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Monstrous America: HBO's *True Blood* as a Gothic/Fantastic Allegory

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Abstract

This article analyzes HBO's *True Blood* as a subversive Gothic allegory for 21st century America. In its polysemic, excessive and hybrid universe, the show allows for different power discourses from American society to be explored. *True Blood* can be seen as a gothic/fantastic allegory that shows that the current debate surrounding American identity today—which is based on the idea that America entered a post-racial phase—is nothing but a myth.

Keywords

Gothic allegory, American identity, post-racial America, speciesism

Özet

Bu makale, HBO'nun 21. yüzyıl Amerika'sını anlatmak için ortaya çıkardığı *True Blood* adlı devrimsel Gotik alegorisini incelemektedir. Çokanlamlı, aşırılıklar içeren ve melez bir evrende geçen bu dizi, Amerikan toplumunda yer alan farklı güç söylemlerinin incelemesine olanak sağlamaktadır. *True Blood,* günümüz Amerikan kimliği çevresinde dönen ve ABD'nin ırkçılık-sonrası bir döneme girdiği düşüncesi üzerine kurulu mevcut tartışmaların bir efsaneden ibaret olduğunu sergileyen bir gotik/fantastic alegori olarak görülebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Gotik alegori, Amerikan kimliği, ırkçılık-sonrası Amerika, türcülük

Writer-producer Alan Ball's latest hit on American television, HBO's horror-romance *True Blood* premiered in 2008 and had seven successful consecutive seasons.[1] *True Blood* is a long-form serial television adaptation of Charlaine Harris's popular Southern Vampire Mystery Series, depicting the adventures of her titular character Sookie Stackhouse.[2] The first-person romance narrative of the books is transformed in the show by Ball's widening of the text to encompass the multiple points of view of a range of characters. Different from the books, on screen, *True Blood* appears as a multi-layered and thus polysemic visual narrative of fear (of difference) and desire (for the other) written across the visually-recognizable geography of American Deep South.

The significance of the show lies in the issues it tackles in a post-multicultural America and the hybrid Gothic/Fantastic mode through which it explores those issues. In a more politically-engaged attitude than the books, Alan Ball uses the show to explore notions like equality, justice, and civil rights in a democratic society; in this case, the United States of America. As Joseph J. Foy suggests, "Tapping into contemporary debates about diversity, gender, identity politics, and immigration, *True Blood* offers important philosophical insights about justice and the proper role of the state in establishing and protecting rights" (51-52). *True Blood*, although mostly labeled as a vampire show, can be seen as an allegory about what it means to be an American in the twenty-first century. The show's overarching discourse makes use of among other things; the discourse of American liberal politics, discourses of multiculturalism, discourses of religious right and discourses of the

1 The show pulled very high and steady ratings among American audiences and has a large fan base all over the world and turned out to be HBO's most lucrative show after *The Sopranos*. According to Nielsen ratings, the show attracted a steady average of 5 million viewers per episode. In addition to viewer ratings, HBO earns a considerable amount of money from the show's DVD and Blu-Ray sales. More information on the show's ratings can be obtained from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True_Blood#U.S._Nielsen_ratings.

2 In 2001, Harris's *Dead Until Dark* launched the series of critically acclaimed, best-selling supernatural mystery novels which are the products of the twenty-first century resurgence of the vampire and paranormal romance genres.

Civil Rights Movement. Underneath its sexy and risqué scenes and its romantic stories, *True Blood* is ultimately a show about a community of individuals who strive for happiness and liberty, and ultimately, power. Contrary to Ball's claim that the show is pure entertainment,[3] it actually depicts a different kind of American national narrative through its wild mixture of gothic/fantastic characters.

In *True Blood*, in and around the fictional small town of Bon Temps, located in Louisiana, different characters interact and strive to carve a space for themselves in the social, political, cultural life in America. With the Great Revelation, vampires all over the world announced their existence to human beings. What made this possible was the discovery of synthetic blood (Tru Blood) by a Japanese corporation. In the multispecies America of *True Blood*, different monsters strive to "coexist;" these monsters include vampires, werewolves, faeries, shapeshifters, ghosts, maenads, witches, and human beings. Added to these species identity markers, different professions give the characters different agendas: there are politicians, reverends, lobbyists, spokespeople, policemen, bar owners, waitresses, cooks, drug dealers and serial killers.

This paper will approach the show as a popular cultural artifact, created in the gothic/fantastic mode, which needs to be read metaphorically as a critique of American society today. *True Blood* gives us a different kind of Gothic allegory for the post-racial, post-feminist, multicultural America of diversity in the twenty-first century. The show uses the Gothic/Fantastic mode subversively to reveal different power discourses in American society both from the nation's history and its current socio-political climate. In the show, the discourse of speciesism is meant to echo the highly-familiar discourses of racism and discrimination in real life America.

1. The Gothic as Cultural Allegory and American Identity in the Twenty-First Century

Before delving into the analysis of *True Blood,* it is necessary to explore the gothic's central role in providing a counter-narrative to

3 In a 2011 interview with Matt Barone on the Complex Pop Culture website, Alan Ball stated that, "You can say that *True Blood* is a metaphor for this, or it's a metaphor for that, but ultimately the show is just entertainment." For the full interview: http://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2011/06/interview-alan-ball-true-blood.

official national narratives in America. In order to prove the gothic mode's relevancy for identity discourses, the current debates over American identity will also be briefly discussed.

1.1 Relevance of the Gothic Mode for Identity Debates

It can be said that, like many other societies, America has created its own "monsters" and "scapegoats" throughout its history to maintain the social order. According to Edward Ingebretsen, a social order reveals its constructedness in two particular ways; first in "the methods of fear by which it constructs the unspeakable (the 'monstrous' or the 'inhuman') as symbolic center of social energy" and second in "the means, legal and extralegal, then used to repudiate and silence that energy" (91). Enunciating and then eliminating monsters has been instrumental in the maintenance of American national and cultural identity. The demonized and monstrified "others" serve as boundary guards that demarcate the limits of socially acceptable identities in the nation. Ingebretsen claims that "Read as an allegory of the civil, then, the monster serves as communal remonstrance and civic exemplum" (97). In this vein, the relevance of the Gothic mode, with its monsters, to any representation of American national and cultural identity is undeniable.

