Chase Berggrun's *R E D* and Transfeminist Erasure: Uncovering a "Queer Tongue" in *Dracula*

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Abstract:
This article examines how the lyric speaker of Chase Berggrun's poetry collection *R E D* (2018) composes herself from the multiple narrative voices of Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897). Berggrun uses erasure as both an embodied and a textual practice in order to record the testimony of a survivor of gender-based violence. An experiment in generic and temporal transformation, *R E D* is best analysed through the lens of trans studies as its author extends queer and feminist readings of *Dracula*.

Keywords: Chase Berggrun, *Dracula*, erasure, feminism, poetics, queer, *R E D*, Bram Stoker, trans studies, transgender.

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Chase Berggrun's 2018 poetry collection *R E D* is an erasure of the twenty-seven chapters of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Dedicated to survivors of rape, sexual abuse, and domestic violence, *R E D* consists of a sequence of lyric poems narrated by a woman subjected to the horrors of patriarchal marriage who ultimately seeks revenge on her husband. It was composed during the author's own gender transition as "they were discovering and attempting to define their own womanhood" (Berggrun 2018: 1). In uncovering a powerfully individual lyric speaker in the diverse documents that make up the novel *Dracula*, Berggrun imagines how a woman might record, write, and even type herself into being, offering a trans-inclusive feminist retelling of the novel through a formal transformation of the source material.

　　R E D thus provides its readers with the opportunity to examine gender and sexuality in *Dracula* in new ways, moving beyond the already established scholarly focus on queerness toward the more specific and less often considered lens of transness. In the introduction to the 2018 collection *TransGothic in Literature and Culture*, Jolene Zigarovich asks: "If Gothic

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'has always been queer,' why can't we also look at specific ways that Gothic 'has always been trans'?" (Zigarovich 2018: 6). Published in the same year, the special issue of *Victorian Review* on 'Trans Victorians', guest edited by Ardel Haefele-Thomas, similarly challenges scholars to turn to trans studies when they approach texts that have been more commonly read through the broader perspective of queer theory (see Haefele-Thomas 2018). Unsurprisingly, considering the focus of classic and influential works of *Dracula* scholarship such as Christopher Craft's 1984 essay on 'Gender and Inversion', the trans studies turn, for which Lisa Hager makes such a compelling case in the special issue of *Victorian Review*,[1] has already begun in *Dracula* criticism. For instance, Thomas M. Stuart has recently described the vampire mouth, both phallic and vaginal, as indicative of the "melding of biological sex", identifying Count Dracula – along with his exact contemporary, the shape-shifting monster featured in Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897) – as a trans-body whose gender and temporal fluidity challenges "eugenic" English culture in the novel (Stuart 2018: 220, 219). In concert with this emerging body of criticism on transness in *Dracula*, Chase Berggrun's poetry collection, through its imaginative reappropriation of the source text, invites readers to develop a fresh awareness of how gender identity functions extremely fluidly in the novel.

Most obviously, the language of *R E D*'s singular female speaker is drawn from all the narrators that contribute to *Dracula*, blurring the boundaries between characters and therefore their categorisation according to a gender binary. Berggrun's erasure thus amplifies the physical and mental gender crossings already detectable in, for instance, Stoker's account of Lucy's four successive male blood donors and Mina's psychic access to the Count's sensations while travelling. However, rather than simply identifying such elements of transness within *R E D*, my analysis of the collection takes its cue from Claire O'Callaghan, whose 2020 article on Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* (2006) models how a trans studies approach can create more inclusive feminist readings of texts, emphasising both embodiment and agency in gendered experience and identity. *R E D* identifies neither its narrator nor "her predecessors", the women of *Dracula* named as Wilhemina Murray, Lucy Westenra, and the "weird sisters", as trans (Berggrun 2018: 1, 62). Instead, Berggrun's assertion that the narrator "traveled alongside them" during their transition foregrounds this erasure of *Dracula* as always informed by a transfeminine perspective (Berggrun 2018: 1). As Susan Stryker and

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Paisley Currah noted in their introduction to the inaugural edition of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, transgender people are "subjects of knowledge" who can "articulate critical knowledge from embodied positions" (Stryker and Currah 2014: 9). Through *R E D*, Berggrun offers us such critical knowledge not only of *Dracula* but ultimately of ourselves as persistent readers of *Dracula*.

