Das Kapital,* "Capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks." Bob Marley warned that the "Babylon system is the vampire." When Myanmar was devastated by a cyclone in May 2008, those accused of exploiting the tragedy for financial gain were called "vampire capitalists."[5] Even Liriel McMahon, a former practitioner of vampirism and founder the Vampirism Research Institute, suggested that Bill Gates and other corporate CEOs are "the real vampires."[6]

Manipulative or parasitic people are also referred to as vampires. When I taught secondary school, a colleague warned me not to be manipulated by the students, adding, "If you let them, they will drink every last drop of your blood." Dr. Jeanne Keyes Youngson, the founder of the Count Dracula Fan Club, received a letter from someone who described himself as a vampire by the sole criterion that he was a social parasite. He added, "Allow me to point out that I am no worse than the average man. I believe we are all vampires in one way or another. Show me the person who will really inconvenience himself to help a stranger, and I'll show you a non-vampire."[7] *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd resorted to similar vampiric imagery in a column about the 2008 Democratic primary:

> Maybe I've been reading too many stories about the fad of teenage vampire chick lit, worlds filled with parasitic aliens and demi-human creatures, but there's something eerie going on in this race. Hillary grows more and more glowy as Obama grows more and more wan. Is she draining him of his precious bodily fluids? Leeching his magic? Siphoning off his aura? It used to be that he was incandescent and she was merely inveterate. Now she's bristling with life force, and he looks like he wants to run away somewhere for three months by himself and smoke.[8]

It is interesting that in this attack on Senator Clinton, Dowd shows how knowledgeable she is of vampire lore. The suggestion that Clinton is siphoning Barack Obama's aura has its roots in nineteenth-century occult lore (see Chapter 3.) Dowd is also drawing on a tradition of self-help literature that uses the word "vampire" to describe those who drain our psychological and emotional reserves. Books like *Unholy Hungers: Encountering the Psychic Vampire in Ourselves and Others* by Barbara E. Hort, *Emotional Predators Who Want to Suck the Life out of You* by Daniel and Kathleen Rhodes, and *Emotional Vampires: Dealing with People Who Drain You Dry* by Albert J. Berstein use the word in this sense.



A peace protest in Budapest, Hungary, portrays George W. Bush as a vampire. (AP Photo)

Finally, the vampire has achieved cultural manifestations such as Sesame Street's The Count and General Mills' Count Chocula that signify nothing. Vampire fiction writer F. Paul Wilson expresses his disgust at this development, "We have lost the vampire; we've trivialized the vampire. I think it happened

about the time 'Count Chocula' found its way to cereal boxes."[9] Wilson is correct: Count Chocula indicates that there is no longer a clear link between the sign of the vampire and a signified concept (assuming there ever was one). These modern cultural icons are imitations of vampires that are themselves imitations, compounded upon each other in what philosopher Jean Baudrillard called "the hyperreal." Count Chocula is an imitation of the actor Bela Lugosi. Lugosi's movies were adapted from Bram Stoker's *Dracula,* which was itself a departure from the vampire of folklore. Thus, we have a breakfast cereal based on an actor based on a book based on a myth.

