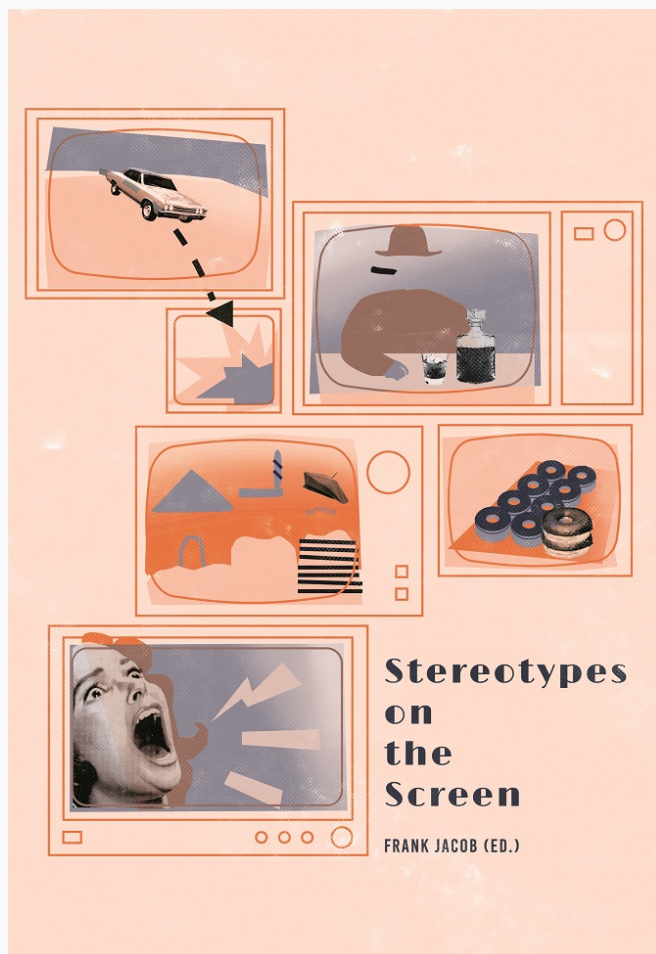


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### “No Darlin’ We’re White. He’s Dead.” Southern Hospitality and Reconfigurations of Discrimination in True Blood

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## 5.

# “No Darlin’ We’re White. He’s Dead.” Southern Hospitality and Reconfigurations of Discrimination in *True Blood*

Verena BERNARDI

### Introduction

The publications of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s (1814-1873) *Carmilla*<sup>1</sup> (1872) and Bram Stoker’s (1847-1912) *Dracula*<sup>2</sup> (1897) gave rise to the long literary tradition of using the figure of the vampire as a platform for the discussion of societal issues. Thus it comes as no surprise that in the last twenty years also television shows (e.g. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Being Human*, etc.) have, to an increasing extent, taken the opportunity to not simply entertain but also expose societal problems and injustices of the present and the past.

The HBO series *True Blood* has often been interpreted in terms of its depiction of the vampire as a metaphor for the discussion of gay rights, the gay liberation movement and the struggle the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer+) community has faced in the process. While this is surely a central underlying topic, the series was created in a way which leaves ample room for the discussion of many other issues, such as the question of racism and gender equality in the US, sexuality, religion, the heritage of the Civil War as well as the aftermath of war and terror in a post-9/11 society.

The aim of this paper is to analyze *True Blood*’s depiction of Southern hospitality, a well-known characteristic but also stereotype of Southern culture. Focusing on the series’ discussion of the discrepancy between Southern

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Costello-Sullivan, ed., *Carmilla By Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu – A Critical Edition* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Nina Auerbach and David J. Skal, eds., *Dracula Bram Stoker – A Norton Critical Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997).

hospitality and discrimination arising from the characters' struggle with their Southern identities, the South is displayed as being othered but also as othering itself through its manners, traditions and inherent attitudes.

### ***True Blood***

The American TV series *True Blood* aired from September 7, 2008 to August 24, 2014 and was made up of seven seasons, comprising eighty episodes revolving around the lives of the main-character Sookie Stackhouse as well as the lives of her family and friends which drastically change with the arrival of vampires in Bon Temps. Due to the series being broadcast on HBO (Home Box Office) – a premium cable and satellite television network – the series was granted more freedom in terms of its depiction of sexuality and violence. Based on *The Southern Vampire Mysteries Series* by Charlaine Harris, *True Blood* diverges more and more from the plots of the thirteen novels as the series progresses.

