Journal of Dracula Studies

Volume 21 | Number 1 Article 7

2019

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Cover Page Footnote

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"After all, it is the glaringly
distant future of 2019,
why can't van helsing [sic]
be a little Black boy from
Rwanda. Just saying."

User comment ("Janika") on the series Van Helsing*, 2017*

When it comes to actors of color in vampire films, *Blacula* (1972) claims first and significant place for its casting of William Marshall (1924-2003) as the undead. The vampire film has had a long and decidedly pale history of using white European or American actors to portray the titular Count before a black actor could don the famous cape.[1] Marshall's performance not only created a memorable film

[1] The significance of the cape was not lost on the filmmakers: it is used for humor in the film, as Skillet asks Mamuwalde twice if he can borrow it, presumably for its fashion value.

vampire, but he also contributed to the script in a way which added additional social and historical consciousness to the tale of his character, Mamuwalde.[2] While numerous blaxploitation films, including *Blacula*, created controversy amongst black critics and others, *Blacula* also attracted its share of supporters.[3] Within the African-American community, the film was even characterized as demonstrating black power.[4]

While monster films typically are named for the monster and feature that character extensively, there must be an opposition figure. In the case of *Blacula*, critics have deservedly focused on the vampiric character in the film, but they rarely address the nature of the character who strives to defeat the

[2] See Walker, Rausch, and Watson, 121-122, on Marshall's contributions to the script.

[3] Though even contemporaneous critics recognized that a film like *Blacula* was unusual for blaxploitation in that it had a black director, it still funneled its profits to whites (see Ward 1976).

[4] Take, for instance, an editorial in *The Black Scholar* about the King Christophe film controversy of the early 1970s, in which Mexican-American actor Anthony Quinn was contracted to perform the role of the Haitian king, a role he planned to perform in blackface. Junius Griffin of the Beverly Hills-Hollywood branch of the NAACP actually voiced approval for the casting along with an unsubtle dig at *Blacula* star William Marshall, arguing that Quinn performing in blackface was fine "if black actors can play demeaning roles in *Blacula*" (53). That comment led to this rebuttal in the editorial: "*Blacula* is a powerful parable of white corruption and heroic black resistance and action against that corruption" (53). Due to the controversy, the King Christophe film was never produced (see Richards 1983).

villain.[5] Not only is *Blacula* unique for having the central vampiric character played by a black actor, but also for having the vampire's opponent similarly cast, in this case featuring the superb Thalmus Rasulala (1939-1991). In his groundbreaking interpretation, the film constructs an image of empowered blackness that far outstrips the monster he works to destroy. Here I will examine the implications of what Novotny Lawrence refers to as the "black protagonist" of the film, a protagonist who has yet to be examined in detail (17).[6] This is not an examination of how the film presents black masculinity—though that is a rich area for future analysis—but how *Dracula*'s genre tropes play out in *Blacula's* protagonist.

Since it is definitely less-well-known than it should be, the film's plot in brief: Mamuwalde, an African prince, seeks the help of Count Dracula (portrayed as white) to end the Atlantic slave trade. Dracula refuses, a fight ensures, and Mamuwalde is cursed to become a vampire and sealed in the castle in a coffin. His wife, Luva, is likewise imprisoned in the same room to die. In our present day (1972), two Californians buy the estate and the coffin. Once shipped to Los Angeles, Mamuwalde awakens and proceeds to feed on the city's residents. But he is startled to meet a woman who is the spitting image of his long-dead wife. The film proceeds in two

[5] In particular see Lehman and Browning, 2009.

