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A BLACK GIRL NAMED AFTER A PLANTATION: TARA THORNTON AND THE USE OF IRONIC RACISM IN ALAN BALL'S TRUE BLOOD

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A BLACK GIRL NAMED AFTER A PLANTATION:
TARA THORNTON AND THE USE OF IRONIC RACISM IN ALAN
BALL'S *TRUE BLOOD*

(Spine title: *Ironic Racism in Alan Ball's True Blood*)

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by

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Graduate Program in Media Studies

2

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
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SCHOOL OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

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**A Black Girl Named After a Plantation: Tara Thornton and the Use of
Ironic Racism in Alan Ball's *True Blood***

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Abstract

This thesis is an in-depth analysis of racial discourse surrounding HBO's *True Blood* and its reoccurring Black female character Tara Thornton. More specifically, it addresses how Tara's character and the use of ironic racism complicate essentialist definitions of race and common representations of Black women on television. This thesis employs a Black feminist framework to perform a textual analysis of *True Blood* and evaluate racial discourse surrounding the program in American news columns and high-traffic online message boards. *True Blood's* high ratings, print media coverage and active fan communities point to its impact on contemporary popular discourse. Thus its depiction of Black women and "Black" culture in America have the potential to reconfigure or perpetuate dominant media codes or cultural assumptions associated with this marginalized population. *True Blood's* use of Southern Gothic narrative conventions to address homosexuality, gender roles and class structures in the United States prove successful, but racial commentary is mostly unacknowledged by entertainment journalists and fans alike. Though *True Blood* has made significant advances in American cable television by integrating numerous racialized bodies into its narrative, creator Alan Ball's use of ironic racism muddies his attempt at provocative or transgressive programming. Teachable moments or opportunities for cultural revision available due to Tara's strong presence in the narrative are rarely articulated in a meaningful manner. Instead, *True Blood* provides racially insensitive images for viewers and reinforces common stereotypes of Black women in the United States.

Keywords: Ironic racism, Race, Louisiana, Black Feminism, (Southern) Gothic, Fandom

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-Table of Contents-

Certificate of Examination	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
Introduction: Welcome to Bon Temps	1
Chapter 1: Coverage of <i>True Blood</i> in American Print Media	25
Chapter 2: (Gothic) Mothers and Black Performativity in <i>True Blood</i>	54
Chapter 3: Fan Interpretations of Racialized Imagery in <i>True Blood</i>	95
Afterword	128
Works Cited	132
Vita	140

-Introduction- Welcome to Bon Temps

In April of 1819, Italian-born John William Polidori's short story, *The Vampyre*, was published in England's *New Monthly Magazine*. His text is considered by academics and vampire enthusiasts to be the first vampire prose ever written to completion, but the undead have haunted the minds of the British since the twelfth century. Believed to be carriers of disease and misfortune, vampires were often blamed for fatal health epidemics and undesirable events within a community. European folklore suggests that suicide and unsavory personality traits such as "being a quarrelsome person, a drunkard, or associat[ion] with ... sorcery/witchcraft" during one's life could result in vampirism upon death (Melton 656)¹. In these tales, corpses plagued with vampirism would rise from their grave at night and feed on the blood of the living.

Polidori's vampire, modeled after his arch-enemy and fellow writer, Lord Byron, is not ugly, bloated, or diseased like the creatures described in original nosferatu² accounts. His character, Lord Ruthven, is a sophisticated and charming aristocrat. *The Vampyre* would later inspire Bram Stoker's *Dracula*³ (1897) and a slew of other vampire narratives including Anne Rice's book series *The Vampire Chronicles* (1976-2003), and Joss Whedon's television program, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN 1997-2003). The

¹ Gordon Melton is a religion scholar with an interest in vampirology. He is also the author of the in-depth vampire work *The Vampire Book: An Encyclopedia of the Undead*. Excerpts from Melton's text can be found throughout this thesis.

² According to Melton "[n]osferatu is a modern word derived from [the] Old Slavonic word *nesufur-atu*, ... a 'plague carrier'" (496).

³ Stoker's *Dracula* is named after Vlad the Impaler. Vlad "was also known as Dracula, 'son of Dracul'" (Rickels 11).

steady flow of vampire-related media content over centuries suggests that the undead have had devotees all along. I however did not show interest in vampire narratives until I came across Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga* (2005-2008) in the winter of 2008. The popularity of Meyer's young adult book series has led to greater fandom⁴ and production of texts exploring vampire lore. Since the publication of *Twilight*, a number of new vampire-related prime-time television shows have aired in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom⁵ and vampire films have continued to profit at the box office.⁶

If we are to agree that the rebirth of vampire fandom in popular culture should be attributed to Meyer, then we must ask ourselves why her book series is influential enough to lead a cultural phenomenon. Elizabeth Anne Miller, a *Dracula* scholar and coeditor of *The Transylvanian Journal*⁷ provides some insight to this question in *Nylon* magazine's 2009 article "Heart of Darkness." Miller explains that vampires are popular again because they are "versatile [and] you can mold them any way you want to" (196). In other words, the vampire is a malleable metaphor used to represent a plethora of social qualms and fantasies. "When writers are able to come up with something new or something different and tell the same old story with a vampire twist," Miller continues,

⁴ See chapter three for in-depth definitions of "fan" and "fandom"

⁵ These programs include *Blood Ties* (CTV 2007), *Being Human* (BBC 2008- current) *True Blood* (HBO 2008 - current) and *The Vampire Diaries* (CW 2009 - current). The undead also appear in syndicated vampire programs (*Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *Moonlight*) and vampire-themed episodes of other popular television shows.

⁶ The second installment in the *Twilight Saga*, *New Moon*, made 258.8 million dollars during the first weekend of its release in 2009 (Fritz).

⁷ *The Transylvanian Journal: Dracula and Vampire Studies* is the only vampire-themed scholarly journal in publication (Melton 466). For more information, see Melton or Miller's website, "Dracula's Homepage" (<http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~emiller/>).

“the vampires come to the fore again” (196). For example, in *Twilight*, the vampire twist is used to breathe new life into cultural narratives involving abstinence. Instead of employing the vampire as a metaphor for social deviance and sexual exploration, Meyer utilizes the archetype to promote self-control, chastity and eternal love. Vampire Edward Cullen’s refusal to engage in sexual activity or feed on the blood of his partner Bella Swan differentiates *Twilight* from most vampire stories that came before it. As I will discuss later in this work, the vampire bite is often eroticized and sexualized, thus using the vampire to promote abstinence is quite a departure from its usual portrayal.

Matt Krantz of the American newspaper *USA Today* provides an alternative explanation for the popularity of vampires. He believes that the undead are in vogue due to America’s economic climate. In “Could the Pop-culture Mood Mirror Stock Market Swings,” Krantz suggests that popular music, movies, and television trends may provide clues to the current and forthcoming economic environment:

When people are in a collective good mood ... they tend to listen to bubble-gum-pop music with a steady happy beat and opt for comedies on TV and in the movies. During these times, investors feel good about buying stocks and push them to extreme bubblelike highs ... Conversely, when they're in a funk, people gravitate to music with dark, complex tones and themes and horror movies or serious dramas. During these times, investors get nervous about stocks ... [T]he runaway popularity of vampire shows, including ‘True Blood’ highlights the population's fascination at

the time with the darker side. Maybe it's not a good sign that vampires are still hot.

Krantz's assertion that nosferatu are fashionable during economic hardship is not a new argument, but his use of HBO's *True Blood* as an example of a popular vampire text suggests that social upheaval may also be responsible for the increase in American vampire narratives. Based on *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (2001- current) book series by Charlaine Harris and restructured for television by Alan Ball,⁸ *True Blood's* explicit sexual content, violence, and language brands the program an "anti-*Twilight*" and returns vampire narratives to their previous status as politically conscious, adult material (Melton 285).⁹

Set in the fictional town of Bon Temps, Louisiana, *True Blood* follows the life of local waitress Sookie Stackhouse (Anna Paquin). Sookie lives in a future where vampires have "come out of the coffin" and walk amongst humans. After they save each other's lives, Sookie and one hundred and seventy-three year old vampire, Bill Compton (Stephen Moyer), fall in love. Similar to characters in *Twilight*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and The CW's current hit program *The Vampire Diaries*, Sookie and her undead lover face constant danger and must battle supernatural and human evils to avoid "true

⁸ *True Blood* is not an *adaptation* but a *version* of the universe (or Sookieverse) introduced in Harris' novels. Television and film scholar Sarah Cardwell outlines the difference between the two terms in her book *Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel*. To Cardwell, creating an adaptation "clearly requires (a process of) adaptation – a conscious process of working upon a text in order to suit it to another medium – whilst 'version' does not imply a process as dependent on the source text, except for a reliance on salient narrative events" (21). Indeed, Ball uses key narrative events from Harris' work, but he creates his own path that eventually leads to the pre-constructed events.

⁹ According to Melton, prior to "the appearance of horror comic books in the 1940s," vampire stories were strictly for adults (285).

death.”¹⁰ Due to the creation of Tru Blood, a synthetic blood substitute produced by Japanese scientists, vampires no longer pose a threat to human life, but they still face much discrimination by the living population. In its first three seasons, *True Blood* has used vampires to explore racism, sexuality, technological progress, religion and consumerism in the (Southern) United States. Vampires have been used as a metaphor for these topics in texts prior to the creation of *True Blood*, and they provide story arcs for other programs currently on air, but *True Blood* is the first vampire television show to explore all of these subjects in a graphic and unapologetic fashion.

Home Box Office

True Blood is able to display controversial issues in a raw form because it is a product of Home Box Office (HBO), a cable “channel that delivers a full slate of ... award-winning, boundary-pushing, genre-defining series, films, comedies and live events” (HBO Canada). A product of Time Warner, HBO began “as a subscription cable channel specialising in the broadcast of premium sports events and films” in 1972 (Johnson 148). According to television scholar Catherine Johnson’s case study, “HBO and *The Sopranos*,” HBO “moved into original programme production, competing with the national networks” (148). Due to this move, “HBO was part of the fragmentation of the US television industry in the 1980s and 1990s during which the production of cult television emerged as an industrial strategy” (148). As a subscription channel, HBO is exempt from the Federal Communication Commission’s (FCC) requirements regarding

¹⁰ Vampires in *True Blood* believe themselves to be in a sort of limbo. They are not entirely living or dead. “True death” occurs when a body is no longer animated and turns to slime.

violent, sexual, and language content (148). The lack of boundaries allows HBO to produce provocative programming.

David Chase's *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), a show about the Italian mob in New Jersey, made HBO the home of "quality"¹¹ television. The program "was densely plotted, focussing on exploring the complexities and contradictions of its characters' moral landscape, and never allowing its audience to take an easy position in relation to the storylines and characters" (149). After *The Sopranos* ended in 2007, HBO continued its tradition of quality television with other dramatic programs including Alan Ball's *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) and *True Blood*. *True Blood* is an anomaly in HBO's roster as the network had never explored live-action programs with strong fantastic¹² themes before its series premiere in September of 2008. The highest rated program on HBO since *The Sopranos*, *True Blood's* season three premiere on June 13, 2010, drew in 6.4 million viewers (Kubicek).

¹¹ According to Roberta Pearson, "Quality television began as a niche-broadcasting phenomenon aimed at the 'right' demographics, that is, viewers with the educational capital to respond to quality programmes literary aesthetics and with the economic capital to purchase products offered by sponsors" (15). In her book *Beyond the Box: Television and the Internet*, Sharon Marie Ross, an assistant professor in Columbia College's Television department argues that "quality television ... aims to provide diversity, to tell stories that are usable within the larger culture ... and to tell the truth about some element of society or culture" (51). *True Blood* compliments both definitions of the term.

¹² In "Definition of the Fantastic," literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov writes that "[i]n a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty ... Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny, or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (14-15).

True Blood as “Cult” and “Transgressive” TV

Johnson calls HBO the channel for “cult” TV. Roberta Pearson, a professor of television and film studies, explains that cult TV is “any television programme that is considered offbeat, or edgy, that draws a niche audience, that has a nostalgic appeal, that is considered emblematic of a particular subculture, or is considered hip” (7). Her article “Observations on Cult Television” also suggests that “‘cult’ television ... caters to intense, interpretive audience practices” (8). Audience practices include everything from discussing plot lines with other viewers, to fan art, to attending conventions dedicated to the text. In his article “Transgressive TV,” English scholar Jes Battis states that a program garners cult status after it has “been cancelled, forgotten, and then resurrected by fan intensity” or if it “debuted riskily as something that must or ought to be cancelled within a competitive broadcasting market, only to be surprisingly taken up, authenticated, and loved by an unexpected community of fans and critics” (78).

While cult television was initially understood to resist conventional program narratives and systems of representation, programs with high ratings and active viewing audiences like *True Blood* revised this definition. These programs, with their “complex narratives and elaborate mythologies resembling those of *The X-Files* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ... signal a configuration of the American television industry – the mainstream as the new cult” (Pearson 9). Stacey Abbott, a scholar in cult television and editor of *The Cult TV Book* reveals that “cult television is an ideal space in which to experiment with stylistic, generic and narrative conventions and break the rules of mainstream television” (93). As a cable channel that carries the slogan “It’s not TV, it’s

HBO,” Home Box Office proves to be the ideal place to find such programming (Johnson 149).

Because Alan Ball uses *True Blood* to circulate provocative images of marginalized bodies and subject matter, the program can also be categorized as “transgressive tv.” Transgressive or ground-breaking “moments in television often occur during conservative and/or oppressive stretches of government policy-making” and often “becomes coded specifically as the (unexpected) representation of racial and sexual minorities on screen” (Battis 77-78). With characters that explore various sexual pairings, the presence of an unconventional Black¹³ male character and numerous independent female characters, *True Blood* has earned its status as a transgressive television program.

Black Women and Binary Thought

Despite some significance in Black cultures,¹⁴ few Black actors and actresses have played a vampire in film or television. William Marshall’s character Prince

¹³ Some race and Black feminist theorists mentioned in this thesis use a lower case “b” when discussing or identifying black populations while others capitalize the word. I have chosen to capitalize “Black” as I believe it gives power and recognition to the identity. I have chosen to use the term “Black” instead of “African American” as I believe that the matters in this work are not exclusive to those who identify as “African American.” The term “Black” encompasses ethnicities in the United States who have shared life experiences based on skin pigmentation and oppression by dominant powers.

¹⁴ Western understanding of vampires and witches, “whose existence was acknowledged by most West African tribes, [were] similar [to] vampire figures found in the Caribbean” and “are almost identical to vampire tales “found in colonies of the French, Dutch and English” (Melton 5). According to Melton “[t]he vampire beliefs seem an obvious example of a common view carried from Africa by the slaves, which then persisted through the decades of slavery into the present” (5). Melton’s work reveals then, that despite the majority of depictions in popular culture, the vampire is not a European creation. As the *True Blood* mockumentary *Vampires in America* (2009) claims, the vampire is a universal creature without one place of origin.

Mamuwalde from the blaxploitation¹⁵ film *Blacula* (1972) is arguably the most popular Black vampire as *Blacula* “was one of the highest grossing films of 1972” (Lawrence 57).¹⁶ Actresses Teresa Graves and Grace Jones have also played blood sucking protagonists on screen (Melton 8). More recently, the late R&B singer Aaliyah played the role of Queen Akasha in the film adaptation of Anne Rice’s *Queen of the Damned* (2002). *True Blood*, *Twilight* and *Buffy* have all managed to include one Black vampire each, but Black vampires’ presence within their larger narratives is quite minimal in comparison to Caucasian vampires. Black characters in nosferatu tales tend to be slayers¹⁷ or prey that do not survive the vampire attack. Alan Ball has revised conventional roles of Black characters in vampire narratives¹⁸ and Harris’ text by introducing Tara Thornton (Rutina Wesley) and Lafayette Reynolds (Nelsan Ellis) as recurring characters. In Harris’ work,

¹⁵ *The Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines “blaxploitation” as “The exploitation of black people, esp[ecially] as actors in films of historical or other interest to black people.” According to Black feminist scholar Kimberly Springer, “[p]roducers and writers of blaxploitation films deployed sexist and racist ideas about African American women in hollow tribute to their power” (40).

¹⁶ The follow-up to *Blacula*, *Scream Blacula Scream*, was released in 1973.

¹⁷ Black slayers include Marvel Comics’ Blade as well as Kendra, Nikki, Rona and the “First Slayer” from Whedon’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The *Buffy* spinoff, *Angel* (WB 1999-2004) included one recurring Black character, Detective Charles Gunn.

¹⁸ *The Vampire Diaries* also includes a Black series regular, Bonnie (Katerina Graham), but the program falls short of providing successful integration of a Black character as Bonnie is often excluded from the narrative until she is needed to perform a task or function for the protagonists.

Tara is White and Lafayette dies in the second book. This creative choice allows Ball to expand racial discourse in his text.¹⁹

Ball's incorporation of Black characters is a revision to the cult television genre too. In "Representation: Exploring Issues of Sex, Gender, and Race in Cult Television" television scholar Lorna Jowett explains that "more mainstream genres such as police drama have a history of including characters from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds" but "'cult' genres have not done the same" (108). Jowett also clarifies that positive representations of non-White characters in a program cannot be dictated by the number of racial minorities on screen thus viewers must pay attention to the *function* of racial and ethnic minorities within the larger narrative (108).

Casts that include racial and ethnic minorities may not use these characters to discuss race, marginalization or difference (108). Instead, "Immigration, naturalisation, and the tensions within diverse populations can be mediated through the trope of the alien/Other in a safely defamiliarised story" (108-109). As *True Blood* is about the undead, commentary on race, marginalization, oppression and discrimination is most transparent in story arcs involving vampires. Their narratives receive the most screen time, news media coverage and discussion on message boards; thus racial discourse

¹⁹ Jennifer Fuller reveals that the increased presence of Black individuals is not exclusive to *True Blood*. In her work "Branding blackness on US Cable Television" Fuller reveals that in the late nineties, "HBO enjoyed a 'huge following' among black people, and reported that black households made up 20–22 percent of HBO-subscribing homes, which was greater than their 15–17 percent of prime-time viewership of broadcast television" (291). This was due to the number of Black actors and actresses in HBO programs (295). "HBO hired a director of ethnic marketing to develop black-oriented dramas, comedies, documentaries and sports programming," Fuller explains, "and began an advertising campaign on black radio" (295). "Black-oriented programming" on HBO included *Miss Evers' Boys* (1996), *The Chris Rock Show* (1996), and Spike Lee's film *Four Little Girls* (1997) (295).

present in other aspects of the program goes mostly unacknowledged by news media outlets and fans. I suggest that close analysis of *True Blood* reveals that progressive or innovative moments in the program deployed through vampire characters are undermined by insensitive depictions of human racial minorities. Black female characters in particular are the main victims of racist stereotypes and marginalization.

Racially charged imagery in *True Blood* usually involves the character Tara Thornton, an opinionated, often cynical bartender at Merlotte's Bar and Grill. Throughout the series, she experiences verbal, physical, and sexual abuse at the hands of family members, human acquaintances, and supernatural species alike. As the daughter of an alcoholic mother and absent father, Tara is fiercely independent and blunt, which leads to conflict with the other Bon Temps residents. Though Ball believes Tara to be the smartest resident in town,²⁰ I argue that she is also the most offensive character in *True Blood* as she is an amalgamation of negative Black female stereotypes. She is positioned as the binary opposite or shadow²¹ of her well-mannered and pleasant best friend Sookie Stackhouse; thus Tara is difficult to like. In her text *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, Black feminist and African American studies scholar Patricia Hill Collins argues that with binary thought, "[o]ne part is not

²⁰ Ball makes this very claim during the DVD audio commentary for the pilot episode "Strange Love."

²¹ The term "cultural shadow," also known as "Jungian shadow" was developed by the founder of analytical psychology, Carl Jung. In *Jungian Archetypes in Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction: The Person, the Shadow, the Animus, and the Self*, literary scholar Lorelei Cederstrom describes the cultural shadow as the beings "in which a group, society or nation projects its own dark side onto persons of other cultures or races. ... large social groups project all the negative qualities they are unwilling to see in themselves onto cultures, societies or nations they wish to dominate" (66).

simply different from its counterpart; it is inherently opposed to its 'other.' Whites and Blacks, males and females ... are not complementary counterparts – they are fundamentally different entities related only through their definition as opposites” (70). The presence of vampires in *True Blood* creates the larger binary of living/(un)dead, which places Tara on equal footing with Sookie, but the underlying white/black binary involving human characters in the program employs racist stereotypes of Black women to create difference.

As cultural theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant write in their book *Racial Formations in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s*, “the designation of racial categories and the determination of racial identity is no simple task. For centuries,” they claim, “this question has precipitated intense debates and conflicts, particularly in the U.S. – disputes over natural and legal rights, over the distribution of resources” (54). The introduction of a third binary category in the program, human/supernatural, acknowledges the complexity of racial identity outlined in *Racial Formations* as supernatural beings can “pass” as human. For example, viewers are led to believe that Sookie is a White human for the majority of the series, but in season three, we learn that she is part fairy. While Sookie is unaware of her fairy heritage until season three, she still takes part in “passing.”²² Viewers have yet to see how the revelation of Sookie’s true bloodline will affect her status as Tara’s binary opposite. Bar owner Sam Merlotte (Sam Trammel) on the other hand has always been aware of his status as a shape shifter and has chosen to keep this information a secret from the majority of the Bon Temps community.

²² I argue that Sookie takes part in passing as she hides her psychic abilities from other Bon Temps residents for fear of prejudice.

He too passes for human. The living/undead, white/black, human/supernatural binaries in *True Blood* are in constant conflict with each other, demonstrating the instability of racial categories.

Defining Ironic Racism

Stuart Hall, a founder of British cultural studies and author of “The Whites of Their Eyes” believes that the general public, government and media “do not know how to conduct an anti-racist struggle” (52). Media producers who identify with the political left attempt to create anti-racist texts, but their work may still include traces of inferential racism. Hall defines “inferential racism” as “those apparently naturalised representations of events and situations relating to race, whether ‘factual’ or ‘fictional,’ which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of *unquestioned assumptions*” (91). Such images “enable racist statements to be formulated without ever bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which the statements are grounded” (91). Offensive stereotypes can be found in progressive works that create a structure of self and Other. The Other (Tara) is constructed against the mainstream (Sookie) and is thus opposed to the beliefs of the main characters or dominant audience. In the case of *True Blood*, vampires and otherworldly creatures (werewolves, witches and demons) throughout the text are the main Other, but Tara is still unlike the majority of human characters in *True Blood* as her skin colour, home life, economic status and personality clash with her peers.

Though one could read *True Blood's* white/black binary system as an example of inferential racism as it is not the strongest example of self and Other in the program, I

argue that *True Blood* is an openly racist text due to its use of ironic racism. Ironic racism is more commonly referred to as “hipster racism,” a term coined by Carmen Van Kerckhove, president of a diversity education firm called New Demographic. She first used “hipster racism” in her article, “The 10 biggest race and pop culture trends of 2006: Part 1 of 3,” posted on the blog *Racialicious* in July of 2007. Often used in comedy programs such as *30 Rock* (NBC 2006 -present), *The Office* (BBC 2001-2003 and NBC 2005 - present) and *South Park* (Comedy Central 1997- present), ironic racism is “often assumed not to be truly racist by virtue of the fact that they so effortlessly engage in the offensive” (Marx and Sieniewicz 5). In their article “Beyond a Cutout World: Ethnic Humor and Discursive Integration in *South Park*,” University of Wisconsin PhD candidates Nick Marx and Matt Sieniewicz provide the following definition of the term:

Ironic racism ... takes advantage of the notion that in a culture so concerned with political correctness, only creators ‘secure (in their) lack of racism would dare to make, or to laugh at, a racist joke.’ ... Thus, to present racist characters in the current comedy environment may, paradoxically, testify to the creator’s ultimate lack of prejudice. (5)

To Marx and Sieniewicz, the “integration of offensive humor into contemporaneous media discussions of ethnic prejudice works to show such prejudice as a systematic, social problem, not one that can be blamed on certain ‘bad’ individuals” (5). In other words, ironic racism is a new motif in which to identify racist images and structures of belief as a social issue.