As a trans poet, Berggrun provides a suggestive parallel to Bram Stoker as an allegedly homosexual novelist. Their queer identities encourage us to consider how both texts not only contain transgender or homosexual content and themes but are informed by the subject position and worldview of their authors. Barry McCrea has argued that *Dracula* is "a terrified and titillated fantasy about the implications of being a heterosexual woman […] viewed from inside the gay closet", a "vision" that "we can add" to the "feminist understanding of marriage as a vampiric prison" (McCrea 2010: 253, 263). Berggrun is akin to Stoker in both desiring and fearing the "implications of being a […] woman" (McCrea 2010: 253) but ultimately does not align themself with the novel's author. Indeed, the parallel between a homosexual man and a trans woman is necessarily limited: while Stoker provides an additional or alternative vision of being a woman in *Dracula* from a position of social and legal exclusion, Berggrun provides a perspective on female experience that is simultaneously embedded and emergent, revealing through erasure the complexities of both Victorian and neo-Victorian gender discourses and practices. O'Callaghan notes that her case study, authored by a cisgender man, "endors[es] an inclusive feminist perspective that validates trans* women as women within feminist history", specifically by demonstrating that transgender women are more vulnerable to the sexual violence and misogyny that so often define women's experience of gendered oppression (O'Callaghan 2020: 93). Authored by a trans woman who inhabits the already vulnerable category of woman with intersectional precarity, *R E D* offers a feminist critique of *Dracula* that unequivocally describes Lucy and Mina's experiences as assault and abuse, framing the male characters' ostensibly nurturing behaviours as consistently coercive and violent.

1.   Reclaiming Female Experience and Agency

Berggrun intensifies the reader's attention to what they have described as Stoker's "hollow, easy, flawed hallucinations of women" by using Stoker's own words to "create a narrative at odds with his warped idea" of women

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(Berggrun in Brady 2017: n.p.). For example, Berggrun's erasure of Chapter V, in which Mina and Lucy's voices first appear through their exchange of letters, inverts Lucy's subservient rhetoric. In *Dracula*, Stoker presents Lucy as seeking her friend's endorsement for gender deference, stating "a woman ought to tell her husband everything – don't you think so, dear?" and asking, "dear Mina, why are men so noble when we women are so little worthy of them?" (Stoker 1997: 58, 60). Berggrun's narrator appears to respond to such an appeal with the starkest of rebuttals, announcing that "a woman ought to tell her husband very little" and concluding the poem before Stoker introduces the voices of Lucy's three suitors in the source chapter with the unpunctuated and therefore more explicitly rhetorical question, "Why are men so little worthy of a girl" (Berggrun 2018: 8). While Stoker's Lucy is attracted to Dr. Seward and enjoys his flirtatious scrutiny of her as though she were a patient, Berggrun's narrator exposes such "power" as "nothing handsome" and such behaviour as revealing a man's belief "that women were made to amuse him" (Berggrun 2018: 8).

    R E D's reversal or contradiction of the source material in such instances builds on the feminist interpretations and adaptations of the troublingly monstrous figure of Lucy that emerged in the late twentieth century. For instance, Berggrun explicitly acknowledges the "significant influence" of Werner Herzog's 1979 film adaptation and its portrayal of Lucy as a "self-determined, powerful woman" (Berggrun in Brunton 2018: n.p.). Berggrun's version of Chapter XVI is a case in point: the narrator describes herself in the terms Seward uses for the vampiric Lucy, even reclaiming his "savage delight" at the thought of killing her, and then asserts, "I will strike the blow that sets me free" and "I shall be ready [...] to find the author of this sorrow and stamp him out", taking on responsibility for the tasks assigned by Stoker to Van Helsing and Lucy's band of admirers (Berggrun 2018: 32-33). Like Joss Whedon's titular protagonist of the television series *Buffy* (1997-2003), another inspiration for Berggrun, *R E D*'s narrator can slay for herself.