[6] Consider, if nothing else, Dr. Thomas's conspicuous absence from a list of the great Van Helsings. Burt (2016) lists many *Dracula* adaptations, but not all of the films included have a character named Van Helsing.

directions, one a romantic reunion, the other Mamuwalde's attempt to avoid the pursuit of Dr. Thomas, a medical examiner and the first character in the film to realize that vampires are real. Ultimately, the reincarnated Luva is transformed into a vampire, but once she is staked and destroyed, Mamuwalde chooses suicide by sunlight over living without her.[7]

Blacula has been examined in numerous articles and monographs, but seldom to the depth it deserves.[8] Nina Auerbach's seminal and oft-cited *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (1995) fails to mention the film even once, an odd omission on the whole since she devotes much of her attention to the ways in which the vampire image changes during the 1970's, the decade which of course encompasses *Blacula*. For all its insights, the book is exclusively white in

[7] One of film's features most commented on its poster, which features Mamuwalde biting a white woman—a character who does not appear in the film, where no such attack occurs.

[8] The question of why is a complicated one that this essay cannot answer: to return to the fundamentals, we should note that since *Blacula* sits at the intersection of blaxploitation and monster film, it consequently suffers from being neither fish nor fowl. Blaxploitation critics have discussed it, but generally only in the context of the larger movement; as for genre critics, my suspicion is that too often it is dismissed by as being a gimmicky take only worthy for its placing a black actor in the leading role, but otherwise having nothing of value to say about vampires. Needless to say, I think both approaches miss the mark. Consider Gingold's remarks: "And while this product of B-flick factory American International Pictures may seem on the surface to be a schlockily opportunistic combination of two popular cinematic trends, several elements raise it above simple camp."

its outlook and focuses on fears which are white fears. To take another major monograph on vampires in film, David J. Skal's *Hollywood Gothic* only devotes half a page, most of that plot summary, to *Blacula* (268-69). George Lipsitz explores the film more deeply in his chapter "As Unmarked as Their Place in History: Genre Anxiety and Race in Seventies Cinema," but still does not examine the role of Dr. Thomas. Finally, to consider a more recent examination, Jon Kraszewski's 2016 article goes so far as to mistake nearly every major detail about the film (errors underlined):

> But when detective Thomas Gordon begins to understand that Manuwalde is the vampire responsible for a killing spree in Los Angeles, he goes to his house, opens the coffin, and stabs what he thinks is Manuwalde. Only it's Tina sleeping in Manuwalde's coffin. (26)

(1) "Gordon" is the character's first name, "Thomas" his last; (2) he is not a detective, (3) "Mamuwalde" is continually misspelled, (4) Mamuwalde does not live in a "house" at any time in the film and, by its conclusion, has relocated to an underground chemical treatment plant from his former warehouse. Finally, to give agency to the white detective character is to steal the role from Dr. Thomas, who is a medical examiner and not a police officer. It is true that Peters, the detective, drives the stake into Tina, but this is one of the few moments of the film in which the white police officer has actual agency—the chase to that point has been instigated by Dr.

Thomas, and in fact the destruction of the vampiric Tina is still directed by him as well.

While it is traditional to discuss vampires, even modern film ones, within the context of boundary crossing—that category which in traditional folk culture meant a person was likely to become a vampire after death—Mamuwalde only fits the traditional transgressor role because he brings a communicable disease to Los Angeles. Unlike Count Dracula in Stoker's novel, Mamuwalde does not seek to conquer the world through vampiric infection: his quest is entirely personal once he meets his reincarnated bride.[9] He seeks to complete himself, not to infect the United States with his minions. He is much more monstrous in a vague sense than a creature plotting world overthrow. In fact, he seems to prefer the company of an attractive woman and the hip sounds of the local club to any imperial ambitions.

Instead, Dr. Thomas is the film's boundary crosser in that his character, a strong, intelligent, and accomplished professional black man, is quite unique in the 1972 world of *Blacula*. When we look at the nature of protagonists in past films (usually known as Van Helsing in adaptations of *Dracula*), we see that not only are all of them white, they encompass other areas of privilege as well. They are educated men, professors and doctors. They are literate and knowledgeable. All these things are

[9] See Benshoff on tragedy/sympathy and how the victims may contribute to this interpretation (37-38). Waller additional writes, "The black prince is actually a tragic victim who is fully conscious of his agonizing plight" (236).

historical privileges of both whiteness and educated whiteness. Knowledge, which has been historically and systematically denied to black men and women through policies of segregation and institutional racism in education, to say nothing of citizenship and voting rights, here stands as a demarcation between races.

