

## Academic Writing in the American University

Please read the following excerpts in preparation for our session together. You will be working together to practice some concepts we'll discuss using these shared texts.

### Thinking about Thesis

The debate about race in Brazil is the result of diverse answers to two primary questions: *How is race defined in Brazil?* and, more pointedly, *What is the significance of Brazil's elaborate and wide-ranging racial/identification vocabulary?* One side sees, underneath the variety of terms, an ineluctable racial dichotomy. The other views race, and the terms, as representing a broad, vague spectrum of characteristics. The reality of race in Brazil does not precisely fit either of these theories, however. Rather, I argue that the system of race in Brazil follows a roughly bipolar model, and the two poles are white and nonwhite. The white pole is cohesive while the nonwhite pole is fluid and contains graded degrees of nonwhiteness.

### Using Sources

#### *Step 1:*

Much of what a corpse “does” [according to eighteenth-century vampire accounts] results from misunderstood processes of decomposition. [...] But however mythical the vampire [in folklore] was, the corpses that were taken for vampires were very real. And many of the mysteries of vampire lore clear up when we examine the legal and medical evidence surrounding these exhumations. “Not without astonishment,” says an observer at the exhumation of a Serbian vampire in 1727, “I saw some fresh blood in his mouth, which, according to the common observation, he had sucked from the people killed by him.” Similarly, in *Vivum et Repertum*, we are told that the people exhuming one vampire were surprised by a “plumpness” they asserted had come to the corpse in the grave. Our sources deduced a cause-and-effect relationship from these two observations. The vampire was larger than he was [in life] because he was full to bursting with the fresh blood of his victims.

The observations are clinically accurate: as a corpse decomposes, it normally bloats (from the gases given off by decomposition), while the pressure from the bloating causes blood from the lungs to emerge at the mouth. The blood is real, it just didn't come from “victims” of the deceased.

But how was it that Arnold Paole, exhumed forty days after his death, groaned when his exhumers drove a stake into him? The peasants of Medvegia assumed that if the corpse groaned, it must still be alive. But a corpse does emit sounds, even when it is only moved, let alone if a stake were driven into it. This is because the compression of the chest cavity forces air past the glottis, causing a sound similar in quality and origin to the groan or cry of a living person. [...] To vampire killers who are digging up a corpse, anything unexpected is taken for evidence of vampirism.

From Paul Barber, “The Real Vampire: Forensic Pathology and the Lore of the Undead.” *Natural History* (October 1990): 78-80.

**Step 2:** The following are examples of students using the above source. For now, simply read them; I'll explain what to do when we meet.

1. One could argue that eighteenth-century vampire hunters were simply guilty of misunderstanding the evidence of decomposition. The fact that a corpse exhibits signs of “vampirism,” such as blood at the mouth or appearing swollen, simply means that the bodies are undergoing the natural processes of decomposition, in which gases cause the bodies to bloat, forcing blood from the lungs into the mouth (as is discussed in Paul Barber’s “The Real Vampire”). That may be the case, but what do we make of cases of “vampires” who groaned when they were staked? This again can be explained: when air is suddenly and forcefully pushed out of the chest past the glottis, even dead bodies make a noise that sounds like a groan.
2. In “The Real Vampire,” Paul Barber argues that witnesses who claimed to find evidence of vampirism when exhuming corpses were often mistaken about what happens to dead bodies. He shows that these witnesses’ observations were “clinically accurate”, but wrong in their interpretations (78). His argument is flawed because he fails to take into account [...]
3. When one reflects on the current popularity of vampire fiction, it’s important to remember that the myths all have origins in real events. For centuries, as people struggled to understand and, perhaps, prevent death, theories abounded about whether or not life really does end with death. In the eighteenth century, accounts of dead bodies that appeared to be bursting with the fresh blood of their victims only reinforced the belief that the dead were alive and well and looking for new converts.
4. Even though eighteenth-century vampire accounts may simply result from a misunderstanding of the “processes of decomposition,” one could argue that the vampire hunters’ predisposition to diagnose dead bodies reflects anxieties about the threat that the dead pose to the living.
5. Paul Barber’s “The Real Vampire” argues that eighteenth-century accounts of vampirism reveal misunderstandings about how bodies decompose. As he argues what appeared to eighteenth-century observers to be clear evidence of vampirism was, in fact, part of a natural process. The appearance of blood in a corpse’s mouth could be explained by the fact that gases formed in decomposition will often force blood from the lungs into the mouth. Likewise, Barber points out that the ultimate proof of vampirism — when a corpse groaned after being staked — is little more than the natural result of exerting pressure on the chest and forcing air from the lungs through the glottis (78-80). Barber’s argument about the relationship between the evidence of decomposition and how that evidence is interpreted as vampirism raises several important questions for historians about the relationship between reality and fantasy in vampire fiction.

6. Although people often think of vampire myths as originating from folklore, we need to be careful about those assumptions. Using “clinically accurate” information, Paul Barber asserts that evidence in eighteenth-century accounts of the “processes of decomposition” demonstrates that many corpses could, and often did, show true signs of vampirism (78). This is not to say that all deaths in the period came from vampirism, but it does suggest that...
  
7. I wish to argue that the basis of many vampire myths came from misreadings of forensic evidence. In fact, if we re-examine most accounts of vampire sightings, it soon becomes clear that what looked like vampirism was little more. Than the natural effects of decomposition. As I will argue, accounts from the eighteenth-century seem to have been the most egregious in misconstruing [...]