



## “Out by Sixteen”: Queer(ed) Girls in *Ginger Snaps*

—Tanis MacDonald

*Gender, like the real, is not only the effect of representation but also of its excess, what remains outside discourse as a potential trauma which can rupture or destabilize, if not contained, any representation.*

—Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*

*Something's wrong. I mean, more than just you being female.*

—Brigitte Fitzgerald to her sister Ginger, *Ginger Snaps*

### Gender Bites; Sexuality Snaps

Released to the cinematic public in 2000, John Fawcett's Canadian cult-horror film *Ginger Snaps* was marketed—with an adolescent female audience in mind—as a wry and wrenching female version of classic B-movie transformation narratives like *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957). Fawcett's film, scripted by Karen Walton, retains the convention of conflating puberty and monstrosity, but instead of examining the body-changing dynamics of adolescent masculinity, *Ginger Snaps* holds the satirical magnifying glass up to the biological changes attending the onset of

menstruation and focuses on social constructions of heteronormative femininity, including a horrified, comedic look at what manufacturers of depilatory products would call “unsightly and unwanted hair.” The sardonic wit of the film reveals that the excesses of representation alter the “effect” of gender as a technology of female identity, in Teresa de Lauretis's terms. Corporeal excesses and the accompanying ruptures of maturation pile up early in the film, when the eponymous Ginger Fitzgerald is attacked by a creature that has been attracted by the smell of the blood from her first menstrual period.

Initially, the film seems to cast the Fitzgerald sisters in the conventional horror-film postures of sexualized monster (sixteen-year-old Ginger) and heroic “Final Girl” (her fifteen-year-old sister Brigitte), to use Carol Clover’s now-ubiquitous designation from her classic study, *Men, Women and Chain Saws*. In some ways, Ginger’s transformation into a werewolf remains well within the heterosexual norms of horror tradition: she becomes a beautiful female monster whose animal appetites are both eroticized and vilified, and she dies in order to preserve the social and sexual mores of the community. *Ginger Snaps* also complicates these conventions, however, by emphasizing the problems that attend the depiction of a female monster and by troubling the usual antagonistic relationship between monster and heroine, complicated within the film by the Fitzgerald sisters’ devotion to one another. Walton’s script seems to suggest, at a number of points throughout the film, that the sisters’ relationship includes incestuous homoeroticism, an undercurrent first evidenced in their blood pact to be “out by sixteen or dead in this scene: together forever, united against life as we know it.”

The sisters’ promise to stay “together forever” crystallizes the intense romantic intimacy of adolescent female relationships and also acts as a covert sign for an erotic connection that is an open secret among fans of the film. While Fawcett and Walton did not necessarily set out to make a teen lesbian film, Walton

states quite clearly on her commentary track on the DVD of *Ginger Snaps* that Ginger “loses her discretion” as she transforms, and that Walton intended at least one scene between the sisters—in which Ginger implies that her transformation erases their sibling relationship—to be even more explicitly incestuous. Despite the number of covert—and overt—lesbian encodings in the film, a queer(ed) reading of *Ginger Snaps* has been noticeable by its absence from scholarly criticism about the film, an absence made obvious in part because fan writing about the film has considered a number of nuanced ideas about the role that desire plays in the sisters’ relationship. For example, Xavier Mendik notes that *Ginger Snaps* brings “lesbian iconography to the werewolf genre” (81), and Sady Doyle’s feminist popular culture blog *Tiger Beatdown* praises the intense, “transgressive” eroticized relationships that the film highlights. Doyle’s discussion is especially interesting for the ways that it extends discussion of the reception of the film to a reading of relationships between female adolescent horror-film fans. Doyle’s assessment of *Ginger Snaps* as a film “specifically for women who used to be awkward teenage horror fans, and have ingested a substantial amount of feminist theory since then” is especially appropriate for my inquiry in this paper into how female friendships and sisterhood are queer(ed) by their quasi-erotic intensity. Suggesting that the intimacy of the Fitzgerald sisters captures something like the

intimacy that developed between her adolescent female horror-fan friends, Doyle names one of the film's multiplicitous fascinations:

Those girls I watched horror movies with: I was closer to them than I ever have been, or probably ever will be, with any other friends. I was closer to them than I have been to most of my boyfriends. There's a weird, overwhelming, mind-meld effect that takes place sometimes between girls: you live in each other and through each other, always trying to figure out how you are the same and how you are different, and loving both the differences and the sameness.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, Doyle's description of female friendship is strongly reminiscent of Elizabeth Woledge's work with the homoerotic fiction she calls "intimatopia," in which the "central defining feature is the exploration of intimacy" between the characters (99). *Ginger Snaps*, with its exploration of queer(ed) female subjectivities, invites a reading of its intimatopic dynamics, beginning with the Fitzgerald sisters' repeated refusal of the social standards of their deadened suburban life and the ways that heteronormative sexuality seems to offer them an equally deadened future.

Critical reception of *Ginger Snaps* to date has focused on the way the menstrual metaphor gestures toward the dearth of discourse concerning female

adolescence as a crisis in embodied subjectivity (Young; Miller; Short; Briefel). The film has been received as liberatory in its delineation of the stifling categorizations of female adolescent sexuality. Without diminishing the contribution that the film makes to such articulations, I would like to recall Lillian Faderman's caveat that lesbianism is emphatically not included in Alfred Douglas's famous phrase "the love that dare not speak its name," but rather more problematically, lesbianism has historically been "the love that had no name" (154). While non-scholarly commentators like Mendik have raised the subject of a contested "lycanthropic lesbianism" in both *Ginger Snaps* and its sequel, it is significant that a lesbian subject position is notably absent from Ginger's tart phrasing of socio-sexual roles for adolescent female viewers: "a girl can only be a slut, a bitch, a tease, or the virgin next door." Just as the word "werewolf" is spoken only once in the film, taboo despite the profusion of wolfish symbols in the film, so too do verbal expressions of same-sex desire only "leak out" occasionally despite the fact that this "queerness" is visually prominent throughout the film.