    R E D also appears to draw on more recent critical work on the women in *Dracula*, which has been more likely to acknowledge Stoker's progressive representation of Mina. For example, Jordan Kistler argues that Mina's feminine sympathy enables her to "regain power after a traumatic assault" (Kistler 2018: 366), while Alyssa Straight emphasises Mina's "productive force" through her documentation and circulation of textual knowledge (Straight 2017: 391), both concluding that Mina's skills are depicted as the
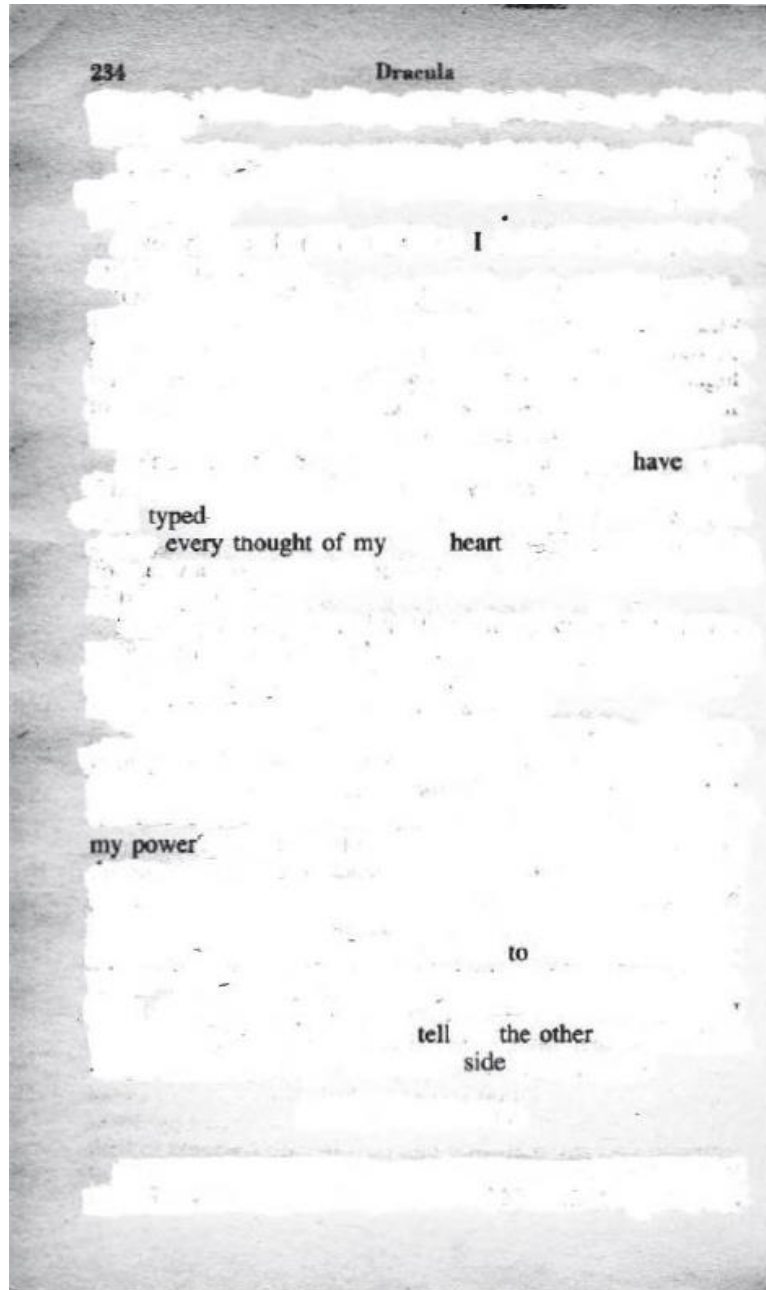
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most essential element in the plot to defeat Count Dracula. Berggrun's erasure also surfaces similar insights, especially by rejecting the apparent passivity of the woman as medium. However, Berggrun has repeatedly affirmed that Stoker's misogyny is "deep-seated" (Berggrun in Brunton 2018: n.p.). Thus I would suggest their implicit alignment with reclamations of Mina's agency demonstrates that such a feminist vision is a product of critical reading practices that "fuck with" *Dracula* just as Berggrun does (Berggrun in Brady 2017: n.p.) rather than an intentional element of Stoker's novel. This is evident in the transformation of Mina's condescending jokes about the New Woman in Chapter VIII of *Dracula* into the narrator of *R E D*'s hope that "someday some new women / will be allowed to see each other happy" (Berggrun 2018: 13). Reading *Dracula* scholarship through the lens provided by Berggrun suggests that to celebrate, for instance, Mina as the author and editor of the documents that make up the novel is to affirm the creative power of our own authorial role as feminist critics, our skill in editing *Dracula* into the feminist text that Stoker was unwilling or unable to produce.

The narrator of *R E D* is akin to Mina, Stoker's critics, and Berggrun themself as she creates her own agency and narrative from the resistant materials of the patriarchy. This demonstrates a trans studies understanding of gender as O'Callaghan explains it: rather than foregrounding performative, socially constructed, or discursive conceptions of gender, a trans approach emphasises the agency of subjects to identify and affirm their gender, as well as highlighting the significance of their embodiment and lived experience (O'Callaghan 2020: 88-90). The narrator of *R E D* composes and articulates herself, fashioning her body as well as her speech.

Berggrun's erasure of Chapter IV provides a revealing example. This is the final chapter in Jonathan Harker's journal of his experiences at Castle Dracula: it includes such provocative incidents for thinking through queer embodiment, performance, and identity as the Count undressing Jonathan; the Count posing as Jonathan after stealing his clothes; Jonathan's failed attempts to subvert the Count's control of his correspondence; Jonathan mimicking the Count's lizard-like crawl across the castle walls; and Jonathan inflicting a gash on the sleeping blood-bloated Count's face, all of which have been explored in depth by critics interested in homoeroticism and gender instability. In Chapter IV of *R E D*, the narrator has to "pretend" to obey her "monster" of a husband as she, like Jonathan, occupies a "prison" in which her body is "threatened" (Berggrun 2018: 6). Rather than exploring this prison

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or investigating her captor, however, the narrator searches within herself and her body: twice she states "I made a discovery" (Berggrun 2018: 6-7). Such discoveries are of her suppressed emotions as "hate awakened" and she "unlocked despair" (Berggrun 2018: 7), but the concrete language borrowed from Jonathan's investigation of a physical space is not merely transferred to describe abstractions. Instead, Berggrun's narrator also insists on the physicality of her self-exploration. This is presented literally in a possible scene of auto-eroticism: her "descen[t]" into a "tunnel-like passage" builds to a release as her "body" becomes "a banquet / ever-widening" (Berggrun 2018: 7). Integrating psychological and embodied self-discovery, the narrator reclaims the selfhood that "had been so forcibly splintered" by unearthing not a stable and coherent centre of identity but a dynamic and complex act of re-creation, "a song sung by wheels and whips / a determined echo   hammering away" (Berggrun 2018: 6, 7).[2]