It is important to note that Marx and Sienkiewicz focus on the use of ironic racism within comedy programs. Ironic racism in *South Park*, *30 Rock* and similar television programs evokes laughter and provides commentary on racial politics in the United States. *True Blood* is a drama that often uses ironic racism for comedic purposes, but the show also relies on the motif to comment on racial politics in dramatic scenes involving racial minorities. I argue that the use of ironic racism to provide social commentary in *True Blood* is complicated by the program's status as a drama series. Many examples of ironic racism in the program are more subtle than others as they do not rely on humor. Instead, subtle moments of ironic racism in *True Blood* require knowledge of racial politics and American history in order to extract social commentary. The inability for viewers to exhume meaning from serious moments involving ironic racism means that the program runs the risk of perpetuating negative images of Black women in media. This thesis will provide examples of comedic and dramatic moments in *True Blood* that use ironic racism to provide social commentary.

In her blog post titled "Hipster Racism," writer and social justice activist S. E. Smith adds that ironic racism is part of a subculture "which wants to seem jaded and urbane and oh-so-witty. Using language which is viewed as inflammatory or not appropriate is supposed to push the boundaries and make someone look edgy." The term was later altered by journalist AJ Plaid to include "ideas, speech, and action meant to denigrate another's person, race or ethnicity under the guise of being urbane, witty (meaning 'ironic' nowadays), educated, liberal, and/or trendy." As this thesis will prove, ironic racism in *True Blood* is an amalgamation of all three definitions.

True Blood first deploys ironic racism via ethnic humour during viewers' introduction to Tara in the pilot episode "Strange Love." Tara is shown reading Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) during her shift at the hardware store Super Save-A-Bunch. After getting into an altercation with a Caucasian female customer, the woman tells Tara that she is "rude." Tara responds by stating "this ain't rude, this is uppity," then slaps her manager (who has come to resolve the problem) in the face. "That's for slapping my ass too much" she tells him. "I'm gonna get my baby daddy who just got out of prison to kick your teeth in!" When her manager begs Tara not to involve the father of her child, she states in an offended tone, "Oh my God! I'm not serious, you pathetic racist! I don't have a baby!" In this example, Ball uses ironic racism to address two common character stereotypes that circulate in popular discourse about the Black community. Though Ball debunks the myth that most Black women have children with incarcerated felons, he confirms other stereotypes that label Black women "loud" and "aggressive."

In the same episode, Tara starts her job as a bartender at Merlotte's Bar and Grill. During her first shift, Tara gets into another squabble with a customer. After a White male diner snaps his fingers at Tara to get her attention, she responds to him in the following manner:

Uh-oh do... do not snap at me. I have a name. And that name is Tara. Isn't that funny, a black girl being named after a plantation? No I don't think it's funny at all. In fact, it really pisses me off that my momma was either stupid or just plain mean. Which is why you better be nice if you plan on getting a drink tonight.

Tara's name, popularized by Tara Plantation in Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone With The Wind* (1936), is a reminder of America's horrific past, when African slaves were forced to work for the profit of White slave owners. By demanding the customer be kind to her, Tara informs viewers that she will not be disrespected or ordered around by anyone. Though Tara's response evokes American history, the use of ethnic humour in this instance takes away from the scene's cultural weight and implications. Viewers may concentrate on the hilarity of the scene and the cultural reference, but may not delve deeper into the commentary on Black oppression in the exchange. In other words, they may not "get" the true meaning behind this dialogue.²³

Offensive or problematic depictions of Black women such as the two above examples continue to circulate in popular media because they have been approved and naturalized by hegemonic structures. "Hegemony," a concept formulated by cultural theorist Antonio Gramsci, refers to the way in which individuals with power obtain the consent of the majority to maintain their status. In "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity" Stuart Hall insists that the struggle to maintain control is a critical aspect of hegemony:

"Hegemony" is a very particular, historically specific, and temporary 'moment' in the life of a society. It is rare for this degree of unity to be achieved, enabling a society to set itself a quite new historical agenda,

²³ Fuller uses Comedy Central's *Chappelle Show* (2003-2006) to discuss audience misinterpretation of racial humour: "Chappelle said that one of the main reasons he left the show was that while in blackface for a sketch, he was unnerved by a white crew member's laughter, saying 'I know when someone is laughing *with* me laugh that I was uncomfortable with' ... Chappelle said the incident deepened his concerns that his racial humor was being misinterpreted by white audiences, and was therefore 'socially irresponsible'" (301-302).

under the leadership of a specific formation or constellation of social forces. Such periods of 'settlement' are unlikely to persist forever. There is nothing automatic about them. They have to be actively constructed and positively maintained. (15)²⁴

Those with power must negotiate their own desires with the general public in order to keep the public from revolting. Hegemony asks us to consider what has become "naturalized" in a society as systems of control are never truly natural. They are rooted in the past and transform or remain static based on current needs and desires. Until recently, binaries have been used to negotiate, gain, and justify power. I argue that representations of Black women have failed to evolve over time as Black and feminist movements often ignore the problems of Black women. In the words of Black feminist and scholar Kimberly Springer, "'Black feminists' voices and visions fell between the cracks of the civil rights and women's movements, so they created formal organizations to speak on behalf of black women with an explicitly feminist consciousness" (1). To Springer, Black women cannot consider White women or Black men as allies in their struggle for equal rights and fair representation.

²⁴ In *Racial Formations*, Omi and Winant provide a longer definition of Gramsci's "hegemony": Antonio Gramsci ... understood it as the conditions necessary, in a given society, for the achievement and consolidation of rule. He argued that hegemony was always constituted by a combination of coercion and consent. Although the rule can be obtained by force, it cannot be secured and maintained, especially in modern society, without the element of consent. Gramsci conceived of consent as far more than merely the legitimization of authority. In his view, consent extended to the incorporation by the ruling group of many of the key interests of subordinated groups, often to the explicit disadvantage of the rulers themselves. Gramsci's treatment of hegemony went even farther: he argued that in order to consolidate their hegemony, ruling groups must elaborate and maintain a popular system of ideas and practices – through education, the media, religion, folk wisdom etc. – which he called 'common sense,' the ideology ... that a society gives its consent to the way in which it is ruled" (66-67).

Hegemony gives rise to a common ideology tolerated among peoples. Hall defines "ideology" as "the mental framework -the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation- which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works" (29). Hall's definition focuses on the relationship between power, struggle and history amongst a population. His definition implies that there is no one truth when it comes to representation or understandings. Instead, there are "partials" or "one-sided" representations that form a dominant perspective. Ideology presents itself in numerous ways for different groups of people. In turn, their understanding of society and beliefs are dependent on their status or placement within that society. Most importantly, no one person or class can create a common ideology as ideology comes from negotiation and agreement between members of society.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins provides a direct link between hegemony, ideology and stereotypes of Black women:

Within U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. In this context, certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. From the mummies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative

stereotypes applied to African-American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression. (6)

Despite his use of over-exaggerated performances and binary systems to acknowledge many of these false identities as constructed stereotypes that have been neutralized over time, Ball's text actually strengthens their presence. This is due to the lack of transgressive moments in *True Blood* that involve Black women, or contradict the stereotypes that he deploys.

An Introduction to Black Feminist Thought

This thesis employs a Black feminist framework to evaluate racial discourse surrounding *True Blood*'s representation of Black women. Collins defines Black feminist thought as a "critical theory [that] encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a collectivity" (9). Black feminist thought exists "because African-American women as a *group* remain oppressed within a U.S. context characterized by injustice" (9). This does not mean "that all African-American women within that group are oppressed in the same way, [or] that some U.S. Black women do not suppress others" (9). Rather, it suggests that *all* Black women experience oppression on a regular basis in one way or another (9). This thesis positions *True Blood* as an oppressive media text for Black women due to its application of ironic racism to Black female characters. Collins stresses that "[r]einterpreting existing works through new theoretical frameworks is another dimension of developing Black feminist thought" (14). By utilizing a Black feminist

framework instead of general racial theory or feminist theory, I am able to concentrate on Tara's "intersecting oppressions," those being her identities of "Black" and "female" (22).

Throughout this thesis, I use the terms "Black" and "blackness" in different ways. The most common use of these terms draw from Black studies scholar Wahneema Lubiano's definitions in her essay "Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means." Lubiano understands "blackness" as "conscious awareness by an individual of being part of a group – Negroes, black Americans, Afro- or African Americans – with a particular place in history and a political relationship to other groups within the geopolitical site of the United States" (330). Lubiano also states that "given the political reality of twentieth-century U.S. life and more than three hundred years of history, ... the idea of 'blackness' [can also be considered] as a social fact" (345). That is to say, "blackness" is also a social reality seen in class, housing and gender divisions.

Research Questions

A number of questions arise when reviewing the use of ironic racism as it applies to Tara and other Black female characters in *True Blood*. The first question I pose is who and what is considered to be "Black" in *True Blood*. Second, I question how *True Blood* negotiates between the Otherness of African American women and the Otherness of vampires. I build upon my second question by asking whether or not Tara and other Black female characters are intended to act as social critique of race and representations of Black women in American culture. As a program that both subverts and maintains

racist representations of Black women, I question whether or not *True Blood* is truly attempting to comment on this marginalized group in society or show off the cultural “awareness” of its writers. Last, I question the impact (intended or otherwise) the use of ironic racism has on *True Blood*’s viewing audience.

Thesis Structure and Methodology

In his work “Encoding/Decoding,” Stuart Hall makes an important statement in relation to intended and unintended meaning of texts:

broadcasters are concerned that the audience has failed to take the meaning as they – the broadcasters – intended. What they really mean to say is that viewers are not operating within the ‘dominant’ or ‘preferred’ code. Their ideal is ‘perfectly transparent communication.’ Instead, what they have to confront is ‘systemically distorted communication.’ (170)

Ball and his creative team appear to use ironic racism to provide social commentary and to debunk racial stereotypes. I argue however that the use of this comic motif in a dramatic series runs the risk of naturalizing certain stereotypes or trivializing issues faced by Black women in the United States. This is because the use of ironic racism is not “perfectly transparent.” Some viewers will identify ironic racism as social critique, but many others will take racist imagery and dialogue as “authentic” or credible depictions of Black women. To explore the problematic use of ironic racism in relation to Black women in *True Blood* and the responses such images receive, I must approach the

program's content from three separate angles. Each chapter of my thesis is dedicated to one way of interacting with the text.

The first chapter of my thesis is an industrial analysis of *True Blood*. The goal of the chapter is to familiarize readers with the program and its key elements as chosen by America's top circulating print media. The *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* and *Time Magazine* were chosen for this exercise. The second chapter is a textual analysis of *True Blood's* season one episodes "Burning House of Love" and "I Don't Wanna Know." The first part of the chapter outlines elements of the Gothic genre, a genre known for its "ambiguity and excess of meaning..." and Louisiana state history as they influence *True Blood's* discourse surrounding marginalization and Otherness (Crow 130). Then, using the aforementioned episodes, I problematize Ball's depiction of Black female lifestyles in the Southern United States and his understanding of blackness as a performance. Finally, using reception analysis, my third chapter investigates how *True Blood* fans relate to, and make sense of ironic racism in the program. This exercise uses Tara-related posts from online message boards hosted by HBO, Television Without Pity and *True Blood* Wiki. The chapter also includes blog entries from the website *Racialicious*.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins explains why this theoretical framework is necessary in academia:

Black women intellectuals have found themselves in outsider-within positions in many academic endeavors. ... The assumptions on which full group membership are based – Whiteness for feminist thought, maleness

for Black social and political thought, and the combination for mainstream scholarship – all negate Black women’s realities. Prevented from becoming full insiders in any of these areas of inquiry, Black women remained in outsider-within locations, individuals whose marginality provided a distinctive angle of vision on these intellectual and political entities. (12)

Thus, while those of various races, ethnicities and gender identities can all be considered Black feminists or find aspects of Black feminist theory applicable to their own lived experiences, Black feminist thought places issues that Black women continue to face in contemporary culture at the forefront of its dialogue. Vampires, Lafayette and Sookie provide positive and transgressive images of minority and female peoples but concentration on Black female characters alone provides a very different interpretation of racial and gender discourse in *True Blood*. Despite the use of ironic racism in the text, Tara and other Black female characters are never redeemed through complicated or subversive depictions like other characters in the narrative.

-Chapter 1- Coverage of *True Blood* in American Print Media

It is virtually impossible to turn on a television, flip through a magazine, or skim news blogs without coming into contact with *True Blood*-related material. America's top circulating print publications are not exempt from *True Blood* mania. *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and *Time Magazine* have all acknowledged the success of Alan Ball's vampire drama through a number of articles which can be found in their respective online archives. This chapter outlines what is and is not considered newsworthy about *True Blood* in America's leading publications.

As the paper with the largest circulation in the United States, *USA Today* is known for its coverage of a wide range of topics and its accessible writing style. As of September 22, 2010, the majority of the one hundred and ninety-seven *True Blood* entries in its online archive were examples of entertainment journalism or infotainment²⁵ stories. The same is true of the one-hundred and fifty-eight entries in the *New York Times* online archive. Despite its reputation as the leading financial and marketing paper, the one hundred and eleven *True Blood* entries in *The Wall Street Journal's* online archive largely consist of light works similar to those found in *USA Today* and the *New York Times*. It should be noted, however, that *The Wall Street Journal* is the only online archive used in this chapter to have weekly blog entries dedicated to *True Blood*. *Time Magazine*, America's magazine with the highest national circulation, has thirty-nine articles on *True*

²⁵ The Oxford English dictionary defines "infotainment" as "broadcast material which seeks to inform and entertain simultaneously; (also more generally) informative material presented in an entertaining way."

Blood in its online archive, which may suggest that entertainment journalism does not have a place within its pages.²⁶

Entertainment journalism covers various aspects of the entertainment industry, and aims to be accessible, entertaining and informative to the general reading audience. Some pieces critique their subjects, but the majority – as is the case with *True Blood* articles – stick with conventional topics such as the celebrity and popularity of cast members. Most discussion of *True Blood* in these archives is limited to themed lists, photo galleries and gossip. There are no set conventions within entertainment journalism to discuss more complex issues such as race and homosexuality; thus, as this chapter will demonstrate, such topics are rarely examined in an adequate manner.

In my analysis, I concentrate on articles about viewership, marketing, sex and violence in relation to *True Blood*. I pay particular attention to works that discuss homosexuality and race in *True Blood* as the program is shaped by and alludes to current American news headlines involving these topics. With the presence of news stories involving immigration laws and gay rights in the United States, we are witnessing a restructuring of what it means to be an American and a re-evaluation of who is entitled to what in the United States. I also point to missing or implied connections between the subject of the article and the program. Finally, I critique the angle from which entertainment journalists approach their topics and I illuminate the implications of

²⁶I used the phrases “True Blood,” “Nelsan Ellis,” Rutina Wesley” and “vampires” to search the print media archives. In total, I found five hundred and five articles with these terms. In the end, fifteen articles were used for this chapter.

prioritizing one topic over another in these texts. Articles referenced were published between September 4, 2008, and September 22, 2010.²⁷

Ratings, Viewership and Advertising

Viewership, ratings and consumption of *True Blood* products is a recurring topic in all four publications. The *New York Times* leads the pack with four articles exclusively about *True Blood's* ratings. In "With a Little 'True Blood,' HBO Revives Its Fortunes," Bill Carter explains that despite the initial reservations of some executives at HBO, *True Blood* has become the biggest show on television:

In the three episodes measured so far this, its second, season, 'True Blood' has amassed viewer totals that any network, including broadcast networks, would be excited to own: 12.1 million, 10 million and 10.3 million. And HBO has attracted those viewers from an audience base about a third the size of fully distributed networks.

Carter confirms that *True Blood* is a gold mine for HBO due to its ability to attract a diverse and expansive audience, but he does not mention that *True Blood's* popularity and ratings have increased due to the use of digital video recorders (DVRs). Dave Itzkoff's "Is the DVR Helping or Hurting Your Favorite Show?" provides Nielson ratings for the top ten programs that have benefitted from DVR time-shifting technology. *True Blood* is tied for fifth place with *Stargate Universe* (Syfy 2009 - 2011). Both programs have seen a 46.9% ratings increase due to time-shifting. The correlation between ratings for *True*

²⁷ The article timeline begins three days before the *True Blood* series premiere and ends one week after its season three finale.

Blood and the use of DVRs suggests the program has a fan base with the financial resources to purchase the technology that will allow them to watch television according to *their* schedule instead of one created by networks.

While Carter ignores the relationship between *True Blood's* ratings and DVR use, he does inform readers that many viewers do not watch the program during initial airtime. In fact, they are not watching the program on HBO at all. According to Carter, *True Blood's* popularity became evident only after DVD sale figures were released. As of July 2009, the first season of *True Blood* had sold over one million copies, while the number of HBO channel subscriptions remained relatively the same (Carter). The large number of DVD sales suggests that a number of individuals are waiting for the DVDs to be available instead of purchasing an HBO subscription as it may be more cost efficient. Like the DVR, DVDs allow viewers to watch the program whenever and as often as they wish. DVDs also promote sharing of materials amongst viewers, making the number of individuals or households watching *True Blood* even more difficult to pin-point. Streaming and downloading video as well as file sharing online further complicate ratings numbers, but also point to a resourceful and Internet-savvy viewing audience.²⁸

The popularity of *True Blood* amongst DVR and Internet users implies that the program has a technology-literate viewing audience. The marketing team behind the program's season three ad campaign seemingly took this information into consideration as they presented strategies to grab and hold the attention of viewing audiences. Alongside typical print advertisements, the creative team released six online minisodes

²⁸ Internet fandom as it relates to *True Blood* viewers is discussed in further detail in chapter three.

featuring series regulars. They also utilized two new forms of advertising to promote the program. *The Wall Street Journal* provides works on both strategies. The first piece, "Video Mobile Ads Ramp Up," is a video entry by Niraj Sheth. In the video, Sheth discusses *True Blood's* rich media ad. Rich media ads are mobile phone advertisements with attached videos or games that take over the entire screen of a smartphone (Sheth). *True Blood's* rich media ad was viewed by iPhone users with the Variety or Flixster application on their phone. The ad targets and is exclusive to those with film and media related applications on a high-end electronic device, and implies that *True Blood* viewers or desired fans are those with an interest in quality television and a disposable income.

The advertisement consists of blood running down the screen and a thirty second clip. The phrase "Do Bad Things" (a reference to the program's theme song by Jace Everett) appears alongside the HBO logo and *True Blood's* airtime. Upon first viewing, smartphone owners are unable to close the advertisement. Instead, bloody fingerprints are left on the screen. The only option is to click on the "tap to watch trailer" tab and view the video. Smartphone users are forced to engage with the content for at least thirty seconds, guaranteeing a certain amount of exposure to the program. The video shows little more than Sookie and Bill running through dark, wooded areas. The advertisement is not gender specific in its address and steers clear of any social commentary. It does not call attention to any content on the program other than what one would expect: blood and vampires. Like a conventional infotainment piece, viewers learn a little bit about the program, but must tune in to get the full story. The lack of potentially controversial

content in the video is not surprising as the goal of advertisers is to intrigue a large number of the intended audience.

True Blood's advertising campaign also introduced a new element to *Playboy* magazine. The publication's June 2010 issue included its first ever 3D centerfold. The centerfold was sponsored by HBO. *Wall Street Journal's* "Playboy Goes 3-D; Spread is Sponsored by 'True Blood'" by Russell Adams reports that HBO agreed to sponsor the spread "as part of a promotion of the launch of 'True Blood' Season 3, ... The spread is accompanied by a 'True Blood' ad, a free pair of 3-D glasses and a data sheet with vampire-related facts." The *Playboy* spread is an effective marketing strategy as it emphasizes the importance of sex appeal, desire and fantasy in the program – three crucial elements of the *Playboy* brand. The *True Blood* advertisement implies that there is something enticing about the vampire, regardless of the audience/consumer's gender, as the program and its writers reject the current vogue of the vampire as a fantasy figure for women only.

Violence and Sexual Content

As mentioned earlier, *The Wall Street Journal* is the only text utilized for this exercise to include weekly episode summaries on *True Blood*. Its "cultural blog" *Speakeasy* includes twenty-four *True Blood* episode reviews by writer Michelle Kung. Kung's *True Blood* entries (as with the majority of *True Blood* entries in *The Wall Street Journal*) commence at the beginning of season two. "'True Blood': Season 2, Episode 4 TV Recap" is Kung's most noteworthy post as it is the only piece with any attempt at

critical analysis. In this entry, Kung cites the aforementioned *New York Times* piece, “With a Little ‘True Blood,’ HBO Is Reviving Its Fortunes.” In the *New York Times* article, show creator Alan Ball states that his program is so popular because “women love the storytelling and the romance, and men love the sex and violence.” After referencing the article, Kung separates the episode into the outlined categories and finds that all four components are equally present in the episode. Kung’s experiment suggests that Ball succeeds in creating a program that fits into numerous categories and delivers what it promises its viewers. Kung does not, however, address the way in which Ball’s statement detracts from the complexity of his program. In the above quotation, Ball introduces another layer of binary thinking into *True Blood* as he suggests that men and women watch his program for very different reasons. *True Blood* pushes against binary or “traditional” understandings of sexuality and gender roles and only uses binary structure in an attempt to provide racial commentary. By categorizing fan desires in such concrete groupings, Ball makes the problematic suggestion that the draw to *True Blood* for viewers is nowhere near as complex as the program itself. Kung’s apparent lack of concern for Ball’s opinion of fan interests is also concerning. With her strong film journalism background and years of experience reviewing media texts,²⁹ Kung should understand that fan-interest in texts is never as simple as Ball would like to believe.

Violence, coded as a masculine element in *True Blood*, is further discussed in *The Wall Street Journal*’s “USA’s Magic Formula For Making Hits.” Author Jordan C. Hirsch

²⁹ Kung’s personal website reveals that she has been “a correspondent and freelance film reviewer for *The Boston Globe*, the “Hollywood Reader” columnist for *Publisher’s Weekly*, and a film writer at *Entertainment Weekly*. She has also appeared as a commentator on MSNBC, CNN’s *Showbiz Tonight*, *E!*, *Extra*, *Access Hollywood*, and *Good Morning America*” (Kung).

writes about USA Network's ability to decrease the amount of violence in its programming.³⁰ Claiming that this lack of violence is an anomaly in television, Hirsch utilizes *True Blood* to prove his point:

USA's accomplishment is all the more remarkable because it comes in the midst of a cultural moment on television teeming with lust and bloodshed. Nothing embodies this trend more enthusiastically than the vampire-themed HBO series 'True Blood,' which earlier this month displayed its penchant for debauchery in a sex scene so graphic that one Los Angeles Times columnist insisted he would 'never forget the image' as long as he lives. The episode inspired a list of the '20 most disturbing TV scenes ever' by Entertainment Weekly.

