

Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*: Colonization and Adaptation

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Abstract This article examines questions of colonization and alterity alongside those of adaptation in Richard Matheson's novel and three film adaptations of this. Matheson's text, as a narrative about colonization, and as a hybrid text itself in terms of literary history, being both part adaptation and adaptatee, provides idea material for considering questions of adaptation and appropriation. This is explored through: narrative form and mis-en-scène; seeing and interpreting the other; hybridity; legend and fiction; and narrative history. Here adaptation is read in terms of adapting to a new environment and the process of alienation, and the adaption of texts or mythologies, which are read alongside one another to provide a reading of community, selfhood, adaptation, and history in the text.

Keywords *Matheson, vampires, alterity, adaptation, legend, myth, monstrosity.*

In a fictional Los Angeles in 1979, Robert Neville, the last human, looks out of his cell at the 'new people of the earth'—a community of vampires—and feels keenly his own non-belonging, his new position as threatening outsider, monster: 'anathema and black terror to be destroyed' (160). Matheson's 1954 novel, *I Am Legend*, has traced thus far Neville's solitary existence in a post-plague world to the point of encounter with these vampire hybrids who have built up their new society, and his subsequent surrender to them.

I Am Legend is a novel deeply concerned with adaptation and change, particularly so in two interrelated forms. First, it is a narrative of colonization, viewed from the perspective of the usurped. It involves a movement out of subjectivity as an active participant in society, through finding oneself in a new world which is distinctly 'other'; or, more frighteningly, in a world in which concepts of selfhood and otherness have been apparently subverted. This becoming other, this alienation—which takes place partly through the older definition of the term 'alienation' in the context of transferring ownership of land to another (OED)—is the focus of Matheson's novel. There is a strong relationship between estrangement and ownership at work here, and this is precisely what Matheson's novel concerns—the *process* of alienation, of becoming other, in losing ownership of a place and of the 'I Am' of subjectivity. It is about adaptation—or failure to adapt—to a new environment.

Secondly, the novel is about the adaptation of stories, about legend, and mythology, and what it means to be a figure of legend. Matheson's novel is deeply connected to the gothic genre, from its origins through Stoker's *Dracula*¹ to its concern with fundamental

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gothic anxieties about history, identity, monstrosity, and legend. It displays the same concern with the 'recapture of history' and 'connections with the primitive, the barbaric' that Punter identifies in the gothic tradition (1996a, 4), along with concerns around limits, transgression, and alterity as identified by Botting (10), and a certain political dimension and social critique noted by Spooner (157).

The concern with alterity is often mapped in uncanny encounters and in the relationship of self to other. Gothic texts, Anolik notes in *The Gothic Other*, are 'marked by an anxious encounter with otherness, with the dark and mysterious unknown' (1). Matheson's novel actually goes much further than most earlier gothic texts in terms of an assimilation of the position of other, of a crossing over into the unknown, as Neville takes on and accepts this status. Inspired by Stoker's *Dracula* itself, and later the inspiration for no less than four adaptations—not including the Romero zombie oeuvre which was likely inspired by the novel²—the text also holds a key place in terms of the lines of inheritance following through and beyond the gothic genre. Through its dystopian vision and particularly in its adapted forms it plays a major role too in what would become the post-apocalyptic genre of fiction. The 'last man' syndrome here meets the vampire novel in a creative and innovative way, exploring concepts of alterity, community, and the position of and relationship with the other. There have been many adaptations of this work, one which lends itself so well to such. This article focuses on the three best known film adaptations, *The Last Man on Earth* (1964); *The Omega Man* (1971); and *I Am Legend* (2007),³ to investigate the relationship between colonization and adaptation in the text and its later incarnations in film. In this, it demonstrates the importance of this text in considering textual colonization and adaptation, through a narrative which concerns the relationships between colonization, history, and legend.

Matheson's novel performs a study of isolation, of solitude and its effect on identity. His text is in many respects a more in-depth exploration of solitude than any of its film counterparts, though Will Smith, star of *I Am Legend* (07) and who assisted in the screenplay for this adaptation, has stated explicitly that this is what he wanted to explore through the character (Carnevale). Hutcheon notes, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, that this is a key problem faced by visual media: 'what videogames, like virtual reality experiments, cannot easily adapt is what novels can portray so well: the "res cogitans", the space of the mind. Even screen and stage media have difficulty with this dimension, because when psychic reality is shown rather than told about, it has to be made manifest in the material realm to be perceived by the audience' (14). The films must work to portray the three years' worth of access to our protagonist Robert Neville's thoughts and feelings given in the novel. The attempt is made through recollections, monologues, and through poignant extra scenes: in *The Omega Man* Neville watches a film of Woodstock dwelling on community, and in *I Am Legend* (07) the viewer sees him conversing with shop mannequins, inventing a repartee and backstory with them.