Located in rural northern Louisiana, the fictional small town of Bon Temps plays a central role in the representation of the societal set-up. Its location in the “Deep South of America” renders the town a microcosm for discussions of aforementioned issues, i.e. race and gender equality, with Bon Temps serving as an exemplary depiction of the South and its divergence from popular expectations.

*True Blood's* characters range from the regular town folk to dominatrix-style lesbians and murderous psychopaths, also regularly exploiting Southern clichés and stereotypes such as the Southern Belle and Gentleman (Sookie and Bill, even if only at first glance), white supremacist rednecks, town drunks or the lone flamboyant homosexual like Lafayette. The characters' outward appearances might be misleading with some searching for belonging and acceptance in a modern society, and others appearing to want to assimilate but having no intention of doing so in earnest. However, as viewers find out throughout the series, it is not only the vampires who are

dangerous, violent and evil but even more so the human population of Bon Temps.

In the first few minutes, viewers are introduced to the underlying topic and essence of the show, as they obtain the position of a silent observer, watching a TV discussion between HBO's Bill Maher (as himself) and American Vampire League spokeswoman Nan Flanagan on a small screen at a gas station:

Example 1

Nan Flanagan: We're citizens. We pay taxes. We deserve basic civil rights just like everyone else.

Bill Maher: Yeah, but, I mean, come on. Doesn't your race have a rather sordid history of exploiting and feeding off innocent people? ... For centuries.

Nan Flanagan: Three points. ... Number one: Show me documentation. Doesn't exist. Number two: Doesn't YOUR race have a history of exploitation? We never owned slaves, Bill, or detonated nuclear weapons. And most importantly point number three: Now that the Japanese have perfected synthetic blood which satisfies all of our nutritional needs there's no reason for ANYone to fear us. I can assure you that every member of our community is now drinking synthetic blood. That's why we made our existence known. We just want to be part of mainstream society.<sup>3</sup>

As Nan Flanagan states in the last sentence "We just want to be part of mainstream society", it becomes clear throughout the series that it is not only the vampires in *True Blood* who constitute either a separate class, race or species, but also the characters of color as well as characters who display from heteronormativity-divergent sexual orientations. What the members of all these groups have in common is that they do not seem to achieve the same status in society as their non-vampire, white and heterosexual neighbors. How difficult the

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Ball, "Strange Love," *True Blood*, season 1, episode 1, directed by Alan Ball, aired September 7, 2008 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010), DVD, 1:03.

objective of justice and equality for all still is in a modern world where supernatural creatures are part of everyday, or rather “every night” life, can be seen in the disparities of Southern hospitality and the acceptance of the vampiric newcomers throughout the series. Just as the vampires with their “rather sordid history of exploiting and feeding off innocent people”, the American South also hosts its own violent past. Bill Maher’s statement can here be interpreted as an accurate description and portrayal of the history of this region, previously mentioned, the South has continuously been othered in literature and popular culture. At the same time, it has also contributed to this process through, for instance, its insistence to the right to carry weapons, the discrimination of the region’s non-heteronormative-conforming population as well as the occurrence of race-related hate-crimes and police violence. One could argue that Nan Flanagan’s statement of the vampires’ quest to be “part of mainstream society” also rings true for the American South as it voices the Southern states’ reputed yearning to be a fully recognized equal member of the community of the United States.

### ***True Blood* and (Southern) Gothic**

The TV series *True Blood* is known first and foremost for its overly dramatic and exaggerated depiction of sexuality and violence in small town life. Adopted as almost common practice for a number of television series, this plethora of clichés and stereotypes gives viewers the choice of either buying into the action on screen, or adopting a more objective perspective. It can be argued that this exaggeration then functions as a means of illuminating societal issues through a lens of irony and dark humor.