Hirsch is correct, *True Blood* thrives on excessive amounts of gore and violence unlike programs on USA Network, but he fails to acknowledge that *True Blood* airs on a premium pay channel known for providing images missing on network cable channels. Due to its inclusion in the basic cable package, USA Network's programming must cater to the wishes of its advertisers and sponsors. HBO, on the other hand, is dependent upon viewer subscriptions and DVD sales. This crucial difference between HBO and USA Network makes a comparison between their programming limited in significance.

The *LA Times* writer and *Entertainment Weekly* article referenced in Hirsch's work refer to the season three episode, "It Hurts Me Too." The final scene of the episode shows

³⁰ Programs on USA Network include *Psych* (2006-present), *Law and Order: CI* (2001-present), and *Royal Pains* (2009-present).

Bill and his maker,³¹ Lorena Krasiki (Mariana Klaveno), engaging in sexual intercourse. During the act, Bill uses his hands to turn Lorena's head around one hundred and eighty-degrees so that he is unable to see her face during the act. Lorena continues to smile as blood runs from her mouth. The screen goes black and the end credits role.

The close relationship between sexual acts and violence towards women in *True Blood* is not an original pairing as this link is a common characteristic in vampire texts. In his essay "Fictional Vampires in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Dracula* scholar William Hughes provides some insight to the importance of sex and violence in vampire narratives. "Described frequently as a 'kiss' but carrying with it pain and blood analogous to those of defloration and or violent intercourse," writes Hughes, "the vampire's bite is at once oral and yet penetrative ... As such, it blurs the boundaries between foreplay and coitus, between the violent and the erotic, between the prelude and the consummation" (45). With *True Blood*, the blurring is often uncomfortable and more graphic than the general viewing audience would expect. However, with the knowledge that violence and sexual intimacy correspond in vampire texts and HBO's quest to provide "boundary-pushing" and "genre-defining" programming, it is not surprising that such images appear on screen. This is not to suggest that each moment involving intercourse and/or violence in *True Blood* is necessary. Making such a statement requires closer analysis of numerous scenes involving both elements. As I demonstrate in chapter three, the use of violent intercourse between Tara and a male vampire proves to be unnecessary and a hurtful display of ironic racism, but Bill's sexual exchange with

³¹ A "maker" is the individual who turns a human into a vampire.

Lorena in “It Hurts Me Too” is necessary to understand their relationship and to explain his actions in later episodes.

The violent scene also reminds viewers that Bill has supernatural strength with the ability and the inherent desire to act in a violent manner. Until this scene, Bill’s romance with Sookie and choice to drink Tru Blood had made him more human than vampire. He was the “Good Guy Vampire”:

[Good guy vampires are] vampires who act morally when dealing with mortals, and, as a whole, conform their moral perspective to a human ethical perspective. They obtain blood without killing or ‘raping’ their victims, and generally acquire blood from animals, blood banks, or willing human donors. A few use synthetic blood substitutes. ... [T]he good guy vampires retain personality and freedom of choice, and are not so consumed with blood lust that ethical decisions become impossible.

(Melton 297)

By having Bill transition from “Good Guy Vampire” to violent predator, Ball reminds viewers that identities in *True Blood* are multidimensional. No one character is exclusively good or evil and it is not always easy to tell who is victim and who is prey.

Homosexuality

Though texts have often portrayed the vampire as enslaved by its quest for blood, the same texts have characterized the undead as liberated by it:

In its sexualised quest for blood ... the vampire is capable of disrupting what have been culturally perceived as discrete patterns of sexual behaviour, and of evading taboos that polarize heterosexuality and homosexuality. The vampire represents, in this sense, the liberation of those sexual activities or desires that have been allegedly proscribed or censored in society or repressed within the self. (Hughes 145)

Since the vampire bite acts as a metaphor for (violent) penetration and pleasure, it is also understood to be evidence of a vampire's ability to see past conventional sexual pairings. The vampire is not interested in the gender of its prey, only in their blood. The penetration and drinking of blood is understood as a (violent) act of intimacy. Since the relationship between vampire and prey is not dictated or influenced by gender, it is not surprising that Ball would use the vampire as a metaphor for homosexuality in *True Blood*.

In the *New York Times*' "After All the Funerals, a Prime-Time Auteur Digs Up the Undead," Alan Ball makes the following observation about vampires and metaphors in his program:

Certainly it's very easy to look at the vampires [in *True Blood*] as metaphors for gays and lesbians ...but it's very easy to see them as metaphors for all kinds of things. If this story had been done 50 years ago, it would be a metaphor for racial equality. But I can also look at the vampires and see them as a kind of terrifying shadow organization that is going to do what they want to do, whether they have to break the law or

not. And if you get in the way, they'll just get rid of you. So, it's a very fluid metaphor.

Ball's comment echoes Elizabeth Anne Miller's assertion that the vampire can be utilized as a metaphor for a plethora of topics. The vampire is an Other, and thus able to stand in for numerous groups.³² Ball also suggests that homosexuality is the most obvious metaphor in the program as gay rights is a popular topic in American and international discourse.³³ Commentary about *True Blood's* homosexual elements appears more often in the archives I analyzed than commentary on marketing, explicit sexual and violent imagery and race. It is only outnumbered by articles that mention ratings. While the topic of homosexuality appears quite frequently, the four news media publications do not fully engage with the topic. For example, the *New York Times* includes eleven articles about *True Blood's* numerous Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) nominations, but fails to engage with the source text. A barrier created by the conventions of entertainment journalism disallows critical discussion of social structures that form a need for such awards and activist groups in the first place.

USA Today provides the best example of inclusion of *True Blood's* gay content without actually acknowledging it as such. Four days before the premiere of *True Blood's* third season, the paper published Gayle Jo Carter's interview "Acting is in Nelsan Ellis' Blood." Ellis plays Tara's cousin, Lafayette. With numerous job titles including "drug trafficker," "prostitute," "road worker" and "line cook," Lafayette is the only openly gay

³² It should be noted that the *New York Times* was the only paper to use a quotation in which Ball acknowledges that the vampires in *True Blood* are mainly viewed as a metaphor for homosexuality.

³³ Ball's concentration on the vampire as gay metaphor may also be linked to Ball's identity as an openly gay man who is known to include gay characters and issues in his texts.

character during *True Blood's* first two seasons. Carter writes that despite Lafayette's popularity with *True Blood* fans, "playing such a wildly flamboyant character has caused some tension in Ellis' family. 'They accept that I'm an actor and I can now pay my rent, and that's about as far as that goes,' says Ellis ... 'I don't necessarily think they appreciate Lafayette.'" Simply put, Ellis' family is apparently unhappy with his decision to play a gay character on television.

There is no explicit mention of Lafayette's sexual orientation in Carter's article. His homosexuality is only implied. She describes Lafayette as "flamboyant" and leaves readers to make their own assumptions as to how this term is being applied. Carter does not mention that Lafayette is Black either. A still of Ellis as Lafayette accompanies the article, but the lack of open discussion on Ellis' portrayal of a homosexual Black male in the Southern United States is problematic, as these identities are central to his story arcs, cultural relevance and use of ironic racism in the program. During audio commentary for the pilot episode of *True Blood*, Ball mentions that if one is Black, male, and homosexual "in a small town in Louisiana, [you are] not going to live long enough to see twenty, or you will be strong enough to kick some serious ass." The result is a flamboyant and unabashedly gay Lafayette who exhibits "masculine" traits of strength and aggression when necessary.

Lafayette's masculine characteristics are shown in numerous episodes, but one of the most memorable is his scuffle with three homophobic Caucasian males in the season one episode "Sparks Fly Out." One of the men sends back a burger prepared by Lafayette, claiming they would like a burger without AIDS. When Lafayette is informed

of the homophobic (and racist) comment, he removes his clip on earrings and confronts the man and his friends. The result is a physical altercation in which Lafayette comes out as victor. While this scene can also be read as an instance of ironic racism (Lafayette is another example of a Black man who solves his problems with violence and is thus to be feared, or alternatively, Black men have AIDS), it subverts common stereotypes of gay men. Lafayette oscillates between stereotypical performances of gay men and Black men in order to debunk problematic social understandings of each identity.

Much of Lafayette's dialogue and many of his story arcs call attention to his race and sexual preference. For example, he is the only recurring human male in *True Blood* to be bitten by a vampire. In fact, Lafayette is bitten by a male vampire, Eric Northman (Alexander Skarsgard). Eric never transforms Lafayette into a vampire, but a bond is formed between them.³⁴ According to Melton, "[c]ommonly in vampire novels and movies, vampire[s] attacked a person of the opposite sex. Most vampires were male and most of their victims, with whom they developed a close relationship, were women" (68). Melton's observations highlight heteronormative gender roles coded in most of the original vampire texts that Ball chooses to subvert in *True Blood*.

Melton also alludes to the link between the vampire bite and (forced) sexual intercourse. Lafayette is not a willing blood donor, and Ball's choice to have him fall victim to a (male) vampire raises numerous questions about racial and sexual hierarchy in *True Blood* that will be addressed in chapters two and three. With the many implications

³⁴ In *True Blood*, a vampire bite alone does not result in vampirism. A vampire must drink most of their victim's blood and then lie with their victim in the same grave for one day. The following night, the human will rise as a vampire.

of the Lafayette/Eric vampire bite in mind, it becomes difficult to understand why race and homosexuality are downplayed in Carter's work. True, the article is an informational piece on Ellis that confirms his status as a heterosexual male, but the lack of deep discussion on the role Ellis calls "an actor's wonderland" implies some resistance on the part of *USA Today* to acknowledge explicit themes of race and homosexuality in television.

Based on the omission of overtly gay content, it appears as if *USA Today*, along with the three other publications used for this exercise, would rather stay within the conventions of entertainment journalism and keep these sections free of controversial material. Carter's interview with Ellis seems to imply that race and homosexuality are central to *True Blood's* success, but that detailed discussion of such topics has no place in entertainment sections. Indeed, the *New York Times* does not dance around the subject of homosexuality like *USA Today*, but I argue that their acknowledgement and inclusion of *True Blood's* positive accomplishments in relation to gay content does not count as sufficient engagement with the program's plot lines, subtexts and metaphors.

The vampire has been linked to homosexuality and used as a metaphor for gay rights numerous times before,³⁵ but America's current social climate is undoubtedly responsible for the stronger presence of this metaphor in Ball's text. *True Blood's* "coming out of the coffin" tagline along with story arcs involving hate-crimes against vampires and their campaigns for equal rights mirror many popular news stories in the

³⁵ While the gay vampire is not a new archetype, Melton notes that the trope was mostly applied to female vampires. "There was a recurring lesbian presence in vampire literature" he writes, "[but] the same could not be said for male homosexuality. The male vampires of the nineteenth century ... sank their teeth into female victims" (342).

last three years involving America's gay community. With the legalization of same-sex marriage in New York,³⁶ news outlets continue to focus on the repeal of the U.S. army's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy and the rising number of suicides by gay teens due to bullying.

Race and Ethnicity

Vampires and racially marked bodies in *True Blood* reflect current racial dynamics in the United States and the call for the revision of representation, social hierarchy and privilege. The selected news media archives do not examine racial discourse in *True Blood* in detail, but the very omission of such commentary is difficult to ignore as the program is structured around racial tensions in the United States. Because definitions of race are shaped by many different circumstances, I have elected to discuss race in *True Blood* under three separate categories: setting, the Black body, and immigration/nationality.

1. Setting

Since the implications of race in the (Southern) United States are arguably more complex than issues of homosexuality (due to a history of slavery and exploitation of African Americans), it is surprising that this narrative element receives the least amount of print space of all major *True Blood* topics in the selected archives. Like the topic of homosexuality, the chosen online archives downplay the importance of race in the

³⁶ On June 24, 2011, New York became the largest state to legalize gay marriage. Gay marriage is now legal in seven states in America.

program or ignore its implications altogether. The first example that involves setting comes from *USA Today's* "Interview With 'True Blood' Vampire, Stephen Moyer."

Whitney Matheson's work is an amalgamation of fan questions for Moyer. "I've read a lot of criticism of how Southern culture and people are portrayed on the show," begins Bill B.'s question. "How did you prepare [yourself] to portray a Southern character? What, if any, is your response to such criticism?" Moyer gives a seemingly calculated response:

I haven't had any criticism at all of my stuff — I've been very lucky, I think. I love the South, I love [my character] Bill. I love the way he sounds, I love doing the accent. I prepared for it quite meticulously, and I work hard on making it correct, and we did try to make him very different-sounding from all the other characters, in that he's 173 years old.

Bill B. rightly acknowledges that *True Blood's* attempt to portray the culture of a particular geographical area in the United States can be problematic and offensive to some viewers. Its depiction of the Deep South as prejudiced, backward, and a hotbed for inexplicable or unnatural phenomena reinforces unsavoury stereotypes of an area still sensitive about its antebellum past. And yet, Moyer chooses to comment on Bill's accent. Moyer's decision to stay away from the topics of race, discrimination and offensive portrayals of Southern culture, or *USA Today's* decision to omit that part of his answer, suggests that the actor or paper are unsure of how they must frame such discussion for general reading audiences.

A similar example is present in *Time Magazine's* online archive. Similar to Moyer's interview, "10 Questions with Anna Paquin" is a compilation of fan questions.

One query comes from Australian viewer, Jordan Dittloff. ““True Blood's’ Deep South setting contributes to the show's sense of danger” begins Dittloff, “do you think it would work as well in a cosmopolitan setting?” Paquin’s answer is similar to Moyer’s:

I don't know if it necessarily has to be the South, but I feel like the small-town ruralness of it is quite important to the story. It isolates the people from bigger, scarier things than vampires and werewolves. As far as a storytelling device, it works well because there's a reason why all these characters happen to know each other. They've all grown up together.

Paquin’s response concentrates on the general associations of a small town instead of the characteristics of a *Southern* small town. Indeed, *True Blood's* plot relies heavily on the close relationships formed in a quiet town, but elements of fear, Otherness and prejudice associated with America’s Southern geographical region, and post-Katrina Louisiana area are equally important to the text.

Before further analysis, I must acknowledge the way in which journalists can deploy the words of the interviewee. Both Moyer and Paquin’s interviews are likely to have been edited for clarity and fluidity, and thus it is unclear whether or not they actually discuss race as it relates to Southern culture and setting. But if they mentioned these points and the media outlet chose to remove them from the transcript in order to fit within the conventions of entertainment journalism, we still have a suggestion that race is either irrelevant to, or is an uncomfortable topic for the actors or readers. With both articles, we add to the growing number of *True Blood*-related pieces that come very close to exploring important topics, but never actually manage to do so.

The interview with Paquin and the majority of articles on *True Blood* in the selected archives fail to acknowledge the importance of American Gothic elements in *True Blood's* storytelling. One cannot begin to understand the implications of race and setting in *True Blood* without acknowledging the conventions of the American Gothic genre. In her work "Introduction to American Gothic," Teresa A. Goddu, a scholar of nineteenth-century American literature provides a description of the regional genre:

[T]he American gothic is most recognizable as a regional form. Identified with gothic doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation's 'other' becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wants to disassociate itself. The benighted South is able to support the irrational impulses of the gothic that the nation as a whole ... cannot. America's self-mythologization as a nation of hope and harmony directly contradicts the gothic's most basic impulses. (265)

As a genre, American Gothic acknowledges the presence of internal Orientalism in the United States. A phrase coined by anthropology scholar Louisa Schein, "internal Orientalism" is used to discuss the South as an Other within the United States. In the minds of many individuals, "the geographic ideas of 'America' and 'the South' are opposite poles of a binary, and the identity of one cannot be understood except as linked to the identity of the other" (Jansson 293) The notions of "American Gothic" and "internal Orientalism" suggest that *True Blood's* Southern setting *does* contribute to the program's sense of danger and may be partly responsible for its success. We will return to

the history of the state of Louisiana, American Gothic and internal Orientalism and their ties to race in chapter two.

2. The Black Body

In the *New York Times* article “Handsome Stranger? Be careful, He Bites,” Alessandra Stanley writes that Sookie Stackhouse spends most of her time with “her best friend, a feisty black woman named Tara ... who can’t hold her tongue, or a job, and is also something of a loner.” To Stanley, “one of the more interesting and less stereotypical characters is Tara’s cousin Lafayette ... a short-order cook at Merlotte’s by day, a gay hooker and drug dealer by night.” In Stanley’s opinion, Tara is a stock character, but Lafayette has numerous layers. Stanley thus suggests that Ball only partially revises race narratives and roles for Black actors and actresses. Though Stanley does not use the terms “ironic” or “hipster” racism, she manages to recognize that both characters are flush with stereotypes, but that Lafayette is somehow different. There is something salvageable in this problematic representation of Black men that is evidenced through instances that complicate his racist character. The fact that Stanley does not identify these instances of stereotype in *True Blood* as examples of ironic racism even after writing an article on this motif³⁷ suggests that deployment of ironic racism outside of situational comedies is more difficult to identify, even for “culturally aware” viewers.

³⁷ In 2007 the *New York Times* published Stanley’s article “Pushing Their Luck, Sitcoms Are Playing With Race Cards.” In the piece, Stanley writes that “ironic race baiting” is a comic motif used to test “the limits of taste and mock intolerance.”

A little over a month later, the paper published Margy Rochlin's "Flesh and Blood In a Town of Vampires," an article on Rutina Wesley, the actress who plays Tara. When asked about Tara, Wesley states that with this character, "I get to create this girl and make her not the stereotypical — for lack of a better phrase — black woman with an attitude ... we see a lot of that. But with Tara we're also going to see a woman who has been through a lot of things." The Black woman who has experienced adversity is another stock character, a point that is never acknowledged by Wesley or Rochlin. Rochlin's article comes very close to discussing the problematic representations of Black women and the structures that lead to these depictions, but her work quickly moves back into the realm of entertainment journalism. The article remains upbeat and optimistic about the program without providing concrete examples of how Tara will be different from most Black female characters on television. Though she does not fully explain herself in the article, Wesley has a very different view of Tara than Stanley. I argue that Wesley has a more positive opinion of her character because she believes that her acting ability and Ball's reputation as a transgressive author will result in a complex character. Unfortunately for Wesley, few journalists and fans support or can identify with the preferred reading of Tara.

Stanley's article was published three days prior to the series premiere on September 7, 2008, so it is doubtful that she had seen more than the first three episodes of the program. Sadly, descriptions of Tara as "brash," "common" or a "black woman with an attitude" are never really undermined in the program. Her moments of anger or rudeness are often deployed through humour, but they are rarely identified as moments of

social commentary by viewers. The *New York Times* has yet to write another piece on the depiction of Black women in *True Blood*. By halting the discussion of Tara and Black female characters in the program, the *New York Times* suggests that representations of Black women is not an important aspect of the program, or that it is not a topic of interest for its readers.

Joshua Alston implies that he *has* watched more than the first few episodes of *True Blood*, but he agrees with Stanley. His article, "I Won't Be Seduced by 'True Blood'" is the only text in all four archives to discuss race in an overt manner. The article can be found in the *USA Today* archive; however, he did not write the piece for the paper. Rather, he is a contributor to *Newsweek*. An anonymous individual at *USA Today* summarized Alston's article, provided a link to the original work, and titled it "Is 'True Blood' Offensive?" "Tara and Lafayette take turns filling the role of the sassy black person who says what the audience would be thinking if the audience's thoughts were quippier" writes Alston. "...[N]either Tara nor Lafayette seems to exist outside of their relationships to the white characters." To Alston, there is nothing transgressive or "edgy" about these characters; they are simply racist. Despite Alston's observations about the portrayal of Black Americans in *True Blood*, writers at *USA Today* do not respond to the article or address the portrayal of Tara and Lafayette. The lack of discussion in relation to Alston's piece allows *USA Today* to remain neutral, while providing an interesting debate for its readers. As of September 22, 2010, the summary article in *USA Today* has only received twenty comments, most of them suggesting Alston should "get over it" as America is considered to be a post-racial society. I argue however, that reader and

journalists' inability to engage with the representation of marginalized Others on television suggests that race is still a sensitive topic in the United States or is too complicated to be addressed in a public forum.

3. Nationality and Immigration

Javier Espinoza's *Wall Street Journal* article "Have the Undead Become Americanized?" provides yet another angle with which to look at racial discourse in *True Blood*. Espinoza discusses "Open Graves, Open Minds: Vampires and the Undead in Modern Culture," an academic conference in England. Dr. Sam George created the conference to discuss the Americanization of the nosferatu and to reiterate the role British works have had in the creation and success of contemporary American vampire texts. George asserts that the "'Twilight Saga' ... and 'True Blood,' ... have contributed to vampires in popular culture 'losing their British passports and becoming Americanized.'" George does not explain the difference between the American and British undead, but states that "vampires [are] no longer the mold-scented monsters of Stoker's novel and early movies but highly intelligent, beautiful and fashionable creatures, with aristocratic manners."³⁸ In other words, the vampire, like many other characters developed for American viewing audiences, has been glamorized.

George makes a valid argument, as vampires in American popular culture tend to be quite beautiful. Tom Cruise, the actor who portrays Lestat de Lioncourt in the 1994 film adaptation of Anne Rice's *Interview With a Vampire* was named "Sexiest Man Alive"

³⁸ This point is not strictly American as the aristocratic or wealthy vampire is a European creation.

by *People Magazine* four years prior to the film's release, while publishing companies continue to sell calendars comprised of images of Angel (David Boreanaz) and Spike (James Marsters), the undead love interests from Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, years after the program's series finale. Indeed, *all* vampires in *Twilight* are so beautiful that one cannot look at them in natural sunlight as their skin sparkles "like thousands of tiny ... diamonds embedded in the surface" (Meyer 260). Even *True Blood's* main blood-suckers are coded as unnaturally attractive. However, unlike these other texts, Ball also includes many other vampires that are quite average looking.³⁹ His decision to include unremarkable individuals normalizes the vampire and suggests that in appearance at least, they are no different from your average human citizen.⁴⁰

By suggesting that a fundamental difference exists between British and American vampires, Espinoza's work also asks readers to consider the qualities (besides affluence and attractiveness) that separate the American vampire from its British relative. The only answer appears to be "American history." While American and European vampire folktales are relatively the same,⁴¹ historical events, specifically slavery in the American

³⁹ Many of the vampires on *Buffy* are understood to be average looking as well, but Whedon's choice to have creatures with distorted and gruesome appearances when they "vamp out" (the term used for vampires on the hunt) complicates this argument.

⁴⁰ The only vampires that seem to look any different from humans are those of European descent as *True Blood's* makeup team adds white liquid foundation so that they look paler than their living, Caucasian community members.

⁴¹ The following tale (set during the American Revolution) is the first reported vampire incident in The United States: "A man named Stukeley, who had fourteen children, began to experience the death of his brood one by one. After six had died, one of the deceased, his daughter Sarah, began to appear in dreams of his wife. The bodies were exhumed and all but Sarah had decomposed... From each body, they cut out the heart, which they burned before reburial of the bodies. The first account of this story was not published until 1888, a century after it supposedly occurred" (Melton 11).

South, result in different back stories for its nosferatu. For example, Anne Rice's Lestat de Lioncourt lived on a plantation for many years, while Bill Compton was turned into a vampire on his journey home at the end of the American Civil War. I argue however, that nationality of the vampire is irrelevant to human characters in *True Blood* as one appears to become less American – or whatever their nationality may be – if they join the ranks of the undead. This argument is first examined during the second episode of the *True Blood* series, "The First Taste." While discussing the Vampire Rights Amendment (VRA) legislation supported by vampire activist groups, Jason Stackhouse (Ryan Kwanten), Sookie's older brother, tells Bill that "a lot of Americans don't think you people deserve certain rights." Jason's words to Bill draw similarities between the VRA and the American Civil Rights Movement as well as parallels between vampires and contemporary immigration regulations in the United States.