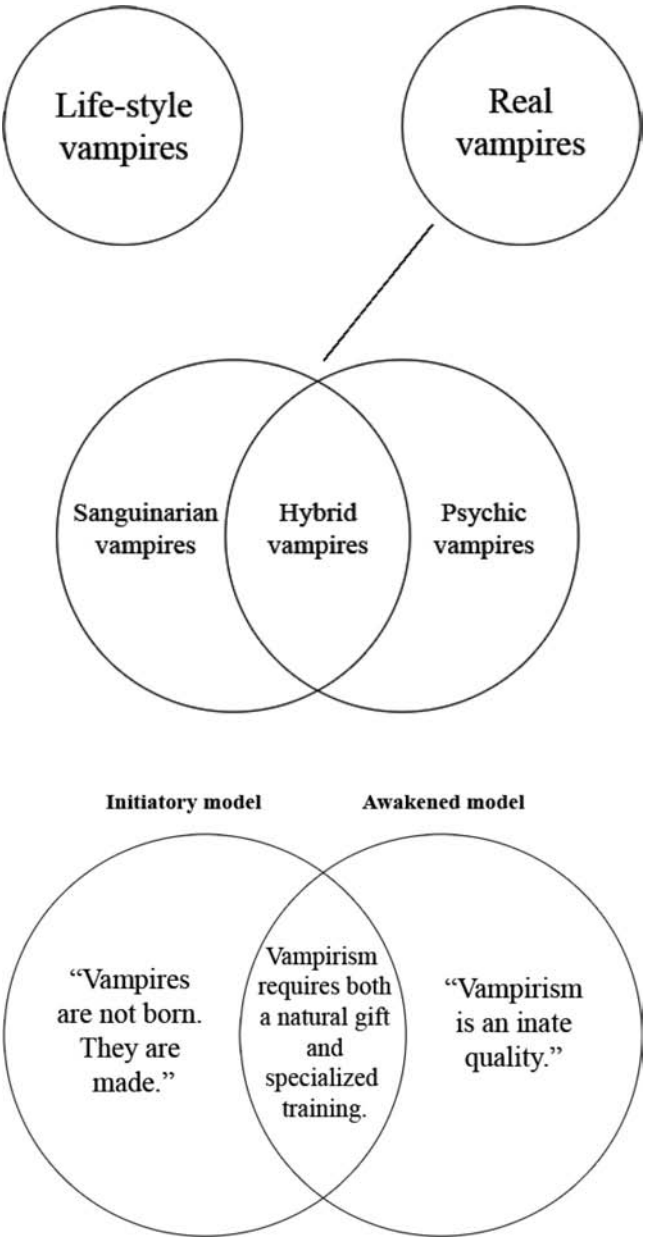
"Vampire" is a term that comes from nowhere and can refer to almost anything. Accordingly, it is extremely difficult to interpret the statement, "I am a vampire." This has led both self-identified vampires and vampire researchers to devise taxonomies of vampires. The late Stephen Kaplan's Vampire Research Center divided its research between physical vampires, psychic vampires, psychological vampires, "vampiroids" (or vampire-like people), vampire cults, vampire tendencies, and vampire interested people (VIPs). Kaplan also added the category of "unsure and unknown types" to cover anything else.[10] Katherine Ramsland reports attending an online class run by Manhattan's Vampire Access Line with a different taxonomy: Class materials delineated six different "races" of vampires labeled Classicals, Inheriters, Nighttimers, Genetics, PsiVamps, and sexual vampires.[11] These vampire taxonomies are not only ephemeral, they are hopeless. Katherine Ramsland expresses her frustration with trying to circumscribe the modern vampire:

> Vampires today do not have to avoid the sun, kill anyone, or even drink blood. They can have families, get a tan, and drink wine. Anyone who wants to devise a definition of the vampire condition has the authority to do so . . . and plenty of people have stepped forward to do just that.[12]

Rather than attempting to present a systematic list of vampire types, this chapter provides some orientation by which the reader can contextualize the individuals who make up the vampire community. Toward this goal, there are three dimensions of vampire experience that are especially helpful. First, there is the distinction between "real vampires" and "lifestyle vampires." Second, there are different feeding methods. Finally, there are different models of how one arrives at a vampire identity that are here dubbed "awakening" and "initiation." These dimensions are not always mutually exclusive, and there are, no doubt, self-identified vampires who defy them entirely. However, they provide a foundation by which to understand the subsequent chapters.

Lifestyle Vampires versus Real Vampires

Much of a self-identified vampire's world is determined by whether or not the individual sees vampirism as a life-style or as an essential part of their nature.



The three axes of vampire identity: lifestyle vs. real, sanguinarian vs. psychic, and initiatory vs. awakened.

Giddens suggests that "life-styles" have become so important to identity in part because modern society presents individuals with an overabundance of choices.[13] Thus, a vampire life-style represents a set of personal choices. "Real vampires" typically do not feel that they made a choice to become a vampire; it is simply part of their nature and cannot be changed.