We might read the deserted city scenes early in the films as an effort to portray visually the emptiness of existence for Neville, the loneliness of his mind. Both of the earlier adaptations open with a cityscape highlighting the desolation. *The Last Man on Earth* opens with the scene of empty streets accompanied by the bodies of the dead. Robert himself—Robert Morgan as he is named in this adaptation and played by Vincent Price—is first viewed almost as one among them, until his alarm awakes him. This in

some respects highlights his similarity to them from the outset of the film, before differentiating him as human, alive, inhabiter of daylight. *The Omega Man* also opens with the empty city scene, though here we see Neville, played by Charlton Heston, immediately as active, driving through the streets. Heston's Neville is more strongly associated with a kind of colonialist figure, an Imperialist. Though all of the Robert Neville figures pursue control of their surrounding area, Neville here is adapted in terms of his job; he is a US Air Force Colonel, an army doctor.⁴ He carries a submachine gun, plays chess against a statue of Caesar in a military hat, and employs tactical language such as 'sector two', 'stalemate', and 'endgame' in the war he wages against the vampires. Straight away we see a Neville who will provoke action, change, in a way the previous ones have not. While *I Am Legend* (07) is the only adaptation not to begin with a focus on the deserted city—this opens with events preceding the outbreak of vampirism—it does utilize other means to highlight the themes of emptiness and solitude, moving the setting from Los Angeles (as in the novel and other films) to New York City, an always-busy city where Goldsman felt the desertion would provide a stronger contrast (*Empire* 79). This adaptation assigns the outbreak of the vampirism virus to a manipulation of the measles virus, intended to provide a cure for cancer, having gone badly wrong and become beyond control. In the deserted New York we see another example of that which ultimately could not be controlled; the city itself has been colonized by nature, and Neville engages in the rural pursuit of hunting deer in a Shelby Mustang through the urban streets. The colonization of the city by nature foreshadows a sense of the colonization of the human world by the dark seekers, the vampires in this film.

This deserted (in human terms) landscape, which in all the adaptations as well as the novel we see first in daylight, is introduced to us on Neville's terms, constructed through him and from his perspective as protagonist of the narrative. The novel, written in the third person yet from Neville's perspective, opens: 'On those cloudy days, Robert Neville was never sure when the sunset came, and sometimes they were in the streets before he could get back' (1). The self is named, individual, the other plural, distant yet threatening. Neville is the sole 'I Am' of the text at this point, the dominant self. In terms of his relationship to the vampires he plays the role of the Orientalist: 'dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it ... [through] a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (3). We see the construction of an identity assigned to one group (the vampires) by another (the human(s): Neville). In Matheson's text, Neville as protagonist first appears as the last representative of the group in power, a power which is fragmented and dissolved over the course of the novel. In the beginning he displays many classic attributes of the dominant self over the foreign other, such as an inability to understand the vampires, 'they were strange, the facts about them' (21). When he first encounters one of the living vampires, Ruth, his distrust towards her stems from the fact that 'his concept of the society had become ironbound' (118). Later, his comment to her on attempting to find a cure, 'I've made antibiotics, injected dozens of them' (137), follows up the phrase 'it doesn't work' immediately with 'it *can't* work' (ibid., my italics), demonstrating his inability to accept the possibility of something which he cannot himself see. Neville's intellectual dominance over 'Ruth and her people' is even shown upon her revealing the pill they have created to manage the disease to him, as he

looks under the microscope and claims, 'he knew what even Ruth and her people didn't seem to know... Bacteria can mutate' (147).

This perspective invites us as reader/viewer to participate in an act of Orientalism, viewing in the first instance the life of Neville as central and vital, and the lives of the vampires as expendable. Though Neville philosophizes on morality at times, he ultimately defends his destruction of the vampires as justified, and we are encouraged in this, in seeing them as monsters, inhuman, partly through animalistic comparisons, 'both women were the color of fish out of water' (8), as well as Neville's experiments on them as subjects.

In terms of the films, in physical appearance the vampires actually develop chronologically, appearing increasingly different from the human throughout the adaptations, from the almost human in *The Last Man on Earth* to the decidedly monstrous in *I Am Legend* (07). These different portrayals of the vampires are related to the differences in audience and medium. McFarlane draws attention to the different forms of 'making you see', by words (in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) or by image (in the cinema of D. W. Griffith) (4). Here we are indeed dealing with different forms of seeing—and it is Neville here in the first instance 'making us see' in both novel and film—in terms of both the visual and of understanding or interpreting. How we literally see the vampires on screen effects our response to them as human, for example the ambiguity of the dark seekers in *I Am Legend* (07) comes out in their expressive yet repulsive, uncanny appearance. The later films have also developed their vampires to relate to different contextual elements. *The Omega Man*, as well as bringing to light anxieties about progress and science, also contextualizes itself with the reference to the Manson trials and anxieties about religious cults through the 'family'. *I Am Legend* (07) relates itself through its vampires to the zombie and post-apocalyptic genres.