Dr. Thomas transgresses on the tradition of white European and American Van Helsings through his very existence as a black man. But his actions are not limited by the existence of a vampire. In other films and texts, Van Helsing derives his authority from the fact that he knows what the vampiric threat is and how to eliminate it. In the case of Stoker's novel, he takes control of the men fighting Dracula because he asserts his knowledge and therefore, as the wise elder, is the best man to lead the group. But when Dracula is dead, Van Helsing will return home and each of those who assisted him will return to their previous lives. In *Blacula*, it is clear that Dr. Thomas already exists in a way which transgresses on white authority and historical power. He is already a doctor, strong, intelligent, holding a position of power—none of these things are granted to him by the virtue of Mamuwalde's incursion into Los Angeles. Dr. Thomas also will be all these things after the vampire is destroyed. As a result, his character is imbued with these traits in a way which makes them permanent. He will return to the medical examiner's office. He may be granted special status from his work on this case, but he will continue despite it, having suffered no loss of power. That is what makes his character so unique.

Most vampire narratives include a Van Helsing, named for Dracula's primary antagonist in Stoker's 1897 novel, who leads the push to destroy the vampire. When played by an older actor, this role taps into an ancient motif from folklore: the helper.[10] The helper is usually an older individual who, if the hero is smart enough to realize it, will impart information necessary to solving the quest. In vampire fiction and film, the quest is not for a physical item, but for knowledge of how to defeat the undead. Characters learn or rediscover the code of the vampire that are crucial to their survival: that stakes can kill, that crosses repel, that sunlight burns.

Van Helsings usually occupy one of two binary modes: either they bring the knowledge of vampires to the other characters/the larger world or research them first and then distribute that information to others. Consider film's most famous Van Helsings: 1931's Edward Van Sloan, who knows exactly what he faces and famously says, "The strength of the vampire is that people will not believe in him."[11] Or 1958's Peter Cushing, who dictates his notes into a voice recorder, presumably so he can later write the definitive work after he's destroyed Dracula.

Blacula imagines a world in which people believe vampires do not exist and our Van Helsing—Dr. Thomas—does not know about them, making him even more impressive in that he researches to

[10] Tim Kane terms this role "the Expert" (60). He does not, however, analyze the role itself beyond the descriptive.

[11] A sentiment echoed by Mamuwalde at the club as well, a nod to vampire film history.

obtain the skills he needs. In film, this is rarer. Consider the Dracula films of 1931, 1958, 1979, and 1992, all of which include a Van Helsing who, true to the novel, knows everything he or anyone else needs to know to destroy the vampire. Granted, *Blacula* is not *Dracula*, and Dr. Thomas is not Abraham Van Helsing. But we may be forgiven for imagining the film might progress as *Dracula* does because Mamuwalde is cursed by none other than Dracula himself. Dr. Thomas therefore has a difficult task: to not only convince himself that vampires are real, but to do the same with any who will assist him. Using his initial suspicions as a guide, he figures it out on his own via what Hefner terms a stack of "obligatory old books" (67).[12] This fits perfectly with what the character Novotny Lawrence labels as "the first black wise elder to appear in the horror genre" (20). That said, Brooks Hefner, one of the few critics to examine the film in detail, has this to say about Dr. Thomas:

> In theory, he should provide the viewer with an alternative hero in the Shaft/Slaughter mold in whom the viewer's sympathies should lie. Instead, it is the romanticized Mamuwalde who is more likely to elicit viewer sympathy. Why, in this case, is the Van Helsing character largely devoid of positive characteristics? (67)

[12] This common motif is carried to its logical conclusion in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series (1996-2003), where the Scoobies literally meet in a library and routinely turn to the dusty books to gather information.