Recent academic work on the Gothic, which started during the 1970s and the 1980s paved the way for a much wider approach to Gothic studies. Starting with David Punter's influential book *The Literature of Terror* (1980), it becomes evident that "Gothic" as an adjective can be used to designate various texts in different media throughout the history of the West. Punter suggests that we can define Gothic "as a historically delimited genre or as a more wide-ranging and persistent tendency within fiction as a whole" (12). It is important to note that, from its beginnings, the Gothic has been a hybrid genre. Maggie Kilgour defines the genre as a literary patchwork "assembled out of bits and pieces" to create a unique textual form (4). This loose stitching makes the Gothic adaptable to various forms and styles in different historical contexts. Gothic, liberated from a fixed generic status, becomes a "mode," or a certain sensibility and worldview. Gothic as a mode, then, becomes "the Gothic," almost like the monsters it has created; fluid, contradictory, excessive, undefinable, uncanny and sneaky; diffusing itself into various

cultural sites. From its onset in the eighteenth century, Gothic fictions are seen to address and also disguise some of the most important desires and anxieties, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural. The longevity and power of Gothic as a genre can be attributed, in Kelly Hurley's words, to "a sort of historical or sociological index," helping us track the social anxieties of a certain geography in a certain time by reading its disguised, deformed, often monstrous forms symbolically (197).

Gothic works have often been analyzed as representations of otherness expressed in the figures of monsters. The dominant culture, the argument goes, abjects onto the hated/desired figure of the monster what it rejects to include within itself. Monsters, in turn, haunt the culture in their uncanny rejection to be repressed. As a result, the monster, as Jeffrey Cohen insists, should be seen as a "cultural body," which haunts its times by blurring the boundaries between the past and the present:

> The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy, giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically "that which reveals," "that which warns," a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again. (4)

In addition, for Judith Halberstam, the monster is an "economic form," which condenses various threats to nation, capitalism and the bourgeoisie into one form (3). She says, "monsters are meaning machines. They can represent gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality in one body" (21-22). Thus, monsters are infinitely interpretable; they are those "abjected fragment[s]" that serve as "others" to "demonstrate" the artificiality and contiguity of the different identity formations in a society.

In this vein, this paper aims to analyze the monstrous forms of *True Blood* as culturally specific, excessive, and hybrid others which expose the mechanisms of cultural identity formation in America through its abjections. *True Blood* can be seen as heir to the Gothic

tradition in American fiction, which has always been used to question, criticize and explore the true nature of American identity.[4] Through its monsters, its convoluted plots, its symbolic settings and its various flamboyant styles, the Gothic in general—and *True Blood* in particular—is characterized by an economy of excess; "excessive imagery, excessive rhetoric, excessive narrative, and excessive affect" (Hurley 194). Thus, Gothic is also a highly self-reflexive mode that exaggerates its own fictionality, which is a necessary tool for it to realize its cultural function of exposing culturally and psychologically abjected contradictions. This self-referentiality can also be found in *True Blood*, which will be discussed in the second half of this paper.

1.2 American Identity in the Twenty-First Century

For a diverse society like American society, any analysis of identity becomes a difficult task. Throughout its history, America has seen various competing identity discourses come to the fore in discussions of American identity. A nation not having the bonds of common ancestry and history but instead built on ideals and values by diverse groups of people, America has been a stage for arguments about national identity that alternate between discourses of diversity and unity. Although some, especially conservative scholars, emphasize the nation as built on shared ideals known as the "American Creed," more liberal-minded scholars tend to emphasize the diversity in American society by focusing on its status as a "nation of immigrants."

4 The Gothic has always had a central role in American imagination. Founded on Enlightenment principles and "the pursuit of happiness," the country's national discourse from the beginning emphasized its lack of an aristocratic past and its status as a democratic nation created on an ideal. Gothic literature, from its beginnings in America, has served as the horrific mirror image of the idealistic, mythic discourses. In their "dream" status, American myths of national identity were founded on fiction, on a complete exclusion of the dark realities and anxieties Americans experienced. Not only was America *not* free of the European past, but it was also not free from its own history written on the new continent. America's history proved to be laden with Gothic truths hidden in the frontier experience, the systematic erasure and slaughter of Native Americans and the abominations of the slave trade. Since the public discourse of the new republic completely repressed the guilt associated with these experiences, in America it was the novel that exposed the dark side of American national identity. Thus, when we look at the foundations of American literature, we are confronted with "a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation" (Fiedler 29).

In the twenty-first century, especially after 9/11, Americans still seem to be obsessed with defining and limiting the characteristics of their national identity. As Kobena Mercer suggests, "identity becomes an issue when it is in crisis" (424). In his book, *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity*, Samuel Huntington talks about this identity crisis in America in the twenty-first century:

> "We Americans" face a substantive problem of national identity epitomized by the subject of this sentence. Are we a "we," one people or several? If we are a "we," what distinguishes us from the "thems" who are not us? Race, religion, ethnicity, values, culture, wealth, politics, or what? Is the United States, as some have argued, a "universal nation," based on values common to all humanity and in principle embracing all peoples? Or are we a Western nation with our identity defined by our European heritage and institutions? Or are we unique with a distinctive civilization of our own, as the proponents of "American exceptionalism" have argued throughout our history? Are we basically a political community whose identity exists only in social contract embodied in the Declaration of Independence and other founding documents? Are we multicultural, bicultural, or unicultural, a mosaic or a melting pot? Do we have any meaningful identity as a nation that transcends our subnational ethnic, religious, racial identities? These questions remain for Americans in their post-September 11 era. (9)

One of the most significant questions that come out of this debate of American national identity is the question of diversity. As a "nation of immigrants," whose social fabric is made up of various different racial, ethnic and cultural identities, the United States, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century, has come to be seen as a "multicultural" nation. For proponents of the multicultural doctrine, America is a highly stratified society in its hierarchies of identity categories such as gender, class, ethnicity, and maybe most importantly, race. Manning Marable suggests that "Americans are arguably the most 'race-conscious' people on earth" and that in the USA, "nationality" is closely linked to categories and hierarchies of national racial identity

(185). Supporters of multiculturalism and scholars and politicians associated with diversity issues like Black Studies, feminism, and gay liberation, see the concept of the "melting pot" which has been used to describe American society, as a fictive ideological tool. Marable claims that "national identity" is actually located in this structure of power and that the melting pot does not exist. He suggests that

> To be an "all-American" is by definition *not* to be an Asian American, Pacific American, American Indian, Latino, Arab American or African-American. Or viewed another way, the hegemonic ideology of "whiteness" is absolutely central in rationalizing and justifying the gross inequalities of race, gender and class, experienced by millions of Americans relegated to the politically peripheral status of "others." (185)

In arguments such as Marable's, whiteness is seen as the center of national prestige, authority and leadership. Categories of difference have been central to how American society has constructed and dealt with its "minorities." The whole narrative of American history can be seen as a big struggle between authorities to categorize, assimilate or even eradicate certain groups while those groups have fought for recognition, power and a voice within the nation. One only needs to look at the histories of Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans or Latinos to see the immense struggle those individuals went through in order to create a space for themselves in the United States. Moreover, it is again telling that all these identity categories are overwhelmingly totalizing and homogenizing, assumed to represent different people from different tribes, nations, races, ethnicities and cultures.