Lifestyle vampires are fascinated by the vampire of film and literature and seek to emulate this archetype. They usually wear black clothing and may also sport makeup, prosthetic fangs, or special contact lenses. Vampire researcher Rosemary Ellen Guiley describes this appearance as "vampire drag." In 2000, *The New York Times* interviewed Ms. Saige, a self-described lifestyler:

> "I live the lifestyle," she says. "But I'm not a real vampire. Nobody can live forever." Ms. Saige estimates that there are 1,000 vampire lifestylists in New York City and thousands more worldwide. "There's a clan in Europe, one in California and a huge clan in Texas," she says. "We all know each other."[14]

Although lifestylers do not claim to be fundamentally different from non-vampires, many lifestylers still show profound dedication to their chosen identity. Journalists Jeff Guinn and Andy Grieser describe an interview in Indianapolis with a lifestyle vampire who sleeps in a coffin and has had resin fangs permanently installed. In the interview, Christine Darque describes learning to eat again after installing the fangs and having to sleep with a bit, lest they break off accidentally.[15]

For some, the vampire life-style also includes consuming blood. While lifestylers may enjoy consuming blood on a variety of levels, they do not need to feed to maintain their well-being in the way that real vampires do. Ramsland quotes an anonymous vampire on the desire for blood: "For me, being a vampire means fulfilling my needs through the willing sacrifice of others. I am offered blood, sex, and power over otherwise inert lives. . . . The ingestion of blood pleases me, it strengthens me, but it does not literally give me power."[16] Such a vampire would generally be considered a lifestyler by the community at large: They describe sexual and psychological gratification from consuming blood but not an actual health need.

Although many real vampires also participate in the vampire life-style, there is tension between the two types. Some lifestylers believe that there are no "real vampires" and that those who claim to be vampires are mentally ill. Conversely, many real vampires express irritation with lifestyle vampires. They feel that their use of the vampire label muddies the waters and makes it harder for real vampires to present themselves as having an actual condition. Real vampires use a number of pejorative labels for those preoccupied with the vampire life-style including "baby bats" and "kids in capes." Father Sebastiaan Tod van Houten, a leader in the New York vampire scene, said of the lifestyle/real vampire dichotomy:

> What bugs me is most people who brought up the whole lifestyler are internet vamps and don't participate off their computers. It seems the people in the internet vamp scene, who labeled this lifestyler scene, think that vamps have to look un-kept, mullet-wearing and sloppy to qualify as a vampire. They scoff at dress codes and dressing up and having fun with it. Damn who doesn't think a decent looking girl wearing fangs, stiletto shoes and a corset is hot? And why would that disqualify her as being able to be a vamp.[17]

At any rate, real vampires are not *defined* by the way that they dress. Instead, they usually define themselves by their need to feed, either on blood or energy, in order to maintain their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.[18] If a lifestyler claimed to require blood in order to be well, they would cease to be a lifestyler and instead would be characterized as a real vampire. By contrast, many real vampires have no association with gothic culture and some seem to view this association as a source of embarrassment. The Vampire and Energy Worker Research Survey (VEWRS) asked vampires, "Do you consider yourself Goth?" Sixty-four percent of respondents answered no.[19]

Many real vampires also believe that they have paranormal abilities similar to those reported by psychics. Suscitatio Enterprises, a research group created by real vampires, describes these abilities: "Vampires often display signs of empathy, sense emotions, perceive auras of other humans, and are generally psychically aware of the world around them."[20] Guinn and Grieser have interviewed vampires who describe abilities such as night vision, premonitions, and mind reading.[21] *The Psychic Vampire Codex* by Michelle Belanger describes numerous effects that can be accomplished by a vampire using psychic energy, such as healing injuries or increasing one's strength and stamina. Lady CG divides vampire abilities into the categories of charm, energy manipulation, empathy, strength, and night skills.[22] From my time in the vampire community, it seemed that virtually all real vampires accept that events defying any traditional scientific explanation happen on a regular basis. However, they were not uncritical, and more fantastic claims made by other vampires could become the subject of ridicule. One of my contacts in Atlanta described meeting a vampire who claimed that he could run up walls like a lizard. Sadly, when he made this boast at a party he added that he was too drunk to offer a demonstration.

Feeding: Sanguinary, Psychic, and Hybrid Vampires

While all real vampires must feed in order to be well, there are three subcategories, each with a different feeding method. "Sanguinarian" vampires consume small amounts of blood, typically human, while "psychic" vampires have the ability to draw subtle energy out of other people. This energy is often called "psi" and is considered to be the life force of the donor. There are also "hybrid" vampires who use both feeding techniques. Unlike the vampire taxonomies used by Kaplan and the Vampire Access Line, these feeding types have become a sort