Despite this tantalizing indictment, Hefner never conclusively details how Dr. Thomas is "devoid of positive characteristics." He interprets him as a literal "Uncle Tom" who works within the white police institution instead of being allied with the black community, but this is hardly a crime, especially when viewed through a pragmatic lens (68-69). Hefner here is using a binary structure of sympathy in which a viewer can only sympathize with one character at a time. In fact, both characters are sympathetic—I would argue that Dr. Thomas is throughout, but even Mamuwalde is sympathetic, especially in the early scenes. Once Mamuwalde has committed multiple murders, however, the audience must recognize that society can no longer allow him to exist, and that he must be destroyed. Nor is Hefner's view the only one: J. C. Macek III, in an online review, used these words: "Luckily, the consistent hero of the film is Dr. Gordon Thomas (played by the very fine actor Thalmus Rasulala), another tough and educated African-American whom the audience can root for the entire time." Clearly, interpretations of Dr. Thomas can vary quite significantly. But Hefner's view also depends on his estimation of the police lieutenant, John Peters, as a figure of white power and influence within the film. However, though *Blacula* clearly exists within a white-dominated world, we never see Mamuwalde enter that white world or interact substantially with white characters. He appears at the club—the film's center of black culture, complete with the vocal stylings of the Hues Corporation—but only interacts

with white culture when he kills a police officer.[13] He never speaks to Lieutenant Peters directly, and it is important to note that during the final scenes in the chemical plant, Mamuwalde calls out, "Doctor Thomas!" not "Lieutenant Peters!"[14] This is not a tale of black/white opposition, and Peters is not Mamuwalde's archival: it is two black men who oppose one another, and this conflict serves as the foundation of the film's plot. Mamuwalde's acceptance of this fact and the racial brotherhood between the two men can be seen in his reply to Dr. Thomas's question while at the club:

DR. THOMAS	Mamuwalde, maybe you can help me. Are you into the occult?
MAMUWALDE	It has some fascination.
DR. THOMAS	How about the heavy stuff? Witchcraft, voodoo...devil worship.
MAMUWALDE	Well, we can't ignore what the world

[13] Even this moment, though rife with repercussions due to our modern understanding of police violence and the #blacklivesmatter movement, is not expanded on in the film. There are no scenes which suggest that Mamuwalde is especially marked for death by other cops due to that homicide, a normally common trope in film and television.

[14] Mamuwalde does use a collective term, "Gentlemen," to refer to Dr. Thomas and Lt. Peters when he encounters them at the warehouse, but later in the conversation uses "doctor" alone and takes no notice of Peters at all.

characterizes as the "black arts," can we?

This is a crucial exchange which establishes the fact that though Mamuwalde, as an undead, is quite different from everyone else at the table, he cannot resist making a comment that indicates their fundamental similarity as black men and opposition to the white world, almost a secret handshake or shibboleth that puts race above other considerations. The use of "we" is also not accidental, but a deliberate attempt to include Dr. Thomas. This is not to say that Mamuwalde truly believes any rapprochement is possible—he still moves his coffin to stay clear of Dr. Thomas, and continues his pursuit of Luva—but for a brief second, he and Dr. Thomas are more alike than they are different. It is this foundation which underlies his orientation towards Thomas as his true rival in the film, not Lt. Peters. But to truly understand Dr. Thomas's character we must examine how he transgresses on the historically white characteristics of a Van Helsing, including his professional position, his sexuality, his power over others, and his othering by characters interacting with him.

Modern statistics emphasize how unique Dr. Thomas's position would be in reality: in 2013 blacks made up only 7 percent of medical school graduates, despite a national population of 15 percent. More historical statistics support the idea that a fictional Dr. Thomas might have been one of the very few black physicians prior to the 1970s: Dr. Wayne Riley, president of the American College of Physicians, noted that his father graduated from

medical school in 1960 when three percent of doctors were black (Thompson). Let us also not forget the significance of blacks in positions of power in the Los Angeles Police Department. Though there have been black officers on the force since the 19th century, both male and female officers have been much less welcome at higher ranks: the first black male police chief only took office in 1992, twenty years after *Blacula* is set.[15] In addition, the Scientific Investigative Division, where Dr. Thomas works, is in fact a famous crime lab which was founded in the 1920's and which predates the FBI's own facility.[16] So while the choice of Los Angeles as the film's setting may have been the result of simple financial calculation for the filmmakers, the implications created by the roles here are anything but. Dr. Thomas is not only a black man in a white field; he represents and operates within the structure of an organization which for a very long time did not have many black members at all, and he does so from a position of influence.