For more right-wing and conservative voices in America, however, American identity needs to be more unifying rather than diversifying. As evidenced in Huntington's anxieties over the loss of the national identity, Americans today are still debating the politics of diversity. This started even before 9/11 threatened American national identity. Merely decades after the turmoil and social and cultural transformation of the 1960s, with the latter part of the 1970s and 1980s, America saw the emergence of a public discourse of backlash as characterized by the prefix "post." This was a part of the right-wing, conservative shift in politics worldwide. One

of the leading scholars of multiculturalism, Will Kymlicka suggests that as a result of the conservative trend in western societies during the 1980s, today, "there is a surprising consensus that we are in a post-multicultural era" (2). This is a direct result of fears among the majority group that diversity has "gone too far" and is threatening their way of life. This fear often expresses itself in the rise of nativist and populist right-wing political movements.

What the prefix of "post" suggests is that minorities, including women and gays, have earned all the rights they could possibly want, have gained equal status with the rest of America and that policies of multiculturalism are now doing more harm than good because programs like Affirmative Action and welfare turned into "reverse discrimination," encroaching on the basic rights of white Americans. Hence, in the national debate, the United States has been portrayed as having entered a post-civil rights, post-racial, post-feminist, post-gay rights, and post-multicultural era. Probably the most significant evidence for advocates of the post-racial era in America came with the election of Barack Obama as the nation's president in 2008. If an African American, the argument went, especially with a middle name like Hussein, can be elected to the highest office in the United States, then racism must no longer exist in American society and there is no need for any "group-differentiated rights" anymore. What is needed now is not a politics of difference or recognition, but a politics of "color-blindness"; policies and laws that will benefit all of society rather than specific identity groups.

Such a blissful picture of American society, however, proved to be another myth. Leftist scholars tried to debunk this myth and demonstrate that America not only did not solve its race and power disparity, but that it has also entered a new era of social control for minorities, hidden under the "post" discourse. In his influential book, *Color-Blind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity*, Tim Wise claims that it was Obama's use of "the rhetoric of racial transcendence" that made his victory possible and that his election, far from being evidence that racism was finally defeated, might "signal a mere shape-shifting of racism" for America (15). Wise calls this "Racism 2.0" and defines it as "an insidious upgrade that allows millions of whites to cling to racist stereotypes about people of color generally, while nonetheless carving out exceptions for those who, like Obama, make us comfortable by seeming so 'different' from what we

view as a much less desirable norm" (15).

Indeed, there is ample evidence that shows that "post-racial" America is a myth, an ideological discourse shift. The concept of race still continues to be central to American politics, but it is radically transformed, as Marable suggests, "within an Aesopian language in which both victims and predators are obscured, half-hidden or inverted" (xvii). Many scholars claim that the American criminal and legal systems work as forms of social control and oppression for minorities, especially for African Americans. So much so that the highly acclaimed civil rights lawyer Michelle Alexander calls the system of mass incarceration in the U.S. "the New Jim Crow."[5]

The criminal justice system is only one example of ongoing discrimination. In other areas of life, there are still astounding disparities between African Americans and whites in America. African American adults are two and a half times as likely as whites to be unemployed and five times as likely to be underemployed. Young and educated African Americans still earn less than their white counterparts. For every dollar of wealth held by white households, African American households have less than ten cents. These disparities result in poorer living conditions and thus poorer health conditions (Margulies 70-71). Debates over illegal Latino immigrants and stricter immigration laws are other telltale signs of "post-racial" rhetoric.

The 9/11 attacks also brought to the fore other identity categories for discrimination. 9/11 was rhetorically constructed as an attack on the values and traditions of America—an attack on national identity—and started a debate about the relationship between the American Creed and Islam. After a brief period of religious tolerance right after the attacks, the sentiments in the nation moved steadily towards a negative view of Islam. The religious right denounced Islam in the most incendiary terms and associated it with violence and evil. The indispensability

5 Alexander describes this new system of oppression as follows: "In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don't. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color "criminals" and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals … Once you are labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal" (2).

of racial thinking to the American mind once again became evident when a new identity category was invented that overlapped race and religion: "Muslim-looking" (Margulies 172). Even though the category is nonsensical, its acceptance in America today is widespread.

All these and many more evidence shows that today, practices of othering and demonizing are very much alive in America. The debate over identity in America is between conservative voices that call for a "unified" national identity and that claim that America has already entered the era of "posts," and more liberal voices that insist that discrimination based on different identity categories still exists, in an even more sinister nature. The Gothic mode, as a popular cultural artifact that mobilizes public beliefs and discourses allegorically, can serve as a different kind of lens to read cultural, political and social practices in America. Within the Gothic cultural production in America today, *True Blood* appears as a more subversive allegory that criticizes the practice of "othering" and that proves the concept of "post-racial" America to be a myth through its monstrous formations.

2. True America: *True Blood* as Gothic Allegory

True Blood is a long-form serial drama, which makes the show's universe vast and excessive. As a result, the show is highly polysemic and ambiguous in its stance towards the issues, discourses and ideologies it explores. As Milly Williamson suggests, "serialization as a narrative form is unable to sustain the clear categorization of the moral universe through the unambiguous depiction of good and evil. Serialized narrative produces shifting perspectives and extended middles that contribute to the moral complications that surround characters" (48). What makes it possible for a show like *True Blood* to explore serious contemporary issues of identity is this moral ambiguity, excess and its gothic hybridity. The show does not easily fit into one specific genre category; it is mostly labeled as "telefantasy" (Cherry 13). This article will approach the show as a hybrid Gothic-fantasy and analyze how it creates a contested space for difficult social issues to be explored. In this vein, Rosemary Jackson's influential book, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981), gives us some insights into the larger term "fantasy" and its affinities with the Gothic mode. Jackson associates fantasy with "imagination and desire" (1) and, although she includes the genre of Gothic within the fantasy tradition, she associates it with "unreason

and terror" (96). For her, traditional gothic texts reinforce middle-class ideology and do not have the subversive potential the fantasy tradition has. Jackson's approach to gothic should be seen as the conventional, generic approach and it should be noted that most of her claims for fantasy also hold true for this study's understanding of gothic as a hybrid mode. Moreover, as Freud contended that the death principle cannot be separated from the life principle; the other face of fear is desire. As bell hooks points out in "Eating the Other," the western imagination does not only project its fears onto the other but also creates "fantasies about the Other" and carries a "desire for contact with the Other" (22), which comes from "the seduction of difference" (23). Therefore, the gothic and the fantastic are parts of the same mechanism of "othering," which writes fear and desire onto the body of the other. That is why, in *True Blood*'s world, moments of intense horror blend with moments of intense desire.