By the end of season one, it becomes quite clear that Black characters in *True Blood* are not treated as well as Euro-American characters, but are considered to be more American than vampires and thus, better received by the Bon Temps community. Cultural studies scholar Jon Stratton builds on this argument in an article "Buffy Failed: 'True Blood' and the Accommodation of Vampires" for the online journal, *Flow*:

Race [on *True Blood*] is not about the classical American black/white binary. Indeed, as I suggested in my article on [Buffy the Vampire Slayer], while Americans continue to be preoccupied with black/white relations, white Americans are now focused on the increasing presence in the United States of members of racialised groups that are neither white nor black. In

this context, blacks are now thought of as members of American society.

Indeed, in *True Blood*, blacks have a place in the everyday, human order.

Blacks are not equal to whites, but they are given human status.

In *True Blood*, vampires are the “racialised groups” that are not considered to be Black or Caucasian. The introduction of the vampire as a metaphor for these “un-American” individuals exemplifies a new racial hierarchy in which the *living* African American is not at the bottom of the totem pole. Instead, the Black body is safely sandwiched between the living Caucasian population and the undead or supernatural (read: immigrant) community.

The exchange between Jason and Bill also reveals that race is not just about skin pigmentation, but status in the eyes of the majority. After the transformation, the vampire is stripped of her/his citizenship or (human) rights and becomes a foreign body in the country. *True Blood* further exemplifies the notion of the vampire as nationless or Other in the eyes of the majority through the incorporation of the character Eric Northman. Originally from Scandinavia, Eric is the vampire sheriff of Area Five⁴² and owner of Fangtasia, a vampire bar in Shreveport Louisiana. He self-identifies as Viking on a semi-regular basis and fashions himself in a stereotypically European fashion.⁴³ While Eric embraces his European roots, his nationality goes unnoticed by the human characters. He

⁴² A vampire sheriff is the overseer or boss of a jurisdiction. He or she makes decisions for vampires in their area and may ask any favour they wish of their vampire community. Bon Temps is part of Area Five.

⁴³ Eric’s dress is similar to what some may call “Eurotrash” fashion. His attire (tight shirts, blonde highlights and dress suits) is associated with an Othered group living in the United States, while other vampires in the program, including British vampire Franklin Mott, tend to dress in contemporary fashion or styles that were popular during their human life.

is a vampire and therefore an Other. Indeed, his history as a Viking prince and current owner of a nightclub is used to deploy ironic racism and shape his story arcs in the series, but it does not change how he is received by the human population. Bill Compton, despite his previous American status, receives the same, cold treatment as Eric by the majority of Bon Temps residents. It does not matter that he has walked on American soil longer than all humans on the program or that he fought for the South in the American Civil War. He is a vampire and the undead are portrayed as little more than foreign creatures feeding on American resources.

Through character dialogue and the VRA subplot, the connection between the vampire and the (illegal) immigrant in *True Blood* prove to be just as noteworthy as the connection between the vampire and homosexuality, but the metaphor receives less attention in the media outlets chosen for this chapter. The vampire as racialized Other in *True Blood* relates to two topics of American news stories from the past year. The first is The Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act (Arizona's Senate Bill 1070). This bill was created to crack down on the number of illegal immigrants living and working in the state. Under SB 1070, it is illegal to transport, rent property or hire illegal immigrants in the state of Arizona. Racial profiling as it pertains to those of Mexican or Latin heritage is in full effect, making Arizona "the first state to demand that immigrants meet federal requirements to carry identity documents legitimizing their presence on American soil" (Archibold). Due to racial profiling, in Arizona, it no longer matters if one is born an American citizen; belonging to the targeted group results in the same treatment by authorities. The second news headline is Obama's DREAM Act. The

Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act works against Senate Bill 1070.

A reference to Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, and the common phrase "living the American dream," Obama's DREAM Act, if passed, will provide peoples of illegal immigration status access to post-secondary school funding in the United States.

Graduating from college or partaking in military service will lead to permanent status.⁴⁴

The connection between vampirism and immigration is not as obvious as that of homosexuality, but the lack of news coverage may be linked to a desire to discuss inequality as it applies to *American* citizens instead of inequality as it pertains to racially Othered American residents.

Entertainment journalism's inability to cover hot topic issues in *True Blood* in a provocative manner suggests that Ball has created a text that problematizes and threatens American social structures that deem race, and (homo)sexuality taboo or sensitive subjects. As news stories on gay rights and immigration imply, the American government must negotiate with its citizens to redefine marriage and reconfigure immigration policies. To do so, Americans must acknowledge that civil rights violations exist in the United States. A clear understanding of who is considered an American citizen cannot be created based on civil rights alone as same-sex couples and those who "look" like illegal immigrants (read: Mexican or Latino) experience contradictory treatment from the state and federal levels of government.

At this time in history, the revision and instatement of laws and bills that include and protect Americans of various sexual orientations are being passed at a moment when

⁴⁴ As of June 2011, The DREAM Act has not been passed.

a regression in civil rights for visible minorities is underway. With the struggle to form a new American society alongside new understandings of race and sexuality, we can perhaps see why entertainment journalism is unable to discuss these subjects in great detail. However, I suggest that ignoring the implications of race in *True Blood* results in a misreading of the text and undermines its goal of identifying instances of racism and prejudice in everyday society. As news media outlets will not critically engage with elements of race in *True Blood*, I must perform my own critical analysis of the presence of blackness, Black women, and ironic racism in the text.

- Chapter 2 - (Gothic) Mothers and Black Performativity in *True Blood*

The print news media analyzed in chapter one allude to racial discourse in *True Blood* but fail to provide concrete or in-depth examples of such discussion in their articles. Entertainment journalism's lack of tools or guidelines to address race is exacerbated by the larger issue of defining the term. To understand race and ethnicity as they apply to Black women in *True Blood*, we must turn to the program itself. First, however, I will discuss the program's genre, Louisiana's history, and racial diversity.

The Gothic

In "Genre Study and Television," cultural studies scholar Jane Feuer reports that "[g]enre offers a way for film and TV industries to control the tension between similarity and difference inherent in the production of any cultural product" (142). Through the use of genre, writers shape their stories and audiences discern narrative tropes in similar texts. *True Blood* relies on the conventions of the Gothic genre. Genre scholars call Gothic "the literature of the nightmare" as it "evolved out of explorations of the inner self" (Melton 296).⁴⁵ Gothic scholar Fred Botting suggests that these nightmares are prompted by uncertainties in everyday living. Its ties to the subconscious and repressed

⁴⁵ Gothic scholar Elizabeth MacAndrew makes this argument in her work *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* (1980). Her theory is summarized in Melton's work.

fears link the Gothic with psychoanalysis.⁴⁶ In his text *Gothic*, Botting writes that “[u]ncertainties about the nature of power, law, society, family and sexuality dominate Gothic fiction” and “are linked to wider threats of disintegration manifested most forcefully in political revolution” (5). Gothic texts ask the reader, “‘what are you afraid of?’ and, in bringing this question to the surface, therapeutically evokes feelings of horror, terror and revulsion” (Horner and Zlosnik 2).⁴⁷ Gothic tales are also “dominated by values of family, domesticity and virtuous sentimentalism, values more appropriate to the middle class readership that composed the increasingly large portion of the literary market in the eighteenth century” (Botting 5-6).

When interacting with the Gothic, one may experience instances described as “uncanny.” The uncanny signals a disruption of familiarity. The revelation of this uncomfortable feeling is the focus of Sigmund Freud’s essay “The Uncanny.” To Freud, “[the] uncanny is ... nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression” or “something

⁴⁶ Gothic scholar Michelle A Masse makes the following observation in her essay “Psychoanalysis and the Gothic”: “The Gothic is such a genre, one that is important to psychoanalytic critical inquiry not solely for its ongoing popularity and easily recognisable motifs, but for the affinities between its central concerns and those of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis examines how and why our most strongly held beliefs and perceptions are sometimes at odds with empirical evidence. We work incessantly to maintain a simulacrum of congruence between fantasy and reality, but boundaries blur in the most routine of everyday events ... Usually we reconcile such breaches, but when it cannot be done readily, Freud tells us that this gap can call forth the uncanny, which is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced” (230).

⁴⁷ In *Gothic and the Comic Turn*, Gothic scholars Avril Horner and Susan Zlosnik reference Fred Botting who argues “that Gothic texts are ‘attempts to explain what the Enlightenment left unexplained, efforts to reconstruct the divine mysteries that reason had begun to dismantle’” (2). In other words, Gothic thrives on mystery.

which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light..." (100). Similarly, Charles L. Crow, a scholar of literary genres and author of *History of the Gothic: American Gothic*, defines the uncanny as "a sense of weirdness, created when something that seemed safe and familiar suddenly becomes strange, or something that should have remained hidden is revealed" (7). *True Blood's* integration of vampires into human society is an example of the uncanny. In this example, the uncanny alludes to notions of self and Other present in Gothic texts.⁴⁸

By the nineteenth century, Gothic would find a new home in America. The change in locale provides numerous tropes that differentiate the genre from its European predecessor. In "Nineteenth-Century Gothic," Allan Lloyd-Smith, a scholar of nineteenth-century American culture, reveals that some European settlers believed that the new frontier did not provide the setting Gothic narratives demanded as it was "without a feudal past and those relics so convenient for the European Gothicism" (109). American writers later realized that their cotton fields, swamps and sprawling mansions could stand in for the cold European landscape, heaths, monasteries and castles. By the end of the century, "four indigenous features were to prove decisive in producing a powerful and long-lasting American variant of the Gothic: the frontier, the Puritan legacy, race and political utopianism" (109). Film scholar Ian Conrich reiterates Lloyd-Smith's assertions in his work "Gothic Film." Conrich writes that American Gothic engages with "culturally

⁴⁸ Horner and Zlosnik write that "Gothic writing always concerns itself with boundaries and their instabilities, whether between the quick/the dead, ... pain/pleasure, 'real'/'unreal', 'natural'/'supernatural', ... [or] human/vampire. ... Such concern with the permeability of boundaries ... manifests a deep anxiety about the coherence of the modern subject. Indeed, Gothic writers deliberately exploit the fear of the 'Other' encroaching upon the apparent safety of the post-Enlightenment world and the stability of the post-Enlightenment subject in order to achieve their effects" (1).

deprived, remote communities, where industrialism is absent. Here, characters struggle against a frightening, powerful and enchanted landscape in which they are trapped and suffocated ... [A] stranger or outsider,” he continues, “often viewed with suspicion or fear, can break the isolation and disrupt the community” (80). Based on Conrich’s description, the Bon Temps community is the perfect reproduction of an American Gothic setting.

While manifest-destiny was popular rhetoric amongst European settlers, “American Gothic presented a counter-narrative, undercutting the celebration of progress, inquiring about its costs and the omissions from the story” (Crow 17). The omissions from American history were the treatment of slaves and indigenous peoples. American Gothic fiction from the nineteenth century, including Washington Irving’s *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820), Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), provide readers with alternative depictions of European Americans and the Othered bodies who came into contact with them. American Gothic literature became a space to explore “the racially ‘othered,’” question hegemonic powers and the affect these structures had on marginalized bodies on this colonized land (Lloyd-Smith 2).

Teresa A. Goddu provides more insight into the counter-narratives present in the American Gothic genre:

American gothic literature criticizes America’s national myth of new-world innocence by voicing the cultural contradictions that undermine the nation’s claim to purity and equality. Showing how these contradictions

contest and constitute national identity even as they are denied, the gothic tells of the historical horrors that make national identity possible yet must be repressed in order to sustain it. (270)

American Gothic provides commentary on the atrocities that have allowed America to become a world power: slavery, class division and the oppression of women and people of colour. *True Blood* abides by Gothic guidelines as Bon Temps is a world where the oppression of and discrimination against minority groups (mainly vampires), class division⁴⁹ and few life opportunities for its residents exist.

Despite changes in regional location and the presence of topics exclusive to the American landscape, American Gothic still “retain[s] some shadows of superstitious fancy which appeared in concerns with the relation of the individual, mentally and politically, [as well as] social and religious forms of order” found in European Gothic texts (Botting 115). The use of vampires, Nazi-werewolves, shape-shifters and witches throughout *True Blood*'s first three seasons can all be interpreted as fantastic metaphors for actual external and internal struggles over racial, ethnic, sexual and class identity. Undermining social structures, including the government (as exemplified by Bon Temps' incompetent police force) and religion (Christian symbols, including the cross, do not have any effect on vampires, and religion is often used to exemplify irrational

⁴⁹ Although the majority of characters in *True Blood* are working class, recurring Black characters are significantly poorer than recurring Caucasian characters.

behaviour)⁵⁰ remind viewers that these institutions are social constructions used to control human conduct and can crumble at any moment.

Southern Gothic⁵¹

American Gothic has been characterized by two geographical areas: New England and the South. The South is the more provocative of the two regions as it functions as America's national Other in popular culture (Goddu 256). Its antebellum past makes the region wholly different from the rest of the country, thus unflattering social matters in the United States are often linked to the Southern landscape. Texts like *True Blood* use the Deep South to explore social injustice in America. This creative choice allows "a national audience to come to grapple with such issues without feeling threatened" (Allain 231). The practice of internal Orientalism in the United States points to a shared ideology or myth where the Southern landscape acts as a hotbed for corruption in America. The region becomes a repository for anything that tarnishes America's national identity.⁵²

⁵⁰ Examples in *True Blood* include The Fellowship of the Sun (an extremist Christian sect that calls for the destruction of vampires) and Tara's mother, Lettie Mae Thornton, a woman so consumed by her relationship with the Lord, she often proves to be a neglectful parent.

⁵¹ According to Crow, "[t]he term 'Southern Gothic', first used by American writer, Ellen Glasgow, became so common in the modern period that each word came to evoke the other" (134).

⁵² While there is some weight in stating that this depiction of the South is the creation of the rest of the United States, it should be noted, that writers like Anne Rice and W J Cash, author of *Mind of the South* (1941), were both raised in the Deep South and have played a role in identifying the region as America's Other. Cash's "descriptions of poor whites as dirty, shiftless, ignorant, even physically revolting, implicate all white Southerners" (Jansson 304). Though Cash's description of White Southerners is offensive and he speaks in binary terms for most of his text, his argument about the difference between Caucasian Americans based on location suggests that whiteness cannot be neutralized as its definition and characteristics depends upon region. Whiteness, is still at the top of America's social hierarchy, but it is not neutral.

With the amalgamation of Southern Gothic and internal Orientalism, national problems become regionalized, thereby allowing most Americans to ignore their own discriminatory actions.

Alan Ball has set *True Blood* in the “violent, decadent south,” a backdrop filled with “gothic monsters and sophisticated perverts” (Allain 230). In her article “Glamour and Squalor: Louisiana on Film,” Mathe Allain, a Francophone studies professor at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette, writes that Gothic elements in “violent decadent south[ern]” narratives “reveal... a deep-seated fear of the violence embedded in American life” (231).⁵³ The violent, decadent south deems violence, overindulgence and the grotesque⁵⁴ imperative to Southern Gothic as these tropes create feelings of discomfort or the uncanny in a text.

Narratives set in the violent, decadent south, or that provide commentary on slavery, racism or oppression often use magical realism⁵⁵ to make the text more palatable for reading audiences (Crow 88). To Latin American studies scholar Amaryll Beatrice

⁵³ There are four common settings in Southern Gothic narratives: the Plantation South, the Homespun South, the Corrupt South and the aforementioned Violent Decadent South. For in-depth descriptions of the first three settings, see Mathe Allain’s article in *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*.

⁵⁴ In this context, the grotesque is the “strange, distorted, or monstrous,” elements of a text “usually as applied to human characters” (Crow 6). Russian literary scholar Neil Cornwell adds that the grotesque “may be characterised as a deformation of the real-life, with verisimilitude yielding to caricature, often of human features ... In literature, it often involves freakish appearance of behaviour” (273).

⁵⁵ “Magic realism is a disruptive, foreign, fantastic narrative style that fractures the flow of otherwise seamlessly realist text. ... its etymology is one that looks to return to the real and reinvest realism with its own magic, rather than reaching out to the fantastic ... what we find in magic realism (particularly at the dark end of its spectrum where it meets the Gothic) is a double-edged *frisson* which oscillates around the disturbing aspects of the everyday” (Armitt 306).

Ghanady, “magical realist narratives do not depict fictional worlds radically different from our own, but integrate the supernatural within relatively believable worlds” (278). This integration of supernatural elements distances audiences from the uncomfortable reality of institutionalized racism and violence in the United States. Institutionalized discrimination becomes part of a fictional narrative. The imprisonment of Lafayette and Tara by vampires instead of humans is a strong example of employing magical realism to distance slavery from the American population. Lafayette spends the first three episodes of *True Blood*'s second season shackled in the basement of Fangtasia after Eric learns that he sells V.⁵⁶ He is released only after he agrees to work for Eric. Then, in season three, Tara becomes involved with Franklin Mott (James Frain), a vampire who later holds her captive on a plantation. I cannot explore controlling images of Black women and ironic racism in *True Blood* without further analysis of slave imagery, thus I will return to this topic in chapter three.

Gothic scholars can outline underlying social commentary present in Gothic texts, but the works remain difficult to categorize as Gothic “is an amalgamation of so many different genres” (Goddu 266). Traces of romance, comedy, mystery and horror can all be found in Gothic texts. The genre, which originated in eighteenth-century England,⁵⁷ now includes film noir, as well as “some crime fictions ... movies and television programs about vampires, much science fiction ... and some graphic novels” (Crow 1-2). As exemplified in the introduction to this thesis, ironic racism in *True Blood* becomes a

⁵⁶ V, or vampire blood is an illegal narcotic in *True Blood*.

⁵⁷ Englishman Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is considered to be the first Gothic text and a major influence on writers such as Bram Stoker, Mary Shelley, and the Bronte sisters.

motif in which to evoke comedy and alleviate tensions within the episode. As I reveal in my textual analysis, ironic racism is also used to create drama and suspense in the narrative.

Louisiana History

In her article “Narrative Theory and Television,” film scholar Sarah Kozloff states that television programs often “underutilize setting” while “[t]heatrical films will lavish money and time on capturing details of the setting with infinite care, making the Western prairie, the futuristic cityscape, or the urban ghetto a major component of the tale” (75). *True Blood* falls in line with theatrical films as Louisiana’s landscape, cultural practices and racial diversity enhance the program’s narrative. As my textual analysis will prove, much of *True Blood*’s ironic racism is tied to Louisiana’s complex identity.

True Blood is one of many programs set in post-Katrina Louisiana,⁵⁸ but the state was a popular setting for films and television programs prior to the disaster in 2005 (Allain 229). While Louisiana is known for its lush regional vegetation (kudzu and Spanish moss), humidity and diverse landscape, many writers choose to locate their tales in the state because Louisiana amplifies the negative characteristics of the South “to the tenth power” (231). Louisiana’s population has managed to benefit from the state’s reputation as a place where sin and crime are natural (Baker 265). In her article “Mad, Bad and Dangerous: Conceptions and Misconceptions of Louisiana’s History and

⁵⁸ HBO’s *Treme* (2010- present), MTV’s *The Real World: New Orleans* (2010) and A&E’s *Billy the Exterminator* (2009- present) all take place in the state of Louisiana.

Heritage,” Vaughan B. Baker, a scholar in Louisiana state history, outlines how the state has profited from its real *and* imagined heritage:

Fabricating such heritage promotes Louisiana tourism, creates jobs, sells souvenirs, and draws people to Bourbon Street and to Harrah's. Creole cooking, Dixieland jazz, crawfish, Cajun music, casinos, and New Orleans ghosts attract vacationers and visitors as effectively as Disney World in Orlando or Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. (267)

While all of the listed attractions bring revenue to the state, the constructed “Louisiana is seldom taken seriously” as kitschy souvenirs and casinos undermine true Louisiana history and cultural experiences like Dixieland jazz or Creole cooking (267). The state is an amalgamation of factual and mythical heritage.

With residents of French, Spanish, African, and Caribbean ancestry living in the state due to prior ownership by France and Spain, Louisiana is home to many ethnicities and racialized⁵⁹ bodies. The diversity of the region was largely responsible for Louisiana's unique race and class division in the eighteenth century:

While other slave-holding states had a binary racial system (a person was legally either black or white), Louisiana's laws long recognized mixed-race people as a separate category. Although the Southern binary system was finally imposed on Louisiana, the state, and especially New Orleans, remained more racially cosmopolitan than the rest of the South. (Crow 89)

⁵⁹ Omi and Winant “employ the term *racialization* to signify the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group. Racialization,” they continue, “is an ideological process, an historically specific one” (64). In this instance I use “racialized” to describe identities that are formed by regional location and as a result of other bodies present in the state.

Members of this third racial category in Louisiana were known as “the *gens de couleur libre* or free people of color” (Disheroon-Green 309). Suzanne Disheroon-Green, a scholar in Southern literature, reveals in “Romanticizing a Different Lost Cause: Regional Identities in Louisiana and the Bayou Country” that despite the practices of the surrounding “Southern states, Louisiana recognized these people *de couleur* – people of Creole, Native American, or other mixed racial heritage – as belonging to a higher class than their darker-skinned counterparts” (310). The *gens de couleur libre* could not vote, but they could own property, slaves, perform business interactions with Caucasians, marry whomever they wished and have children who would carry “their fathers’ names, regardless of race” (310). Though still inhumane in practice, “strict laws governing the care and working conditions of slaves were enforced by the French, laws which were later explicitly retained by the Spanish” (309). For example, slaves in Louisiana “were afforded some protection from physical and sexual abuse under the law and could offer evidence in court against whites if the situation warranted it” (309).⁶⁰ Louisiana’s third racial category and slave laws disappeared after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803.⁶¹ The creation and subsequent deterioration of Louisiana’s third racial category provides further

⁶⁰ According to Disheroon-Green, “...slaves were allowed the right to marry individuals of their own choosing, children were not separated from their mothers at the young ages at which such separations occurred in the United States, and slaveholders were admonished to teach their charges Catholicism and to prohibit them from working on holy days. Failure to fulfill these responsibilities could lead to, among other things, the loss of the slaves” (309).

⁶¹ After Louisiana became an American state, “the ‘one-drop rule’ and, later, Jim Crow laws became the de facto standard for the rights – or lack thereof – of people of color, effectively eliminating many of the rights that had been taken for granted prior to the Louisiana Purchase. American law destroyed the caste system in Louisiana, clearing the way for the longstanding colonial caste system to devolve into one of the most viciously enforced biracial hierarchies of any Southern States” (310).

evidence to suggest that race is a fluid concept manipulated to accommodate the desires of those in power.

Louisiana's mythical heritage is strengthened by the vampire. The popularity of Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* has deemed Louisiana America's vampire capital and New Orleans the "true American vampire city" (Melton 490).⁶² Melton believes that Louisiana's diverse population, religious practices and European architectural influence make the state the perfect Gothic setting for vampires:

[Louisiana] was the center of voodoo, a religion practiced in secret during the night by the slaves who built a different culture in order to survive away from their homeland. New Orleans also stands as a foreign enclave within a country dominated by English-speaking British influence. In the French Quarter, New Orleans is also a land separated from the present by its unique architecture and heritage. (490)

Melton has provided historical facts about New Orleans, but the history of Voodoo, the region's cultural diversity and old-world architecture is seldom discussed outside of academia or Louisiana tour guides. They simply add to the Otherness and allure of Louisiana. Writers like Charlaine Harris and Alan Ball rely on the imagined Louisiana and its ties to vampire lore for their texts. Both authors add to the danger and mysticism

⁶² While Rice's books are the most popular vampire tales set in the state of Louisiana, they are not the first. Slaves and freedmen would tell tales of the *fifollet*. "The *fifollet*, the traditional will-o-the-wisp (light seen at night over swamp areas), derived from the French incubus/succubus figure, was the soul of a dead person that had been sent back to Earth by God to do penance, but instead attacked people ... On occasion, the *fifollet* became a vampire who sucked the blood of people, especially children" (Melton 7).

associated with the state as their naturalization of vampires in the region strengthens its ties to the supernatural.