An exploration of the play of taboos and conventions through which Walton flaunts her rewriting of horror-film tradition makes it evident that *Ginger Snaps* is usefully understood as an entry into the queer-monster pantheon. What Sara Gwenllian Jones calls the "latent textual elements" of the



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film (82) reveals the relationship between the Fitzgerald sisters to be socially transgressive and resistive to heteronormativity. Catherine Tosenberger has made a similar observation about slash fiction’s queer readings of the Winchester brothers in the television series *Supernatural* (“Epic”). One of the important differences between the “queering” of the siblings in *Supernatural* and *Ginger Snaps*, however, can be found in the tone of the textual reading of the siblings’ relationships. *Supernatural* generally plays strangers’ misperception of the Winchester brothers as a couple for laughs, while *Ginger Snaps* establishes the Fitzgerald sisters as a couple in terms that are deadly serious. A queer reading of *Ginger Snaps*, then, is not transgressive because it reads a queer connotation into a heterocentrist text, but, rather, as Alexander Doty suggests about popular culture texts in *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, because it transgresses the cultural convention of using adolescent maturation as a “discursive frame” of social heteronormativity (xiii).

The suburban gothic landscape of *Ginger Snaps* contrasts the bland houses and the savagery of ancient monsters lurking within the adolescents of Bailey Downs, as do many contemporary horror films deliberately located in “disturbia,” as Richard E. Gordon, Katherine K. Gordon, and Max Gunther termed it as early as 1960.<sup>2</sup> Before *Ginger* is bitten, life as the Fitzgerald sisters know it is plagued by the banality of their classmates’ jockeying for social position and the sticky sentimentality of their mother’s cooing over her “little girls becoming young women”: the usual humiliations of twenty-first-century middle-class female adolescence writ large. For the Fitzgerald sisters, the *real* horror show is the brand of gender normativity that threatens to trap them into replicating “this scene,” their phrase for the dispiriting sameness of their

suburb. Walton and Fawcett suggest that the film's intention is to discuss the "new appetites" and "atrocities" of female adolescence, which the film does with considerable relish (qtd. in Young 248). Even though the film's social critique of adolescence as a suburban nightmare crackles with satire, the problem with regarding *Ginger Snaps* as a feminist horror film is that the film's "snap" depends upon a wry examination of sex and power that cannot be sustained by the equation of femininity with abject monstrosity. Ginger suggests feminist frustration with the code of compulsive heterosexuality when she clarifies that her supernatural hunger is not exclusively sexual: "I get this ache," she says, "but it's not for sex. It's to tear things to pieces." What Ginger tears to pieces in this film are the heteronormative expectations of female adolescent sexuality, destabilizing gender through the excesses of representation and "de-secreting" desire by destroying the fantasy of a stable sexual identity, in Lynda Hart's terms (16). Feeling repugnance for a suburban heteronormativity should not necessarily be equated with feeling repugnance for heterosexuality, but by offering a glimpse of supernatural lesbian lust, the film earns its portrayal of a heroine who resists sexual advances from both men and women to "queer herself" as the Final Girl who loves the female monster. Reading Ginger's transformation into a werewolf as a potential coming-out narrative suggests that *Ginger Snaps* is only partly a film about the "horrors" of

becoming a woman. It also offers adolescent viewers (as well as older audiences) the chance to read the film as an examination of the concomitant social horror of growing up lesbian in the bleakness of the Canadian suburbs, where female same-sex desire continues, in some ways, to resist declarations of identity politics.<sup>3</sup>

Part of the subversive power of *Ginger Snaps* is the film's investment in the beauty of transgression as it exists in the twists and turns of sexual identification. The choice to consider the Fitzgerald sisters as an erotic couple suggests an answer to the question of why the film's feminist examination of the menstrual monster is arrested half-way through the film.<sup>4</sup> The film's critique of the crisis in female bodily subjectivity is usurped by the examination of female intimacy, and the difficulties of identifying and naming both intimacy and violence are embedded in the scene depicting the werewolf's attack on Ginger. During the attack, Brigitte rushes at the creature and whips it repeatedly with her camera on a long leather strap. The camera's shutter is released by the motion, and later, Brigitte looks closely at the accidental snapshot which shows only an eye, a few sharp teeth, and a mass that could be either flesh or fur. The photo is clearly not of a human being, but neither is it absolutely identifiable as an animal. Although the attack scene is filmed as though it were a rape scene, a directorial decision that Walton acknowledges in her commentary, Brigitte's inability to identify the attacker introduces a recognizable set of

conventions in horror film: the surviving victims' initial refusal to recognize the monstrous body and their subsequent refusal to attribute unusual phenomena to supernatural sources. The glimpse of—and inability to name—the creature in the photograph foreshadows the struggle with gender and sexuality that underscores the rest of *Ginger Snaps*. While the film's title is intended as a double pun on Ginger's premenstrual stress and lycanthropic rage—and perhaps also as a sharp take on female adolescent sexuality as a sweet consumable treat—the photo is the viewer's first “snap” of Ginger's future, and as such, it presages the negotiation of difference that the film proposes.

What sets *Ginger Snaps* apart from other “queer monster” films is how the relationship between Ginger and Brigitte, established from the outset as the only positive force in their bleak suburban nothingness, remains about love: sisterly, interspecific, and erotic. As in Joss Whedon's television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Ginger Snaps* implies that the intensity of the relationships between female adolescents and young women are deepened by supernatural transformation, although of course they are not immune to the disasters that supernatural powers attract. *Ginger Snaps* does not offer the simple horror-film misogyny of womanly body as monstrous body or the more subversive, but still fairly limited, reading of monster-as-queer that has been popularized by male queer film theorists like Robin Wood, Vito Russo, Harry Benshoff, Ellis

Hanson, and Michael William Saunders. *Ginger Snaps* reaches for something more difficult, equating transformation not only with sexual awakening but also with a sharpening of erotic intimacy between queer(ed) girls, unearthing a more radical—and more cohesive—subversion, a subtext that illuminates the possibilities that dwell in the gaps in the menstrual monster metaphor of the film.