When it comes to Dr. Thomas's sexuality, Novotny Lawrence makes a suggestive remark: "Building upon the tradition established by blaxploitation characters such as John Shaft and Youngblood Priest, Dr. Thomas is well dressed and desired by both black and white women alike [my emphasis]" (20). Lawrence does not go further in explicating this remark, but since there are so few white women in the film, and none of them interact with Dr. Thomas in any sexual way, I can only

[15] http://www.lapdonline.org/home/content_basic_view/47101
[16] *Los Angeles Police Beat*, Volume XLVI: 3 (March 2000), 3.

assume he means the morgue secretary, Shirley. Transgressing bounds of race and sexuality when he first enters the morgue, Dr. Thomas has a brief but significant exchange with the white female secretary:

DR. THOMAS	Hi, Shirley. Sam here?
SHIRLEY	Sure. Sam, Dr. Thomas is here. How ya doin'?
DR. THOMAS	Fine. You?
SHIRLEY	Fine. You're lookin' good.
DR. THOMAS	Thanks.

Not very impressive on paper, perhaps, but of course in just reading the words we fail to hear the nuances of this interaction. The secretary, Shirley—who has no other lines in the film and no role to speak of beyond this exchange—is flirting with the good doctor, and not subtly, either. Dr. Thomas's reactions, in his smile and near-chuckle, can be seen as a response to behavior which he is used to and does not reciprocate (he does, after all, have a live-in girlfriend), so it is clear that he recognizes the tenor of her remarks. So again, despite the lack of interracial male-female relationships in the film, here Dr. Thomas is transgressing racial purity and is portrayed as a desirable man even as he is firmly and clearly partnered to a woman of his own race—which represents the traditional film and media limits of male black sexuality.

The most famous Van Helsings on film have generally displayed few sexual overtones: this is an area reserved for Dracula, whose feedings always transgress personal boundaries and thus are automatic metaphors for sexual relations. Sexuality

is also incompatible with the elder role. In 1931's *Dracula*, we have an older man who plays no sexual role, and in 1958's *Horror of Dracula*, the dynamic Peter Cushing is younger and more dashing, but still displays no overtly sexual traits. Perhaps only 1992's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* engages sexuality with this character: Anthony Hopkins plays Van Helsing as a little unstable and, in the final scenes, quite susceptible to Winona Ryder (Mina Harker) and her semi-possessed, succubus-like behavior. Amongst these interpretations Dr. Thomas occupies a middle ground: he is presented as sexually desirable by women both white and black, but he is "off the market" due to his relationship with Michelle. But his physicality remains, paired with a studiousness and intellectual ability to discover the truth of vampirism. When Michelle refuses to join him to exhume a body, he applies a pressure which can only be read as sexual:

MICHELLE	Gordon, I'm always with you, right?
GORDON	Right, right.
MICHELLE	But not this time.
GORDON	Come on, babe. Come on. Just for me?
MICHELLE	Nope.
	You're so bad.
	You're so good.

Hidden between the last two phrases Michelle utters is the important physical language of Dr. Thomas's persuasion: he embraces and kisses Michelle in order to gain her acceptance of his plan. The scene reinforces his sexual prowess and ownership of his

girlfriend, explained by her complete reversal of the initial refusal.