As the Gothic genre is celebrated for its allowance of multiple interpretations of its texts and as “a literature of fear,

ambiguity, and transgression,”<sup>4</sup> it – and especially the Southern Gothic sub-genre – is ideal for a show such as *True Blood*. The series’ location in northern Louisiana as well as the fact that a great part of the plot takes place at night – when the vampires come out to play – already create a certain mystification. Especially the main character Sookie tends to put herself in situations common for the Gothic genre. Seemingly fulfilling all characteristics stereotypical for the damsel in distress in the Gothic genre, Sookie is a pretty, blond, naïve young (virgin) waitress with the gift of telepathy which leads to her othering in Bon Temps’ society as being “crazy as a bed bug.”<sup>5</sup> However, as the series progresses, Sookie regularly subverts the cliché of the “Gothic heroine”<sup>6</sup> who runs away from danger in a white gown when she for instance runs across the cemetery to Bill’s house at night, only wearing a white nightgown. Similarly, the main character seems to provoke dangerous situations as for example when Sookie takes the vampire Bill to a walk across a cemetery at night<sup>7</sup> or when she goes to the vampire bar *Fangtasia* wearing a white dress with red floral print showing lots of cleavage, giving the vampires an unobstructed, almost deliberate view not only of her bosom but also her neck.

As Punter and Byron point out, the combination of traditional Gothic elements with “the particular concerns of the American South” leads to “an emphasis on the grotesque,

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<sup>4</sup> Charles L. Crow, “Fear, Ambiguity, and Transgression: The Gothic Novel in the United States,” in *A Companion to the American Novel*, ed. Alfred Bendixen (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 129-146.

<sup>5</sup> Ball, *True Blood*, season 1, episode 1.

<sup>6</sup> Katie Saulnier, “From Virtuous Virgins to Vampire Slayers: The Evolution of the Gothic Heroine from the Early Gothic to Modern Horror,” *Watcher Junior* 4.1 (2009), <http://www.watcherjunior.tv/04/saulnier.php>.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Buckner, “Escape from Dragon House,” *True Blood*, season 1, episode 4, directed by Michael Lehmann, aired September 7, 2008 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010), DVD.

the macabre and, very often, the violent”<sup>8</sup> as can be seen in the many instances of aggression and violence between the series’ humans and vampires. In season 1, viewers are exposed to both, instances of human as well as vampiric violence. Not only are viewers introduced to three vampires who keep humans as pets and food resource until they tire of them and eventually drain and kill them, but we also see humans who take the law into their own hands, simply setting these vampires’ “nest” on fire, ridding the world of them for good. Aside from human-vampire aggression, however, viewers also observe human-human aggression as when Matt and Michelle Rattray beat Sookie in the forest at night, until only Bill’s interception and blood can save her from certain death.

The combination of the gothic genre and the use of the vampire as a destabilizing figure of identity form the ideal foundation for the discussion of societal issues and the negotiation of various cultural conflicts. Needless to say, vampires are known for their usefulness in the analysis of race, as can be seen in the anti-Semitic reading of Stoker’s *Dracula*<sup>9</sup>. *True Blood* takes up this tradition by drawing a concept of discrimination in various forms, revealing that past mistreatments of certain groups are still present and that society has not yet learned its lesson from history but rather continues to be prejudiced towards anything that seems new, unknown or deviant.

I argue that in following gothic traditions, *True Blood* offers a platform where, as Levina and Bui state, “society can safely represent and address anxieties of its time.”<sup>10</sup> As Robin Wood sets forth “culture and society dictates that which we must repress” and it is this “surplus repression [...] shaped by the demands of a capitalist patriarchal society” which “makes

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<sup>8</sup> David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 116-17.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Halberstam, “Technologies of Monstrosity: Bram Stoker’s ‘Dracula’,” *Victorian Studies* 36:3 (1993), 333-352.

<sup>10</sup> Marina Levina and Diem-My T Bui, eds., introduction to *Monster Culture in the 21st Century* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 1.