        While Mina's acts of textual reproduction as she transcribes and types Seward's phonograph diary and other documents were a collaborative undertaking and form of service in *Dracula*, *R E D* presents the mediation of texts by her female speaker as a solitary narrative of self-determination. Having earlier "come alone to learn" about the history of women's "destruction" in "a sort of library", Berggrun's narrator later affirms her "power   to tell the other side" (see facsimile page below) through typing out her thoughts, her heart, and her self (Berggrun 2018: 4, 34). Having "copied the words of this terrible story" (Berggrun 2018: 34), she can track and comprehend the unfolding narrative of her subjugation, and thus she can decide to author its ending by plotting her husband's death. She had earlier "wanted him blotted out" but then realises she must create his absence rather than erase his presence: "I came to the conclusion / that the best thing would be death / I had written the last hour   of his life" (Berggrun 2018: 8, 35). As predicted and planned by the narrator in Chapter XVII, *R E D* ends ten chapters later with the line: "And he died" (Berggrun 2018: 59). By taking control of the text, the narrator is also able to assert control over the outcome of the plot she first reports and later determines.

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234   Dracula

                                    I

                                                        have

typed
   every thought of my   heart

my power

                                        to

                                tell   the other
                                        side

Facsimile of Chase Berggrun, *R E D* (2018), endpaper, p. 67.
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    R E D bears witness to its narrator's experience of abuse, and her commitment to "share […] bitter hours   recorded here" is essential to counter her husband's gaslighting (Berggrun 2018: 15). For instance, the narrator's unfolding realisations are indicated by the use of both spacing and line breaks in this example: "I have given up sleep / I am getting fat   he tells me / that he loves me   but I doubt that" (Berggrun 2018: 15). Following her announcement of an intentional physical behaviour, the narrator's apparently self-deprecating perception of her body initially seems to emerge from her husband's representation of it. However, the subsequent line reveals that what he tells her is untrustworthy information about his own emotional attachment to his wife, which she questions after a brief pause. While alluding to a conventional insult from a man becoming bored of a female lover, the narrator's description of her enlarging body is reclaimed as potentially both accurate and worth celebrating. Aspiring to the vigilance enabled by wakefulness, the narrator is also gaining mass and taking up space, able to reject her husband's account not only of her appearance but of his own feelings. These lines are a relatively close transcription of the flirtatious "nonsense" from Arthur that Lucy shares with Mina but contrast radically with Stoker's emphasis on both women's absolute trust in their partners (Stoker 1997: 101). As Berggrun recovers an alternative narrative from the male-authored text of *Dracula*, their narrator must do likewise.

    The risk of requiring such an account from a survivor, however, is that their confession is expected to satisfy patriarchal scrutiny. The narrator of *R E D* finds herself "not in a condition to prove much" after one instance of assault: she is "hieroglyphical   half-obliterated" like an ancient manuscript fragment that can be only partially deciphered (Berggrun 2018: 41). It is her body that is treated as a text, a source of information, in this description and she fears what her body might reveal to the man who intends to "autopsy operate   cut   unscrew" (Berggrun 2018: 25). Having recognised her entry into sexual maturity – both puberty and marriage – as a "wound", she writes that "My girl blood   my queer blood   seemed to keep breaking down / The secret of my body   coming out" (Berggrun 2018: 22). The description of her blood as both "girl" and "queer" suggests the extreme vulnerability of the transfeminine body as it functions as a public site to negotiate social anxieties about gender and women, regardless of the private intentions and individual agency of those who live with and through such bodies.

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The narrator of *R E D* has learned that men who "explain explain explain" have denounced female bodies as "unholy" when it is they who have enacted sacrilege upon them (Berggrun 2018: 28), just as it is Van Helsing who marks Mina's forehead in *Dracula* and thus makes her believe she is unclean. Unable to control how her body is marked by the actions of men, the narrator of *R E D* fears how her body will be read by a patriarchal society that will only attend to male-authored experience and evidence. This is a lesson we can learn from *Dracula* through the magnification produced by Berggrun's erasure. For example, in Stoker's novel, Van Helsing uses the simile "like the fine ladies at the opera" to describe "new beliefs […] which are yet but the old, which pretend to be young" (Stoker 1997: 171), aligning male-authored ideas that are to be respected with female bodies that are to be mocked. Berggrun expands this transference of language in *R E D*: thus, it is the female narrator rather than Van Helsing's theories that will "sprout" when "ripened" in the erasure of Chapter X (Berggrun 2018: 18). Berggrun reveals women as always the implicit object of knowledge in the novel, registering a deep ambivalence about gendered forms of knowledge.