Racial Diversity in *True Blood*

Though Alan Ball does not include any biracial actors in his program,⁶³ he acknowledges the unique racial makeup of Louisiana by having a visually diverse cast. Along with numerous Black and Caucasian characters, Ball has integrated one Cajun human, one Asian vampire, one Native American vampire, and two Hispanic characters into the narrative.⁶⁴ *True Blood's* onscreen diversity recalls minority discourse scholar Herman Gray's article "Television and the Politics of Difference." "[P]olitically, blacks and people of color demanded to be treated as subjects of the nation" Gray reports "and not just as consumers whose spending power was harnessed through race-based marketing strategies, while their cultural traditions, experiences, and identities remained beyond representation" (101). In addition to more visibility on television (as broadcast images were supposed to mirror America's cultural, racial and ethnic diversity to its viewers), minorities wanted programming that they could identify with. *True Blood* comes

⁶³ I argue that Ball has chosen not to include biracial characters so as to draw concrete racial lines in relation to skin colour. I will address his choice to do so in my textual analysis.

⁶⁴ Ironic racism is also used to animate minor characters in the program. Chow the Asian vampire "is a gamer – a practice commonly associated with a Japanese stereotype" (Stratton). LongShadow (the Native American vampire) is revealed to have stolen money from Fangtasia. As Stratton points out in his article, "untrustworthiness is a trait associated with native Americans in many traditional Westerns." Because these examples of ironic racism are subtle, I argue that most viewers may not identify them as social commentary.

very close to accomplishing this task, but as noted in the introduction to this thesis, inclusivity of marginalized bodies must go beyond physical presence in a text.

Omi and Winant admit that “Black” is often considered “as one ethnic group among others” and “national origin, religion, language, or cultural differences among blacks” are not used as “sources of ethnicity” (22). They also point out that “[s]imilar problems can be discerned in ethnicity-based treatments of ... Native Americans, Latin Americans, and Asian Americans” (23).⁶⁵ To Omi and Winant, “[t]he aggregation of Americans of Filipino, Japanese, Koreans, Chinese and now, Vietnamese, Loation, Thai and Cambodian descent into the category of ‘Asian American,’ for example, is clearly a racially based process” (23). They believe that “these various groups should be able to maintain their ethnic identities and thus avoid ‘racialization’” (23). Unfortunately, racialization of characters is a common practice. Like many television programs, *True Blood* fails to provide certain minority characters with ethnic backgrounds. Characters are stripped of ethnic identities and simply become Black, Asian or Hispanic.

In *Shaded Lives: African-American Women and Television*, Black feminist scholar Beretta E. Smith-Shomade quotes former model Bethann Haridson, who reveals that “[s]ometimes when a company desires a clear visual difference in their ad, they’ll ask for a Black model who is definitely Black looking” (61). Her statement compliments my assertion that Ball hired a visually diverse cast to emphasize difference between

⁶⁵ Though some may argue that acknowledgement of a specific ethnic identity like Chinese American is more desirable than Asian American as the latter strips the individual of their ethnic heritage, both titles are equally controversial as they are often applied to individuals with stronger ties to America than their country of origin. For example, a fourth generation American of Chinese decent is still considered Chinese or Asian American despite strong familial history in the country.

characters. Television “[rarely does] ‘fat.’” Smith-Shomade adds, “And in the case of Black women, dark skin often substituted for this fat” (60). Ball could argue that he cast a dark-skinned actress to play Tara to resist “prevailing standards of beauty” in media or to reflect the racial diversity in Louisiana (Collins 89). I argue however that Rutina Wesley’s skin-colour strengthens binary imagery in *True Blood*.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins explains the implications of pigmentation for Black women:

Prevailing standards of beauty claim that no matter how intelligent, educated, or ‘beautiful’ a Black woman may be, those Black women whose features and skin color are most African must ‘git back.’ Within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blond, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other – Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair. (89)

If blonde, blue-eyed Sookie is the desirable character, binary thought suggests that Tara is the unattractive, lesser woman. Narrative evidence supports my claim as Tara’s recurring love interest Sam Merlotte reveals that he would rather be with Sookie. Ball’s creative choice to apply oppressive cultural binaries to physical appearances proves more hurtful than transgressive.

In her essay “To Live and Live in Dixie,” writer and illustrator Paula Rogers comments that “Southerners have become pop-culture caricatures, symbolic of being left behind by the modern world and economy” and that “*True Blood* mirrors this identity

crisis by creating a version of the South that is an impression, not a documentary” (49).

Rogers’ statement proves credible as Ball chooses elements of Louisiana heritage that pique his interest to tell a Southern Gothic tale about the politics of race, gender, sexuality and ethnicity in the United States. Unfortunately as my textual analysis will reveal, Ball fails to provide a counter-narrative for Black women.

-Chapter 2 Continued-

With the conventions of Southern Gothic and Louisiana history in mind, I can now provide a textual analysis of Alan Ball's *True Blood*. Using the season one episodes "Burning House of Love" and "I Don't Wanna Know," I explore Ball's interpretation of blackness and Black female life experiences in the United States. Paying close attention to mise-en-scene, diegetic and extradiegetic sound, lighting, character position and editing choices, I critique the role images of Black women play in *True Blood*'s larger narrative involving marginalization and Otherness. "Burning House of Love" was chosen for analysis as it is the first episode in the series to apply themes of human struggle and indulgence to Black women. "I Don't Wanna Know" completes the story arc from "Burning House of Love." Together, the episodes point to the complex nature of ironic racism in *True Blood*.

Written by Chris Offutt and directed by Marcos Siega, "Burning House of Love" follows a two-part episode involving the murder and funeral of Sookie's grandmother, Adele Stackhouse (Lois Smith).⁶⁶ During Adele's funeral, viewers are introduced to Tara's mother, Lettie Mae Thornton (Adina Porter). It is subsequently revealed that Lettie Mae is an alcoholic who frequently abused and neglected her child and thus Tara often

⁶⁶After Sookie's biological parents died in a car accident, she and her brother moved in with Adele. In her essay "The Missing Mother: The Meaning of Maternal Absence in the Gothic Mode," Gothic scholar Ruth Bienstock Anolik reveals that the "dead mother" is a Gothic motif (25). "If a mother is not evil" Anolik writes, "she must be dead for the narrative to advance" (29). This is because a "good" mother protects the female protagonist from deviant behaviour (27). Adele is an example of a "good" mother, and so she must be removed from the narrative.

found herself in Adele's care. "Burning House of Love" provides viewers with a closer look at Tara's strained relationship with her mother, and the knowledge that Lettie Mae blames her alcoholism and abusive tendencies on demon possession.

"Burning House of Love" and "I Don't Wanna Know" provide moments where Black women act and participate in activities coded as simultaneously "Black" and "female" in American culture. Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" provides more insight into the implications of coding:

Certain codes may ... be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed – the effect of an articulation between sign and referent – but to be 'naturally' given. ... However, this does not mean that no codes have intervened; rather that the codes have been profoundly *naturalized*.⁶⁷ (167)

Hall's piece draws attention to images and sounds that a society accepts as natural. In Hall's opinion, viewers may identify racist images of Black women as authentic representations of this group instead of controlling images "naturalized" by their continued circulation in popular American media. *True Blood* attempts to point to inherently racist codes as absurd methods of control by deploying offensive stereotypes in an exaggerated manner. It also employs controlling images to empower the subject of the stereotype. I suggest, however, that *True Blood's* white/black binary system and

⁶⁷ Author's emphasis.

tendency to empower Black women through deviant means undermine Ball's attempt to provide alternative representations of these women in television.

The Thornton Residence

Charles L. Crow states that "familiar materials of Southern Gothic [include] a family with a history of madness [and] alcoholism living in a decaying mansion" (130). He also reveals that part of telling "the story of race in the South is to reveal the secrets of houses" (88). If we exchange the decaying mansion for a crumbling house, the Thorntons become the perfect Gothic family. Fred Botting adds that the Southern home and its secrets may also represent "the decay of family and culture" (161). Adele's murder in her residence is a literal depiction of Botting's statement, but as my textual analysis will prove, Tara's home life reflects Botting's assertion too.

In "Burning House of Love," we enter Tara's home for the second time in the series. The rented, rundown dwelling and overgrown lawn is significantly smaller than the Stackhouse property. In addition to confirming a significant economic division between Tara and Sookie, the unremarkable house signifies the different "life chances" provided for each woman by her respective guardian. According to Omi and Winant, "[i]ndividuals receiving roughly equal incomes, or partaking of equal quantities of wealth, are deemed to have similar 'life chances' and assigned to groups in a 'status order' or ranked hierarchy of 'classes'" (27). The men use American sociologist William J. Wilson's description of life chances to clarify their point:

although black 'life chances' were formerly determined by racial stratification, since 1965 they have been shaped directly by 'class' stratification. After state-enforced racial inequality was eliminated by civil rights legislation, blacks were admitted to the society-wide system of stratification, rather than being confined to a specific location by segregation. The results are a black community which is stratified into a small privileged 'class' whose opportunities are equivalent to those of whites with similar high levels of training and skills, and a massive black 'underclass; which is relegated to permanent marginality. (27)

In addition to flawed personalities and "unattractive" physical appearance, blackness in *True Blood* reflects economic difference. More specifically, blackness represents undesirable economic status. *True Blood* suggests that life chances are still highly dependent on racial stratification as characters of the same class experience different levels of economic struggle based on the colour of their skin. "Well-off" humans are non-existent in the Sookieverse; thus Black bodies stand in for the poorer class. Tara and Sookie have a similar income and educational background, but inherited property has placed Sookie in a better financial situation than Tara. Tara's obligations to her alcohol-addicted mother, and her confrontational demeanor, linked to a lifetime of abuse, also make her struggle to move up on the socioeconomic ladder more difficult.

The full weight of Tara's unfortunate financial and family situation is articulated when Lettie Mae first introduces the idea of an exorcism. The sequence inside the Thornton home begins with a medium close-up shot of a cracked mug. Viewers see a

hand pour coffee and vodka into the mug as a voice on the radio asks “what does it mean to accept Jesus as your personal saviour?” Tara can be heard from a distance, explaining a scheme to keep bill collectors from contacting her mother for another month.⁶⁸ This establishing shot reintroduces Lettie Mae as alcohol-dependent but religious – two characteristics that shape her actions throughout the series. Alan Ball’s choice to have a mess[y] and cluttered” program “about no control, all of the time” is most apparent in the Thornton home as the space is disheveled and unorganized, much like its main inhabitant, Lettie Mae. The scene cuts to Lettie Mae walking into her living room. Tara is sitting on the couch with bills in her hand. The room is filled with empty alcohol containers, old newspapers and worn furniture. Cheap, white blinds shield the women from the sun, while a beaded room divider and a fan add to the decor. The items in the residence are newer than furniture in the Stackhouse home, but they appear to be inexpensive and of low quality.

Lettie Mae announces that she needs four hundred and forty-five dollars for an exorcism. Tara comically shouts “we’re broke Mama ... what you need is an AA meeting!” As she moves to her brown armchair, Lettie Mae explains that she wants to give up alcohol, but the demon inside of her is very powerful and is keeping her from the Lord. The sermon on the radio is not audible during the verbal exchange. The omission of extradiegetic sound in the scene forces viewers to rely on the performances of Porter and Wesley to set the mood and suggests that no one emotion is appropriate for the scene. The conversation between the women ends with Tara rising from her seat to grab the mug of

⁶⁸ There is no evidence to suggest that Adele or Lettie Mae work, and so, viewers are left with the impression that both mother figures are supported by the girls.

spiked coffee from her mother. A brief struggle between the women ensues and ends with the drink spilling on Lettie Mae. To Tara's horror, Lettie Mae frantically sucks the alcohol out of her clothing and blames her actions on the demon. For the first time in the series, Tara is speechless, pointing to the gravity of the scene. Unlike the Stackhouse home and conventional Southern Gothic houses, the Thornton residence does not have any secrets left to expose. Lettie Mae's alcoholism, the family abuse, and financial instability are all on display.

The struggle between Tara and Lettie Mae for the mug and dominance in the scene extends to character positioning. At the beginning of the sequence, Lettie Mae is standing so Tara, seated on the couch, must look up to communicate with her mother. In this instance Lettie Mae is the dominant figure in the exchange. Once Tara explains that they cannot afford the exorcism, Lettie Mae sits too. Lettie Mae's dependency on her child's income revokes any power she may otherwise have in their relationship. At the end of the scene, Tara stands up to snatch the drink away from her mother shifting the power balance in the scene for a second time.

The oscillating shots of Tara and Lettie Mae provide more insight into their individual behaviour. Tara is placed squarely in the middle of the frame and the camera remains steady. This use of a camera technique applied to most human characters in *True Blood* suggests that there is nothing significantly out of the ordinary with Tara. Lettie Mae's framing is less traditional. She is placed closer to the right side of the frame and the camera is noticeably shaky. She is literally a marginalized body in the scene. The different shot techniques deployed for each character implies that there is a significant

difference between these two Black women. They may share the same last name but the resemblances end there.

Let us return to the importance of sound in the above scene. The lack of extradiegetic sound draws attention to Tara and Lettie Mae's speech patterns. Their grammar and pronunciation of words is much closer to Standard English than Lafayette's, but can still be considered "Black English." Smith-Shomade notes that the use of Black English in television became a popular subject of discussion in the 1970s (58):

One study concluded that the result of African-American assimilation into larger society was its linguistic patterning of majority culture. The study suggested that in situation comedy '[t]he language heard ... is a homogenized version of the dialect which gives the impression of speakers in transition *between* speech communities. ... Consequently, not just race, but class and political position, are becoming increasingly significant predictors of [Black English] use.' In other words, speech on these situation comedies presented a Black dialect in correlation to class positioning. The dialect used was applied only to assert difference – difference in socioeconomic positioning, in perceived desirability, and in presumed intelligence. (58)

Similar to situation comedies, difference in *True Blood* is extended to aural representation as Tara's speech pattern is unlike those of non-Black characters. Smith-Shomade also reveals that "dialect/slang helped authenticate the fictional sitcom world" (58). Ball points out the absurdity of associating Black English with Black authenticity by having

Wesley, Porter and Nelsan Ellis *perform* Black English in an overly exuberant manner. *True Blood* also subverts dominant codes that associate Black English with comedy, simple-mindedness, or ignorance as Tara is provided with insight and valuable knowledge that other characters are lacking. In addition to providing legal and medical advice to Bon Temps residents,⁶⁹ Tara supplies Sookie, Jason, and Lafayette with guidance on self-preservation in a region swimming with vampires. She communicates all of this information through Black English. Unfortunately, Tara's moments of intelligence are far outnumbered by her moments of "comical" vulgarity. Viewers are more likely to remember Tara yelling senseless profanities at Merlotte's customers than recall her engaging in meaningful conversations with them.⁷⁰ Thus, Ball's attempt to use Black English to signal the cultural "awareness" or cleverness of a character is undermined by the frequent use of the speech pattern in unnecessary arguments.

Angry Black Women and "Bad" Mothers

Tara's level of concern for her mother in "Burning House of Love" is unusual for her character. She is normally bossy, "uppity," argumentative, and loud in an attempt to prove her intelligence and independence. These moments of self-assurance are delivered with a large amount of sass and provide comic relief in the form of ethnic humour.

⁶⁹ In the season one episode, "Escape from Dragon House," Tara states that "school is just for White people looking for other White people to read to 'em." She would rather save her money and learn the material on her own.

⁷⁰ Contributors to the *True Blood* message boards used in chapter three often state that their dislike for Tara stems from her inability to communicate in an "appropriate" manner with other Bon Temps residents.

Though Tara often makes valid points about the treatment of Black individuals during her rants, these moments of ironic racism are still troublesome as many viewers will concentrate on the angry image instead of the underlying commentary about oppressive practices in the United States. Issues with this caricature, known as the Sapphire,⁷¹ are acknowledged in the audio commentary for “Burning House of Love.” During a scene in which Tara yells at Sam Merlotte for demanding a relationship, Offutt states that writers “can’t let Tara be angry one hundred percent of the time, because it often goes there. [Sam is being] reminded that she is a practical girl, but she has built a wall around her.” Writers work hard to “manage the anger in Tara” Offutt continues, but “she’s going through a lot here [which] gives her permission to act this way in this episode.” Offutt’s explanation for Tara’s behaviour is pointless as Tara always seems to be “going through a lot.” She is simply another Black female character who has experienced adversity and continues to struggle with her lot in life. The moments when Tara displays her knowledge in a calm manner or demonstrates concern for others are so few and far in between that they hardly make up for her isolating behaviour throughout the rest of the series.

The Sapphire is one of many controlling images of Black women in *True Blood*. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins states that “the cult of true womanhood” believed “‘true’ women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Propertied White women and those of the emerging middle-class were encouraged to aspire to these virtues” (72). Black women, however, “encountered a different set of controlling images” (72). The Sapphire is not described in Collins’ work

⁷¹ The Sapphire character type comes from the *Amos ‘n’ Andy* character of the same name (Hill, Raglin and Johnson 5).

but another controlling image, the “welfare queen,” receives a lengthy description. The welfare queen is an updated, racialized version of the welfare mother.⁷² Collins quotes Wahneema Lubiano who reports in “Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels” that the welfare queen is defined by her “lack of job / or income ... the presence of a child or children without a father and/or husband ... and ... a charge on the collective U.S. treasury” (337-338). These characteristics of the welfare queen reflect the cycle of poverty and violence that Blacks in the United States find themselves in. Studies like the *Moynihan Report*⁷³ suggest that society blames the welfare queen for the poor life conditions of African Americans as they pass on questionable behaviour, poor family values and work ethic to their children (338). There is no evidence that Lettie Mae has ever collected welfare, but supporters of the *Moynihan Report* would argue that her inability to provide a safe home environment and a father figure for her child has placed Tara in a disadvantaged life position.

⁷² “With the election of the Reagan administration in 1980, the stigmatized welfare mother evolved into the more pernicious image of the welfare queen ... To mask the effects of cuts in government spending on social welfare programs that fed children, housed working families, assisted cities in maintaining roads, bridges, and basic infrastructure, and supported other basic public services, media images increasingly identified and blamed Black women for the deterioration of U.S. interests. Thus, poor Black women simultaneously become symbols of what was deemed wrong with America and targets of social policies designed to shrink the government sector” (Collins 80).

⁷³ The *Moynihan Report* or *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*, was released in 1965. The study written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan claims that the disintegration of the nuclear family within Black communities is to blame for Black poverty in the United States. Lubiano makes the following observation about the report: “the welfare-dependent single mother is finally the synecdoche, the shortest possible shorthand, for the pathology of poor, urban, black culture. Responsible for creating and maintaining a family that can only be perceived as pathological compared to the normative ... family structure in the larger society, the welfare mother is the root of greater black pathology” (340).

The juxtaposition of black and white in *True Blood* – now fully extended to the lives created for Tara and Sookie by Lettie Mae Thornton and Adele Stackhouse respectively – becomes highly problematic as it suggests that the Black population in America is in crisis due to Black women's inability to take care of their home and family. Ball's portrayal of a Black mother ignores the implications of life chances and institutionalized racism in producing such unsavoury situations for Black women. His work also suggests that Black individuals stand in the way of their own success. Lettie Mae even manages to destroy the humble living Tara has built for herself as Tara must use her hard-earned funds to support her mother.⁷⁴

Lettie Mae is what Jungian psychoanalysts call the “narcissistic mother.”⁷⁵ Though “appearing on the surface to have good will and a nurturing attitude toward the child” the narcissistic mother actually “drains the energy of the child and weakens the child through subtle (and not so subtle) exploitation” (Melton 551).⁷⁶ As a narcissistic mother, Lettie Mae's emotional immaturity has caused Tara to take on the numerous roles her mother needs her to play (551). Tara becomes parent, friend, maid, therapist, and medical doctor for Lettie Mae. Having to fulfill these various roles for a mother “creates in the child a compliant, but false self – an empty shell that, though it appears to be

⁷⁴ The notion of the dependent Black mother is reiterated again in season three when viewers learn that Lafayette sells drugs to pay for his mother's residence in a mental hospital. Both mothers act as vampires, feeding on the finances of their kin.

⁷⁵ Jungian psychoanalysts are those who research and apply the theories of Carl Jung to their own works. Quotations pertaining to the “narcissistic mother” character type discussion come from Melton's summary of Julia McAfee's paper “The Vampire Archetype and Vampiric Relationships.”

⁷⁶ Based on the described scene alone, Lettie Mae does not appear to be a nurturing individual. However, as the series continues and Tara's suicidal tendencies become apparent, Lettie Mae, though flawed, does what she deems necessary to help her daughter.

functional and successful, is in fact covering an extremely enfeebled, needy, and fragile core” (552). In other words, Lettie Mae is responsible for Tara’s weaknesses and inability to become a well-rounded individual. Jungian analysis suggests that Tara’s bad behaviour and status as Sapphire should be blamed on Lettie Mae’s poor parenting instead of hegemonic structures that have led to the oppression of Black women.

Though Jungian analyses do not identify the narcissistic mother as a racialized archetype, *True Blood* manages to do so as Lettie Mae is the only mother to display the above characteristics during the program’s first two seasons. Indeed, Gothic texts need “a suitably evil mother [to promote] the deviant Gothic plot” but placing this identity onto a visual minority may not be read as a Gothic trope, but an instance of overt racism (Anolik 29). The presence of the unsuccessful Black mother to enforce binary structures suggests that ironic racism in *True Blood* does not provide alternative understanding of Black women or critique the social structures that have placed them at a disadvantage. Instead, the narrative motif upholds offensive beliefs about Black women.

Voodoo in Louisiana

After she catches her mother offering sexual favours to a stunned banker in exchange for a loan, Tara agrees to pay for the exorcism. At nightfall, the Thorntons set out to meet Miss Jeannette (Aisha Hinds), the woman who will perform the ceremony. Miss Jeannette is a hunched over Black woman with a cane in one hand and a lantern in the other. Her shaved head, satchel and dirty dress imply that she is a simple woman who lives in the forest. Tara voices her skepticism about the exorcism, but Miss Jeannette

reports that her knowledge about the expulsion of evil spirits has been passed down from her grandmother. Though her grandmother was paid in livestock and tobacco to perform such ceremonies, Miss Jeannette will only accept cash in advance. Her demand for payment up front is our first clue that there is something suspect about Miss Jeannette. She quickly counts the money in front of the Thorntons before leading them to an abandoned bus covered in vines. It appears as if Lettie Mae's exorcism will not mirror those performed by a priest or pastor from the religion she turns to for comfort.