Understanding of the other's power comes for Neville in the novel when he finds himself suddenly in the position of the rejected, the monster, faced with a new standard of normalcy which he can never fit. In the final few pages of the novel, with the realization that the vampires are the 'new people of earth' (160), finally comes comprehension, where 'he understood what they felt' (*ibid.*), and it is this understanding, this acceptance, that completes his shift from selfhood to otherness and leads to his self-destruction. Neville's acceptance of himself as monstrous other comes through realizing the fear that the vampires feel for him:

Abruptly that realization joined with what he saw on their faces – awe, fear, shrinking horror – and he knew that they were afraid of him. To them he was some terrible scourge they had never seen, a scourge even worse than the disease they had come to live with. He was an invisible specter who had left for evidence of his existence the bloodless bodies of their loved ones (160).

Note his awareness of himself here as something 'they had never seen', something 'invisible'—the relationship to Anolik's 'fearful unknown' is clear here and associates him further with otherness. The invisibility of the other also lies simply in the fact that they are never truly 'seen', that their identity is given rather than fully observed and understood, as in Said's theory and Neville's earlier identification of the vampires. The question of seeing and truth becomes one of perspective, a subjective act rather than

objective one. For the first time, Neville regards himself here through the eyes of what was to him the other, observing new and disturbing aspects of himself as he appears to them.

This ending to the novel, the complete reversal of position of self and other, is conspicuously absent from all three film adaptations of the novel. It is, in fact, even absent from Matheson's own screenplay for an adaptation, suggesting perhaps that it would be problematic to represent in visual media; the representation of a complete turn in perspective, a shift in consciousness, would present the difficulties described by Hutcheon above, in terms of making manifest the space of the mind. Robert Morgan in *The Last Man on Earth* never fully accepts the position of monstrous other, though Ruth's refusal to his suggestion of joining the vampires—'You can't join us. You're a monster to them!'—does make us aware of this twist. Morgan does realize by the end of the film that 'they were afraid of me', when he is informed by Ruth of the consequences of his actions:

Ruth: Many of the people you destroyed were still alive! Many of them were loved ones of the people in my group.

Robert: I didn't know.

However, he persistently refuses the position of other, through to the very ending of the film. Ironically Robert's excuse here falls back on his very unseeing, his lack of knowledge. As he is surrounded and shot by the vampires in the final moments he persists in this unknowledge, continuing to decry them as 'freaks!', 'mutations!', and declaring himself 'the last man'. Morgan's flight for refuge to the Church appears to locate him as the 'good', while the vampires' murder of him on the alter steps seems villainous, but this could also represent the overthrowing of the earlier ideological order by a new dominant social group (the vampires), through the symbol of the church. The ending is in many respects highly ambiguous, and what is interesting in terms of audience response is the extent to which we credit Morgan's assertion at the end; we may rather, in fact, share Robert Neville's level of understanding from the novel, and question this definition of 'man'/'freak', regarding his protests as more futile, a clinging on to an obsolete ideal. As such, his construct of the vampire ultimately fails, and the limits around what we designate as 'human' or 'vampire' are called into question. Despite Morgan's denial of their humanity the crowd of families gathering around at the end of the film actually appear very human, particularly given the crying baby within the group. Morgan is killed by the vampires, but he dies an unwilling death, a frustrating result of misunderstanding, lacking Neville's acceptance of the vampires' need to destroy him.

This misunderstanding actually places the vampires in the role of dominant group, of the unseeing. Morgan's own blood in this adaptation carries the cure for vampirism so here the vampires, in killing him, may well be destroying their own future. Ruth's appeal to Morgan following his shooting by the vampires is accompanied with 'they didn't know ... they didn't know', echoing Robert's own protestations regarding his killing of them. Here again a lack of knowledge may foreshadow the downfall of a people, where the other is threatening through the community's lack of understanding of them, rather than directly so.

The Omega Man, while it diverges from the novel greatly in terms of plot, attempts to make this question of perspective and monstrosity explicit through Matthias, the leader of 'The Family' (the new vampires), who upon capturing Neville reminds him of his killing and asserts: 'you're the angel of death doctor, not us'. Nonetheless, once again, in *The Omega Man*, Robert ultimately refuses the position of other. Matthias attempts to construct Robert's non-being: 'He is part of the dead, and he has no place here ... he is obsolete ... you are discarded ... you are the refuse of the past', but Robert's cynical and defiant response, 'you're full of crap', refutes this definition of self, not allowing himself to be defined by their terms. Robert Neville in this adaptation is killed with a spear, a significant choice of weapon in terms of the colonization question. The spear appears native American, and there is something of a reversed intertextual nod to *Dracula* here, who was killed with hunting knives, as Arata has pointed out, the 'weapons of empire' (641). Here the one advocating a return to the simplicity of life—Matthias believes the plague was a punishment for man's hubris, his technological advance—destroys the 'puppet of technology' with the basic tribal weapon. Neville's military hat is placed on the side of the fountain by the young girl, preserving his connection to the imperial, and the strongly colonial feel of the film connects this adaptation directly back to Matheson's predecessor.