Exposing the threat of masculine logos as exerted upon women's bodies, *R E D* also strives to create a parallel account of a woman's intellectual and embodied experiences that seeks legibility on very different terms. While Jonathan Harker offers "bare, meagre facts, verified by books and figures" in his journal (Stoker 1997: 35), Berggrun's narrator in the erased version of Chapter III decides to "begin" with the embodied and individual "observation" (Berggrun 2018: 5), which Stoker's male protagonist explicitly dismisses as confusing and doubtful. The narrator of *R E D* "want[s] to believe […] in / a universe   willing / to understand" (Berggrun 2018: 29), acknowledging such a readership as both desirable and unlikely. She begs the reader for acknowledgement – "Can you not tell […] Don't you know" (Berggrun 2018: 38) – in the impatient hope that her attempt to narrate has succeeded as a communicative act, even as she refuses to comply with the hegemonic conditions for storytelling employed by Stoker and his narrators. "This whole story is put together / in such a way that you know more than I do" (Berggrun 2018: 39). Thus the reader bears a significant responsibility to avoid a prurient attitude toward her disclosure or a hasty judgment upon her sanity. Recalling that "Victorian gender was the work not only of a person in and of themselves but also the work of intimate partners, institutions, and communities" (Hager 2018: 51-52), we must engage with the

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narrator's testimony and Berggrun's erasure on their own terms, even as we recognise that their goals are to be accomplished collaboratively.

2.   Erasure and Its Possibilities

The praise featured on *R E D's* cover by the publisher indicates that early readers of Berggrun's erasure understood and responded to this appeal: Srikanth Reddy, whose sequence of erasures *Voyager* (2011) is cited in the collection's acknowledgements, predicts that readers will be "saturated and implicated" (Reddy in Berggrun 2018: 64). Berggrun's fellow poets also provide a nuanced account of the textual and bodily emergence of self in *R E D*, demonstrating the centrality of this arc in the collection. For instance, Natalie Eilbert's featured review emphasises Berggrun's construction of the narrator's agency as "a selfhood that comes alive in declarative flourishes", describing how "'I,' that bossy mercurial pronoun" becomes a "transcendent blade beyond confession" even as the "body queers, it splints" (Eilbert in Berggrun 2018: 64). Similarly, Reddy suggests the erasure can be regarded as a "formal experiment in queer auto-theory", an "adventure in appropriation as self-disclosure" (Reddy in Berggrun 2018: 64). Both endorsements capture the dynamic I have described, in which *R E D*'s narrator discovers and fashions herself through wrestling with identities and experiences that originate from others. However, I would counter Reddy's interpretation of *R E D* as "the metamorphosis of individual into chorus" (Reddy in Berggrun 2018: 64). Reversing this formulation reminds us that *R E D* resolves the multiple narrative voices of *Dracula* into the singular voice of its narrator as Stoker's multivocal novel, an overt instance of heteroglossia, is transformed, unified, and centralised into a lyric utterance. Berggrun's narrator selects, absorbs, and remakes the text of *Dracula*, rejecting its plurality of narrative voices and focusing the reader's attention on what only remains implicit in the novel: this story of violence is recorded and shared by the woman who most suffers from and most triumphs over her persecutor.

        Chapter VII of *R E D* is the exception to this centripetal formal strategy: Berggrun's tripartite structure follows Stoker's segmentation of the chapter into a newspaper account of the storm at Whitby, the ship's log recounting Count Dracula's decimation of the crew, and Mina's journal entry on Lucy's distress in the storm's aftermath. Berggrun's erasure presents a third-person narration of the storm – as "She took all men" – that brackets a briefer first-person plural account from the men's point of view as "God

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seems to have deserted us" (Berggrun 2018: 11). Even in this rare adherence to the source novel's hybrid form, however, Berggrun reduces the distinction between the article pasted into Mina's journal and her own continuation of events, foregrounding female agency and authority. David Hoover has used computational stylistics to demonstrate that, unlike its formal precedents such as Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), Stoker's *Dracula* does not present its multiple narrators as unique or distinctive speakers (see Hoover 2017: 25). By almost always erasing the formal and linguistic markers that might distinguish *Dracula*'s narrators and their different choices of media, Berggrun's erasure reveals the lack of diversity in Stoker's composition. It also reveals the accuracy of referring to the novel as "Bram Stoker's *Dracula*" (following the example of Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 film adaptation), which the erasure's title page must do in order to produce *R E D* as the title for Berggrun's collection. *R E D*'s consolidation of a female-authored counter narrative suggests a different singularity as the source for *Dracula*: its editor, Mina Harker.

Earlier versions of *R E D* did explore the specific voices of *Dracula*. Berggrun describes in interviews how they "wrote poems in Dracula's voice, a series of short epistolary lyrics from Mina to Lucy" but were not "satisfied" and turned to the more "physical" practice of erasure as the project evolved (Berggrun in Brunton 2018: n.p.). The narrator of *R E D* thus displays vocal versatility in her absorption of language that was mediated by multiple people in *Dracula*. A case in point is Chapter XXIV, which opens in *R E D* as follows:

> Where there is   where shall be
> blood   blood   blood
> soon   and   final
> blood   blood
>   where there might be
> blood   a dense   blood
> again   blood   again
> (Berggrun 2018: 48)

Blood spurts forth "again […] again" in these lines as the narrator recalls her own blood as it flowed from both natural causes and masculine violence, determining how the blood in her husband's veins, what engorges his penis

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as a tool of violence, might be released when she enacts her revenge. Anticipating the destruction of this male body, the narrator reflects: "My language was of blood" (Berggrun 2018: 48).