us monogamous, heterosexual, and bourgeois.”<sup>11</sup> Wood also proclaims that “repression is closely linked to the concept of the Other [...] as representational of those characteristics that we repress in order to fit into the cultural normative regime.”<sup>12</sup> Skal asserts “that the history of monster films is first and foremost a history of the culture that produced these monster images.”<sup>13</sup> The vampires in *True Blood* are free from the here mentioned societal constraints. In contrast to the human race, for vampires it is normal to give in to their urges and desires without being reprimanded by members of their species. While even today in a modern world, topics such as homosexuality are still an issue, the pansexuality of many of the series’ vampires, is just one of the perks of being undead. Unlike the humans of *Bon Temps* for example who judge Sookie’s virile brother Jason for his promiscuity, vampires do not feel the need to differentiate between male and female sexual partners, however often these partners change or in which relationship they stand. These relationships reach from seemingly regular relationships between lovers for instance to maker-progeny or progeny-progeny relationships which in human terms could be compared to sexual relations between father/mother and child or among siblings. The unconstrained and uninhibited sexuality in *True Blood* is one characteristic of vampires which lets them appear to be a more open-minded, practical, maybe even in certain respects more progressive race than the humans. Especially in season one, consorting with a vampire proves to be deadly for humans. When Bill tries to make Sookie aware of the danger of her socializing with a vampire he says “We don’t have human values like you.” Sookie, instead of being afraid, simply counters this warning with the statement “Well humans turn on them who trust them, too.”<sup>14</sup> Here Sookie does not only

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<sup>11</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Alan Ball, *True Blood*, season 1 episode 1, 26:28.

allude to the history of the South when slave-owners oftentimes tended to physically and psychologically abuse their slaves, but she also refers to and foreshadows frequent occurrences throughout the series when her fellow residents of Bon Temps turn against her brother, herself or each other in general. The American South in *True Blood* can here be seen as what Robin Wood in *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan* defines as “the Other” whereas he states “[o]therness represents that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with [...] either by rejecting [...] or [...] by assimilating it.”<sup>15</sup> I argue that the series shows that the South’s adherence to traditions and manners creates a sense of community among its practitioners where certain issues, be that sexual orientation or the right to rights, maybe even this region’s history itself need to be repressed to uphold tradition and order. *True Blood* suggests that this region does not need monsters. Instead it appears to be a double-edged sword of its own with the shadow of its past still looming over it. I assert that the maintenance of “Old South” behavior and ways of thinking which are represented in the series uphold a modified version of the tradition of “separate but equal” with the South being part of the United States but still distancing itself from the rest of the nation through for instance its compliance with manners and traditions. The fictional small-town of Bon Temps in *True Blood* thus serves as an in-between-space or contact-zone where the old and the new South try to come together.

### ***True Blood* and Southern Hospitality**

As the past two decades have shown, American vampires and other supernaturals tend to inhabit regions which somehow set themselves apart. Here one can think of examples, such as Stephenie Meyer’s vampires and werewolves who live in the

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<sup>15</sup> Robin Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan... And Beyond: A Revised and Expanded Edition of the Classic Text* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 65-66.

constantly overcast small town of Forks in the state of Washington or L. J. Smith's vampires (*The Vampire Diaries*) who mix and mingle with the population of Mystic Falls, Virginia, a seemingly average small town which is situated on so-called ley lines causing it to be a supernatural hotspot. Falling in line with the examples of Forks, WA and Mystic Falls, VA, the American South with its distinct history of slavery and the Civil War, and its swamps and mysterious wilderness (e.g. Southern moss) constitutes the ideal location for a story about vampires and other supernatural creatures. New Orleans in particular, with its notorious historical connection to voodoo and the practice of magic (witches, etc.), has been depicted in fiction as a mecca for the non-human population of the United States. Movie- as well as television series-vampires oftentimes find themselves in New Orleans at least once during their screen time (e.g. Louis and Lestat in *Interview with a Vampire*, Bill and Eric in *True Blood*, Stefan and Damon Salvatore in *The Vampire Diaries*) as this large and vibrant Southern city appears to be a great place to blend in or hide in plain sight. However, the South is not only known for its distress and connection to magic but, especially its rural regions are famous throughout the world for the people's friendliness, politeness and hospitality. This binary perception is what really accounts for the appeal of the South and plays a central role in *True Blood*. As political debates, e.g. the removal of the Confederate flag from the capitol of Charleston, SC, but also the South's self-advertisement show, the South does not appear to be capable to or maybe does not want to shake off its history and appears to continuously maybe even consciously struggle against this region's entry to the modern world. Yet, this detachment from the rest of the U.S. however, is what lends this region a certain mystification and excitement. Tourists are fascinated by the traditions and manners which, as McPherson explains, "are repeatedly framed as the glue that binds the South together,

distinguishing it from other regions.”<sup>16</sup> In stark contrast to tourists’ perceptions of these manners and traditions however, McPherson defines southern hospitality as “a carefully manipulated stage set of moonlight, magnolias, and manners” stating that the “southern hospitality is a performance, a masquerade, an agreed-on social fiction, albeit a powerful one with material effects.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, obliterating this well-known and well-exploited characteristic of the South, Roberts also construes southern hospitality as being “all about personal and cultural performance – with the south [...] representing itself as special, chosen, a fav[o]red region congratulating itself on not having the problems associate with the rest of the country.”<sup>18</sup> Now, in *True Blood*, the South does face the same problems as the rest of the country. Vampires have come “out of the coffin” and – even though a little later – also find their way to Bon Temps in the backwoods of the southern states.