Each of these adaptations takes on Matheson's myth, which is in part Stoker's myth, and establishes its relevance to their own context. It is notable that the post 9/11 adaptation is the adaptation which refuses the most forcibly to shift perspective in the way Matheson's novel did, which, given the early cold war environment of Matheson's novel, might appear a strange contrast, one which indicates much about contemporary perspectives and accounts of selfhood and alterity. The film is certainly ambiguous in places, and the humanity of the dark seekers is attended at several instances in a highly significant play on perception. In one scene Neville captures a female to experiment on, and during this capture a male risks exposure to daylight to recover her. Neville's assessment of this, that 'it's possible decreased brain function or growing scarcity of food is causing them to... ignore their basic survival instincts. Typical human behaviour is now entirely absent'⁵ misses the point; the dark seeker risked its own well-being to save the captured vampire (his partner, it appears), a decidedly human thing to have done. This vampire's mirroring of Neville's own trap later in the film to capture him very nearly succeeds, and the group led by him which at the end invade Neville's house appear to be there looking for the female, whom Neville has managed to cure. They have clearly been seeking her for some time, and Neville's underestimation of their ability to organize, his misconception of the other, ultimately proves his downfall in this adaptation. Hantke's consideration of the dark seekers as 'unambiguously not human' (170) is questioned here; the whole point is that Neville misjudges, underestimates the other's humanity, and thus brings about his own downfall, through a false sense of superiority.

However, ultimately, the vampires as a group remain distinctly other, something to be defeated, and Hantke's assertion that their 'insect-like' invasion 'brings to mind American fears about illegal immigration' (170) does have a resonance here, where this adaptation adopts a different approach on a personal to a cultural level. Here, the film suggests, you can understand the other individually, you may look them in the eye and come to terms with them as Neville does the dark seeker at the end; but they

may not have dominion or power as a group unless they become like you, become ‘cured’ in human—for human read Western—terms.⁶ The dark seekers here would need to become human in order to be ‘acceptable’ beings. Otherness, vampirism, is to be resolved here, never suffered to exist as part of community.⁷

Matheson’s novel, then, participates in a study of how we interpret the other, and narrative form is paramount to this. It also investigates the ways in which we interpret and invest in legend. The term ‘legend’ suggests a narrative of a chiefly fictional nature, yet this remains at question in the text, and the attempt to separate ‘history’ from ‘narrative’ or legend is deemed ultimately unworkable. In Matheson’s novel, inspired by *Dracula*—a text which has become a legend in itself—and taking its cue from that, here science, like humanity, cannot conceive of its ‘other’, legend or mythology. Towards the beginning of the novel, in narrating the history of the plague and how it came to monopolize the world so successfully, Robert Neville reads the line from *Dracula* spoken by Van Helsing: ‘The strength of the vampire is that no one will believe in him’, and notes poignantly, ‘that line was true; no one had believed in them, and how could they fight something they didn’t even believe in?’ (23). This is to be the downfall of man’s hubris, of his scientific progress; ‘before science had caught up with the legend, the legend had swallowed science and everything’ (*ibid.*). Misapprehension as with Orientalism, with a lack of understanding or truly ‘seeing’, is related here to the concept of myth and legend, to something seemingly older than science, something for which modern progress and technology has failed to account and has falsely constructed as myth. Neville later attempts a further mastery over superstition upon ‘solving’ the mystery of the vampirism: ‘there, on the slide, was the source of the vampire. All the centuries of fearful superstition had been felled in the moment he had seen the germ’ (80). Yet the power of superstition and legend will assert itself again by the end of the novel through Neville himself, in his role as monster, and this anxiety about the ability of science to completely ‘solve’ the mysteries of superstition pervades throughout the novel.

Related to the interpretation of legend, narrative and history, is the concept of rewriting history, reassessing mythology, which is central to *I Am Legend*. Anxieties about history and about access to the past, particularly in the telling of history and narrative, represent a central concern of the Gothic, as noted at the outset, further associating this novel with the genre. Punter notes in *The Literature of Terror* the Gothic’s connection to ‘unofficial’ histories (1996b, 187), to narratives which challenge the accepted text of history. It calls into question another form of power and colonization, a form of control over narrative, and thus over history. Exploring his history of vampirism Neville asserts, ‘The vampire was real. It was only that his true story had never been told’ (81). He goes so far as to read vampirism into historical events such as the black plague and the fall of Athens, again suggesting a new ‘truth’ to history. If legend begins with truth, anything can become a legend in time, can find its way out of ‘history’ and into ‘narrative’, by those who would (mistakenly) separate the two. This is to be the fate of Neville himself at the close of the novel, as he takes the cyanide pills offered by Ruth and prepares to consign himself to history and, later, to mythology:

Full circle, he thought while the final lethargy crept into his limbs. Full circle. A new terror born in death, a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever.
I am legend. (160).

Neville himself will become the stuff of legend, ultimately, something whose very existence is called into question by the unreliability of the spoken or written word, the narrated text.