A reader might assume that Stoker's language is also of blood in the source chapter, but this is an instance where Berggrun erases pure rhetoric in order to reclaim the materiality of language and its entanglement with embodiment. Chapter XXIV of *Dracula* is dominated by Van Helsing's voice as he records himself on Seward's phonograph and, through Mina's meeting report, describes his interaction with the captain of the ship on which the Count is planning to make his escape. Van Helsing is quoted by Mina as citing the captain's frequent swearing thus: "the captain tell him that he had better be quick – with blood – for that his ship will leave the place – of blood – before the turn of the tide – with blood" (Stoker 1997: 276). Van Helsing's anecdote about the sailors, "my friends of the thirst and the language that was of bloom and blood" (Stoker 1997: 277), is intended to be a humorous instance of this foreigner (also note the ungrammatical verb form, "tell") amusing his friends by describing a lower-class group who are constantly swearing. Berggrun transforms Stoker's playful language, recalling the weaponisation of the symbolic body through the sacramental wafer used against both Lucy and Mina in *Dracula*, in order to demonstrate the seriousness of blood in their reading of the novel. The dark and ironic humour produced by Van Helsing's account of the captain describing "his ship – with blood on her also" (Stoker 1997: 276) is far from a laughing matter in *R E D* as the narrator's "mouth made for speaking firm" (Berggrun 2018: 48) forces us to perceive the physical consequences of linguistic violence, whether suffered or deployed.

The source material's ease with mocking not only the "polyglot" captain's rage against the Frenchman the Count presents himself to be (Stoker 1997: 276) but also the quaintness of Van Helsing's Dutch accent indicates the thread of xenophobia that runs through *Dracula*, which has been especially noted by critics interested in Stoker's presentation of Count Dracula as a foreign threat. Scholars that attend to the Count's queerness usually acknowledge this intersectionality. Indeed, he is one of the examples used by Caroline Koegler and Marlena Tronicke to demonstrate how Victorian colonial discourses continued the Gothic's "organisation of transgressive desires along ethnic and geographical lines" (Koegler and Tronicke 2020: 21), while Stuart's account of Dracula as a trans character

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explicitly notes his "queer repudiation of England's linear eugenic culture" (Stuart 2018: 219). Recent feminist accounts of the novel have been careful to examine the potential complicity of female characters in this imperialist project. For example, Straight argues that Stoker presents Mina's "skills as a service to the English nation" in order to "work against male fears of female literacy" (Straight 2017: 391), historicising rather than condemning this vision of her agency as a common late-Victorian argument for women's empowerment.

Berggrun's erasure does not appear to reinforce what is often deemed problematic in either Stoker's racialisation of queer characters or his imperialist logic. Later in the bloody Chapter XXIV of *R E D*, we learn that the narrator "tasted enemy tongues" (Berggrun 2018: 48): unlike Stoker's fear-inducing presentation of the Count's desire to speak English so that he cannot be identified as a stranger (see Stoker 1997: 26), Berggrun celebrates their narrator's linguistic empowerment through appropriation, suggesting that it is not a means for passing but rather a form of resistance against existing social and cultural scripts. For instance, the opening of *R E D* owns the racialised and orientalised depictions in Jonathan's journey as he has to translate the "queer words" he hears and drinks a foreign wine that "produces a queer sting on the tongue" (Stoker 1997: 13). In Chapter I of the erasure, the narrator announces: "I was a country of queer force […] my queer tongue would not   could not shut up" (Berggrun 2018: 3). Continually resistant to the modern epistemologies imposed on those Othered by British society, the narrator tells the man who diagnoses her "memory" as "a mental disease" to "take your theories elsewhere" (Berggrun 2018: 39), directing the discourse of her always vulnerable body, her "queer tongue", toward desire and self-actualisation. By laying claim to the language used by those who would oppress difference, Berggrun's narrator celebrates her own difference, mimicking the queer community's reclamation of derogatory terminology.

This example of Berggrun's rejection of Stoker's imperialism and xenophobia reveals how they navigate the power dynamics always at play in erasure as a practice in which one writer takes over another's text. Berggrun has acknowledged the "politics of erasure" as "unsettling and frightening", asserting their "right to deface" *Dracula* but recognising that, in other instances, erasure can be an act of white supremacy (Berggrun in Brunton 2018: n.p.). Repeatedly citing in interviews the essay in which Solmaz Sharif expresses her anxiety that "the striking out of text is the root of obliterating

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peoples" (Sharif 2013: n.p.), Berggrun can be understood as aligning themself with Solnaz's itemisation of the "political and aesthetic objectives of poetic erasure", which includes efforts to "highlight […] an original erasure" (Sharif 2013: n.p.), such as the erasure of women's voices and experiences in *Dracula*.