As Jim Goad states, “the South has become America’s cultural nigger rendered in geographical terms,”<sup>19</sup> Graham infers that the South is “[t]he ‘dark’ underbelly of the nation, the reversed image in the mass-media mirror, the South was and is America’s repellent yet all too compelling Other.”<sup>20</sup> This “othering” of the South culminates in the exploitation of this region’s particularities in popular culture and achieves “a politically recharged setting for the nation’s ongoing melodrama of race and social class.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003), 150.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Carol M. Megehee and Deborah F Spake, “Decoding southern culture and Hospitality,” *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research* 2,2 (2008), 98.

<sup>19</sup> Jim Goad, *The Redneck Manifesto* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 87.

<sup>20</sup> Allison Graham, “The South in Popular Culture,” in *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*, eds. Richard Gray and Owen Robinson (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 335.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

The notion of being the “repellent yet all too compelling Other”<sup>22</sup> attributed to the South also adequately describes the reception of vampires in *True Blood*. While the locals of Bon Temps are afraid of the “newcomers” (Bon Temps faces its first vampire in Bill Compton, even though vampires have been out of the coffin for two years), they are at the same time fascinated. With “vampire Bill’s” arrival, life as the locals know it is over and it is then when vampires and humans are forced to interact with each other that the struggle of identity in this region becomes obvious. Viewers gain insight into the still prevalent problematic of old vs. new South mentalities through the series allusions to discrimination and events in African American history. Not only does *True Blood* introduce the vampires’ quest for “basic civil rights”<sup>23</sup> within the first two minutes of the show, but the main character Sookie also mentions to vampire Bill that her boss Sam “supports the vampire rights amendment,”<sup>24</sup> alluding, as I argue, to the Reconstruction Amendments in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, African American Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 60s, or the LGBTQ+ community’s fight for the abolition of the Federal Marriage Amendment in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Bill sarcastically replies to Sookie’s affirmation of Sam’s good will, “How progressive of him,” hinting at the series’ later exposure of bigotry and the feigned friendliness and hospitality towards the vampire race. This pretense of friendliness with its concealed bigotry becomes more apparent early on in season one when Sam and Sookie argue about prejudices towards and the maltreatment of vampires:

Example 2

Sookie: And frankly Sam I’m surprised at you. I thought you were FOR the vampire rights amendment.

Sam: Well I think they should be able to have their own bars, I just don’t think people ought to go there.

Sookie: So you just wanna turn to the days of separate but equal?

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Alan Ball, *True Blood*, season 1, episode 1, 1:03.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 16:57.

Sam: I don't give a shit about equal. We can give them more than we got. Just as long as everything is separate.<sup>25</sup>

This is just one of the many instances in the series when history seems to repeat itself and the parochialism familiar to the South become apparent. Looking at the series' clichéd depiction of Southern hospitality, we find an example of the new, more open-minded and progressive vs. old, traditional South in the two characters of Adele Stackhouse (Sookie and Jason's grandmother) and Maxine Fortenberry (Hoyt's mother). Both women exhibit certain similarities as they are natives of Bon Temps and are well-known and respected members of the town's community. Moreover, Adele as well as Maxine have both raised children as single parents, with Adele taking care of her grandchildren after the tragic accident and deaths of their parents, and Maxine raising Hoyt without a father who committed suicide when Hoyt was ten years old. Although they do not belong to the same generation (Maxine seems to be in her fifties while Adele is in her mid-seventies), both women are representatives of the older part of Bon Temps society.

As can be seen throughout season one, Adele Stackhouse is the poster-child of a Southern Belle, deeply caring for her friends and family, constantly taking care of the people close to her and always ready to cater to her guests' needs. The following short transcribed excerpt of episode two depicts a situation where Adele treats Tara, Sookie's best friend, as if she, too, were her granddaughter. She hugs and kisses her hello when she visits and immediately tells her to sit down while she makes a fresh pot of coffee.