The fact that a prime-time television show like *True Blood* can appropriate gothic conventions and monsters in excess and with significant ease, and that the audience of the show can easily recognize the monstrous intertextuality within the show without needing references, reveals that the Gothic is very much in tune with our postmodern times. In the cultural production of "late" capitalism, if, as Frederic Jameson argues, the past has become a museum, a storage of images to be recycled at will, the union of the hybrid mode of Gothic and postmodern form of "pastiche" becomes inevitable. Jerrold Hogle notes that the Gothic, from its beginnings, has made use of "signs only of older signs" which were themselves broken off from many of their past meanings and existed more as "mere signifiers" (15). For Hogle, even the Gothic label, which has no connection to the actual Goths, has been "counterfeit all along" (16). In this view, the Gothic mode is seen as a repository of past images, figures, narratives and tropes available for usage anytime to "symbolize and disguise present concerns, including prejudices" (16). Alan Lloyd-Smith labels this repository of gothic discourses "Heritage Gothic:"

> the Gothic heritage becomes *Heritage Gothic*, a use of now conventional tropes that is legitimated simply through previous practice … But one advantage of this cultural revolving door is that the audience no longer needs persuasion of the authenticity of Gothic entertainments: absurdity or even incoherence are not problems, and the

> author or film maker is freed to play with the form; even to be straightforward in accepting its strangeness as if it were plausible. (126)

Hence, popular television audience of *True Blood* does not even question the implausibility of having all kinds of monsters created throughout the history in the same show. After all, in a Gothic world, the question is not plausibility but the celebration of excess and hybridity. And the Gothic mode is omnipresent in its hybridity:

> the Gothic seems to be so recognizable, even when fragmented and circulating within other forms, that it stubbornly resists its own obsolescence, and invites us instead to recognize its continuing existence, through *hybridity*, as one of the most powerful genres, one which speaks of the depths as well as the surfaces of western culture. (Lloyd-Smith 127)

True Blood might be perceived as "escapist," or "reactionary" in its Gothic excess; however, this study is more interested in the potential postmodern space opened up by Gothic excess and hybridity for certain discourses of power to flow into. For scholars like Judith Halberstam, Gothic excess, in creating hybridity and crisis, creates room for multiple interpretations and paradoxical outcomes. As "multiple interpretations are embedded in the text" of a show like *True Blood*, this creates a polysemic field where "meaning itself runs riot" (2). In its disguise of pure entertainment, a show like *True Blood* also creates a grotesque space for the American history and national character to be contested.

Even though *True Blood* takes Deep South as its setting and uses a truly Southern Gothic iconography and mood, the world it creates is actually representative of the larger world of America. In this vein, the show can be seen as an "allegorical" American Gothic as Eric Savoy defines the term. For Savoy, gothic is most American when it gestures towards allegory. The "allegory" in Savoy's analysis, however, is a fluid tendency rather than a figure, "an impulse rather than a literary artifact" (6). In American Gothic allegory, there is a level of "translucency," i.e. it is not a formulaic, total narrative that stands for another whole experience in reality. In this case, allegory creates a certain "temporality" in which

otherness can return and can be expressed. This temporality, this space created by such an allegory makes American Gothic a temporal frontier for an alternative history to be created.

Through its inscription of the twentieth century socio-political discourses of multiculturalism and American national identity, *True Blood* also strives to recreate a different fragmented history of (in) tolerance for America through its marriage of the monstrous and official discourse in its allegorical frontiers of the real and the imagined. Savoy calls this frontier "an epistemological frontier in which the spatial division between the known and the unknown, the self and the Other, assumes temporal dimensions" (6). In *True Blood*, allegory does not mean that vampires stand for one class of individuals in the American society while werewolves stand for another race etc.; it rather means an opportunity to create a temporal space in which different discourses of power (whether of the marginalized, of politicians, of religious authorities, of media, or of the poor and the rich) can all come back and face one another among the bodies of monsters:

> The gothic cannot function without a proximity of Otherness imagined as its imminent return; consequently, allegory's rhetoric of temporality—its gesturing toward what cannot be explicitly recovered—aspires to a narrative of the return of the Other's plenitude on a frontier in which 'geography' supplements the impossibilities of language, of both national and personal historiography. (Savoy 6-7)

This figuration of allegory in American Gothic as a temporal space in which past repressions of history can be contested characterizes *True Blood*. From its first moments on, the show reveals itself to be an allegory of contemporary America. Carefully looking at the first sequence of the first episode "Strange Love,"[6] one can see most of the issues that are at the forefront of the show's Gothic heterotopia. The opening shot is taken from inside a moving car and shows us a dark road in a swampy Southern geography covered with the American South's "weird" trees. The bluesy soundtrack of this first minute helps to create the Southern Gothic mood. The camera cuts into the car where a young boy gets a hand-job from his girlfriend. Thus, the first act the

6 The HBO DVD set for Seasons 1-6 was used for all the references to the scenes and dialogues in the show.

viewers witness is a sexual act and the camera cutting into the rearview mirror reminds us of our own voyeuristic participation in such acts in the show. Next, we see a neon sign, a familiar symbol of contemporary postmodern commodity culture, which says "We Have Tru Blood." As the camera moves into the supermarket with the two teenagers, we are again reminded of our position as viewers through shots from the market's security mirror.

In the store, the clerk is watching *Real Time With Bill Maher* (an actual talk show airing on HBO) on television and the issue being discussed is race, in a quite different context but with uncannily familiar words. The spokesperson of AVL (American Vampires League) Nan Flanagan talks about how vampires are "citizens" since they pay their taxes and deserve basic civil rights like everyone else. When asked about the violence vampires have exercised on humans, Nan points out there is no documentation and lashes back with; "Doesn't your race have a history of violence and exploitation? We've never owned slaves Bill, or detonated nuclear weapons." The plea for civil rights and the pointing of fingers over the discourse of race on who is more violent have special connotations in the Southern Gothic space of the show. What is more, this is the first incidence of many others when characters in *True Blood* learn about the bigger world of America through their television screens. Media's role in disseminating discourses of power is one of the issues that is constantly being emphasized in the show.

The camera cuts down to the store clerk watching the television, stylized in a truly Gothic fashion with leather, chains, a bracelet made out of bullets and long dark hair. Our eyes also catch the name of a brand of a product on the counter: "Red Man." As the clerk pretends to be a vampire to impress the teenagers, they ask if they can "score some V" from the clerk. When the potbellied, flannel-wearing customer in the store reveals himself as the true vampire, the teenagers run away. The scene mocks the idea that one can spot a vampire from his mannerisms and clothes and shows us how vampirism also came to be associated with a style. The actual vampire of the scene puts a six-pack of TruBlood on the counter and the camera cuts into a low-angle shot of the bottles reminiscent of product commercials. The vampire threatens to kill the store clerk if he pretends to be "one of them" again and leaves the store.

Thus, in less than five minutes, *True Blood*'s America is revealed to the viewers: In the obsession of the young generation with vampires,

we can see a culture itself obsessed with youth, sex and violence. We see a culture obsessed with difference (whether it be race, sexuality, or species) and which loves to talk about it every chance it gets. We see a culture hooked on drugs; literal ones like V (vampire blood) and methamphetamines or more cultural ones like television. We see a totally commodified, consumer culture in which even a life-giving substance like blood can become commodified and sold as a product. All these issues that surface during the first sequence of the show permeate the world of *True Blood* as more issues are added to the mix.