#### **“Out by Sixteen”: Queer(ed) Sisters, Suburban Closet**

In *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas*, Thomas Waugh contends that a cultural refusal to read adolescent lesbian existence in films that are set outside of major urban centres implies that “the lesbian body doesn't exist outside of its urban materiality,” and, further, that the failure of filmmakers (and viewers) to locate the lesbian body in a suburban or rural setting is nothing less than “our failure of the imagination” (123). The fact that the lesbian body in *Ginger Snaps* is adolescent makes reading the queered sign of that body even more urgent, given the growing concern over crises faced by queer youth.<sup>5</sup> In the face of such a general “failure,” it is useful to remember Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's admonition that “it's only by being shameless about risking the obvious that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative” (22). Reading *Ginger Snaps* as a potential coming-out narrative would be in itself the kind of shameless critical act to which Sedgwick

refers: a “coming out” as a queer(ed) reader. Certainly the open-secret structure of the girls’ intimatopia suggests, as Alexander Doty does, that a queer reading may begin with a textual analysis and proceed to the adoption of a queer reading position (xi). Sedgwick affirms that, since no single person can control the “often contradictory codes by which information about sexual identity can be conveyed,” coming out is “a matter of crystallizing intuitions or convictions . . . that have already established their own power-circuits” (80). In the case of *Ginger Snaps*, some of these “power-circuits” have been established by fan writing, like that of Doyle and Mendik, about the film, and are driven by the force of articulating the possibilities of Adrienne Rich’s “lesbian continuum” (23–75) as they appear in popular culture that is consumed and, in some cases, reproduced by adolescent audiences.

The signs of girlhood in *Ginger Snaps* are filtered through queerness and the signs of queerness through girlhood, but seeing this requires a reader to uncover covert verbal and visual cues beneath the multiple but strained images of heterosexual desire in the film. When the Fitzgerald sisters mock their school as a “total hormonal toilet,” their outsider status is predicated on their shared perception of themselves as girls rather than young women who have been disempowered by bodily changes, and their cynicism underscores their seemingly wilful delay of menstruation. Given that menstruation is a

corporeal reminder that desire can have far-reaching consequences—pregnancy and abortion among them—the infinite deferral of the “pleasures” of adulthood makes sense for Ginger and Brigitte. This deferral is buoyed by the sisters’ shared blood oath to leave the suburb of Bailey Downs and to remain together at all costs. As one of the recurring symbols of an eroticized partnership between the sisters, the oath sets up the terms by which the sisters plan their escape. “Out by sixteen” connotes the many ways they can defy containment: out of school, out of their parents’ home, out of the suburbs, out of restrictive ideas of socially constructed femininity. The fear of being “out of time” by the age of sixteen emphasizes the oath’s potential as a suicide pact and reinforces the seriousness of the “together forever” oath. With the onset of Ginger’s lycanthropy, the sisters’ blood oath can be seen as an encoded speech act that conflates the state of being “out” (of the closet and of suburbia) with a deliciously ambiguous “togetherness,” and complicates it with a supernatural conception of “forever.”

Because this queer reading of the state of being “out by sixteen” appears to be quite obvious, the fact that it has been nearly ignored by scholarship about the film seems quite mysterious. Only April Miller has suggested that the sisters’ “uncommonly strong bond” (284) may be homoerotic, and she acknowledges a single such moment—the navel-piercing scene—when,



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in fact, encodings of erotic partnership between Ginger and Brigitte appear frequently throughout the film. Each girl demands constant affirmation that her sister will never leave her, and the demonstrations of these devotional relations reinforce a reading of erotic partnership between the characters. Miller alludes to a scene in which Brigitte, in an effort to protect Ginger from the werewolf “virus” invading her blood, climbs atop her sister’s body to pierce Ginger’s navel with a silver ring. Ginger writhes beneath her sister during the piercing and suggests that Brigitte should sport a matching ring. However, the piercing scene only presages Ginger’s promises to Brigitte that transformation and its orgasmic possibilities (“you see fireworks, supernovas!”) are meant to be shared (“This is so *us*, B!”). Ginger is without a doubt “out by sixteen,” emerging as womanly, wolfish, and lesbian in one ferocious swoop. Of these three apparently simultaneous transformations, only the first, into womanhood, is speakable in Walton’s script. The second transformation, into monstrosity, operates under strict linguistic restrictions, as both Brigitte and Sam (the older boy with whom she shares both scientific interest and supernatural lore) use “lycanthrope” to refer to Ginger’s condition and consciously, even coyly, skirt the term “werewolf.” The third transformation, into a same-sex desiring subject, remains largely subtextual, even though this desire seems to be “always already” known to Ginger.

Judith Halberstam usefully suggests that the “vertiginous excess of meaning” produced by the sight of a monster not only resists naming, but, further, can never be matched by appellation (2). The partial snapshot of the attacking creature defies *logos* as both word and knowledge of the word, and the Fitzgerald sisters endlessly



defer a complete definition of Ginger's condition even as Brigitte searches for a cure. As Ginger begins to grow fur and canine teeth and acquires a taste for rough sex and for the flesh of neighbourhood dogs, Brigitte's unwillingness to identify the creature in the photo grows into a refusal to name what Ginger is becoming. It is only with Sam that Brigitte uses the term "lycanthrope." When she is with Ginger, Brigitte's use of the Greek term seems inadequate in exactly the way that Halberstam suggests.