#### Example 3

Tara: Good morning, Ms Stackhouse.

Adele: Good morning Tara. (*Kisses her on the cheek.*) You sit down I'll make a new pot.

Tara: 'right.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Brian Buckner, *True Blood*, season 1, episode 4, 26:56.

Highlighting Adele's genuine friendliness, the scene is shown in warm light with the sun shining through the kitchen window. The warmth of the situation and especially Adele's behavior towards Tara is amplified by Tara's facial expression. When she interacts with Adele, Tara looks happy and loved; once she sits down next to Sookie reality seems to hit and Tara's expression changes to exhausted and sad. Similarly to this situation, Adele, again being the perfect host, shows her grandson Jason the same love she did Tara when he appears only minutes later. Adele immediately asks him to sit as she sets out to "fix [...] breakfast" for him.

Example 4

Adele (*enters the room*): You will never believe what happened!  
Oh hey Jason! You sit down.  
Jason: Yes.  
Adele: I'll fix you breakfast.<sup>27</sup>

Both instances present Adele as an extremely hospitable person who cannot help herself but care for others. This caring is either given in the form of food or of words of advice for Sookie as when she kindly discusses her granddaughter's fears and discomforts of a possible relationship with "vampire Bill" in later episodes.

Similarly to these examples, Adele also presents the picture-perfect, progressive Southern woman when it comes to her behavior towards strangers. When she meets the vampire Bill Compton for the first time she is warm, caring and open-minded. In fact, she even seems delighted by Sookie's love-interest in Bill, not ever stating any concern about the "interraciality" of their potential relationship. When Sookie asks her "Aren't you gonna tell me to be careful?" Adele simply answers, "You're always careful, Sookie. About what counts. And I can depend on that. Isn't that right?"<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Alan Ball, "The First Taste," *True Blood*, season 1, episode 2, directed by Scott Winant, aired September 14, 2008 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010), DVD, 21:36.

<sup>27</sup> Alan Ball, *True Blood*, season 1, episode 2, 23:20.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 28:38.

When she invites Bill into her home, Adele is a polite and friendly hostess who promptly offers sandwiches to her guests, including Bill. The moment she remembers that he cannot eat regular food, Adele is sincerely embarrassed and apologizes for her faux-pas showing great manners and consideration for other people's feelings. Adele does not distinguish between people, she does not assign categories. Instead she treats everyone kindly and with the respect they deserve, even if she disagrees with them.

Example 5

Adele (*offers Bill a sandwich. Realizes he doesn't eat solid food.*) [*Deep intake of breath.*]: Oh Mr. Compton. Of cour-. Of course. You- You don't- ... eh. Well. I'm s- I'm sorry.<sup>29</sup>

In stark contrast to Adele Stackhouse who – as I argue – can be understood as representing “new South” mentalities, the character of Maxine Fortenberry, however, functions as a representative of the “old South” thinking and behavior. Not only is Maxine extremely prejudiced and does not hide her feelings when it comes to her dislike of vampires, she is also a sensation-seeking, manipulative woman who enjoys other people's hardships and no one can be safe from her gossip.

Both women, Adele and Maxine, represent the stereotype of Southern friendliness and hospitality. Maxine loves her son just as much as Adele loves her grandchildren; however, while Adele's friendliness and hospitality (also towards vampire Bill) are honest, Maxine's display of these attributes towards anyone but her son (although she also manipulates him) is rather “a performance, a masquerade.”<sup>30</sup>

This feigned Southern hospitality becomes especially vivid in episode 6 of season 1 when Maxine attends Adele's wake after Adele was brutally murdered. To keep up the appearance of grieving the loss of “an angel sent from heaven” as she refers to Adele, Maxine brings a tuna-cheese casserole to the gathering. Supporting the stereotype of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 31:22.

<sup>30</sup> McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie*, 150.