The Deep South small town of Bon Temps in the show can be seen as a microcosm for *True Blood*'s allegorical American Gothic project. For a small Louisiana town, Bon Temps has a vibrantly diverse population, made up from religious and secular communities, public employees, business owners, different individuals who represent different elements of American life. Foy calls Bon Temps's community "typically American:" "A community of individuals all trying to carve out a space for themselves in which to pursue the things that make them happy" (54). In their "pursuit of happiness," the characters, from day to day, see that America does not always live up to its promises of tolerance and individual rights. In its exposing of the intolerance and discrimination within the heart of the nation, *True Blood* can thus be read, as Ruddell and Cherry suggest, "as a critique of the American Dream" (50).

The show opens up its small town setting to the larger discourses within the nation through emphasizing the role of the media in disseminating the discourses of diversity and discrimination. The power of television is omnipresent in the show as most of the main characters watch television news and talk shows to get informed about the larger American socio-political developments. The characters constantly watch political, religious and civic figures discuss about evil, morality, violence and vampire rights. This omnipresence of television within a television show serves two ends. First of all, through the metaphor of vampires and their newly-gained extreme visibility within the nation, *True Blood* creates a world saturated in violence (also with occasional references to the war in the Middle East), discrimination and debates on "human rights." As such, the show seeks to incorporate a lot of the current real-life discourses in America today. On a second level, *True Blood*, through its constant depictions of people watching television in a television serial, creates a double-layered, self-referential

discourse about its own status as a television show. One instance this self-referentiality becomes apparent is when Arlene, a waitress, talking to her kids on the phone, says, "If Rene tells you, you are too young to watch a scary movie on HBO, I side with him" ("Strange Love"). This instance is a typical example of how HBO is playing with postmodern knowingness; as a scary show on HBO, *True Blood* is warning its younger viewers against watching scary shows on HBO.

In its self-referential allegorical critique of America, *True Blood* uses supernatural monsters, especially vampires, as fluid metaphors and incorporates different forms of discrimination that permeate American society in its discourse of speciesism. Televised narratives of vampires have been around ever since *Dark Shadows* (1966-1971) and vampire narratives have run across a different range of genres from teen comedy/drama and gangster drama to detective story and soap opera. Most televised vampires, following Anne Rice's sympathetic first-person protagonists, have been depicted as reluctant, existentially suffering, sympathetic anti-heroes and the vampire has lost its connection to evil. *True Blood* changes this formula and creates a world where vampires no longer *need* to drink human blood because a synthetic substitute has been developed. As such, the show's vampires appear both sympathetic and scary, depending on the individual characters. The show, even though it also depicts individual vampires' stories, in its larger narrative, also focuses on the vampire *community* and its interaction with the human community in America. In this vein, it might be useful to first explore how the two communities interact on the public and national level before going deeper into the other ways the show explores the vampire metaphor.

One way the show creates this larger-world vampire-human interaction is through its depictions of television talk shows within its narrative, where the contemporary political and religious discourse in America is constantly being invoked through the discussion of vampire rights. As such, *True Blood* also frequently refers to the increasing cultural polarization between Right Wing Christian fundamentalism and progressive liberalism in America. It is no coincidence that the first vampire we see on the show, albeit on another television screen, is the spokesperson for the American Vampire League (AVL), Nan Flanagan, who has dedicated her life to attaining equal rights for vampires and passing the Vampire Rights Amendment (VRA), which would provide constitutional recognition of vampires, allowing them

to file suit against public acts of discrimination and protecting them from attempts to infringe on their social, political, and economic rights (a play on ERA and the Civil Rights Act). In her television debates and elsewhere in the political arena, Nan is usually pitched against different Republican politicians or the representatives of the Fellowship of the Sun, a fundamentalist Christian group run by "pro-living" crusaders like Rev. Steve Newlin. The television appearances of these public figures constantly invade the show's narrative of the everyday life of its characters.

In one of his television appearances, Steve Newlin calls vampires immoral and says: "I am more concerned with basic human rights, the right for our sons and daughters to go to school without fear of molestation by blood-thirsty predators on the playground or in the classroom" ("The Fourth Man In the Fire"). Combining the familiar fear discourses about homosexuals and sexual predators in America with his speciesism, Newlin is able to call for "human rights" because, in his worldview, vampires are not humans. In this formulation, vampires are evil and immoral because they feed on people whom they, with justification, see as their inferiors. Thus, the play over the term "human rights" in the show creates a critique of Western humanism and its long history of "othering." Throughout Western history, one of the main justifications offered for depriving certain groups, such as women or racial minorities, of their civil rights has been that they are somehow less than human (e.g. women as weaker sex, or Africans as animalistic savages). Anything that is not human is seen as mere things and exist only to be used by human beings as a means to an end. The horrible extension of this logic in the Western mind has been that the Western civilization are also entitled to hunt and enslave other human beings. Thus, speciesism can be seen as the first step (or the justification point) of sexism and racism.

In more traditional vampire narratives, it is only the vampires that feed on humans. *True Blood* complicates this formula by depicting a universe where humans exploit vampires as well. The "V juice," the blood of the vampires in the show, is a powerful drug for humans. Hence, a lot of humans hunt and drain vampires for their blood and vampires become valuable commodities. On the other hand, the classic predator story continues on the vampires' side and a lot of the vampires in the show see human beings as lower forms of life in the food chain. As such, *True Blood*, in its conflict between vampires and humans,

creates a complicated moralistic universe where speciesism runs both ways. The show, both in its vampires who see humans as inferior and in its humans who cannot deal with such a view, hints at the hypocrisy and violence at the heart of speciesism. As Blayde and Dunn suggest:

> *True Blood* reveals how self-serving and questionable those arguments really are when it shows vampires reasoning along the same lines to justify the slaughter and exploitation of the species *they* regard as inferior—us. *True Blood* lets us see what it would be like to be a member of an exploited species. In so doing, it asks us to reexamine our prejudices about what constitutes the value of a living creature and perhaps reconsider whether our 'civic duties' might reach beyond the boundaries of our own species. (46)

For the religious right, this speciesism (supposedly perpetrated by vampires) gives the right to human beings to protect their communities at all costs. In another instance, Newlin defends the validity of hate for higher aims: "He is the force of love. But how do we respond to forces that block, undermine and destroy love. Well, you cannot love evil. You have to hate it. So, hating evil is really, loving good" ("Scratches"). Newlin claims that in the war between the darkness and light, people have to pick sides and that they need hate to survive. The Fellowship of the Sun's fear-mongering discourse and demonization of vampires as evil and immoral are very familiar discourses for America, where marginalized figures have been cast as evil monsters throughout the nation's history. Jackson suggests that

> The concept of evil, which is usually attached to the other, is relative, transforming with shifts in cultural fears and values. Any social structure tends to exclude as 'evil' anything radically different from itself or which threatens it with destruction, and this conceptualization, this naming of difference as evil, is a significant ideological gesture. (52)

As such, vampires are "evil" because they are different and as an identity category, the vampire has the power to subvert the familiar and the known.