Speechless horror also has a satirical function in the film's targeting of normality, however. After seeing their classmate Jason McCarty flirting with Ginger, Brigitte demands of her sister, "Swear you won't go all average on me." Ginger's blithe reply—"Just 'cause some gonad gets his zipper going? No way"—suggests that the sisters are perfectly happy to keep themselves separate from the vicissitudes of heterosexual high school mating rituals. Such resistance in itself does not necessarily point to incipient lesbianism, since many young women, both queer and heterosexual, regard the prospect of becoming a "mindless little breeder," as Brigitte calls their classmate Trina Sinclair, as a fate worse than death. To some extent, then, Ginger's transformation does traffic in the B-movie tradition of *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, in which the biological changes of puberty are humorously paralleled with transbiological metamorphosis.<sup>6</sup> Becoming a woman is not the social or sexual equivalent of becoming a man,

however, a fact that the film clearly recognizes in its satirical encodings of femininity and sexual identity. As Brigitte observes as she attempts to articulate the unnameable about Ginger's changing body and personality, "Something's wrong. I mean, more than just you being female."

What is "wrong" with the Fitzgerald sisters in *Ginger Snaps* is precisely the kind of resistance that has made the film popular with commentators like Doyle and Mendik, who bring to their readings an awareness of adolescent reception of horror films. Mendik's discussion of the "*Ginger Snaps* audience research project" notes fan identification of the *Ginger Snaps* cycle as films with "significant appeal to a non-horror audience" who view the films as "coming-of-age dramas" with "lesbian undertones" (78–82). Whether or not viewers adopt a lesbian reception position, the ways that Ginger and Brigitte refuse the standard trappings of social femininity and entertain themselves in a sisterly circle of two is indicative of Doyle's "weird, overwhelming, mind-meld effect that takes place sometimes between girls": a queer(ed) relationship. Over and over, the Fitzgerald sisters (whose Celtic surname implies a link to Irish culture's rich supernatural folk tradition) claim that they would rather be dead than be cute like their classmates, or matronly like their mother, or without each other in any circumstance. The morbidity with which the sisters portray their possibilities of escape is reflected in their

pursuit of their photographic “death project” as well as in their blood oath. Both of these bloody enactments counterpoint the sisters’ lack of menstruation and act as creative opportunities in which the sisters impose their will on blood, rather than have blood impose its will on them. The “death project” consists of photos in which Ginger and Brigitte pose as victims of extravagantly staged suburban murder and suicide, complete with “suicide notes” quoting Shakespeare and Milton, suggesting a half-ironic, half-romanticized accompaniment to these gruesome photos.<sup>7</sup> Covered in fake blood, impaled by fence pickets, and eviscerated by garden shears, the girls perform the feminine subject as sacrificed by, and to, a macabre banality of domestic phallic objects. The girls are proud of the bleak comic sensibility displayed in the photographs, but their teachers and classmates are nearly unanimous in their opinions that the photos are “deranged” and “disgusting,” with the only exception being the flirtatious Jason McCardy, who views the display of the photos as one more opportunity to eroticize Ginger. The photographs show the girls’ dedication to their outsider status as well as their awareness of the kind of spiritual death represented by “life as they know it.”

### **“Together Forever”: The “L Word” Times Two**

If the blurred snapshot at the start of the film acts as a symbol for a metamorphosis (and a desire) that cannot be named, then the script emphasizes this

resistance to definition by never putting the word “werewolf” into Ginger’s dialogue, and only once allowing Brigitte to utter the word in order to disprove Sam’s doubt that she does not know the meaning of the word “lycanthrope.” This injunction against saying “werewolf” (from the German-derived Old English word “man-wolf”) and the affirmation of “lycanthrope” as the word of choice (using the Greek root “anthropos” [person] as opposed to “andros” [male]) extends to the film’s substitution of monkhood as the chemical cure for lycanthropy in order that Brigitte can avoid pronouncing the word “wolfsbane.” With each utterance of the word “lycanthrope,” it becomes increasingly evident that Bailey Downs is a world in which the scientific “lycanthrope” is pronounceable, yet the erotic “lesbian” is not. The euphemistic “lycanthrope” and the unspoken “lesbian” are set against each other as terms that challenge normative subjectivities within the film. Within the film’s lexicon, these two terms establish the parameters of subversive speakability for the adolescent characters. Brigitte uses the term “lycanthrope” with a certain amount of resistance, for lack of any other word that suffices, but Ginger herself eschews all definition, preferring to attribute her changes first to puberty, then to sexual hunger, and finally to an access to power that she asserts as both super and “natural”: “I’m a goddamned force of nature. I feel like I could do just about anything.” She lets puny mortals fret

about strict definitions of gender and sexuality. The burgeoning sexual power that Ginger accesses through her supernatural metamorphosis is first seen through a standard slow-motion catwalk shot of Ginger arriving at school. The transforming Ginger wears briefer, tighter clothing and a knowing smile grows on her face as the boys stare at her “new” beauty. Well out of established character, she necks passionately with Jason at a school sporting event. All signs appear to point to a heterosexual male fantasy of female adolescent behaviour: the unleashed erotic power of Ginger’s maturing female body is compounded by the aggression of her metamorphosing transbiological body, resulting in a sexually dominant, supernaturally strong, erotically demanding woman.

Reading Ginger’s appetite for violence as a “result” of her thwarted desire adds another complicating factor to a queer reading of the film. In *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*, Hart notes that “the shadow of the lesbian is laminated to the representation of women’s violence, that indeed it is the lesbian’s absent presence that both permits women’s aggression to enter the specular field and defuses the full force of its threat” (x). In other words, the open secret of the sisters’ sexual desire invites viewers to question the illogical dichotomy of female sexual criminality, a major question that emerges from lycanthropic transformation as filtered through lesbian subjectivity. According to the logic of the film,

is Ginger violent because she is a lesbian or is she a lesbian because she is violent? The film exposes these questions as inadequate to the task of reading female aggression and aligns the film’s dynamics of transformation with Hart’s observations that, “if desire always verifies masculinity, so does crime. And it is the wedding of these two discourses that produces the paradoxical object—the ‘impossible’ lesbian, who was always already a criminal” (11). If Ginger is “a goddamn force of nature,” we must consider if the crime is to be found in the damning or in the force, or perhaps in our narrow definitions of “nature” itself.