According to Berggrun, erasure is "always a (somewhat uncomfortable) collision of voice", and they had to struggle to "balance, merge" their own and Stoker's voices (Berggrun in Brady 2017: n.p.). I would argue that *Dracula* lends itself to the transformation of voice that happens through erasure because the mediation and even arbitration of voices through different textual practices lies at the heart of Stoker's own formal strategy. Dr. Seward's phonograph diary is a particularly revealing example. When Mina overhears him recording an entry, she experiences "intense surprise" at the discovery that he is talking to "no one" (Stoker 1997: 195). She then becomes the sole auditor, transcribing and typing his entries so that their colleagues can access necessary information without having to hear Seward's "anguish […] like a soul crying out to God" because of the "tones" of the "cruelly true" recording device (Stoker 1997: 197). At this point in the novel, as Stoker begins to reveal how the documents we have been reading so far were collated through Mina's skill and efforts, readers retrospectively recognise that their apparently intimate connection with Seward's voice is an illusion: it is a voice created by Stoker's text and, even within the fictional context of *Dracula*, it is a voice mediated by Mina's text. One might even argue that Mina's labour can be directly associated with the practice of erasure as she creates a narrative through transcribing and combining the words of many others. When Stoker composed a stage adaptation of *Dracula* in order to safeguard the dramatic rights, he cut and pasted extracts from the printed novel into the play script: this attempt to embody documents, to present the novel's voices as emanating from people rather than texts, was famously unsuccessful (see Buzwell 2014: n.p.). As the intentional pun of Berggrun's title indicates, *Dracula* is what is read. Specifically, it is women's voices and women's truth that are provided through text rather than speech: as Van Helsing notes of Lucy when she was under the Count's power, she was only able to write and not to speak about matters relating to her manipulator (see Stoker 1997: 281).

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3.   Conclusion: Queering Time

Erasure enables authors to reimagine and wrestle with texts from the past, often in order to discover what was erased, illegible, or silent in the original, especially when the source text was created by those with power and privilege.[3] For example, in *Zong!* (2008), M. NourbeSe Phillip uses erasure to discover the voices and stories of Africans that were murdered on a slave ship by working only with the words of a legal case about their enslavers' insurance claim. Through an existing analog practice, Berggrun's use of erasure achieves what Rox Samer aspires to through digital methods that can "remix our transphobic, transmisogynistic, cissexist reality" by "fragmenting what was thought unified and not hiding the cuts with which it does so" (Samer 2019: 540, 542). In using erasure to produce a transfeminist reading of *Dracula*, Berggrun dismantles Stoker's text in order to reconstruct the experiences of those who would otherwise be invisible and inaudible, allowing the resulting lyric fragments to register a persistent process of becoming.

          Erasure as a material practice has suggestive potential for transpoetics, as defined by Rebekah Edwards, because it works to "engage relations between the textual and the corporeal" (Edwards 2014: 252). Berggrun "draws on the discord, contingencies, and multiplicities possible in language" to create *R E D* (Edwards 2014: 252), particularly by examining such possibilities as they occur on the page. The facsimile pages from Berggrun's erased copy of *Dracula* that appear in the published version of *R E D* are from Chapters XXI and XVII: the emerging poems mention the body and blood as well as dressing oneself and typing or copying words and narratives, providing a microcosm of the collection's reckoning with embodied, performative, and discursive articulations and experiences of gender. *R E D* continues a tradition in rewriting *Dracula* as it follows in the wake of Dodie Bellamy's *The Letters of Mina Harker* (1998), which explored queer embodiment in the context of the AIDS crisis in San Francisco: as Christopher Breu has argued, Bellamy uses vampirism to present the body as both "malleable" and "haunted by […] material and biological limits" (Breu 2012: 269). This understanding of the body anticipates how trans studies encourages us to consider gender as more than performative or discursive. *R E D* demonstrates the potential of transfeminist erasure to uncover a far more subtle account of how womanhood is imposed, chosen, and (re-)made at the intersection of embodiment and language.

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A key element of this account is its temporality. The narrator of *R E D*'s textual embodiment is explicitly linked in Berggrun's prefatory remarks with the author's physical embodiment, both of which are described as a process unfolding through time. This process, however, is far from a linear chronological narrative. The narrator's becoming occurs simultaneously in the past, present, and future through the possibilities of lyric, specifically the eternally present moment of enunciation. Literally, the 'I' of *R E D* speaks of multiple temporalities and in multiple tenses. Chapter XIII opens with a series of statements that record past actions in order to bring the reader to the narrator's current state of mind and her anticipation of a future: "I threw […] I studied […] I hastened towards the moment / I care for nothing now except brute action / It will take thousands of men to hold me back" (Berggrun 2018: 46). These lines offer the past as a means to reach the present and the future as a possibility to be negated by the endurance of the present: the narrator focuses intensely on activity rather than reminiscence or prediction. As Jian Neo Chen and micha cardenas argue, resisting the narratives of transition that remain necessary for medical and state recognition of trans identity enables us to imagine "transness" as "a multidirectional movement in an open field of possibility" (Chen and cardenas 2019: 472). *R E D* offers such movement and possibility through its narrator's power to manipulate time: she is a "modern Morpheus" who "made the minutes disappear" and recognises that it "may be necessary to undo time" (Berggrun 2018: 14, 53).