In the second season of the show, the Fellowship of the Sun

organizes a leadership conference at their "the Light of Day Institute," to train people to spread their ideology for a fee of one thousand two hundred dollars. The Fellowship is actually training an army of spiritual soldiers whom they call "Soldiers of the Sun," preparing for a war against vampires. The discourse for the justification of violence for higher moralistic and religious aims has a familiar ring for the twenty-first century America fighting a spiritual war against Islam. At the institute, Steve uses a familiar sentence: "The line has been drawn. You are either with us or against us" ("Timebomb"). In a symbolically charged scene, during a role-play activity at the camp, Jason, as a Soldier of the Sun, has to deal with Sarah (Steve's wife), who is pretending to be a vampire. When Sarah does not listen to reason and threatens to eat Jason's loved ones, Jason has no choice but to turn to violent action. In quite a resourceful way, Jason grabs the flag of the United States in the room, breaks the pole on his leg and uses that as a stake to stab Sarah in the heart. The scene is quite symbolic in the usage of the American flag as a weapon to destroy the "other." *True Blood* openly criticizes the nation's use of power and violence against its chosen others. Another symbolically charged scene is when one of the soldiers from the Institute, in a fit of violence, enters a house full of vampires as a suicide bomber and explodes himself ("Timebomb"). After the suicide attack, on television, Sarah and Steve talk about the events. Sarah says, "We are fighting for God's green earth, and daytime, and Christmas, and Easter eggs and all that is sacred and good. We are fighting for…," and Steve finishes her sentence: "Human rights. HUMAN rights!" ("I Will Rise Up"). The depiction of a fundamentalist Christian as a suicide bomber and the condoning of violence as a necessary fight for "human rights" thus create a liberal counter-narrative against the fundamentalist right-wing tendencies in America. Dennis Rothermel suggests that the discourse used by the Fellowship of the Sun

> incorporates the deliberate selective violence of anti-abortion extremists, the sanctimoniousness of the anti-gay marriage movements, the xenophobia of the anti-illegal immigrant movements, the para-military zealotry of American football culture and the resentfulness underlying the Tea Party's fanatical opposition to health care insurance being extended to all. (96)

Thus, fundamentalist Christian "human beings" in the show's narrative are depicted as some of the true monsters in America today. As opposed to this public image of the Fellowship, the public discourse appropriated by the vampires echoes the previous fights for equality from American history and adds a discourse against speciesism. On the AVL website, we find a letter from Nan addressed to the supporters of vampire equality, in which she signs off by explicitly evoking the memory of the civil rights movement with a quote from the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.: "The arc of the universe is long. But it bends toward justice." In the letter, Flanagan states that they are working for "the passage of landmark legislation guaranteeing a basic set of rights for all sentient beings." In her interview on *Real Time with Bill Maher*, Nan says, "We're citizens. We pay taxes. We deserve basic civil rights just like everyone else" and in her *In Focus* interview, she questions the discourses of othering: "Who's to say what's natural? Who's to say that what my body can do is any less natural than what yours can do?" The arguments made by Nan are possible only because most of the vampires, now, in the public sphere at least, have chosen "mainstreaming," a replacement for the word "assimilation." The problem about mainstreaming, however, is that it is essentially a performance—vampires acting like humans. In order to be fully incorporated into the society, vampires *chose* not to drink human blood. This also entails vampires hiding certain more disturbing fact about themselves from the public eye. In order to be able to integrate into the human society, vampires perpetuated certain myths about themselves, such as their adverse reactions to crucifixes and their inability to be photographed, in order to appear weaker than they really are. This performative and constructed nature of mainstreaming is also emphasized in the show through the fact that, in contrast to everyday vampires, Nan's is a carefully constructed public image that is supposed to be attractive and non-threatening to humans and she carefully sidesteps all the questions that would lead to a threatening portrayal of vampires. In contrast, in her private time, we constantly see Nan in more "Gothic" clothes and also witness her feeding on humans. In the repeated appearances of Nan on television, where she carefully tries to maintain the public image and in continuously depicting vampires drinking blood from humans, the show highlights the constructedness of the "official" face of the vampire community.

Furthermore, not all vampires agree with the mainstreaming policy. In the third season, the vampire king of Mississippi, Russell

Edgington shatters this benign public image of vampires when he breaks in to the studio of a news broadcast and rips off the spine of the anchor on live television. Russell, then, sits in the anchor's chair and delivers his own message to the nation:

> The American Vampire League wishes to perpetrate the notion that we are just like you. And I suppose, in a few small ways, we are. We're narcissists, we care only about getting what we want no matter what the cost, just like you. Global warming, perpetual war, toxic waste, child labor, torture, genocide. That's a small prize to pay for your SUVs and your flat screen TVs, your blood diamonds, your designer jeans, your absurd, garish Mcmansions. Futile symbols of permanence to quail your quivering, spineless souls. But no, in the end, we are NOTHING like you. We are immortal because we drink the true blood. Blood that is living, organic and human. … Why would we seek equal rights? You are not our equals. We will eat you after we eat your children. ("Everything Is Broken")

Russell's view of human beings as lesser creatures is actually shared by many vampires, just as the Fellowship's views are shared by many human beings. This shattering of the public image of vampires, in Seasons five and six, leads to a full-blown human-vampire war, depicting the extreme consequences of a world-view based on "othering."

In Season five, the storyline takes us to the vampire Authority headquarters (some sort of vampire government) run by the chancellors and the Guardian (some sort of vampire president). The Authority has been struggling to make coexistence with humans a lasting reality: the Guardian even associates himself with JFK and Martin Luther King Jr. in their efforts for the Civil Rights. However, we learn that there is a faction among vampires, Sanguinistas, whose aim is to stop integration. According to the show's narrative, Sanguinistas believe in "the Original Testament," or the "Vampire Bible," which predates both the old and new testaments. According to this original document, before Adam and Eve, God created Lilith, who, like God, was a vampire, which leads the Sanguinistas to claim that vampires were created in God's image, not humans. Adam and Eve's true purpose was to create a race that would feed vampires: "And their flesh shall nourish yours, their blood shall

flow within you for as the beetle nourishes the lark, so shall human nourish vampire" ("Authority Always Wins"). We learn that, after his murderous act on television, Russell became a hero for Sanguinistas, the "poster boy with the anti-mainstream movement, their Osama Bin Laden" ("Whatever I Am, You Made Me"). Even though these "terrorist" extremists who believe that humans are just food for vampires are pitched against the Authority and the mainstreamers, it is obvious that the Authority's position is not as clear cut as it seems. To maintain their power over the unruly vampires, the Authority has developed new torture techniques such as exposing the prisoners to UV light and injecting silver into their veins (sunlight kills vampires and silver weakens them). Thus, the indication is that authority figures do not hesitate in hurting "their own kind" when it comes to maintaining the status quo. Moreover, even though the Authority, in the public arena, works for mainstreaming, they also believe in the vampire Bible and Lilith. Early on in the season, in their council meetings, we see the members of the Authority go through an elaborate ritual during which each member tastes a drop of Lilith's blood from a vile which they keep in a glass shelf and to which they bow down to.