Certainly, reading the lesbian body in horror film is no simple matter of invoking the commonplace of reading the monster in the mainstream horror film as a homosexual “sign.” Vito Russo and Robin Wood have both made the point that the male monster’s perversely configured body invites spectatorial identification from “othered” viewers. In *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*, Harry Benshoff suggests that the parallel between gay man and monster is literal and cultural, as both are “permanent residents of shadowy spaces: at worst caves, castles and closets, and at best a marginalized and oppressed position within the cultural hegemony” (7). Wood, Russo, and Benshoff all focus on men as subjects and on adult gay men as audience members, however. Mainstream horror films, on the other hand, presume a heterosexual male audience. When



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of the sisters' intimacy.



lesbians are discussed as “queered monstrosities” in horror-film criticism, the lesbian vampire is the figure that usually surfaces. Discussing “Lesbians Who Bite” in *Out Takes*, Ellis Hanson calls the lesbian vampire “a seductive and irrepressible force” in “a long narrative tradition of the gothic in which homosexuality is always the unspeakable that is nevertheless spoken in a nightmarish fit of panic and horror” (192). Bonnie Zimmerman’s examination of the powerful filmic appeal of the lesbian vampire provides a useful point of comparison from within the lesbian viewing community: “No attempt of man or god can prevent the lesbian from passing on her ‘curse.’ The effect of this transference is not at all horrifying, but rather amusing, almost charming to a lesbian viewer” (qtd. in Hanson 192). If, as Hanson has it, these “lesbians who bite” are attractive to viewers of all kind of sexualities because they read as “bruisingly butch and fabulously femme” (193), however, then his description proposes a problem in representing the female werewolf as an object for aesthetic delight. Unlike the film vampire, who (male or female) is tremendously strong but visually graceful and even seductively effete, the film werewolf body has traditionally been gendered male: hairy, canine, muscled. With the notable exception of Elizabeth M. Clark’s thesis, “Hairy Thuggish Women: Female Werewolves, Gender, and the Hoped-For Monster” and Mendik’s previously mentioned fan discussion of “lesbian lycanthropy,” critics have been slow to interpret the female werewolf, much less the lesbian werewolf, as a trope of transformative power or eroticism.<sup>8</sup>

In *Imps of the Perverse*, his tongue-in-cheek “genealogy of gay monstrosity,” Michael William Saunders points out that horror film has produced relatively few manifestations of female supernatural predators other than the female vampire and cites *Cat People* as

the best example of these few (11–12). This absence raises more questions about female and lesbian representation in horror film than it solves, and such limitations in reading gender and sexuality in horror film gesture to the problems of monstrous female representation with which *Ginger Snaps* struggles. The transformation of the “fabulously femme” Ginger into a werewolf while the film offers the sight of actress Katherine Isabelle’s body as a heteroerotic display is visually problematic once the transformation progresses beyond the werewolf’s ability to heal quickly, grow hair, and sprout a tail. Indeed, Ginger’s tail is a perfect case in point. The camera’s gaze on Ginger’s ripening body, her tail protruding slyly from the back of Ginger’s black underwear, is more erotically encoded than abject and suggests that this “othered” female body continues to be claimed by cinematic tropes of heterosexual desire. Saunders’ reference to *Cat People* is a reminder of a typical visual strategy used to sidestep the issue of the animal body and femininity. Watching Jacques Tourneur’s original 1942 film *Cat People* or Paul Schraeder’s 1982 remake, viewers need make no imaginative leap at all to regard the lithe bodies of actors Simone Simon or Nastassia Kinski as feline, and Fairuza Balk’s half-woman, half-cat in John Frankenheimer’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1996) follows a similar feline codification of femininity. The comparison of women to cats is imbedded in slang expressions, with descriptions of

“catty” behaviour, where a sexually aggressive woman is a “tigress,” a “cougar” who preys on younger men, or (if she herself is younger) a “kitten with a whip.” Even “pussy,” the slang term for female genitalia, takes a feline metaphor. These colloquialisms conflate the female and the feline almost seamlessly. Not unlike the lesbian vampire, a cat-identified woman can possess strength alongside her heteronormative femininity.<sup>9</sup> Dogginess—the canine strain—is traditionally glossed as a male trope, however, from its associations with sexual promiscuity and violence to pack behaviours, or as in Nancy Savoca’s 1991 film, *Dogfight*, as a double allusion to unattractive women and to military violence.

#### **“Life as We Know It”: Final Girl Fallacies**

Discussions of sexuality, normative or subversive, should not distract viewers and discussants from the fact that *Ginger Snaps* is also a film about geek girls, their othered subjectivities, and how such adolescents value each other during what Patricia Molloy points out is “the collapse of the (territorial) boundary between adolescent and adult.” The navel-piercing scene suggests the collapse of one boundary, exposing as it does the erotic current of the sisters’ intimacy. Significantly, this scene occurs immediately after Ginger returns from having sex with Jason in the back seat of his car. Ginger is very much the aggressor in her encounter with Jason, but despite his terrified

screams, her attempts to use violence to force a gender reversal fail. When Ginger returns to the sisters' basement room, she is incredulous that even the force of her supernatural aggression did not change the social dynamics of the heterosexual encounter. She compares Jason's sexual subjectivity to her own by shrugging disconsolately: "He got laid. I'm just a lay." This scene begins with Ginger discussing what viewers are meant to assume (based on the previous shot of the girls looking at the corpse of the dog next door whom Ginger has dismembered and eaten) is her description of killing the dog: "there's all this screaming and squealing, and then he's done." The line acts as a double entendre, for it becomes clear that Ginger is also speaking about her disappointment in her sexual encounter with Jason.