When we return to Tara, Lettie Mae, and Miss Jeannette, Marcos Siega uses an establishing shot analogous to the one earlier of Lettie Mae pouring coffee and alcohol into her mug. This time, hands place a large rock on a bare stomach. The camera pulls back to reveal Miss Jeannette preparing Lettie Mae's body for a Voodoo exorcism. Like the alcohol, the rock will "heal" Lettie Mae. Charles L. Crow points out that, "[t]he attack upon the innocent by evil spirits, or perhaps Satan himself, is an American nightmare that runs back to colonial times (173). He also mentions that "[d]emonic possession is a variant of the doubling, twinning and infection themes found throughout the Gothic" (173), suggesting that the story arc involving demonic possession may not be racially motivated, but further incorporation of Gothic motifs. I argue, however, that there is much more to the integration of Voodoo than an homage to the Gothic genre or Louisiana heritage. Race and feminist theorist Shannon Winnubst alludes to a possible reason for a Voodoo exorcism in her article "Vampires, Anxieties, and Dreams: Race and Sex in the Contemporary United States." In the work, Winnubst uses blood and the vampire trope to discuss "whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality" as "natural"

identities that create the problematic Self/Other binary and other systems of control (1). She writes that Richard Dyer, author of *White*, “links the white ideal of masculinity to the figure of Christ, notably invoking race and Christianity as signifiers of ‘whiteness’” (5). Winnubst’s observation suggests that Tara and her mother may have taken part in Voodoo because it is more “Black,” more “feminine,” thus more appropriate for their characters. As further analysis will prove, Offut is undoubtedly aware of the racialized and gendered nature of Voodoo, thus the exorcism should be read as another example of ironic racism in the text.

Tara asks Miss Jeannette a second time about her knowledge of exorcisms. Miss Jeannette calmly answers again that she learned to perform such ceremonies from her “mama who learned it from her mama [and] so on, going back a thousand years.” Miss Jeannette’s explanation for her inherited knowledge signals the first time that *True Blood* places significant emphasis on bloodlines.⁷⁷ Genealogy is often repressed in Southern Gothic narratives that involve race due to blood ties as a result of the rape of Black women committed by White men (Crow 86). The story arc involving Miss Jeannette, however, places significance on lineage as it relates to the continuation of familial history, heirlooms,⁷⁸ genetic codes and culture. Genealogy in this instance also emphasizes “good” mothering as Miss Jeannette’s close relationship with her mother has provided her with valuable knowledge to help or “mother” others.

⁷⁷ Until this episode, more concentration had been placed on human blood as the drink of choice for vampires and vampire blood as an intense recreational drug. There had also been mention that vampire blood has the ability to heal dying humans.

⁷⁸ Miss Jeannette’s healing stone has been passed down from generation to generation.

Miss Jeannette tells Tara and Lettie Mae that she will lure the demon out. “Lure it out?” Tara challenges with arms crossed. “Uh huh, right,” she says, “don’t you need a Ouija board and some chicken bones?” As Tara undermines Miss Jeannette’s abilities, her body is placed on a higher viewing plane than Miss Jeannette and Lettie Mae’s. She is physically looking down with disapproval at the women. Tara’s reluctance to participate in the ceremony aligns her with skeptics who view Voodoo as a Louisiana tourist gimmick. Her skepticism is understandable as Miss Jeannette’s healing stone from Africa,⁷⁹ and the interior decor of her bus (hanging animal skins, bones, a shabby cot, wooden chairs a sea of white candles and a wash basin) pay homage to Voodoo kitsch.

During the audio commentary, Offutt explains that he and his team “didn’t want the Caribbean Voodoo doctor.” This is a puzzling statement as Voodoo in Louisiana has strong ties to Caribbean and African slaves (Touchstone 378). Offutt does not elaborate on his point but researcher Blake Touchstone’s article “Voodoo in Louisiana” clarifies Offutt’s remark. It appears that Offutt and his team did not want to create a campy Voodoo ceremony that viewers are familiar with; they wanted to shoot an “authentic” ceremony. However, authenticity in Voodoo is difficult to achieve as very little information on actual Voodoo rituals exists. Touchstone suggests that real Voodoos were probably “those who usually avoided the large, public lakeshore fetes” on St. John’s Eve⁸⁰ (382). He also speculates that credible, present-day Voodoo rituals are so small in number and “so secret that few if any outsiders ever witness them” (382). St. John’s Eve

⁷⁹ Miss Jeannette never states which African country her stone is from. The lack of specific origin falls alongside *True Blood*’s tendency to address race, not ethnicity, as it applies to visual minorities.

⁸⁰ According to Touchstone, St. John’s Eve is the most important date on the Voodoo calendar.

celebrations along Lake Pontchartrain in Louisiana “were inspired by voodooism but were not nearly so romantic as the ceremonies described in popular historical accounts or those purportedly held before the War Between the States” (377). Touchstone’s work suggests that popular understanding and representations of Voodoo have *some* factual references but are mainly a spectacle for curious audiences.

Though Black⁸¹ women were the largest group present at Voodoo ceremonies at Lake Pontchartrain, the event was celebrated by the many races and ethnicities living in the state (378). Touchstone provides a summary of a St. John’s Eve celebration from an 1872 article in the *New Orleans Times*:

The correspondent, who spoke gumbo French, had learned the secret location of the real festival from ‘a faithful old Voudou.’ Near the spot where Bayou Tchoupitoulas met Lake Pontchartrain, about three hundred people, including Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen, had set up a cauldron. Into it were placed water, black pepper, a snake cut into three pieces, a cat whose throat Marie Laveau personally slit, and a live black rooster. All the while, singing and chanting filled the air. Then everyone disrobed while Marie Laveau put powders into the pot and conducted secret rites. At twelve o'clock all hands raced into the lake. Later there was more singing, dancing, eating, drinking and "recreation" in the bushes. (381)

Touchstone believes the *New Orleans Times* article to be a less absurd rendition of the Voodoo rituals on Lake Pontchartrain and thus more reliable. At the same time however,

⁸¹ Touchstone does not specify if “Black” at this point in his text also refers to biracial women previously placed in Louisiana’s third race category.

he concedes that there is still a hint of embellishment in the piece. In the end, Offutt's Voodoo exorcism is much like the celebrations on Lake Pontchartrain: a mixture of factual and mythical imagery.

One can witness some aspects of "authentic" Voodoo in present-day Louisiana by visiting a Black spiritual church. Anthropology professor Claude F. Jacobs has published many works on African American religions including an article titled "Spirit Guides and Possession in New Orleans Black Spiritual Churches." In the work, Jacobs reveals that these congregations are based on Voodoo and Catholic ritual and have a strong belief in spirit guides. While under the possession of a spirit guide, an individual "act[s] as spokespersons for deities" (48). One of the most popular spirit guides is Father John:

Since some aspects of the churches' belief and ritual are traceable to Louisiana voodoo, Father John may be Doctor John, one of the most famous mid-19th century practitioners of the Afro-Catholic syncretic cult. Of all his ritual activities, curing ceremonies were perhaps the most important among the black and white clientele that he developed. (49)

Father or Doctor John's Voodoo practices seem eerily similar to Miss Jeannette's. Even her name, a French, feminine derivative of John, points to a connection between the holy figure and Lettie Mae's exorciser. Jacobs also reveals that researchers of Black spiritual churches describe the congregations "as 'other worldly' in orientation and largely composed of women who have 'given up hope that the socioeconomic problems characterizing their daily lives can be solved by any effort on their part'" (66). Lettie Mae's *true* motive for drinking is never revealed but her economic situation is a likely

reason. Like the women in the spiritual churches, Lettie Mae believes that divine intervention is the only solution to her suffering.

Similar to the ceremonies described in Touchstone's work, drums and chanting are part of Lettie Mae's exorcism. Miss Jeannette begins to beat on a drum and Lettie Mae's body starts to convulse. As the drumming and yelling in Miss Jeannette's "demon song" grows stronger, the intensity of Lettie Mae's convulsions increases. The convulsing body is common during Voodoo ceremonies. "During worship" Jacobs begins, "any number of people may get 'in the spirit' ... At these times, individuals enter a trance or dissociative states that include long periods of dancing ... the utterance of owl-like 'coos' ... violent seizures, [and] writhing on the floor" (46). Jacobs' work confirms that Lettie Mae's violent shaking is a fair depiction of an individual "in the spirit."

At the height of the exorcism, a caged possum begins to squeal. The possum has become the new host for the demon. The camera cuts to Miss Jeannette moving to drown the possum in the wash basin, to Tara shaking her head in disbelief and lastly, to a stunned but calmer Lettie Mae. The drowning possum creates another link between Miss Jeannette and a holy figure. In the book of Luke, Jesus Christ commands demons to leave the body of a man named Legion. "Then went the devils out of the man, and entered into the swine: and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the lake, and were choked" (Luke 8:33). During the drowning of the possum, the women are all framed using a medium close-up shot. This film technique implies that all three women are experiencing the same amount of intensity and are thus equals in this moment of terror. The editing choices during Lettie Mae's exorcism capture and hold the audience's

attention, but also ask viewers to consider whether or not a demon really *was* inside of Lettie Mae. If vampires and shape-shifters exist, surely the same could be true of Voodoo healers and demons. By creating a Voodoo exorcism that mirrors those in Christianity and Black spiritual churches, Offutt comes as close to an “authentic” Voodoo ceremony as an outsider can get.

Othermothers and the Black Community

As Tara and Lettie Mae prepare to head home, Miss Jeannette reveals that Tara has a demon within her too – one more powerful than her mother’s. Convinced of Miss Jeannette’s abilities,⁸² Tara participates in her own exorcism in “I Don’t Wanna Know.” Written by Offutt and directed by Scott Winant, Tara’s exorcism is more violent than Lettie Mae’s. Instead of returning to Miss Jeannette’s bus, the women hold the ceremony in a forest clearing. “What’s that?” Tara asks as Miss Jeannette pulls a vial from her pocket. Miss Jeannette simply asks Tara for her hand. “Why?” Tara demands. “Why, why, why” Miss Jeannette mimics. “Why’s it have to be in the woods? Why’s it have to be before dawn? Why \$799.95? Why, why, why? You think knowing the answers will save you? Shut up and give me your hand.” Tara’s questioning reveals her reluctance to follow the instruction of another individual. Her failure to take orders from anyone thus far in *True Blood* suggests that Tara views compliance as a sign of weakness. She may also be resisting the ceremony for fear of becoming like her mother. Tara hesitantly places her hand in Miss Jeannette’s, who proceeds to spit in Tara’s palm. Miss Jeannette explains

⁸² Lettie Mae’s rejuvenation, refusal of alcohol and involvement in the (church) community is used as evidence of a successful exorcism.

that her saliva is purer than Holy Water. Tara follows Miss Jeannette's instructions to hold her hand over the fire, rub the spit on her face, and drink "snake juice" to begin the ceremony.

Tara's exorcism also begins with convulsions, but she does not appear to be in a trance like Lettie Mae; she looks ill. When Tara begins to vomit, Miss Jeannette commands the demon to show itself. The demon appears as a small child. Tara explains to Miss Jeannette that the child is herself. Miss Jeannette informs her that "the demon will take on any form to stay alive" and that Tara must kill it with a dagger. As Tara creeps closer to her younger form, the frightened child with black orbs for eyes pleads "no Mama, please. Don't hurt me." The demon's line confirms that Lettie Mae's poor mothering is to blame for Tara's behaviour. Tara ignores the demon and proceeds with a stabbing motion. The camera switches to a long shot of Tara stabbing thin air. When the camera cuts again, a medium close-up shot displays Tara's horrified face and a bloody dagger. Only Tara can see the demon.

As Tara begins to cry, Miss Jeannette moves closer to comfort her. The menacing and eerie music used during Miss Jeannette's scenes is replaced with a swelling of violins. Collins states that "Black daughters raised by mothers grappling with hostile environments have to come to terms with their feelings about the difference between the idealized versions of maternal love extant in popular culture ... and the ... troubled mothers in their lives" (187-188). Miss Jeannette's embrace is symbolic of the mother Tara never had. She has resolved Tara's inner turmoil and provided comfort and security in Tara's first moment of vulnerability in the series. She becomes Tara's "othermother."

Othermothers “not only feel accountable to their own kin, they experience a bond with all of the Black community’s children” (189). Collins explains the role of these women in more detail:

Community othermothers’ participation in activist mothering demonstrates a clear rejection of separateness and individual interest as the basis of either community organization or individual self-actualization. Instead the connectedness with others and common interest by community othermothers model a very different value system, one whereby ethics of caring and personal accountability move communities forward. (193)

Though Miss Jeannette demands payment for her role as othermother, she still exemplifies her traits. She takes Tara under her wing, and uses her wisdom to put Tara on the right path because Lettie Mae cannot. Miss Jeannette’s actions suggest that “good” mothering (and religion) is all that is necessary to heal the Black community.

Tara returns home after her exorcism to find Lettie Mae asleep on the couch. She informs her mother of her whereabouts, prompting Lettie Mae to exclaim “my prayers have been answered ... we’re saved!” This exchange between mother and daughter recalls the scene in “Burning House of Love” where Lettie Mae first mentions the exorcism.

This time, however, both women are sitting on the same couch and identical camera framing is used. The Thornton family has been reunited. As Tara and Lettie Mae embrace for the first time in the series, the same score used during Tara and Miss Jeannette’s hug begins. The similarities between the Tara/Miss Jeannette and the Tara/Lettie Mae hugs

reiterate Miss Jeannette status as a mother figure and identify Lettie Mae as a “good” mother.

To celebrate their new lives together, Tara and Lettie Mae dine at their favourite restaurant outside of Bon Temps. On their way home, Lettie Mae falls ill and so Tara stops at the pharmacy. When Tara asks the store clerk for a product, she is shocked to see Miss Jeannette. In a stark contrast to her previous manner, Miss Jeannette appears before Tara in a clerk uniform, a shoulder-length wig, glasses, nail polish and makeup. Tara pushes the frightened woman and demands that Miss Jeannette explain herself. “I got a son in prison,” she reveals, “another one in Iraq. I got a daughter with Diabetes, and three grand babies to take care of. I do what I have to for my family. Same as you.” In this moment, Miss Jeannette leaves the realm of supernatural being and becomes another struggling Black female. Touchstone writes that his analysis of newspaper articles reveals that Voodoo ceremonies were about “money-making” and that “the voodoos described in the popular literature were in reality drunk picnickers and dancers or enterprising blacks turning a fast buck selling gris gris and admission to a spectacle” (386). Like some of those present at St. John’s Eve festivities, Miss Jeannette is an entrepreneur who pretends to be a Voodoo healer in order to provide for her family. And like the other attendees Tara and her mother have paid to participate in a spectacle.

The demystification of Miss Jeannette’s character serves two functions. First, it satirizes individuals who associate Louisiana’s Black community with Voodoo or supernatural powers. These individuals are considered both gullible and guilty of internalizing codes circulating in popular American discourse. Second, the revelation

positions Miss Jeannette as an empowered woman as she *chooses* to use regional history and her “intersecting oppressions” to her benefit. She became what Lettie Mae and Tara wanted her to be, much like the performers at St. John’s Eve celebrations. Her ability to *perform* the role of an “authentic” Voodoo healer further reiterates that interpretations of race are always changing, depending upon the wants and needs of a particular person or group at a given time. Miss Jeannette needs to be a Voodoo healer to earn a living for her family and so she gives herself a false, but widely accepted identity to do so. While the plot line with Miss Jeannette is empowering in one aspect, it suggests that Black women can only exercise power through deviant means. Her power comes from swindling honest and vulnerable people. The revelation also promotes oppressive images of Black women as “bad” mothers. Lastly, it removes the othermother (read: “good” Black mother) from the narrative. Indeed, this must occur to comply with Gothic conventions, but her absence from the text suggests that Black women can never cross binary lines.

Tara chooses to keep Miss Jeannette’s true identity a secret from her mother, but this revelation causes Tara to regress back to her former role of Sapphire and adopt the controlling image of “jezebel,” a stereotype that defines Black women as “sexually aggressive.”⁸³ After her forceful, failed attempt at an intimate encounter with Sam Merlotte, Tara drives away under the influence of alcohol. While driving, she sees a naked woman and a pig standing in the middle of the road. Tara swerves to avoid hitting

⁸³ Collins states that “...the jezebel ... is central in this nexus of controlling images of Black womanhood. Because efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression, historical jezebels and contemporary ‘hoochies’ represent a deviant Black sexuality” (81). Collins also explains that “Jezebel’s function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women” (82).

the pair, and drives into a ditch. When she looks back, the woman and the pig have vanished. In the following episode “To Love is To Bury,” Black female deputy Kenya Jones (Tanya Wright) accuses Tara of fabricating the story about the woman and the pig and arrests her for impaired driving.⁸⁴ Disappointed with her daughter’s actions, Lettie Mae refuses to bail Tara out of jail. Again, Lettie Mae fails to act as a “good” mother to Tara, suggesting that inherent incompetence, not demon possession, is responsible for her inability to care for her child. A White social worker by the name of Maryann Forrester (Michelle Forbes) eventually pays Tara’s bail and takes her home. Tara’s mother/daughter relationship with Maryann provides a major story arc for the second season of *True Blood*. By the end of *True Blood*’s first season, Tara is jobless, alcohol dependent and alone. She has become who she never wanted to be: her mother.⁸⁵

Herman Gray defines “blackness” as “a ‘constellation of productions, histories, images, representations, and meanings associated with black presence in the United States’” (118). Alan Ball attempts to complement Gray’s belief as Tara, her mother, Miss Jeannette and Kenya provide slightly different images of Black women in the United States, but they still stand as controlling images of this group. “Burning House of Love” and “I Don’t Wanna Know” demonstrate *True Blood*’s failure to revise popular

⁸⁴ Though Kenya does not receive much screen time in the series, she exhibits characteristics of the “Black lady” stereotype. Hill describes the Black lady as the woman “who stayed in school, worked hard, and [has] achieved much” (80-81). While this image appears to be a positive one, the Black lady is “another version of the modern mammy, namely, the hardworking Black woman professional who works twice as hard as everyone else” (81).

⁸⁵ Though Maryann presents herself as a caring and positive mother figure, she eventually reveals herself to be a maenad who manipulates and possesses Tara in order to carry out her plan of sacrificing Sam to the god Dionysus. Maryann provides another example of passing in *True Blood*, but also reiterates my assertion that Black mothers are the only individuals who can help Black children/the Black community.

representations of the Black female body and outline said stereotypes and performances as social constructions, neutralized over time makes it difficult to decipher Ball's preferred reading of the text. The episodes run rampant with examples of ironic racism but the images are more problematic than subversive or transgressive. Instances of intrigue such as Tara's kindness towards her mother and Miss Jeannette's positive role as othermother are all shattered by negative images of these characters as irrational women and cons artists. To understand the implications of these images within larger discourse we must turn to fans of the program.

- Chapter 3 -

Fan Interpretations of Racialized Imagery in *True Blood*

In the previous chapters, I outlined the lack of racial discourse in news media coverage of *True Blood* and supplied my own interpretation of the text's use of blackness and ironic racism. I concluded that Chris Offutt's application of ironic racism to Black female characters does not undermine, or point to naturalized stereotypes of this group as offensive structures of control. This chapter uses information gathered from popular *True Blood* message boards and blog entries to explore racial discourse within *True Blood* fan communities. I outline fan interpretations of Tara, Lettie Mae's Voodoo exorcism and the slave/master imagery present in *True Blood's* third season. This exercise reveals that ironic racism in the program generates minimal race-related discussion on message boards. I provide two key explanations for the lack of racial discourse in *True Blood* fan communities. First, I suggest that some instances of ironic racism in the text are too subtle for viewers. Second, I argue that fans fail to discuss race, blackness and ironic racism because they do not know how to approach these topics in a public setting or fear that their comments will be ill-received by other fans. Both theories ultimately point to the individualistic nature of *True Blood's* fan communities online.

Participatory Fandom and the Internet

It is not uncommon to hear individuals identify themselves as fans of a program, musician or sports team, but the meaning behind the label is seldom articulated. In his

work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, aca-fan⁸⁶ Henry Jenkins reveals that “fan” “is an abbreviated form of the word ‘fanatic,’ which has its roots in the Latin word ‘fanaticus’” (12). According to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, “fanaticus” originally meant “[o]f or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee’ but quickly assumed more negative connotations, ‘Of persons inspired by orgiastic rites and enthusiastic frenzy’” (12). As Jenkins points out, the negative connotation of the word went even further:

As it evolved, the term ‘fanatic’ moved from a reference to certain excessive forms of religious belief and worship to any ‘excessive and mistaken enthusiasm,’ often evoked in criticism to opposing political beliefs, and then, more generally, to madness ‘such as might result from the possession by a deity or demon’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*). (12)

“Fanatic” was shortened to “fan” in the latter half of the 19th century as journalists adopted the term to describe enthusiastic professional sports spectators and eventually

⁸⁶ An aca-fan is an academic who also considers themselves a fan. This term is important as fandom was often depicted as low-brow in popular culture. However, as Jenkins points out, fans are often “highly educated, articulate people who come from the middle classes” (18).

came to encompass any individual devoted to commercial entertainment (12).⁸⁷ Despite its wider use, descriptions and representations of fans and fan culture continued to marginalize and disparage individuals who showed heightened interest or undue investment in their favourite texts.

In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins insists that problematic portrayals of fans as “social misfits” and consumers of low culture (10) are due to “anxieties about the violation of dominant cultural hierarchies” (17). Fans resist dominant cultural structures by “poaching” original and high culture works and revising them to suit their own desires. Jenkins reveals that fans who are “unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise ... assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons” (18). These interpretations, revisions and evaluations of mass culture manifest in original fanworks such as fan fiction, fan art, fan videos, fanzines and filk

⁸⁷ This chapter concentrates on *True Blood* fandom, but is important to acknowledge Alan Ball’s understanding of fandom as he alludes to fan behaviour in his text. Ball uses Lettie Mae to toy with the original understanding of fan culture. In addition to introducing demon possession, Ball places strong emphasis on her overzealous devotion to Jesus Christ. Lettie Mae’s love for her Lord acts as a barrier between herself and reality. After the nineteenth century, fandom was split in to smaller categories. One of these categories was the “orgiastic fan.” Ball uses Eric Northman to manipulate the “orgiastic fan” or the “groupie” trope (usually reserved for musicians) to fit his program (15). As vampire and owner of Fangtasia, Eric is often adored and propositioned by human clientele. These humans who long to sleep with and be bitten by vampires (referred to as Fangbangers) act as a loose groupie parallel in the program. Those given the derogatory title of “Fangbanger” are a marginalized sect in the *True Blood* realm as they are portrayed as individuals “whose interests are fundamentally alien to the realm of ‘normal’ cultural experience and whose mentality is dangerously out of touch with reality” (15). I argue however that Fangbangers are better received by audiences than Lettie Mae. Indeed, they are a marginalized population, but many positive sexual encounters with vampires in the program encourage participation in this subculture. The same cannot be said of characters who participate in organized religion.

music.⁸⁸ These activities convey fans' narrative longings to writers and network executives and act as celebrations of the original text.

Though fan practices were frowned upon by media corporations when *Textual Poachers* was published in 1992, fan or cult audience practices have become an acceptable pastime for a larger group of television enthusiasts. In her article "Television and the Cult Audience: A Primer," fan scholar Hillary Robson makes the following statement about contemporary television audiences:

They tune in and watch each episode of their favourite series with relish, frequent official and unofficial websites, and speculate on the next week's and season's turn of events. They are the viewers that networks prize and promote to, the ones who will spend a few extra dollars on *Entertainment Weekly*, enroll in a season pass on TiVO and gleefully watch reruns. Behaviours once categorised as strange, odd, or obsessive are today socially acceptable. Today's cult, in essence, is a reflection of our modern television-viewing culture. (220)

In addition to acknowledging the acceptance of fan activities by wider audiences and media industries, Robson points to the relevance of media convergence in the television industry. The Internet in particular assists in increased fandom, discussion and circulation

⁸⁸ According to Filk writer and essayist Gary McGath, "Filk music is a musical movement among fans of science fiction and fantasy fandom and closely related activities, emphasizing content which is related to the genre or its fans, and promoting broad participation. Filkers are people who participate in this movement."

of television texts.⁸⁹ Fan desire to discuss texts in detail and gain knowledge of its world and characters has led to an increase in fansites and network microsites dedicated to cult TV and programs with larger viewing audiences.⁹⁰ These websites are archives containing information about their intended program and may include any of the following fan-related material: fan fiction, fan art, folk songs, message boards, live chat rooms, blogs, vlogs and links to podcasts and tribute videos.⁹¹ They may also include news media articles on the program or specific actors, promotional videos, picture archives and program-related petitions. Popular social networking sites including Twitter

⁸⁹ While the Internet provides a positive space for fandom, there is still some resistance of fan activity by corporate media producers. Circulation of fanworks that violate copyright laws still come under scrutiny by media industries.