Beyond the sexual, *Blacula* grants Dr. Thomas an influence and power beyond what we would expect from his professional role. Once he enters Lieutenant Peters's office, for instance, his entire demeanor is that of an equal or, at times, even a superior. He directs the flow of the investigation, but the most significant moment is nonverbal: the doctor doesn't take a seat in front of the lieutenant's desk, he sits on the desk. Dr. Thomas's venue is medicine, not investigative work, nor does he hold police rank, yet he presumes to sit on the desk. He also feels free enough to make criticisms from a racial standpoint.[17] And how close must you be to the lieutenant to have police files—which presumably are confidential—dropped off "at the club?"[18] This is all a little unprofessional, but clearly these two men have an attachment that is strong, as seen by the fact that Peters never objects to Thomas's actions.[19]

This is seen particularly in the use of naming. Dr. Thomas refers to the Lieutenant by his first name five times in the course of the film, and the Lieutenant does the same to Dr. Thomas twice. If that were not enough, Dr. Thomas leaves his girlfriend, Michelle, at Peters' house with his wife, Jill, while

[17] The most noted being his comment, "Strange how so many sloppy police jobs involve black victims."

[18] Nor does Thomas have to specify *which* club. Clearly, he and Peters are close enough that this suffices.

[19] While I examine the scene on its own, Hefner examines with fascinating detail the visual parallels between this scene and similar ones in *Shaft* (1971).

they are looking for the vampire. The significance here, which does lend credence to interpretations of Thomas as living figuratively outside the black community, is that he is better friends with the white police lieutenant than anyone in his own neighborhood.[20]

Thomas's power in the quest for Mamuwalde also appears in his role leading the pursuit. As the film's Van Helsing, Thomas directs the action even though Peters is the only logical leader from a real-world perspective, being a police officer. While attempting to locate the vampire, the two men share this exchange:

LT. PETERS	What do we do now?
DR. THOMAS	Now we wait. The only thing for sure is that he has to return to his coffin...before daylight.

For Peters, asking this question is emasculating: it is impossible to be in charge when you do not know what to do next. Peters here demonstrates how he is completely out of his depth and dependent on Dr. Thomas's knowledge. Instead of relying on the police, the traditional guardians of law and order, Peters turns to *Blacula's* Van Helsing. Just as in so many films and the novel *Dracula*, characters defer to Van Helsing because they know he knows more

[20] See Hefner, 70. Though a counterpoint is his friendship with Bobby McCoy, Mamuwalde's second victim. Thomas also is comfortable within his sphere, represented by blacks at the club, and is not "othered" there—he has the ability to move between both worlds.

than they do, and therefore he has the right to direct their actions.

Dr. Thomas also keeps the pursuit active by derailing Peters's pessimism. In the final stages of the search, Peters complains, "This will never work." Thomas replies, "We got no choice. We gotta keep going." Again, the successful tracking of the vampire is due entirely to Dr. Thomas, though Peters no doubt has real-world experience in finding suspects and apprehending them for trial. Instead, Dr. Thomas here functions as the brains, and Peters utters remarks more suited to a sullen teenager brought along for the ride than an experienced police officer.

Finally, Dr. Thomas not only has knowledge which outstrips that of the lieutenant, but he is more dynamic in his actions as well. When the two men find themselves trapped in the warehouse with Mamuwalde's minions, Peters is unable to bring himself to throw an oil lamp at Barnes, a former officer of his who has been transformed into a vampire. Dr. Thomas, however, does so, killing the vampire and ensuring the men survive. This continues a series of physical acts that Thomas, who again is only a doctor by training, is able to do while others are unable to engage. Later, while still in the warehouse, Thomas leaps bodily after a vampire to stake him, a move from the same cloth as Peter Cushing's running hump at the conclusion of *Horror of Dracula* (1958). Similarly, when he exhumes Billy Schaffer, whose corpse has become a vampire, he vigorously leaps onto the creature and stakes it to death. It is clear that his role includes physical opposition to the vampiric threat, not merely book-

reading and delivery of information to Peters and the other police units.