To move into legend is a kind of annihilation, a denial of one's subjective existence. The legend here is something which begins with a death—Neville's—through which he takes on a new symbolic identity. His identity as symbol can be related to Žižek's concept of the word when, quoting Hegel, he describes the word as a 'death' in a sense: 'as soon as the reality is symbolized ... the thing itself is more present in a word, in its concept, than in its immediate physical reality' (131). A similar process occurs here, Robert Neville will become more real as a concept to the new population, as legend, than in his reality; the stories will overtake the truth, the 'adaptations' of his being mask the 'original'. The title of the novel, *I Am Legend*, confirms and asserts his new identity as no longer human but the matter of legend, of fiction, as object rather than subject, a symbolic image. This is a monstrous image, an illustration of the threatening outsider, the other. The separation of self and world dies out at the point at which he becomes a part of the fabric of narrative, of world, and ceases to view himself as an autonomous being, a 'self'. It represents a loss of the Cartesian dualist sense of self, an ability to separate mind from body, self from world. Lying chronologically as it does on the cusp of postmodernity, Matheson's text reflects anxieties about where in culture to situate a coherent idea of 'the self', in relation to history and narrative.

What is striking about the adaptations of the novel is that, just as Neville in these refuses the position of 'other', they also deal very differently with the concept of legend, and what it means to fall into fiction. *The Last Man on Earth* substitutes the term 'legend' for 'the last man', asserting its agenda as a more strongly post-apocalyptic film, questioning definitions of humanity, and moving away somewhat from the concept of legend and storytelling. *The Omega Man* also focuses on this concept of being the 'last', through its change in title.⁸ The term 'omega' again emphasizes its post-apocalyptic nature; strangely so, perhaps, given that in this adaptation Neville is *not*, in fact, the last human, though he may be the last man—the other survivors are youths. *The Omega Man* appropriates a very different form of legend, a seemingly more positive one. Ritchie's exclamation to Neville on finding out his blood carries protection against the disease, 'Christ, you could save the world!' is not entirely coincidental, since Neville's death is portrayed as a Christ-like sacrifice. This death in the fountain and his presentation of the bottle of his blood (here again the 'cure' to vampirism⁹) to Dutch invokes many elements of Christianity, through baptism, sacrificial blood, communion, and the crucifixion pose portrayed in his position. His symbolic identity as 'cure' as well as 'man' is again something positive, connected to redemption. Perhaps here again the term 'omega man' takes on a transcendental quality, Neville's blood representing the end of the plague, a messiah-like value.

The connection to a religious analogy can be made through the term 'legend' itself, in its earlier definition as 'the story of the life of a saint'; Neville's death in both *The Omega Man* and *I Am Legend* (07) is a sacrifice to a cause, to a wider purpose. *I Am Legend* (07) in many respects adopts the Christian aspect of legend most strongly. Anna's tribute to Neville at the close of the film attests to this:

Dr Robert Neville dedicated his life to the discovery of a cure and the restoration of humanity. On September 9th, 2012, at approximately 8:49 p.M., he discovered that cure. And at 8:52, he gave his life to defend it. We are his legacy. This is his legend. Light up the darkness.

A somewhat different legacy from that of Robert Neville in the novel, the ‘terrible scourge’ more terrifying to the vampires than even the disease itself. Here Neville is associated with a Christ-like light, rather than darkness and ‘black terror’ (Matheson 160), and, Messiah-like, with the ‘restoration of humanity’. The term ‘we’ also establishes a sense of community, awarding Neville a positive role in the new ‘people of earth’—here humans—and the heroic rather than monstrous status.¹⁰ Earlier, I drew attention to the significance of the openings of this and *The Omega Man*, where Neville is immediately viewed as active, more so than in the earlier film. From the outset these films have a different agenda; their Nevilles find their cures, and have a community of humans to pass it on to, a legacy to bequeath to the human ‘people of earth’. At the same time and conversely though, Anna’s declaration has to echo somewhat the pronouncement at the film’s opening, of the ‘cure’ for cancer which cause the initial outbreak. There are ominous undertones here just as with the novel, and Neville’s reminder that bacteria can mutate.

Will Smith has also connected Robert Neville with the biblical character of Job, who has come to symbolize the solitary struggle against seemingly impossible odds (Lee). This ‘leitmotif’ features recurrently in Matheson’s work (Oakes 64) and represents the central plot narrative which survives in all three adaptations, while the relationship between self/other may be changed, along with the relationship to legend.