The conflation of sex and violent consumption is supernatural shorthand for an uncontrollable appetite, and the intended misidentification of "squealing" as part of male sexual climax may certainly be read as a wry lesbian reference, one that significantly is situated immediately before the navel-piercing scene. The objectification of actor Katherine Isabelle's body in this scene discomfits attempts to read the film as a feminist revenge fantasy but confirms the subtext of lesbian desire. As Ginger writhes beneath Brigitte's body to the accompanying wail of an electric guitar, it is apparent that this is the real erotic moment for Ginger, a deliberate contrast to the "lay" of the preceding

scene. The moment is complicated, however, by the lie that Brigitte tells when she claims that she found the ring when she has in fact received it from Sam. Karen Walton points out in her commentary to this scene that Brigitte's first lie to Ginger is about the origin of the ring; it is a lie that connotes an emotional infidelity, if not a sexual one.

Ginger's own infidelities with boys appear parodic in comparison to her devotion to Brigitte. Her sexual strut, which appears to offer her body as a display to gawking high school boys, can be read as merely an exercise of her power, not as real desire. By the time Ginger reaches the final stage of her supernatural transformation, Brigitte is already aware that a being who "could do just about anything" is a societal threat: not liberatory, but lethal. Despite the fact that she is turning into a werewolf and so is putatively freed from moral or ethical human standards, Ginger does not kill indiscriminately, or even for food, but rather according to the fractured logic of jealousy. The men Ginger murders are not thrill-kills, but men who seem to present barriers to her desire to be "together forever" with Brigitte. Ginger targets Sam, whose friendship with Brigitte may be read as a potential heterosexual threat, and also targets and kills two older men (the school counsellor and the custodian) whose interest in Brigitte exists only in Ginger's super-paranoid imagination. Although she justifies her murders by claiming that she is protecting Brigitte, Ginger is

jealous of any whiff of earthly sexuality that might compromise the sisters' increasingly transbiological union, an act in defiance of human boundaries yet ironically longed for as a way to preserve "life as they know it." In what is certainly the film's queerest moment, Ginger crawls atop the prostrate Brigitte, offering her eternal life, supernatural sexual freedom, and the ultimate in intimate unions, all while delivering a final seductive argument for freeing Brigitte from the rules of the mortal world. Purring in her ear, Ginger reminds Brigitte that her supernatural form grants permission to desires by effacing a species-based and familial relationship with the line "We're almost not even related anymore." The incestuous implication is so overt that it nearly (but not quite) buries the lesbian reading. The triumvirate of taboos presented in this moment is exhilaratingly transgressive and culturally arresting. The simultaneous evocation of incestuous desire, same-sex desire, and interspecific desire suggests a social-sexual monkey trap for the viewer who tries to decipher which transgression is most prominent or the most shocking.<sup>10</sup>

This intimatopia is complicated by sibling rivalry, however. Sue Short identifies Ginger's "sexual jealousy," but aligns it with competition between the girls and effaces the erotic jealousy in which Ginger views Sam as her rival (97). Without a doubt, Ginger's sexual jealousy fuels the action, but she is jealous of Sam's sexual chances with Brigitte, not of Brigitte's

chances with Sam. Brigitte is the love object here, not the sexual rival, and she knows it. After finding Ginger about to seduce and kill Sam, Brigitte uses the sisters' oath of infinite fidelity to challenge Ginger's aggression while affirming her erotic union with her sister: "together forever, united against life as we know it." With this bold gesture, she counters any evidence of a potential heterosexual romance with Sam by "outing" herself furiously, blurring sexual consummation with heroic confrontation. Her challenge to Ginger delineates the significant difference between sibling rivalry and partner jealousy: "You want me? You want me! Stop hurting everybody else and take me!" Brigitte then cuts both her own and Ginger's palms and clasps their hands together, at once renewing their blood oath and infecting herself with the lycanthropic virus. Brigitte has given Ginger exactly what she has been demanding: a repetition of the oath and an action that will unite the sisters in a supernatural erotic union. When Brigitte clasps Ginger's hand to mix their blood together, she declares, "Now I am you." Her tone is defiant, but the statement is poignant. Brigitte chooses lycanthropy in a way that Ginger did not, but throughout this film and its sequel, she will also resist it as Ginger did not and perhaps could not.

The scene with the renewed blood oath is the last scene in the film in which Ginger is recognizably human, though she is already much changed. The feline/female, canine/male dichotomy suggests that



She does not get to be the lycanthropic equivalent of Zimmerman’s “charming” lesbian vampire, but is, instead, limited by being coded strictly as the sexy female monster.



the visual representation of a female werewolf is no easy matter. During the scene at the Halloween party, Ginger is dressed and presented like a fashion model and moves through the room like one—disinterested, focused on the middle distance, with her partly transformed body attracting only admiring glances as a seductive “costume.” This attempt to maintain Ginger’s seductive appearance while showing off her transformation, however, produces one of the most disturbing moments in the film, one with which the costume and makeup crew must have struggled. When Ginger attempts to seduce Sam, she pulls her jacket aside to reveal a large rib cage and three sets of canine nipples instead of human breasts. The viewer is offered the sight of a body that is undeniably female but whose species is significantly liminal. In this scene, Ginger’s femaleness is rendered visually more important than her species identification. She does not get to be the lycanthropic equivalent of Zimmerman’s “charming” lesbian vampire, but is, instead, limited by being coded strictly as the sexy female monster.