Perhaps the most interesting interaction in the film is between the funeral home's director Mr. Swenson and Dr. Thomas, but it is also puzzling in that it speaks to Dr. Thomas's role in the community and how he is perceived by other black men. Swenson, who is also black, at first mistakes Thomas for either a mourner or a meddler—the doctor is examining what to the audience (through dramatic irony) is the sign of the vampire's bite on Bobby McCoy's neck as he lies in his coffin. Swenson approaches and attempts to stop him before realizing who he is dealing with:

MR. SWENSON	I'm so sorry, but I can't let you disarrange...
DR. THOMAS	I'm Dr. Thomas with the Scientific Investigation Division.
MR. SWENSON	Of course. I'm so sorry, doctor. I didn't realize you were a professional man.

Swenson's response also indicates how Dr. Thomas exists outside expectations: we know from later on in the conversation that Swenson doesn't "get many whites" in his funeral parlor. This is a segregated world, and Swenson also assumes that the doctor is an average man, not a "professional" man—an assumption that proceeds directly from his race. Then we come to the strangest line in the entire film, which sets Dr. Thomas apart:

DR. THOMAS	Thank you for your help.
MR. SWENSON	Glad to be of service. Any time you need my help, don't hesitate to ask. I'm at your service, doctor. That's my job....doctor. That is the rudest nigger I've ever seen in my life.

The barest possible interpretation is that Dr. Thomas leaves without acknowledging Swenson's offer further, but Swenson's reaction is far out of bounds with what has occurred. Other critics have found the "rudest nigger" comment similarly odd: in the YouTube series "Black on Black Cinema," which features three commentators, none of the critics seem to find this exchange remotely sensical, though it appears inadvertently humorous as a result.[21] But regardless of the reason for Swenson's reaction, at this point Dr. Thomas is "othered" by it. Perhaps, given the nature of black men in the medical ranks, Swenson associates "professional" men with whiteness, and thus Dr. Thomas is classified as holding white characteristics which are interpreted as rude, or simply that Swenson expected a fellow accomplished black man to show him respect and exhibit deference to his position, which Dr. Thomas does not in any great degree—his behavior is businesslike and brisk, but does not offer any explicit

[21] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_jo2fWpOJSc.

insult. But through this incident, Dr. Thomas is set apart from the three black actors in the first Los Angeles scenes (Swenson, Tina, and Michelle).

One element from *Blacula* that the script fails to take up is the potential for Mamuwalde's disassociation at being in Los Angeles in 1972. He may appear a bit odd in his old-fashioned cape, but he never reacts with shock at skyscrapers, cars, pollution—even the racial variety of the city in which he now prowls.[22] All these are missed opportunities for othering—demonstrating, in fact, that Mamuwalde is not othered by his location. Despite his African origin, Mamuwalde is fully at home in LA. This is because there are really two Mamuwaldes: the vampiric, who grows hair when he consumes and seems much more animalistic, and the debonair, "drawing-room vampire" who shows up at the club to romance Luva. Despite the otherness of his African origin and vampiric nature, Mamuwalde is very much a black American male. He is not even particularly African in his displayed attitudes, habits, or beliefs, despite his backstory. He does not speak with a culturally-specific accent, though his delivery is perhaps more formal than that of people he encounters.[23] And as we've seen, his consumption as

[22] Especially considering that from Mamuwalde's point of view, he only just awakened from the prison of his coffin and his reality of the year 1780, providing almost unlimited opportunities for estrangement as he views modern American culture.

[23] This is in marked contrast to Bela Lugosi's character in *Dracula* (1931), whose accent not only othered him to the human characters but beyond the film itself, became the stereotype for Dracula's accent forever afterwards.

a vampire takes place during a physically altered state.

To face off against this dual-natured vampire, we have Dr. Thomas. While anyone can become a vampire through a bite, placing the Van Helsing role in the hands of a black actor in an American film in 1972 goes much further than casting a black actor as the vampire—it creates a black Van Helsing who is the potent agent of law and life, who hunts down Mamuwalde in order to protect his world. In the end, though in *Blacula* the vampire keeps the spotlight, it is Dr. Gordon Thomas who is the truly empowered black man on screen.

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* I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.