This move from active member of society—from subjectivity and the positivist sense of ‘I Am’—to a concept, an idea based in legend, is to some extent a shift from a position of power to one of powerlessness. Losing his status as an active character, Neville does not say at the end of the novel ‘I am a figure of legend’ or ‘I am a legendary being’, but asserts simply that ‘I *am* legend [my italics]’, defining the concept of legend as his new, inhuman, powerless identity, as a mythical figure rather than an individual, *narrative* rather than *narrator*. Neville’s story ends at this point, when he is no longer the master of it. Nonetheless, as Hantke points out, the seemingly positive ending of *I Am Legend* (07) in fact gives Neville even less agency; Neville here does not ‘tell’ his own ending, as Neville in Matheson’s novel does (165), even if his ‘I Am’ is passive, a relinquishing of power and identity to some degree. Though Neville in the novel will become the stuff of legend, narrated rather than active narrator, his story ends with him. Again, we see the power of the social construct, of the teller over the told, the colonization of a self by the one telling their story. In the 2007 film, the story ends via Anna; it continues after the death of Neville. Her dedication also reveals something about legend and reliability, in the need to ‘tell’ and assert the legend at the end, to ‘establish an authoritative reading’ of the events of the story, a reading ‘placed so conspicuously at a moment [the end] that allows neither contradiction nor correction’ (Hantke 165). Just as this film refused the shift in identity, refused to allow dominion to the other, it also imposes its own reading in the end, writing over the moments of identification between Neville and the dark seekers. The other, as monster, is threatening to the stability of narrative history as well as to community.

The act of defining something as legend is an attempt to come to terms with it. Howells has stated of gothic novelists that the fictional worlds they create 'rendered their fears ultimately harmless by containing and distancing them in a fantasy' (7). The same can be said for Robert Neville; he will apparently be rendered harmless by his place in myth, in fantasy, in their forgetting—just as his society had done previously with the vampire—that he was ever actually real. The family in *The Omega Man* illustrate this by designating Neville a relic, a vestige of the past as discussed earlier, in a conscious attempt to render the other powerless.

This necessarily relates back to the question of Orientalism, and the question of the (mis)interpretation of the other. If the truth of the legend is not 'seen', it is not truly appreciated as a threat, merely a distant idea of one. Matheson's text functions by challenging established boundaries such as that between fiction and reality, and the consignment of the monstrous, in any sense, to myth is never something straightforward. The vampires' victory in the novel is never complete. By relegating Robert Neville to figure of legend, the vampires are doing with humanity just what humanity had previously done to the vampire, a creature 'consigned, fact and figure, to the pages of imaginative literature' (23). Again, 'how could they fight something they didn't even believe in?' (ibid.). This consignment to legend, then, does not destroy the power of the other, merely the self's—and community's—conception of that power. This is demonstrated in *The Last Man on Earth* in the parallel 'I didn't know'/'they didn't know', and illustrated here through the concept of legend. Society will always fear that which it excludes or writes off, and in this text with good reason. The vampires fear Robert Neville since, as Oakes notes, in the same way that the monstrous usually functions as something destabilizing, here 'the last human becomes a source of destabilization in a society where the majority are vampires' (75). Here the 'I Am Legend' has another angle; Neville personifies what legend is, how it functions in society, as non-real threat, cautionary fiction, or later in *I Am Legend* (07) as an ideal, an almost saint-like legend. While they share the same title, the novel and later film differ in their interpretations of the term. The vampire community seeks to contain a monster (*I Am Legend*) while the human community raises a hero (*I Am Legend* 07).¹¹

While Neville's acceptance of the position of other and death in the novel may seem like surrender, this does not take into account the potential power Neville's figure will gain. While he loses his status as self, as subject, in moving over to the apparently passive form of legend, the undercurrent is present and strong here. Though those in charge of Ruth's society will doubtless try to represent Neville as a figure of 'ignorance and defeat' his refusal to let them give him death on their terms—taking his own life rather than face execution—challenges this immediately, and the indication in the novel in my opinion is that Neville will retain, if not a hero status, a monster status imbued with its own form of social power. He will be a vital part of the new community through his very exclusion, his very non-being.

Legend in its monstrous forms is not so inactive, not so powerless then, as it might first seem. Here the value of myth to community is key, the importance of narrative in forming an identity for the community, defining it and setting up a web of narrative history, 'telling stories about it' as Said asserted, adapting it to suit the needs of the community. For an icon to exist, they must be adaptable and thus be adapted. For Stam

and Raengo, it is adaptations which create the original, purely through being copies of it (8); literary icons are only created through adaptation, and the vampire figure has to be recognized as a key example of this, far though Lawrence's 'dark seekers' might be from the vampires in *I Am Legend*, and through that from Count Dracula. Yet the hybrid is still suffered to be judged, by many a critic of adaptation. The classic 'fidelity judgment' placed on adaptations is key here, and is related to a sense of threat, or anxiety, that somehow the adaptations will usurp or replace the 'original', as the vampire community replaces that of the human in *I Am Legend*, and perhaps ironically is not suffered to do in any of the filmic adaptations.

An important aspect of legend in relation to adaptation comes through Neville's own words at the end of the novel, his 'unassailable fortress of forever' (160). 'Unassailable' implies something which cannot be destroyed, testifying to the power of myth asserted earlier. Whether it is entirely unassailable remains at question though; certainly it is adaptable, subject to alteration and change over time. Unassailable does not here imply changeless. This is the beauty of a text which is already doing something with myth, providing what the *New York Times* referred to as a 'variation of vampire lore that won't die' (Beale)—it remains present but in ever-changing and thus always relevant terms. Clasen notes Matheson's use of myth and relates this to adaptation in a different way: 'With *I Am Legend*, Matheson thus reigns in the power of myth to deliver his anxieties; this may be part of the reason why his story transcends the time and place of its production' (325). Clasen actually highlights here what is an important theme to the novel itself, the ability of myth to withstand time. The central motif of the lone man struggling against the odds—the Job motif—takes on a new resonance in each context, as new constructs of meaning and interpretation form around the central narrative. The film's success in terms of its adaptability is down to the combination of the representation of a kind of eternal struggle in the *leitmotif* Matheson himself mentions as well as the ability to relate this to wider issues from both its original context and later ones.