As the season continues, the Authority changes its face completely. As the chancellors drink Lilith's blood, they start to get high and slaughter humans in their intoxication and religious frenzy since they all see Lilith appearing to them and believe that their actions are sanctioned by God. The Authority, then, starts secretly attacking and destroying the Tru Blood factories across the nation in order to force other vampires to feed on humans as well. Steve as the AVL spokesperson, in a television appearance says, "We at the AVL are working closely with our friends at Homeland Security to find the terrorists who cut off our food supply. But people should not have any fear of leaving their house tonight" ("Gone, Gone, Gone"). This appropriation of the familiar American national discourse suggests that the clear-cut opposition between "us" and "them," between the righteous American and the evil "terrorist" may not be as clear cut as it seems.

Thus, most vampires in *True Blood* are not innocent. In the larger political, public level, the vampire community can be seen as serving a metaphor for the danger of too much power. The actions of the Authority— their trying to keep a benign public face while retaining their belief in a separatist religion, their torturing their own "citizens" to keep the order, their final yielding to the violent ways endorsed by a

fundamental religion and their creating a public discourse about some "terrorists," which actually serves to hide their own actions—works as a perfect allegory for an America, which has been fighting a "spiritual" war against "terror" in the Middle East and an America, which is not afraid to encroach on its citizens' rights in order to keep the nation safe. However, *True Blood* complicates these issues further in its sixth season as the humans organize and retaliate against the vampires.

In the first episode of the sixth season, Louisiana governor Truman organizes an urgent press conference and addresses his citizens. He urges them to obtain guns and protect themselves against the murderous vampires. After a vampire among the crowd throws blood on him in protest, the governor adds, "As Andrew Jackson once said, peace, above all things, must be desired. But blood sometimes be shed to obtain it on equitable and lasting terms" ("Who Are You, Really?"). Once again, the national discourse—with reference to one of its presidents—is manipulated and used to create fear among people and make them organize against a common enemy. By now, human beings have manufactured silver bullets that emit UV light and contact lenses that will protect them against the glamoring of the vampires and they use them in their war against the vampires. The governor also uses a more sinister weapon against the vampires; as he has become partners with Yakonomo corporation and he lets them use his factory for the manufacturing of Tru Blood. He contaminates the synthetic blood with the new disease of HepV, which kills vampires. In this world of advanced military and biological weaponry, the culmination point is the governor's vampire prison, which also acts as a cover for the research facility that makes all sorts of experiments on vampires (observing their intercourse, making them run in hamster wheels, torturing them, etc) in order to come up with a formula that would "eradicate the vampire race" ("You're No Good").

As *True Blood*'s larger public narrative gets more and more violent, from the accumulation of images and discourses of othering, the viewers are left with a vision that casts the power discourse itself as monstrous. The roles of the religious and national discourses in creating hate for the sake of maintaining status quo is omnipresent. As things escalate between the two opposite groups, none of the sides is innocent. As such, in its larger narrative, *True Blood* depicts a world where othering and demonizing leads to hate, to violence, to "terrorist" acts and then to more systematic violence through advanced

weaponry, through "Nazi" concentration camps and through war. The show, borrowing real life instances from human history and American history, creates an allegorical world in which America, as a nation, ends up fighting a war against a group of people (vampires), who believes in a different prophet. As such, *True Blood*, in its counter-historical allegory, depicts America as monstrous on a larger national level through its depictions of the abuse of power by the authority figures who manipulate the discourse of speciesism for their benefit.

True Blood is indeed a crucible in which various discourses of power intermingle and return in monstrous form. The show creates a world in which individual members of American society also use, abuse and are subjected to different power discourses of hate and intolerance. Thus, the show uses the history of America and borrows from different discourses of othering that has been used for different minority groups and blend them into its crucible of monstrous America. On the level of its individual characters, the show continues its gothic allegorical stance.

True Blood, for example, makes use of the gay rights movement's discourse, the discourse of the demonization of homosexuals in America and the gay jargon in its exploration of the vampire metaphor. The opening titles of the show includes a visual reference to a neon church billboard with the slogan "God hates fangs" emblazoned upon in, which echoes the slogan "God hates fags" of the bigot Baptist pastor Fred Phelps used in his anti-gay propaganda.[7] This pun in the title sequence seems to be a critique of the tensions surrounding the assimilation of gay men and lesbians into the heteronormative culture of America. Indeed, many references in the show associate the experience of the vampires with gays. As vampires "come out of the coffin," they have to hide their true identity (mainstreaming) in order to live alongside humans. Also in the show, it is hinted that the way vampires have sex is "not natural." In the show's metaphorical playing field, the metaphor of bloodsucking and the vampire's unnatural sexuality are played together to echo discourses othering homosexuality. Vampires are encouraged to mainstream, to conform, deny drinking of human blood in favor of Tru Blood. Thus, the assimilation of the homosexual (vampire) into

7 Gay rights supporters have denounced Phelps as a producer of anti-gay propaganda and violence-inspiring hate speech. Phelps's church, the Westboro Baptist Church, is considered a hate group and monitored by the Anti-Defamation League and Southern Poverty Law Center.

mainstream culture demands abstinence from transgressive sexuality.

However, the othering discourses of class, gender and sexuality usually intermingle with the race issue in the show. *True Blood* mostly uses its speciesism debate to make comments about the role of race and racial thinking in American society. One symbolically charged scene occurs in the beginning of the second season, in the episode "Nothing But The Blood," when Lafayette (a gay, African-American short-order cook) is kidnapped by Eric (the vampire sheriff of Area 5) because he was dealing vampire blood. Lafayette is kept in Eric's basement with other human prisoners who are all chained to a big wheel on the ceiling and the characters are seen to turn the wheel to change their positions in order to reach the bucket that serves as their toilet. During this scene, the extreme close-ups of Lafayette in chains, forced to push the wheel with a desperate look in his face clearly echoes the experience of the slave ships and refers to the experience of African American bodies who led their lives in bondage in the South. As such, Ball explores the issue of race in the American South through the dark body of Lafayette.