⁹⁰ The first two notable television fansites were for *Xena Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. The official Xena website, powered by Universal Pictures, was advertised before the end credits of each episode (Ross 38). According to Ross, “by the second season of the show, the first endorsed fan site emerged with Whoosh!/The International Association of Xena Studies ... featuring academic and fan-based articles, interviews, episode summaries and analyses, and artwork” (38). The Bronze, the Buffy forum named after the popular nighttime hangout spot of Buffy and her friends, was moderated by the WB.

⁹¹ Perhaps the most popular Truebie fan video is “Oh Sookie” by rapper Snoop Dogg. “Oh Sookie” is a three minute music video homage to *True Blood*'s main female protagonist. The video aired after the June 20, 2010 episode on HBO and subsequently appeared on the HBO website and YouTube page. It is also a bonus feature on the *True Blood* season 3 DVD box set. The video was a compromise between Ball and Snoop as the latter wanted to have a guest appearance on the program. Snoop Dogg's video relies heavily on the comedy and heterosexual relationships on the show. Footage from the program is spliced together with images of Snoop posing at Merlotte's Bar and Grill and dancing with Sookie look-alikes. While the video received mixed-reviews from fans, it demonstrates the mixed audience that watches Ball's program.

and Facebook⁹² have proven to be popular spaces for *True Blood* fans, but HBO.com and *True Blood* fansites contain the most information on Bon Temps residents.

True Blood and Interpretive Communities

Creative and counter-interpretations of texts are important to fandom, but I am most interested in fan interpretations of blackness and ironic racism in *True Blood*. In *Beyond the Box: Television, and the Internet*, television scholar Sharon Marie Ross argues that the intricate plot lines in programs like *True Blood* “demand unraveling and a ‘playing with’” and “that the Internet provides a convenient and pleasurable forum in which viewers can puzzle out the world of these programs” (43). Thus, I used four websites – three message boards and one blog – to garner fan opinion about racial discourse and Tara in *True Blood*. The following four sites were employed for this exercise as they appear to have the most fan activity and relevance to my work.

1. *HBO.com* (www.hbo.com/true-blood)

HBO.com hosts the official *True Blood* message forum. As of April 4, 2011, the site had a total of 1851 topics. Popular subjects include character appreciations, episode recaps, predictions for the upcoming season and celebrity gossip. Twenty-three of the message board topics debate which Sookieverse is better: Ball’s or Harris’. A hierarchy is in place on the *HBO.com* boards, as participants are ranked based on the number of posts

⁹² *True Blood* has a strong presence on Twitter. Fans can follow numerous characters including Sookie (@SookieBonTemps), Lafayette (@LafayetteTB) and popular locations such as @FangtasiaBar. As of April 10, 2011, the *True Blood* Facebook fan page has 7,046,550.

they contribute to the website. The *True Blood* message board is not autonomous, so members can raise their ranking by participating on other *HBO.com* message forums. Possible rank positions include “Fresh Voice,” “Active Voice,” and “Established Voice.” The highest title is that of “HBO Insider.” One cannot obtain this level based on contributions – it is held by those employed by HBO. The “HBO Insider” status reminds users that HBO has the highest level of knowledge, control and authority on the boards. They hold the power to manipulate user discussion by releasing spoilers, debunking fan theories and removing comments that may offend others.

2. *Television Without Pity* (www.televisionwithoutpity.com)

With a total of one hundred and twelve topics on *True Blood*, Television Without Pity (TWP) supplies the second set of message boards for my research. Created by Tara Ariano and Sarah Bunting and powered by Bravo,⁹³ contributors at TWP are known to provide snarky commentary on popular texts. The website undermines dominant, often negative depictions of fans as “intellectually immature” as it provides a platform for fans to obsess over their favourite texts *and* demonstrate their ability to analyze and unpack the program’s complex imagery at the same time. TWP is an outlet in which fans balance “fannish” behaviour and “real world” criticism. Similar to the *HBO.com* boards, TWP’s users are ranked based on the number of posts they contribute to the site’s

⁹³ Bravo, owned by NBC, purchased TWP in 2007. Since the purchase, fans have commented on increased site regulation and favoritism towards NBC programming. NBC comedy programming often uses ironic racism as comic motif so it is surprising to learn that TWP does not feature an article on this controversial topic. Perhaps by refusing to acknowledge the controversy surrounding its use, NBC suggests that there is nothing troublesome about it.

message boards. The titles at TWoP such as “Coach Potato,” “Channel Surfer,” “Loyal Viewer,” “Video Archivist,” “Fanatic,” and “Stalker” refer to television viewing habits and fandom, but do not have negative connotations; the titles are evidence of users’ dedication to the online community.

*True Blood Wiki*⁹⁴ (www.truebloodwiki.wetpaint.com/).

True Blood Wiki, a fansite created and moderated by *True Blood* devotees, is an archive of information about the program, its cast, Harris’ books, and vampire mythology. The website contains a fan-made biography for each character, enabling users to familiarize themselves with characters’ relationships, personalities, status as human, vampire, werewolf or shape-shifter, and occupation. As of April 4, 2011, *True Blood Wiki* had a total of three hundred and nineteen topics. Because the website hosts live chats and includes links to *HBO.com* message boards, its own discussion topics are limited to episode commentaries and predictions for season four. The hierarchical system on *True Blood Wiki* has come under scrutiny by *True Blood* fans as moderators⁹⁵ have been known to delete users or posts that do not reflect their own interests. The excessive (mis)use of authority undermines the sense of community or equality associated with a wiki. Aside from the site’s writers and moderators, *True Blood Wiki* users are not given a status to signify their rank in the community. Instead, contributors build a reputation through discourse with other fans.

⁹⁴ Rebecca Wilcott, author of *Truly Madly Deeply: The Unofficial True Blood Companion*, states that “a wiki is a collaborative website that focuses on one topic and is run by its users” (157).

⁹⁵ The website has sixteen moderators and one hundred and sixty-one writers that contribute to articles and blog posts found on the website.

Racialicious (www.racialicious.com)

Racialicious, a blog created and moderated by Latoya Peterson, focuses on topics that receive less coverage on popular fansites and in news media texts. The blog provides a positive space where concerns such as the portrayal of women and minority groups in pop culture are discussed in an in-depth manner. Due to its provocative subject matter, *Racialicious* is heavily policed by site moderators. Individuals who wish to contribute an article or comment on posts must have their content approved by site moderators first⁹⁶ to ensure that offensive remarks are not posted on the blog. On June 22, 2010, moderator Thea Lim introduced “The *True Blood* Round Table.” Created in time for *True Blood*’s third season, the roundtable is a weekly entry in which Lim, Peterson and other established site contributors explore representations of race, sexuality and gender in *True Blood*.

Due to the high volume of posts on *HBO.com*, *True Blood Wiki*, *TWoP* and *Racialicious*, I have chosen to ignore topics unrelated to Tara. I did not contribute to board discussions or inform contributors of my lurking⁹⁷ to ensure that my presence would not sway conversation to fit my research or disrupt the dynamic that already existed between users on the websites. All four websites are public forums, thus ethics clearance was not necessary. There was no violation of fan privacy. Some posts have been condensed for clarity, but I have refrained from correcting spelling and punctuation.

⁹⁶ “When visitors post a comment to this blog, it is not automatically published. It is held in a queue until we approve or reject it” (*Racialicious Comment Moderation Policy*).

⁹⁷ In fandom, “lurkers” are those who read posts but do not contribute to fan discussion.

I also abstained from censoring profane language of the contributors in order to reflect the fandom as accurately as possible.

A Parallel Sookieverse

As Jenkins observes, “[b]oth academic and popular discourse adopt labels for fans ... that identify them through their association with particular programs or stars. Such identifications, while not totally inaccurate, are often highly misleading” (36). Jenkins is correct, as fan titles do not encompass other media enjoyed by devotees of a particular text, but fans willingly take on labels to identify their interest. They also adopt labels to differentiate between members of the same fandom. For example, those who hope that Sookie will remain with Bill Compton are known in *True Blood* fandom as “Belles” while Eric Northman fans are called “Viking Wenches.” Both “Belle” and “Viking Wench” are fan-generated titles. Jenkins also mentions that “[f]ans often find it difficult to discuss single programs except through references and comparisons to this broader network” (40). *True Blood* fans are no exception; however, most comparative analyses and references on the message boards involve Harris’ book series. “Bookies” favour the original text by Charlaine Harris, while “Truebies” prefer Ball’s version.

In the introduction to this thesis, I noted that Ball wanted a strong Black presence in his program;⁹⁸ ergo Tara was transformed from the minor Caucasian character in the novels to a Black series regular with her own story arcs. The message boards in this exercise suggest that fans have mixed feelings about Ball’s Tara. Many viewers love

⁹⁸ A stronger Black presence for Ball appears to mean more Black characters with more screen time.

Tara's forthcoming and cynical attitude, but just as many others find her personal histrionics to be ridiculous, self-inflicted and repetitive. In *HBO.com*'s thread "Tara Thornton played by Rutina Wesley," a fan with the username *Royal D* wrote "I lvoe this character, Rutina portrays her greatly. I love the idea that the storylines possible for this character are virtually limitless. From depression, confusion, rage, happiness this character is definately one of the most round and entertaining." In *HBO.com*'s anti-Tara thread, "Please get rid of Tara!," *S. Daniel* wrote "I've disliked Tara since that season one scene where she was "working" in that store (reading a book actually) and being rude and racist to everybody. We get that she had a messed up mother," *S. Daniel* continues, "but she also had Sookie's Gran too. You'd think she would have learned some of the manners that Sookie did."⁹⁹ The conflicting interpretations of Tara's behaviour may reflect fan personalities or understanding of the text. *Royal D* believes that Tara's brash character adds an element of excitement to the program, while *S. Daniel* believes that her poor behaviour does not equate to entertaining television. Neither fan reads Tara's character as a racial stereotype, implying that her character has become an accepted or neutralized representation of Black women.

After reading posts in "Please get rid of Tara!" that pleaded with Ball to remove her from the show,¹⁰⁰ *Royal D* came to Tara's defense and explained her appeal to thread contributors:

⁹⁹ As outlined in chapter two, Tara supports her mother despite her childhood abuse. I argue that Tara most likely learned about compassion and loyalty from Sookie's grandmother, as "bad" mothers cannot pass on nurturing characteristics.

¹⁰⁰ Alan Ball is known to lurk on *HBO.com*'s message boards.

Tara's storyline is not really a happy story. If you are looking for that in her storylines you would like ... the books version. This show is not a happy, smiley fun times show, it is going to be dark and characters are constantly going to have struggles and challenges and face depression which is what makes it appealing to most people. Tara is that character that everyone can relate to at some point, whether it's a bad upbringing, having to deal with constant changes, bad choices, dating the wrong people, and just having to fight to survive.

I think the problem is some people are only focus on the fact that she has a bad attitude (which most enjoy) or is sad but if you actually pay attention as to why she is like that you would see overall this is a good entertaining character that is in some sort the anti-sookie.

Royal D argues that fans cannot expect Tara to be a jovial character as such behaviour does not appeal to most viewers or fit the program's theme. By identifying Tara as the "anti-Sookie" *Royal D* also (unconsciously) acknowledges *True Blood's* underlying white/black binary system. While I concentrate on the difference in physical appearance, mothering, and economic status, *Royal D* focuses on Tara's function as a relatable character for audiences. In *Royal D's* opinion, Tara's tribulations make her more realistic than Sookie. Her poor attitude and personal obstacles are reasons to keep her character.

Ann A.65 does not share *Royal D*'s sentiments towards Tara, but she manages to flesh out *Royal D*'s comparison between Book and TV Tara. In *HBO.com*'s thread "Tara Thornton??? Whats gonna happen there??" *Ann A.65* made the following post:

I wish the writers would have handled the character of Tara differently. ...

More like the books, where Tara overcame her childhood abuse, for the most part, and went on to be successful. ... Show Tara is far from successful... she's into blame and self-pity.

Ann A.65 and other Bookies express their desire to have TV Tara open her own dress shop outside of Bon Temps and marry, like Book Tara. They believe this to be a plausible story arc for the fourth season as Tara left Bon Temps at the end of season three. I argue however that the use of this plotline is an unlikely possibility as Ball's Tara lives a life that is coded as "Black." Ball's Tara learns from her life experiences, but never truly manages to become successful.

In her book *A Theory of Adaptation*, literary theorist Linda Hutcheon writes that "adaptation is unavoidably a kind of intertextuality *if the receiver is acquainted with the adapted text*" (21).¹⁰¹ Hutcheon believes that comparing an original text with an adaptation or version "is an ongoing dialogical process ... in which we compare the work we already know with the one we are experiencing" (21). To Hutcheon, comparative analysis of related texts is a popular and necessary practice because adaptation is a large part of global culture. I suggest that fans like *Ann A. 65* wish that TV Tara mirrored Book Tara because they have a strong allegiance to the source text. Fans must remember,

¹⁰¹ Author's emphasis

however, that *True Blood* is a version of Harris' text, thus Ball has no obligation to incorporate major elements of Harris' narrative into his program.

Based on the selected websites, it appears that fans who interact with the novels and program acknowledge personality and narrative difference, but fail to connect these changes to Tara's race. One can suggest that the lack of discourse pertaining to racial difference suggests that contributors to these large message boards believe that Tara's race has little to do with her character development. This argument is flawed as Tara comments on the tribulations of being a Black woman in almost every episode of the series. The very use of ironic racism in *True Blood* is reliant on her identity as a Black woman. I argue that fans do not call attention to the implications of her racial difference because they do not have the language to conduct such conversation in a public arena. They do not want to appear racist for introducing race. I suggest, however, that the intentional omission of race from the discussion is a form of racism in and of itself. I will return to this argument later on in this chapter.

“Burning House of Love”

HBO.com's message boards do not contain any posts prior to January of 2010 and writers at *Racialicious* did not begin their weekly roundtable discussions until June of 2010, so we are left with posts from *True Blood Wiki* and *Television Without Pity* to decipher fan interpretations of the Voodoo plotline in “Burning House of Love.”¹⁰²

¹⁰² Fan discussion on “I Don't Wanna Know” is not included in this chapter as there is minimal discussion on Tara's plotline that differs from that found in “Burning House of Love” discussion boards.

Truebies at *True Blood Wiki* began to discuss the episode prior to its air date in the thread “Episode 107: Burning House of Love.” After watching the episode preview, Truebie *Reginabee* believed the episode would spend a significant amount of time on Lettie Mae’s exorcism. “The scene with Tara and her mom at Adele’s funeral was fine” *Reginabee* writes, “but I really don’t want to spend 20 minutes watching a bunch of voodoo bullshit.” *Morgaine*, one of the sixteen site moderators, responded directly to *Reginabee*:

I know what you’re saying, but for those who don’t know, Voudon is a religion that draws correspondences between the African Orisha and Catholic Saints. It may or may not be an element of any exorcism shown in the show. More likely we’ll see a Protestant exorcism, or a Catholic one for the purposes of the show, unless AB goes for the shock factor and just pulls it out of the air.

Morgaine has a point, as Lettie Mae’s behaviour before and after her exorcism imply involvement in the Protestant or Baptist church; Voodoo is an unlikely route to salvation for a devout woman of these Christian sects. However *Morgaine*’s suggestion that a Voodoo ceremony will add “shock value” to the program is debatable. *True Blood* relies on the imagined Louisiana for narrative devices, and so viewers should expect references to Voodoo in the program.

Other contributors at *True Blood Wiki* undermine *Morgaine*’s suggestion that Lettie Mae’s exorcism will be tied to the Protestant Church as they spotted “Voodoo paraphernalia” in the episode preview. “I was just hoping Alan Ball would stick with a

charismatic Christian approach,” *Morgaine* explains, “but as you say, they ARE in LA, so Voodoo for hire is probably the deal. Sigh. How typical.” *Morgaine*’s diction in this post is quite vague. Is she using “charismatic” to describe stereotypical depictions of Southern Baptist church congregations, or to confirm her stance as a Christian woman? Is the exorcism “typical” because Voodoo is commonly associated with Louisiana or because a Black woman will be exorcised, thus reinforcing racial stereotypes of this group as gullible and socially deviant? *Morgaine* never clarifies her terminology or contributes another post containing racial undertones, which leads me to conclude that her comment was related to the overuse of Voodoo in Louisiana narratives.

After “Burning House of Love” aired, *Morgaine* made the following post about Lettie Mae’s exorcism:

Well, it wasn't as bad as I thought it might be, but that's not saying much.

Killing the animal was dumb - it's not like the demon will die with it - it will just look for another host body, and would have probably gone into one of the other women.

The idea that Tara has demon is too much. They might jump the shark there. The alcoholic mother is good background, but it shouldn't be taking up valuable screen time -- especially when Eric only said 10 words!

Morgaine appears to have lost interest in the exorcism, much like other Truebies in the thread.¹⁰³ Other posts about the exorcism at *True Blood Wiki* mainly focus on the possum. Only three Truebies reported to have read the drowning possum as a biblical reference. In TWoP's "Burning House of Love' 2008.10.19" thread, a Truebie with the screen name *random* wrote that Lettie Mae's exorcism made them uncomfortable. "I felt bad for the possum" *random* confesses, "I'm no good with scenes where bad things happen to animals." *MetalMel* agreed with *random*, stating "I'm finding the Tara/Lettie Mae storyline interesting, but I was squicked out by the possum drowning. I can watch people being killed and that doesn't bother me, but I'm a complete wuss when it comes to any animal stuff like that." The numerous posts about the possum imply that fans are more concerned with animal rights than the issue of Black performativity during the exorcism. The lack of discourse on Black performativity is puzzling as ironic racism in *True Blood* partially relies on audience recognition that cast members are performing these stereotypes to draw attention to social codes. If fans do not identify instances of stereotype or racial satire, it may be difficult for them recognize the (attempted) subversion of these images in other scenes. They may read these images as authentic examples of "Black" culture.

Another common theme in threads dedicated to "Burning House of Love" is sympathy for Tara. Many contributors, like *some1105* from TWoP's "Burning House of

¹⁰³ "Burning House of Love's" opening sequence featuring Bill and Sookie in a bathtub takes its place. Fans were more interested in this scene and the introduction of three new vampires. The episode also introduces Jason's new love interest and Sookie's Great Uncle Bartlett, a man who had inappropriate thoughts about Sookie when she was a child. With all of these new story lines competing for attention, it is understandable that the exorcism, which included no reference to vampires, would prove to be less interesting to a website that mainly caters to Belle and Wench related dialogue.

Love' 2008.10.19" thread can relate to Tara's position. They wish Tara would abandon her mother and take care of herself:

As someone else who grew up with addicts, both of the functioning and non-functioning variety, all I could think of the entire episode was how much I wished Tara would walk out the door and never look back. Unless they're truly going for the cold turkey voodoo sobriety thing, there's nothing Tara can do for her vampire of a mother except let her suck her dry. (some1105)

In her text *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*, Nancy K. Baym, a Communications Studies professor at the University of Kansas, states that applying one's own experiences to a program is not unusual, as "[o]ne core practice in interpreting the soap is personalization, whereby viewers make the shows personally meaningful. They do this by putting themselves in the drama and identifying with its situations and characters" (71). Baym's observation suggests that Truebies on the chosen websites (unintentionally) ignore racial discourse involving Tara because they are more concerned with shaping the narrative to fit their own lived experiences. *some1105's* post suggests that she relates to Tara's situation as she has also been a victim of abuse, not because she is a visible minority. *Morgaine* at *True Blood Wiki* makes the narrative personal as well as she later states that she performs exorcisms, thus articulating why she was unmoved by Ball's portrayal of the ceremony.

Truebies at TWoP mainly debate whether or not the demon within Lettie Mae was real. Most contributors who discuss the exorcism agree that Lettie Mae truly believes that

she is housing a demon, but they are unsure as to whether or not the demon is a figment of her imagination. "I really like the ambiguity of the whole demon thing" writes *Bourgeois Nerd*, "[b]ecause, on the one hand, this is a show with vampires and telepaths and werecollies, so demons aren't automatically unthinkable. On the other hand," *Bourgeois Nerd* continues, "it really could all be delusion on Tara's mother's part and con on the bus lady's. Lettie's convulsions could have been nothing more than her doing what she thought, even unconsciously, happens at an exorcism." *random* agrees with *Bourgeois Nerd* as she writes, "given that the undead walk the night and even run cheesy bars in this story, maybe the demon and the subsequent eviction thereof were real? But that's all the more reason to run away [from Lettie Mae]." Though *Bourgeois Nerd* and *random* do not personalize the exorcism like *some1105*, all three contributors believe that the best thing for Tara is to cut ties with her mother, as Lettie Mae is a con and/or deeply disturbed.

Though speculation surrounding the exorcism illustrates fan consideration of setting, shock value, state history and *True Blood*'s complex mythology, there is no evidence of a racially conscious audience in the Voodoo-related threads. Fans cannot be expected to make connections between *True Blood*'s Voodoo exorcism and "Black" cultural markers (such as Black Spiritual churches, economic hardship, or "bad" mothering) as this requires outside research. The complete absence of discourse about the relevance of race in season one's Voodoo exorcisms provides an alternative theory for the lack of racial discourse in the communities: Ball's commentary on blackness is too subtle, even for his critical fans.

Slave Imagery and Sexual Abuse

Ball abandons subtlety later in the series as Tara's story arc for season three contains one of *True Blood's* most controversial displays of ironic racism to date. After calling her now deceased partner Eggs (Mehcad Brooks) a "nigger," two White men get into a physical altercation with Tara. Luckily, vampire Franklin Mott comes to her aid. Despite her aversion to vampires, Tara forms a sexual relationship with Franklin, but quickly uncovers his troublesome behavioral habits. Believing Tara to be his soul mate, Franklin declines her request to end their relationship. Franklin fears that Tara will run away and so he decides to hold her captive. Tara spends much of the third season tied and gagged, only released to travel or engage in sexual activities with Franklin.

Though "young, unprotected women are frequently subject to imprisonment and to rape" in Gothic works, and the slave/master relationship between Tara and Franklin is sexually motivated, Tara's race allows for allusions to the enslavement and rape of African American women by White men in American history (Anolik 25). The similarities between Tara's predicament and female African American slaves become impossible to ignore in the fifth episode of the season, "Trouble." Written by Nancy Oliver and directed by Scott Winant, "Trouble" takes place on vampire Russell Edgington's plantation in Jackson Mississippi. Most of the series regulars find themselves at the mansion for one reason or another, including Tara, who has travelled to the home with Franklin against her will. In "Trouble," Franklin ties Tara's arms to a bed and forces her to wear a long white nightgown, similar to ones seen in pre Civil War era pictures. When Franklin leaves the room, Tara loosens her bindings and attempts to flee the

mansion. Oliver's script calls for Tara to run across the plantation lawn while being chased by a werewolf.