When Ginger undergoes the final throes of her metamorphosis, she emerges from the van as fully lycanthropic: a creature marked as female by the vestigial teats lining her underside but as muscled as any male werewolf—or as any human male bodybuilder, for that matter. The film then heads toward that horror staple so thoroughly examined by Carol Clover in *Men, Women and Chain Saws*: the climactic sequence when the virginal “Final Girl” faces off against the sexualized monster. In true doubled-handed fashion, supporting and subverting the conventions of horror film, the climactic battle of *Ginger Snaps* is as typical as it is intentionally problematized. Brigitte has all the characteristics of a classic “Final Girl” in Clover’s terms: she is less sexually experienced than her peers and is also



“intelligent, watchful, level-headed . . . the only one whose perspective approaches [viewers’] privileged understanding of the situation” (44). Her virginal status appears to keep her just out of reach of the monster’s clutches, while her sexually active peers (Sam and his former girlfriend Trina Sinclair) die horrible deaths. She stands off alone against the beast and uses a phallic weapon—a knife—to masculinize herself in battle and ultimately to feminize the monster through a murderous castration of its strength (43–50). Clover warns, however, against readings that suggest that biological sex of the Final Girl is an unequivocal feminist gain, stating that the Final Girl is much more often appropriated as a male surrogate, an (ironically) honorary male standing in for the largely young male audience (50–53). In other words, in most conventional horror films, the Final Girl’s reconfigured “maleness” serves the homosocial/homoerotic pleasure of the male horror fan and undermines readings of the Final Girl as a feminist symbol. Such appropriative figuration is more heinous, perhaps, for the ways that it “tricks” inexperienced female viewers into assuming that they are being “represented” onscreen by a strong female character.

Reading the battle scene in *Ginger Snaps* for its queer signs, however, suggests possibilities for a Final Girl who, if not completely severed from such homosocial male figuration, is also not easily appropriated by or assimilated into phallocentrism.

The pitched battle between the girls, complicated by love, begins with an eerie calm. The lycanthrope has mortally wounded Sam off-camera, leaving the Final Girl’s battle to be the visual climax. As Brigitte enters the room, ready for battle, she can see Sam sitting up in a crawl space, bleeding from his chest, clearly close to death. The lycanthrope crouches beside him. Brigitte crawls forward and stops by Sam’s side, facing the lycanthrope. In a scene that recalls vampiric communion, with the dying man framed between them, both Brigitte and the lycanthrope begin to lap up his blood from where it has pooled on the floor. On her hands and knees, with a lowered head and a posture that mirrors that of the monster, Brigitte exchanges a protracted gaze with the werewolf before dipping her head to bring her blood-covered hand to her mouth and lick it. Even with the unfettered monster no more than three feet from her face, Brigitte exhibits neither fear nor bravado. The gaze she exchanges with the monster is cryptic and it recalls Linda Williams’s assertion that a “woman’s look at the monster offers at least a potentially subversive recognition of the power and potency of a non-phallic sexuality” (570). The look implies Brigitte’s impending lycanthropy and suggests that, with her transformation, the sisters will at last be “together forever.” The scene also reminds us that Brigitte has adamantly refused Sam’s offer of heterosexual rescue: that they leave town and secure enough monkshood for her to live a manageable life.

Finally, the look is one more acknowledgement of Brigitte's belief that her beloved Ginger dwells within the body of the monster.

Such love is not for the weak. A number of differences from Clover's "Final Girl" scenario suggests that the lesbian subtext of the script profoundly affects the final scene of the film. Instead of facing off in what Clover calls "the Terrible Place," the monster's "dark and damp" even "intrauterine" lair (48), the sisters face off in their shared basement room, a more ambiguous space because it has sheltered monster *and* heroine, and because the basement has functioned as haven *and* as restricting closet. Pursuing a queer reading of the film also means accounting for the fact that the monster has been, on some level, Brigitte's lover. How "virginal" is this Final Girl? While Brigitte resists Ginger's supernatural advances, the wailing guitars and grinding motions of Ginger's body against Brigitte's in the piercing scene is a metaphor of penetration, or at least a mutual experience in erotic frottage.

In typical Final Girl fashion, Brigitte arms herself for the battle with two phallic weapons—a knife and a syringe full of monkshood—although her initial plan is to inject the lycanthrope and use the knife only to protect herself. She does, inevitably, use the knife to penetrate the lycanthrope's belly—the site of the navel piercing—as the beast leaps upon her. If Brigitte gains phallic power by her use of the knife, as Clover suggests, she rejects it a moment later. Gazing up at

the death project photos pinned to the wall between their beds, Brigitte embraces the grotesque body of the monster which glistens with lymph and sweat, slippery as a foetus. She calls the lycanthrope "Ginger," and it is easy to visualize the girl behind the monster's still-open eyes, magically intact like Red Riding Hood lying whole but trapped in the wolf's stomach. Like the Woodcutter of the fairy tale, Brigitte has stabbed the beast in the stomach, but, in this modern fairy tale, the girl does not emerge but dies within the body of the beast. The final shot of the film confirms what Brigitte announced in renewing her blood oath: "Now I am you." The film's sequel (*Ginger Snaps II: Unleashed*) will challenge the veracity of that statement, as Brigitte struggles to live without succumbing to her lycanthropy, treating it as a chronic condition that can be controlled with regular injections of monkshood, and telling the taunting ghost of Ginger that she—Brigitte—is the "stronger" of the two sisters.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly, the ending of *Ginger Snaps* does reproduce some of the disheartening hegemony of the horror genre. Ginger's success in being "out by sixteen" has also predicated her "death in the scene," which seems on the surface to perpetuate the myth of the sacrificial lesbian. But Brigitte's mournful embrace suggests a profound uneasiness with the genre: this Final Girl is neither triumphant nor relieved. Her grief and her chosen engagement with the leaking bodily fluids of the monster "out" her as lover and beloved.