Another important African American character in the show is Tara, a young woman, who is also Sookie's best friend and foil. Tara is a perfect example for the place of African Americans in post-racial America. She can be seen as Sookie's foil because as Sookie defends tolerance and understanding of difference—because she is different herself—Tara is cautious about vampires, is prejudiced against them and advises Sookie to stay away. It is quite ironic that, as a marginalized individual herself, Tara struggles to find tolerance in her heart for others. When she warns Sookie and says "You know they can hypnotize you!" Sookie reveals Tara's hypocritical prejudice: "Yeah. Black people are lazy and Jews have horns" ("The First Taste"). Tara is actually a sign of post-racial America in her paradoxical status. Cruelly named after the plantation in *Gone With the Wind*, Tara often uses the race card, as a reminder of Southern racism, sarcastically and to get what she wants from other people. She is usually aggressive, confrontational, and rebellious in her dealings with people (can be seen as another articulation of the angry black woman stereotype), which leads her boss Sam to ask her to remind him why he hired her in the first place. Tara answers, "You hired me because of affirmative action" ("The First Taste"). In another instance, when she lies for Jason to save him from prison, she says that they are a couple and they have been keeping it a secret. When the Sheriff asks why they did that, Tara, once again uses

the race card: "People think just cause we got vampires out in the open now race ain't an issue no more. But have you seen how white folks look at mixed couples in this town? Race may not be the hot button issue it once was but it's still a button you can push on people" ("Escape From Dragon House"). Tara is both a sign and a critique of post-racial America in her simultaneous exploitation and criticism of racism in the South. Tara's seemingly out-of-place reference to the fear of miscegenation is completed further in the show through the depiction of vampire-human couples.

Especially in the first season of the show, the human characters are shown to be both disgusted and amazed by the idea of vampire-human sex. From the first episode, the anxieties over vampire sex is revealed when Jason talks to a woman he is having sex with and learns that she regularly has sex with vampires. Jason is both disturbed and fascinated by the idea and he says he read in Hustler that everybody should have sex with a vampire at least once. Throughout the season, the white woman characters who have sex with vampires are killed one by one, which increases the anxieties in the society about white women having sex with "monsters." At the end of the season, it is revealed that the murders were committed by a human who hates vampires (and women for that matter). This discourse of repulsion and fear of forbidden sex with monsters and the simultaneous hypersexualization of the vampire figure echoes the past fears of miscegenation with its discourse of African American "beasts" threatening white womanhood and the accompanying hypersexualization of African American men. It is no coincidence, therefore, that in the first season, all the murdered victims who previously had sex with vampires are white women.

The show also invokes the fear of miscegenation in the Deep South setting in its first episode when Bill (Sookie's vampire lover) comes to the town bar Merlotte's to visit Sookie. The two are irresistibly drawn to each other and as Sookie walks toward Bill's table and meets him, the camera changes its position and starts to canvas the bar from where Bill and Sookie are sitting. As the camera does a full circle, it is revealed that every single individual in the bar—who are all recognizably lower-class whites, except, ironically, Tara—is staring at the mixed couple with disapproval and disdain. When the show's Deep South setting is taken into account, the scene invokes the tensions around "mixed couples," which was, and maybe still is, prominent in the region.

Thus, in a show like *True Blood*, where there are frequent references to the Civil Rights Movement's discourse and leaders, it comes with the territory (literally) that the discourse of speciesism almost always echoes or blends into the discourse of racism. *True Blood*'s small Louisiana town is a place where hate crimes are a fact of everyday life. In season five, we witness an anti-supe (anti-supernatural creatures) gang of masked thugs who model themselves after Ku Klux Klan. This group, Keep America Human, also has a website, where they have their "Human Patriot Manifesto," in which they claim: "Vampires and other covert mutants are stealing our jobs, buying our politicians, controlling the media, and seducing our children. If we have any chance of keeping America human, brave citizens like us have got to stand up and fight back."[8] Thus, the group uses anti-immigration, anti-homosexual and racist discourses from American history in order to legitimate the eradication of the vampire "race." Most ironically, this hate group includes an African American member and in their attacks, instead of Klan-like hoods, these thugs wear Obama masks. The choice of Obama masks is quite provocative for the show; even though Obama *is* the President of U.S., he is, after all, black. Thus in typical *True Blood* fashion, the discourse of hate and racism is projected unto the "supposedly" post-racial America of tolerance and diversity.

There are many other instances in the show when we witness the blending of the speciesism discourse with race. As humans, especially fundamentalist Christians fear and other the vampire "race," so do vampires usually see humans as the inferior "race." In "Escape From Dragon House," Sam claims that, "Humans shouldn't go to vampire bars" and Sookie asks him, "You want to return to the days of separate but equal?" Sam's answer is quite matter-of-fact: "We cannot be equal. We need to be separate." In probably the most sarcastic and humorous instance where speciesism and racism collide, Arlene's son, upon seeing Bill, turns to his mother and says, "Momma, he is so white!" Arlene's answer is: "No darling. We are white. He is dead" ("Sparks Fly Out"). This two-sentence dialogue sums up the show's double discourse; while speciesism invokes racism, racism is also still very much in existence in human life.

As a result, what sets apart *True Blood* from any other "vampire show" on television is its intentional incorporation of the political and cultural issues of America past and present while, at the same time,

8 Can be reached on www.keepamericahuman.com.

retaining a distanced humorous perspective. *True Blood* displaces the issues of racial and sexual difference in America and discourses surrounding these issues onto its vampires (and sometimes onto other supernaturals). This makes the show a more subversive text than most of the seemingly "realistic" shows on American television today. The fact that a show like *True Blood* can so easily invoke and explore the discourses of difference is evidence for the subversive potential of fantasy and the Gothic.

According to Jackson, modern fantasy is not about inventing a totally strange non-human world but about "inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* 'new', absolutely 'other' and different" (8). As fantasy, and also the Gothic, transforms this world into something "strange," it represents our own world back to us as "re-placed and dis-located" (19). This dislocation, which can also be found in *True Blood*'s "strange" universe of the Deep South, defies unity and closure, and opens up a space for silenced "other" meanings to be explored. Fantasy "introduces multiple, contradictory 'truths': it becomes polysemic" (23). According to Jackson, in this polysemy and in its bringing back the silenced "others," fantasy is opposed to institutional order and throws back on to the dominant culture what it seeks to abject: "Un-doing those unifying structures and significations upon which social order depends, fantasy functions to subvert and undermine cultural stability" (69). *True Blood*, in its fantastical gothic "transformation" of discourses centering on difference from American national, political and cultural life into a discourse of species difference, reveals how despising the Other is actually a function of building identity. Whether it is homosexuals, blacks, Muslims or vampires, the American identity needs its "others."

In the polysemic, postmodern space of *True Blood*, simple formulas do not work. In the show's allegorical American Gothic/Fantastic landscape, it is difficult to pinpoint which identity category is actually being demonized. What the show does, rather, is to use its monstrous creatures and humans to *expose how othering, demonization and fear works* by exploring its mechanisms as manifested in different discourses and instances in American history. As a result, what is revealed as monstrous in the show is "othering" itself and America's obsession with that practice.

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