In her essay "Night is the Color of Blood: The Color Aesthetics of True Blood," Truebie Peg Aloï recalls that Sookie was shown wearing a "white gown and running through the misty forest in a clear homage to those wonderful Hammer films" in season one (184).¹⁰⁴ "White" Aloï writes, "is a color that signifies innocence, purity, youth, a 'blank slate' or beginning" (183). White may suggest these things in season one as Sookie runs to Bill, but Oliver subverts these connotations with Tara in season three. Instead, the white gown evokes images of fear, restriction, control and the runaway slave.¹⁰⁵

Fans are conscious of the racial connotations in Tara's escape scene, but they fail to understand the gravity of Tara's situation or find justification for this imagery. Truebie Lorelei L. made the following post in *HBO.com*'s "Ep 29: Trouble:"

Ok where do I start? Well Tara and Franklin are the best thing going for me right now, they are amazing together. The scene with Tara running for her life from the old plantation house almost had me on the floor. It just made me think of that scene in season one when she talked about being named after a plantation, classic!

¹⁰⁴ Aloï is referring to Hammer Productions films. The studio released eight different films starring Dracula between 1960 and 1974. The imagery is used again in season three, when Sookie dreams of wearing a sparkly white gown and escaping to fairy land.

¹⁰⁵ In season three, contradictory associations with "white" are extended to Caucasian characters. In addition to revealing Sookie's identity as part fairy, *True Blood* introduces werewolves and a number of shape-shifters who initially appear to be White humans.

Despite an intense chase scene accompanied by a spine-tingling soundtrack, Oliver and Winant failed to evoke feelings of horror, discomfort or anticipation within *Lorelei L.* Instead, it was read as a moment of comedy. Though Rutina Wesley does not tap in to the same comedic acting skills used in many of her scenes including the “name” scene, *Lorelei L.*’s response to the image reveals that Tara’s constant pairing with comic relief, and ironic racism makes it difficult for some fans to read Tara as anything but amusing. As a result, fans may (mis)interpret the struggles of Black women as laughable, humorous, or less important than the oppression or abuse of other bodies.

maatkare, a contributor at TWoP is able to make a connection between the escape, *Gone with the Wind*, and the 1977 television miniseries *Roots* (ABC). “Did anyone else have a freaky ‘Gone With the Wind’/‘Roots’/Kizzy callback at Tara’s aborted escape in the white gown, in front of Ye Stately Southern Manor?” *maatkare* asks. “Between last season’s opener Lafayette/Kunta Kinte moment, Alan Ball strikes some evocative racial chords.” *Yellowbird* replies to *maatkare*, stating “[y]es, yes, yes! I caught it on the re-watch¹⁰⁶ and it bugged me out. I’ve always appreciated how aware Alan Ball is with the race issue and he does it just enough.” In “Beyond a Cutout World,” Marx and Sieniewicz argue that ironic racism in “South Park not only asks the viewers to make connections to other media, but it also asks its audience to critically engage with the modes of discussion in which these secondary texts are participating” (6). With the exception of the “name” scene, the secondary texts used as pop culture references in *True Blood* do not provide any social critique or subvert Black (female) stereotypes. The images simply demonstrate

¹⁰⁶ HBO airs the newest episode of *True Blood* Sunday nights at 9pm and 11pm. I also airs Mondays at 9pm (HBO.com)

the creative team's expansive knowledge of American pop culture. My argument is strengthened by fans' inability to extract any meaning from the familiar images.

After identifying herself as a visible minority, *TWoP* contributor *shrunkn violet* admitted that she dislikes "watching Tara being tied up (to a toilet, no less) and tormented as she has been. This sh*t can't be over fast enough for me." Though she is referring to the previous episode in the series, *shrunkn violet* is the first fan to problematize the slave/master relationship between Tara and Franklin *TWoP*. Truebie *Karinova* also comments on the vulgarity of Tara and Franklin's relationship and the escape scene. She calls attention to Ball's use of racially charged imagery to add credibility to his program:

It's... gross. Beyond gross, verging on 'hipster racism' (ie: using painful race imagery in an attempt to look funny, cool and/or urbane). *There!* I said it! Everything from the plantation locale to the fetishy antique nightie Franklin put her in, to the totally gratuitous ... tied-to-the-bed-ever-at-his-mercy situation (threat of rape: implied!), to the pointless Run To Freedom *while chased by dogs* ... to the having to pretend to *enjoy* Massa's sick attentions for self-preservation (I just threw up in my mouth a little bit)...
to the look of bug-eyed terror on Tara's face the whole damn time.

Karinova also reveals that this imagery has left her feeling marginalized within her fandom:

I was like, shocked: *Holy crap, am I really seeing this?* Meanwhile, my viewing partners are all cracking up, totally unable to take any of this seriously, becuz omg Franklin is just tooo hilarious, amirite?! Har. Dee.

Har. Way to undermine the gravity of Tara's situation. Way to play it for laughs. I guess we're not expected to feel anything for her at all.

And what was the point of all that?? Where the hell are they going with this? Why do I suspect: nowhere at all. Do the writers realize that this is extremely painful— almost unbearable— for (*ahem*) some of us? Do they even care? Clearly not. Honestly, the Tara character is *already* so problematically racialized— and I know it's unintentional (it always is), and I have yeeeaars of practice in Just Letting It Go ... and for TB I *have* been letting it go— but this... *this was almost too much to take.*¹⁰⁷

Though I disagree with *Karinova* about the intentionality of racist imagery in *True Blood* (racist imagery in *True Blood* is *always* intentional), she makes a very poignant observation about fan responses to the employment of ironic racism in *True Blood*. *Karinova* suggests that ironic racism is only identified as racist or hurtful to those affected by its use. Aside from *ilivety*, a contributor who disagrees with *Karinova*'s reading, there is no fan response. Her thoughts and opinions are left unacknowledged by TWoP contributors.

Silence may suggest fan agreement with analysis in other forums or fandoms, but Truebies in the selected online communities tend to voice their opinion on most topics that surface on the message boards. I suspect that fans do not openly agree or disagree with *Karinova* as they are concerned with generating wank. The popular fandom wiki, *fanlore.org*, defines “wank” as “[a] loud and public online argument, often involving

¹⁰⁷ Fan's emphasis.

many participants outside of the initiating members, and often devolving into side-taking, hyperbole, and personal attacks.”¹⁰⁸ On websites where online identities and status grow over time, fans may fear losing rank amongst other users by saying the wrong thing or participating in an argument. Though fan intention is likely to prevent intra-fandom conflict, the dismissal of racial discourse in *True Blood* fandom is a racist practice. It marginalizes sections of the community who wish to critique the representation of Othered bodies in the text and allows for problematic images to become naturalized.

[F]anlore.org reports that some fandoms “have objected to the use of wank to describe discussions or arguments about serious issues like racism or sexism, in any given fandom ... It is felt that equating these issues with lesser issues such as ship wars¹⁰⁹ trivializes them.” Fandom communities for David Simon’s HBO’s drama *The Wire* (2002-2008) do not consider heated discussions of race wank. *The Wire* explores the lifestyles of different communities living in the city of Baltimore Maryland. Its TWoP threads are filled with fan discourse on marginalized bodies and oppressive images. In the TWoP thread “Thomas ‘Tommy’ Carcetti: He Wakes Up White in a City That Ain’t” *Wire* fan *Ankai* made the following post:

[Thomas] runs for mayor, hoping to unseat the current Black mayor. But he realises that it will be an uphill struggle and that being White will be an issue, so he deliberately goads a Black man who is unhappy with the current leadership to also run for mayor. This splits the Black vote and

¹⁰⁸ “Use of ‘wank’ may especially indicate a debate which occurs over and over with nobody ever changing their minds” (fanlore.org).

¹⁰⁹ “[Relation]ship wars” is the fandom term used to describe arguments pertaining to preferred couplings in a text.

gives Thomas a better opportunity to get the position himself. ... it got me thinking about the Europeans coming in to stake claims on Africa ... they ... turned tribes against each other [and] fed on ethnic rivalries...

While *Orion7* disagrees with *Ankai's* reading he or she manages to compliment *Ankai's* thoughtful analysis. There are numerous other examples on *TWoP* that point to the tolerant nature of *The Wire's* online fan community.

The Wire threads suggest that discourse about race is more likely to occur in communities dedicated to realistic texts. This statement is not meant to undermine *True Blood's* status as a transgressive or quality television program. Rather, it suggests that *True Blood's* excessive use of racial stereotypes and ethnic humour lead some viewers to deem racism laughable or undeserving of further critique. As suggested earlier, the strong presence of a human/vampire binary also undermines racial discourse provided by human minorities (Jowett 108). If Alan Ball were to extend stronger critical race discourse beyond vampires, fans may be more likely to follow his lead.

The lack of support from other online contributors forces Truebies like *Karinova* to search for websites like *Racialicious* to discuss their topics of interest. Unsurprisingly, *Racialicious* is the only website to take an in-depth look at the meanings and connotations of slave imagery in "Trouble." In the roundtable post "Gratuitous Slave Imagery, Hobbit-Troll-Vampires & Team Jesus: Roundtable for True Blood S03E05" discussion leader Thea makes it clear that she and other contributors "get" ironic racism in *True Blood* and do not applaud its presence in the narrative:

...first things first: dear lord, whose idea was it to have the black women fleeing a white Southern mansion in a Sojourner Truth outfit then get mauled by a dog (ok it was a werewolf, but it looked like a dog)? Do we buy that that was not a slavery reference – could the writers really be that culturally tone deaf (to their own damn culture!) to not see the significance of that image? And if they did see the significance of that image, why on earth drop it casually into an episode (and show) that has nothing to do with American slavery?

Thea's observations provide a good outline to start discussion about the episode and its historical references, but there is a problem with her statement. Thea's claim that *True Blood* has nothing to do with American slavery undermines a major theme in the program. The echoes of slavery and the Antebellum South ring through *True Blood* on a regular basis. When one considers the discriminatory social structures that have led to Tara's lower working class position and allusions to the American Civil Rights Movement via the VRA, American slavery cannot be ignored.

Discussion about the slave imagery in "Trouble" continued during the following week's round table, "Off With His Head, Hipster Racism & Scapegoating Poor Folks: *True Blood* S03E06." This time, there was a call to put an end to hipster racism in *True Blood* as it trivializes the struggles of Black women in America:

Thea: I hope we never see Tara tied to a bed again. Can we talk about the visual impact of seeing a white man tie up a black woman and physically dominate her for so many episodes? Just as with the 'Tara runs from the

slave mansion' imagery, I just can't get over the trivial use of such loaded and hurtful images, for no clear reason.

I guess this is kind of an art philosophy argument – I feel that you shouldn't use such historically weighty optics, simply for entertainment. It just feels crass - and also plain confusing. Part of me keeps expecting this show to turn into an exploration of American slavery. It's almost like Alan Ball's subconscious is dying to talk about it. I mean, did anyone else hear Russell say 'Take Bill to the slave quarters and kill him'? Why – why the offhand, unnecessary references to something that brings up so much pain for American viewers.

In addition to deeming the slave imagery unnecessary, Thea insists that the slave references are painful and uncomfortable for (African) American viewers. This is an interesting point as the majority of fans did not find fault in the narrative arc; they chose to comment on romantic pop culture references that the scene evoked instead of the historical violence associated with the imagery.

Reading Tara's Escape

After Tara is caught, she is returned to Franklin who reveals his plan to make her his vampire bride. In the following episode, "I Got A Right to Sing the Blues," Tara seduces Franklin in order to have him untie her arms. When Franklin falls asleep, Tara beats him over the head with a mace and attempts to leave the plantation for a second time. In this episode, written by Ball and directed by Michael Lehmann, Tara is

successful in her escape. Because Franklin has a large fan following online, I must outline Truebie response to Tara's escape. Contributors to *HBO.com*'s "Ep. 30: I Got a Right to Sing the Blues" thread believe Tara was wrong for leaving Franklin. *d. binder* wrote "omg I hope franklin forgives tara lol hes crazy but I like him lol him and tara make a good couple lol," while *K. Stamos* wrote "I love Franklin's craziness...it's completely entertaining! :)." *d. binder* and *K. Stamos* are not alone in their love of Franklin. Some fans on the HBO message board have become so invested in the relationship between the two characters that they fail to realize or articulate his abusive tendencies.

In the same thread, Truebie *Kimberly E.* made the following post:

I'm very surprised at some of the comments posted about Franklin. I'll admit, I thought he was cute and psychotic BUT that ended the moment I realized Tara stepped into the rape survivor's group. Go back and watch this with a different view: Franklin kidnapped Tara, tied her to a bed and she was FORCED to have sex with him in order to survive. I'm wondering if the reaction would be different if it was Sookie.

Though *Kimberly E.*'s post is ignored by message board users, her line of questioning echoes Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*. Collins believes rape and acts of violence towards Black women to be "visible dimensions of a more generalized, routinized system of oppression. Violence against Black women tends to be legitimated" she continues, "and therefore condoned while the same acts visited on other groups may remain nonlegitimated and non-excusable" (146). I interpret *Kimberly E.*'s question as asking if

viewers are ambivalent about Tara's abuse because she is a woman of colour. By encouraging fans to consider their reaction had Sookie been in Tara's position, *Kimberly E.* encourages critical engagement with the text, but also acknowledges that audience reception is framed by the appearance of the character(s) involved in the story. She believes that fans may be more willing to protest the sexual and physical violence involved in this particular story arc had the victim been White or more like themselves.

Television Without Pity users had a different reading of the runaway slave imagery from those at *HBO.com*. Participants in the "3-6: 'I Got a Right to Sing the Blues' 2010.07.25 (recap)" thread did not comment on the slave imagery in the episode or their love for Franklin. Instead, Tara-related discussion focused on her ability to take control of her situation.¹¹⁰ The escape from the plantation home was read as a moment of "girl power." Fans were pleased to see Tara escape the oppression of her male captor and save Sookie who had been captured by werewolves in the previous episode. Truebie *hardy har*'s post claiming "TARA FOR THE MUTHAFUCKIN' WIN!" and Truebie *orange slice*'s comment "Glad to see kick-ass Tara again," exemplify fan contentment with the outcome of Tara's situation. *Drjas* wrote "[s]o impressed with Tara this ep. She cons Franklin, sends Sookie some escape vibes and brings the pain to all in her way." Fans

¹¹⁰ Despite the fact that *True Blood Wiki* is the only website chosen for this exercise that is completely moderated by fans, the board has very little to say about "I Got a Right to Sing the Blues" in relation to Tara's escape. The commentary available exemplifies fans' contentment with Tara's return to the fiery character she was in the first season, but says little else. The posts are similar to those on *Television Without Pity*, but are not as strong. Thus, I have chosen to use posts from *TWoP* to discuss female empowerment.

also voice their concern for Tara's safety as they recognize that she did not actually kill Franklin and that he will most likely come after her again.¹¹¹

A very interesting trend appeared on *TWoP*'s message boards after "I Got A Right to Sing the Blues" aired on television. Many fans who cheered about Tara's escape referenced Black female cultural icons in their messages. Fans *mimicked* the example of ironic racism shown in the previous week's episode. *ShuranaoHana* wrote "[t]he title of this ep should have been 'How Tara got her groove back'" referring to Terry McMillan's *How Stella Got her Groove Back* (1997),¹¹² a novel about a woman who learns to take control of her life and go after what she truly desires. "I loved Tara's fierceness returning" writes *Sedruol*, possibly referring to Beyonce Knowles' alter ego Sasha Fierce and/or Tyra Banks' signature "look."¹¹³

The strongest association with powerful Black female characters in this thread comes from *Dee2*, who wrote "I loved Tara going Sophia from *The Color Purple* on Franklin. Bash Mister's head in & think about heaven later Tara Mae!" Black Feminist Alice Walker's American Gothic novel *The Color Purple* (1982)¹¹⁴ takes place in the Jim

¹¹¹ In the *True Blood* universe, one must decapitate, stake or set fire to a vampire to kill them. *TWoP* participants also find humour in Ball's choice to fill the bedroom with sharp objects that can be used to stake a vampire, only to have Tara use a mace that is useless in her current situation.

¹¹² *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, written by Terry McMillan, became a feature-length film in 1998. Directed by Kevin Rodney Sullivan, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* stars Angela Bassett, Regina King and Whoopi Goldberg.

¹¹³ Tyra Banks often reminds the contestants on her program *America's Next Top Model* to "smeyes" (smile with your eyes) in photos. If a participant can 'smeyes' she will likely end up with "fierce" photos.

¹¹⁴ Three years after its publication, *The Color Purple* was adapted for screen by Steven Spielberg. In 2005, the story was adapted for the stage and in 2008, BBC made a radio version.

Crow South and tells the story of a young Georgian woman named Celie. Celie spends the majority of the text experiencing sexual, physical and emotional violence at the hands of men including her stepfather. While Celie is never physically tied up like Tara, her father limits her interaction with the outside world and hides letters from Celie's sister and children.

Sophia, on the other hand, is a strong Black woman who experiences many forms of abuse as well, but refuses to let this control her behaviour. Instead, she fights back. When Sophia is slapped in the face by the mayor, she returns his blow and is subsequently arrested. Sophia experiences physical abuse during her years of incarceration, but manages to find the strength to continue on with her life. Perhaps fans referred to these memorable characters to provide some comedy to their commentary, or demonstrate their own cultural awareness, but they also suggest that despite her racially insensitive story arcs, Ball's character will always generate some form of fan response.

Unsurprisingly, the message boards and blog posts reveal, there are many ways to read a particular text. For most individuals on the chosen websites, *True Blood* is explored and analyzed on its most basic level. Fans are interested in character rants, speculation and general discussion. Some Truebies choose to concentrate on aspects of the program that are similar to their own lived experiences while others compare Harris and Ball's texts. Still others cheer for Franklin despite his abusive tendencies. They have decided to concentrate on the betrayal of a romantic partner, despite being labeled as an abuser and oppressor by other fans. Lastly, Truebies take a feminist reading and choose to associate Tara's run to freedom with (Black) female empowerment and independence.

There is nothing inherently wrong with the various readings and interpretations fans bring to a program consumed for entertainment. However, *True Blood* relies heavily on racially charged language, imagery, and moments in history to build its narrative, thus fan ignorance, misinterpretation or disregard for these creative choices is evidence of fans' discomfort or unfamiliarity with racial discourse. *True Blood* comments on numerous social justice issues, but it is up to the fans to point out these instances and form negotiated readings that acknowledge or interact with this commentary.

- Afterword -

To promote the release of *True Blood*'s season three DVD box set, HBO launched the interactive website trueblooddigdeeper.com and the Dig Deeper Challenge. The Challenge is a trivia game based on the program's main characters. The website, trueblooddigdeeper.com, provided video with the answer to each question. This marketing campaign proved successful as *True Blood: The Complete Third Season* topped Nielson's DVD sales chart during the first two weeks of its release (Arnold).¹¹⁵ The Challenge encouraged interpretive audience practices and friendly competition amongst Truebies, but failed to engage fans in intellectual, controversial or transgressive aspects of the program. If the Challenge had coaxed viewers to "dig deeper" and question representations of Othered bodies in *True Blood*, more fans might be aware of the series' underlying social critique on power structures and systems of representation.

This is not to say that Alan Ball has failed at relaying his messages about social inequality in the United States to viewing audiences. He successfully employs the undead and stereotype to undermine controlling images of (White) women, the gay community, and Black men in the United States. The problem with *True Blood* lies in its depiction of Black women. My engagement with *True Blood* through a Black feminist lens reveals that subversion of stereotypes exclusive to Black women are missing from the program. Contradictory images of members of this group are necessary to identify racist images as social critique of methods of control and oppression.

¹¹⁵ *True Blood*'s season two DVD box set reappeared on the charts in the number nine spot (Arnold).

Ball's interpretation of Black women as demonstrated through Tara, Lettie Mae, Miss Jeannette and Kenya recalls offensive categories and images of this group circulating in other media texts. These controlling images are intended to be interpreted as ironic, as Ball does not *really* hold racist beliefs that position these women as Sapphires, "bad" mothers, cons, or Black ladies. They are present to identify blackness as a performance and a system of oppression in the United States. However, the intended function of ironic racism is not "perfectly transparent" to, or accepted by *True Blood's* viewing audience. News media outlets and fan communities imply that many viewers find the representation of Black women in the program offensive. They consider *True Blood* as another text that continues to circulate cruel images of Black women in popular American media. Fans and journalists argue that there is nothing salvageable or subversive about these characters. Dissonance between fan and creator opinions about ironic racism in the text suggests that in the end, *True Blood* takes part in inferential racism. Though well intentioned, Ball actually reinforces controlling images of Black women.

Alan Ball's inability to provide diverse or transgressive images of Black women and his (mis)use of ironic racism in *True Blood* do not equate to "bad" or less transgressive television. Rather, it implies that offensive portrayals of this community are firmly established as natural in dominant American ideology. The validity of my argument is emphasized by the fact that programs with Black creators like *Grey's*

Anatomy (ABC 2005 - present) also fail to resist or move past offensive depictions of this group on television.¹¹⁶

At the beginning of her book, Patricia Hill Collins makes the following observations about Black feminist thought:

Black feminist thought can offer African-American women a different view of [themselves] and [their] worlds. By taking the core themes of a Black women's standpoint and infusing them with new meaning, Black feminist thought affirms, rearticulates, and provides a vehicle for expressing in public a consciousness that quite often already exists. More important, this rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African-American women and stimulate resistance. (32)

Black feminist works including this thesis, Joshua Alston's *Newsweek* article and *Racialicious* acknowledge troublesome representations of Black women in popular culture and attempt to identify and deconstruct controlling identities like the welfare queen, the Black lady, and the jezebel. However, far more texts, though well intentioned, reinforce these oppressive titles. I argue that individuals who can identify racist imagery in popular texts should not be discouraged by the continued circulation of oppressive images. Instead, they should move Black feminist discourse from specialized journals, textbooks and blogs, and discuss issues that are relevant to Black women in popular newspapers, magazines, fan forums, and blogs. This would require the reconfiguration of

¹¹⁶ Shonda Rhimes is the creator, head writer and executive producer of *Grey's Anatomy*. Her character Miranda Bailey (Chandra Wilson) is a successful surgeon and the overseer of interns. She is also a "Black lady" and "matriarch." Bailey's nickname, "The Nazi," creates a connection between Black women and unsavory behaviour.

entertainment journalism and acceptance of critical racial discourse in high traffic online fan communities as more than just wank.

Part of resisting controlling images of Black women will be to acknowledge ironic racism for what it really is: racism. Though often used to provide social critique, the motif still touches on sensitive topics and allows for offensive images to circulate and be interpreted by less “aware” viewers as authentic or true. This becomes more apparent than ever outside of situational comedies. This is not to say that *all* racist or offensive images need to be removed from television. After all, the Gothic genre is almost entirely based on the premise of Self and Other. Instead, there needs to be more discussion of *why* these systems of control exist and *who* benefits/suffers from them in contemporary culture.

True Blood will need more than a few episodes to compensate for three seasons of discrimination against Black women. Perhaps Ball will use the program’s fourth season to show his audience an alternative representation of this community. Character revision does not require a complete structural overhaul of the program; Ball would simply need to add more resistant dialogue or positive images of Black women. This could mean positive images of Black women that point to ironic racism as commentary on cultural prejudice, or even self-reflexive moments in the text whereby characters identify themselves as offensive caricatures of this group. It is more likely, however, that Ball will put all of his creative energy elsewhere and allow Tara and other Black women to continue on as offensive stereotypes, immortalized on DVDs, and in Internet videos. We’ll have to stick around in Bon Temps awhile longer to find out.

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