Such statements also resonate with notions of simultaneity related to the concept of the palimpsest often evoked in discussions of neo-Victorianism (see, e.g., Gutleben 2002: 16), especially of neo-Victorian intertextuality and adaptation. The palimpsest furnishes the "conceptual framework" (Jones and Mitchell 2017: 7) for *Drawing on the Victorians: The Palimpsest of Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Texts* (2017), which connects nineteenth-century and neo-Victorian graphic practice to Gérard Genette's concept of "transtextuality" from *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982, English trans. 1997), which he defines as "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (Genette qtd. in Jones and Mitchell 2017: 2). Arguably erasure, as in Berggrun's *R E D*, likewise constitutes such "transtextuality", engaging in what Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell call "the layered self-referential, metatextual […] work that has become the signature of 'the neo-Victorian'" (Jones and

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Mitchell 2017: 2-3). By overwriting and obliterating a previous text via grafting new writing on/over prior inscriptions, the palimpsest also engages in practices of erasure. In both practices – palimpsest and erasure – the reader thus simultaneously encounters past, present and future when "the imperfectly erased traces of previous writings" may "themselves reemerge" as "a ghostly, partially legible past bleeding through contemporary textual productions", thus "challeng[ing] the fixity of textual meaning and the linearity of historical progress" (Jones and Mitchell 2017: 7). Yet erasure and its undoing of time remains curiously underexplored and often entirely unreferenced in neo-Victorian criticism to date, including in Jones and Mitchell's collection, a critical blind spot that this article begins to rectify.

The time that is most obviously undone in *R E D* is the time that has passed since *Dracula* was composed and published, a period marked by the endless rebirth of the undead vampire in entertainment. Neo-Victorian studies has often focused on novels and new media at the expense of poetry, reflecting the realities of both contemporary publishing and the popular consumption of neo-Victorian artifacts. Attention to a collection such as *R E D* can therefore expand our understanding of what the past might offer the present, especially in Berggrun's resistance to narrative chronology. The only recently deceased Tom Phillips spent five decades combining the practices of the palimpsest and erasure to create the multiplying editions of his visual epic, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (1973-2023). First begun in 1966, the project involved "alter[ing] every page" of W. H. Mallock's *A Human Document* (1892) "by painting, collage and cut-up techniques to create an entirely new version" (Phillips 2023: n.p.). The unfinished aesthetic of erasure is intrinsic not only to this iconic neo-Victorian exemplar, but arguably also to neo-Victorianism's wider-formal and political goals. Berggrun's choice to produce a poetic erasure from a prose source is particularly notable because, as Ann Heilmann has argued in her account of neo-Victorian life-writing, "the act of crossing gender" usually demands to be accounted for by "similar acts of boundary transgression" in terms of genre (Heilmann 2018: 13). Berggrun's decision to erase a novel into a collection of poems, to move across the limitations of genre, enables *R E D* to offer a narrator who is always in a state of becoming rather than one whose development is defined by a structured plot of transformation.

Berggrun's erasure remakes the relentlessly chronological and minutely accurate narrative of *Dracula* into a lyric sequence devoid of

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temporal markings. *R E D* queers time in order to enable what Carolyn Dinshaw has described as "touching across time" (Dinshaw et al. 2007: 178), much as Berggrun, through their erasure of *Dracula*, provides the "life-affirming, affective-sensual self-recognition" that queer neo-Victorian texts offer queer readers so often "denied historical visibility" (Koegler and Tronicke 2020: 1). Demonstrating how one such reader discovered such affirmation, TC Tolbert, who "often identifies as a trans and genderqueer [...] poet", reacted to *R E D* by revelling in the collection's "gifts of transition" and its "gift of a body" that their "own body needed" (Tolbert in Berggrun 2018: 64). *R E D* is the discovery of a contemporary voice, the voice of a woman and a survivor, as a trans poet transforms the always already proliferating cultural artifact of *Dracula* into a source of insight and agency into what it means to be "a storm of a woman" (Berggrun 2018: 5).

Notes

1. Hager argues that "[f]or Victorianists, trans theory and trans studies offer nuanced ways for us to approach our older interpretations of depictions of gendered spaces, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation", countering and correcting reductive binarism (Hager 2018: 32). The same holds true for neo-Victorianists.
2. Word spacing is reproduced as it appears in the *R E D* source text.
3. For a useful overview of major works, see Travis Macdonald, 'A Brief History of Erasure Poetics' (2009). Robin Coste Lewis also provides a thorough survey in 'The Race Within Erasure' (2016), emphasising how erasure can challenge the marginalisation of people of colour within the literary canon.

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