Myth is, then, subject to change, redevelopment and appropriation. Certainly the makers of adaptations are often regarded as having committed a form of 'misapprehension' of the 'original' text, of a form of colonization of an earlier narrative, this anxiety mentioned previously about usurping the original, related to a fidelity judgment. Adaptation though, involves reinterpretation; it becomes, as Hutcheon notes, 'repetition, but repetition without replication' (7).

What is produced through this repetition is, as Sanders notes, a hybrid text (19). In her writing on adaptation and hybridity Sanders refers to Homi Bhabha on the newness of the hybrid form, and its potential to add meaning rather than to overwrite (19). A sense of hybridity pervades throughout Matheson's novel and its adaptations; the 'new' vampires are a kind of vampire-human hybrid, turned while alive rather than returning as undead, and the filmic adaptations create a hybrid relating to myth through medium and context. Postcolonial theory is also deeply concerned with invasion and displacement, a key theme in a novel in which 'displacement is the ultimate irony ... The old world (symbolized by Neville, his barricaded/segregated house, and his singular convictions of moral rectitude) must give way to the new world (symbolized by Ruth, the other hybrids, and their restructuring of society)' (Davis Patterson 25–26). Reading through the eyes of the displaced, those now alienated, we also mistrust the

hybrids in each adaptation. Yet it is in this hybridity that they are something different from their predecessors, both human and vampire. The question remains: to what extent we see adaptation as a form of colonization, or of miscegenation? For Hutcheon, ‘an adaptation is *not* vampiric [my italics]: it does not draw the life-blood from its source and leave it dying or dead, nor is it paler than the adopted work. It may, on the contrary, keep that prior work alive’ (176).¹²

McFarlane notes, on the subject of criticism of adaptations, ‘fidelity criticism depends on a notion of the text as having and rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a single, correct “meaning” which the film-maker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with’ (8). Much anxiety and frustration at adaptors of texts is over whether the adaptors truly ‘see’ or understand the texts—and we are back to seeing here as with Orientalism. Neville sees the ‘true story’ of the vampire, he ‘solves its mystery’. Yet if this text demonstrates anything, it is that seeing is merely perspective, and is subject to change. If there is no single ‘correct meaning’ to the text, as McFarlane notes and indeed as theorists such as Barthes have asserted (1977), then all is open to adaptation, to reinterpretation.

A final form of hybridity is illustrated in terms of genre and writing. Hutcheon’s description of the adapted text as ‘palimpsestic’ by nature (9) is particularly apt here for the most recent film, given its multiple authors and many rewritings. *I Am Legend* (07) is described in its feature in *Empire* as ‘trying to break genre’, ‘a small character art film’ (Smith), ‘a weird hybrid’, ‘essentially a character piece’, and ‘both a human story and a monster movie’ (Goldsmann). These varying definitions highlight the difficulty of translating a novel such as Matheson’s into film and trying to assign this a genre, since it is by nature hybrid, palimpsestic, its lines of ancestry tangled and multiple like the vampire figures it portrays. The multiple authors and over/rewriting of the script for the film is something often noted in reviews and pieces on *I Am Legend* (07) (e.g. Jensen; Halbfinger), a film which acknowledges itself as both an adaptation of Matheson’s novel and of *The Omega Man*, a kind of hybrid, again, of the two (Carnevale). The apparent importance of the writing process here and its many contributors and developments perhaps responds to concerns about writing, accuracy/creativity, and history. This is key particularly in terms of film, where Stam and Raengo note the collaborative nature of film, in terms of its creation, in contrast to the novel—a film requires many hands, many creative inputs (17).¹³

In conclusion, Matheson’s text and its subsequent adaptations represent an ideal ground for the consideration of colonization in literal terms and textual terms, through adaptation. It demonstrates anxieties about the effect on the self of colonization, about the instability of self and community as well as the instability of the text, and of history. It is a text about a man adapting to a new world, or failing to, or changing it, as well as being about legend and myth and their relationship to change. The genetic mutations which occur in the texts here correspond to theories on adaptation which see this process as a kind of mutation, a genetic evolving (e.g. Stam and Raengo 2–3). Sanders has noted that ‘mythical literature depends upon, incites even, perpetual acts of reinterpretation in new contexts’ (63). Each of the adaptations examined here engages in a reinterpretation on the part of its multiple creators, and on the part of its viewing audience. We are faced in this instance with a text with multiple meanings and interpretations.