The film's exploration of the female werewolf as a sign of lesbian eroticism suggests a convergence of gender, alternative sexuality, and transbiology, a triumvirate of competing taboos that cannot be ignored. *Ginger Snaps* may still be first and foremost a

horror story about the transformations of adolescence, but, by offering a resolutely intimate representation of incestuous adolescent same-sex desire that destabilizes horror-film convention, *Ginger Snaps* frames female relationships in all their queer(ed) intensity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For alerting me to female audience responses to *Ginger Snaps*, I thank Dr. Jennifer Brayton of the Department of Sociology at Ryerson University, who discussed this with me after I presented a version of this article to the Film Studies Association of Canada in Saskatoon during Congress 2007. I also thank the unidentified professor who attended the same session and told me that his female students displayed a great interest in the lesbian subtext in *Ginger Snaps*, while his male students claimed to be mystified by such a reading.

<sup>2</sup> As Bernice M. Murphy notes in *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, the suburban gothic mode surfaces as history's vengeance on a homogenized modernity: "protagonists frequently invoke the 'newness' of their surroundings as a kind of guarantee against supernatural incident. The perception is that since the suburbs have no history they should therefore remain untouched" by historical events (10). The film's prequel, *Ginger Snaps Back: The Beginning*, locates the origin of the Fitzgerald sisters' "curse" as a Windigo narrative, showing the sisters as young Irish immigrants who, while en route to a colonial fort in nineteenth-century British North America, are attacked by a

powerful unseen force in the winter forest. While much about this prequel is problematic, the impulse to account for a history of place that has been elided by the suburb of Bailey Downs implies strongly that one person's "new place" covers another person's heritage. See Patricia Molloy's excellent article for a discussion of the prequel as an allegory for the "rogue" element that plagues notions of sovereignty in a developing nation-state.

<sup>3</sup> The French title for *Ginger Snaps* is *Entre sœurs*, which potentially reinforces an erotic reading of what occurs "between" the Fitzgerald sisters.

<sup>4</sup> In two excellent articles on reading the menstrual monster in *Ginger Snaps* that were published in 2005, April Miller emphasizes the film's use of lycanthrope folklore to underline "the limits placed on female sexual subjectivity" (281), particularly as such limits may be defined in the morbid sameness of Bailey Downs as a "Stepford community" (290), while Aviva Briefel uses *Ginger Snaps* in her examination of the feminist possibilities of the onscreen menstrual monster.

<sup>5</sup> The recent “It Gets Better” campaign, aimed at queer youth in crisis from social alienation, violence, and suicide, is a case in point. While not intending to take the place of such a campaign, positive depictions of lesbian characters such as Willow, Tara, and Kennedy in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* suggest accessible supernatural women whose queerness is welcome in their peer group.

<sup>6</sup> A line drawing of a large beetle tacked to the sisters’ bedroom wall is a visual allusion to the most famous twentieth-century narrative of transbiological transformation: that of Gregor Samsa into a dung beetle in Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*.

<sup>7</sup> The verses that accompany the photos are allusions to canonical works that favour misunderstood death, loneliness, and rebellion. The final four lines from *King Lear*, with its reminder that “The oldest hath borne most,” becomes poignant in light of Ginger’s death, while the lines from Book 2 of *Paradise Lost*, “long is the way / and hard that out of Hell leads up to the light,” suggest the girls are Miltonic demons struggling up out of their basement. The final note, from Siberian explorer Pavel T. Shvetsov’s 1801 suicide note, is not canonical, but takes on a similar tone—“I am leaving this place forever / without thought / without hope / without work. / Alone in the dark / the snow will cover my footsteps”—thus presaging Brigitte’s loneliness at the end of the film and the plot of its sequel, *Ginger Snaps II: Unleashed*. Appropriation from the texts of these male authors suggests the Fitzgerald sisters’ assertion of a heroic suicidal partnership rather than a weak and singular Ophelia-modelled death.

<sup>8</sup> Appearances by the female werewolf in mainstream horror media include the character of Veruca played by Paige Moss in season four of the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and the lead

character played by Christina Ricci in the 2005 film *Cursed*. Both of these female werewolves are performed as overtly heterosexual. Kelley Armstrong’s *Bitten* and its sequels, about a female werewolf living in Southern Ontario, emphasize with wry humour the problem of being “the only female werewolf” on the planet. The title of Martin Millar’s recent young adult novel *Lonely Werewolf Girl* says it all.

<sup>9</sup> This semiotic slip from female to feline is so powerful that screenwriter Walton voices it in her commentary on the DVD of *Ginger Snaps* as she is discussing the physical construction of the werewolf used in the film’s final scenes.

<sup>10</sup> The issue here is one of social judgment; in the classroom, I have found that students’ opinions vary widely about which taboo emerges as the most transgressive. Pedagogically, such a discussion is useful for parsing the ways that *Ginger Snaps* arouses such judgments of levels of transgression. Some students have argued that the incest taboo is more powerful than the taboo against interspecific congress.

<sup>11</sup> A similar strategy for managing supernatural identity as a chronic condition was an important plot point for the character of Louis in Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* and for the character of Angel in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*. Brigitte’s reliance on monkhood is misread by other characters as a heroin addiction in *Ginger Snaps II: Unleashed*, but a closer real-life parallel may be found in the use of protease inhibitors to change a diagnosis of AIDS into what has been medically termed a “liveable condition.” Likewise, Remus Lupin in the Harry Potter novels relies upon a wolfsbane potion. For discussions of Lupin’s condition as an AIDS metaphor, see Nel; Tosenberger (“Homosexuality”).

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Tanis MacDonald is Associate Professor in the Department of English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. She is the author of a forthcoming study on the feminist elegy in Canada, *The Daughter's Way: Canadian Women's Paternal Elegies* (Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2012), and of three books of poetry, most recent of which is *Rue the Day* (Turnstone, 2008). She is also the editor of *Speaking of Power: The Poetry of Di Brandt* (Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2006).