Matheson has said of his novel simply that ‘I don’t think the book means anything more than it is: the story of a man trying to survive in a world of vampires’ (Brown and Scoleri). In some respects, this is true. At the same time, however, it does not need to, for this very concept is loaded with meaning itself. The adaptations of his novel reveal this; each in its different social context takes a very different path in view of this exploration of solitude, of what it means to be the one against the many. Even as the films illustrate anxieties about literal hybridity and ‘new beings’ they, as hybrids themselves, do not write over or by any means devalue the original text. Matheson’s role in the literary canon of the vampire is often understated, yet its place in connecting this genre with others, and in demonstrating the connections and developments between the written and the visual text cannot be disregarded. This is a text which is vital in its exploration of colonization, of adaptation to an environment, a text which itself is colonizer/colonized, adapted, and considers questions of truth, perception, narrative and history not just within itself but through its very status as text.

NOTES

¹ Matheson has noted that *Dracula* was his inspiration in writing the text, turning around the single vampire figure in a human world to a single human in a vampire world. <http://iamlegendarchive.blogspot.co.uk/p/richard-matheson-interview.html> (accessed 21 May 2014).

² This is suggested in numerous places, one being an interview with Richard Matheson at <http://iamlegendarchive.blogspot.co.uk/p/richard-matheson-interview.html> (accessed 21 May 2014).

³ Given the common titles of the novel and the most recent film adaptation, the film is hereafter referred to as *I Am Legend* (07) for clarity. Matheson himself wrote a script for an adaptation of the book, entitled *The Night Creatures*, which is available as Richard Matheson, ‘The Night Creatures’ (screenplay for an adaptation of *I Am Legend*) in *Visions Deferred: Three Unfilmed Screenplays by Richard Matheson* (Colorado Springs, CO: Edge Books, 2009), 33–176. Matheson’s own adaptation of his novel was never made into a film, since it was refused by the censors at Hammer Studios. Another film adaptation, *I Am Omega*, was released also in 2007, but was not well received and diverged still further from the novel, hence this article focuses on the other three.

⁴ Neville actually goes from plant worker in the novel, to scientist in *The Last Man on Earth*, to military doctor in this and *I Am Legend* (07), presumably for credibility in terms of the time span for his finding of a cure and tactical ability to outmanoeuvre the vampires.

⁵ Mark Protosevich, *I Am Legend* dir. by Francis Lawrence (Warner Bros, 2007).

⁶ The DVD release of *I Am Legend* (07) includes an alternative ending for the film, which actually dwells much more on the encounter of Neville and the Dark Seeker at the end, emphasizing the understanding they reach. This ending was rejected in favour of the death of Neville, which further establishes his heroic status.

⁷ A point that should be made here is that in Matheson’s own screenplay for an adaptation, the destruction of Neville by the vampires at the end is also absent, though they do take him captive in the final scenes. Ruth reveals ‘you’re too valuable to kill. You [sic] immunity to the germ is worth more to us’ (2009, 175), suggesting a deeper awareness and understanding on the vampires’ part here than in either the novel or any of the other adaptations.

⁸ It is worth noting here that according to the *imsdb* site and others, the film was originally intended to be titled *I Am Legend*, but was later changed. Earlier versions of the script hold the original title: <http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Omega-Man.html> (accessed 10 November 2014); http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/i_am_legend_6_26_70.html (accessed 10 November 2014).

⁹ It is also worth noting here that Neville refers to his blood as ‘160-proof old anglo-saxon baby’, relating this back to his image as Western Imperialist also, and connecting this Christian, ‘saviour’ theme to the colonial.

¹⁰ The ‘Christ-like’ themes in the adaptations are discussed briefly along with Neville’s monstrosity in the novel in an interview with Richard Matheson at <http://iamlegendarchive.blogspot.co.uk/p/richard-matheson-interview.html> (accessed 21 May 2014).

¹¹ In having considered the titles of the film adaptations, the meaning of ‘legend’ and centrality of the

Neville figure, Matheson's own screenplay again merits mention here, in terms of his move to focus the title on the vampires, the 'Night Creatures', rather than on Neville himself. This is perhaps to distance it somewhat from the novel, as even this adaptation moves away from the concept of legend explored in that text. It may also be for dramatic reasons, in terms of its being written for Hammer, who tended to keep the focus on the monstrous figures themselves. However, it could also be ironic in terms of the ending (see note 6), whereby they are revealed precisely to be more than 'creatures'.

¹² This text can illustrate a truth within this, the 2007 film gave rise to a new edition of Matheson's text complete with cover image from the film, encouraging many new readers. Exact sales figures were unavailable, but sites such as the Barnes and Noble site demonstrate the popularity of the text and particularly the amount of readers drawn to it by the film, via the reviews section: <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/i-am-legend-richard-matheson/1007650491?ean=9780765357151> (accessed 20 August 2014).

¹³ It should be noted here that the novel, of course, does too; the very discussion on intertextuality and literary inspiration should hint at this, however the process of writing does remain a more individual pursuit in literal terms.

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