Southerners compensating everything with food, this appears to be a traditional offering in Bon Temps as Lafayette comments “another one?” when Tara sarcastically states that “nothing says you’re sorry like a tuna-cheese casserole.”<sup>31</sup>

As the viewers can gather from Sookie’s mindreading abilities, Maxine’s actions and intentions do not coincide. In fact, Maxine does not attend the wake to show emotional support, but was hoping to see the scene of the murder and maybe even some residual blood. When she tells Sookie that everyone is going to “miss her [grandmother] *so much*,”<sup>32</sup> she is at the same time thinking how extremely disappointing it is that there is no indication or evidence left of the gruesome event. As Sookie is still in shock and thus in no shape to block out other people’s thoughts, she overhears Maxine thinking “I heard they almost cut off her head. I don’t see any blood. Should’ve gotten here sooner. Maybe I should’ve brought my Red Velvet Cake instead.”<sup>33</sup>

As is visible in this scene, Maxine Fortenberry is blatantly intrusive. Not only does she not care about other people’s feelings, she is also extremely prejudiced and hateful only pretending to be friendly and accommodating when she can gain an advantage from her deliberate deception of others.

When her son Hoyt talks to his mother about his girlfriend, the newly turned Jessica, Maxine brazenly informs him that she disapproves of this relationship (season 4, episode 9). This disagreement represents the first step towards Hoyt’s eventual emancipation from his mother’s influence and Old South attitudes. Until this point Hoyt did as his mother said even though he oftentimes does not agree with her or feels irritated or even embarrassed by her actions. In comparison to his prejudiced mother, Hoyt is a very open-minded young man, representing “new South” mentalities in

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<sup>31</sup> Raelle Tucker, “Cold Ground,” *True Blood*, season 1, episode 6, directed by Nick Gomez, aired October 12, 2008 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010), DVD, 12:19.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 12:42.

<sup>33</sup> Raelle Tucker, *True Blood*, season 1, episode 6, 12:46.

contrast to his mother's old-way thinking. The following transcript shows that Maxine Fortenberry is opposed to anything and anyone different from her worldview.

Example 6

Hoyt: Why do you have so much hate in you?  
Maxine: I don't.  
Hoyt: That's a flat lie.  
Maxine: Who do you think you're talking to?  
Hoyt: My moma ... who hates Methodists.  
Maxine: I got my reasons.  
Hoyt: And Catholics.  
Maxine: Just priests ... and nuns.  
Hoyt: African-Americans.  
Maxine: Hush! ... That's a secret.  
Hoyt: People who don't take care of their gardens or people who park their trucks up on their lawn. Or ladies who wear red shoes.  
Maxine: It looks cheap.  
Hoyt: Families with lots of kids. Or chequered curtains ... and cats ... and dogs ... and bait. Every girl that I ever liked. ... And the more that I like'em the more do you hate'em.  
Maxine: I simply object to a girlfriend who will kill you and eat you. I think that's reasonable.  
Hoyt: You don't even know her. ... FULL of hate! ... I see you now  
Maxine: Well it's not my fault. It's the way I was raised up.<sup>34</sup>

As becomes clear in this exchange, Hoyt – unlike his mother – is not the product of his upbringing although Maxine surely was not a role model in terms of open-mindedness and acceptance. While Maxine attributes her animosity and bigotry to “the way [she] was raised up,” Hoyt managed to attain a much more tolerant attitude towards life and what is happening around him. This example clearly shows what “a carefully manipulated stage”<sup>35</sup> the concept of southern hospitality can be. Maxine is well aware of what kind of

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<sup>34</sup> Nancy Oliver, “I Will Rise Up,” *True Blood*, season 2, episode 9, directed by Scott Winant, aired August 16, 2009 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010), DVD, 25:25.

<sup>35</sup> McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie*, 150.

behavior is expected of a woman in the South, showing appropriate reactions in different situations, e.g. when she attends Adele's wake, however, she obviously feels differently in reality, only keeping up appearances to not lose face in society.

Although her son made her aware of the wrongness of her discriminatory behavior, Maxine does not seem to be able or maybe does not want to shake off her ingrained prejudices as is obvious when Hoyt invites her to Merlotte's to introduce Jessica to her. Not only does his mother arrive twenty minutes late but she also verbally offends Jessica and openly states her dislike of and bias towards their relationship.

#### Example 7

Maxine: I surely wish I could meet your people. See what your family is like.

Hoyt: Mom!

Jessica: Somebody made me a vampire against my will, Ms Fortenberry. I don't have a family anymore.... Except your wonderful son.

Maxine: I'm very sorry for you. That wasn't fair. But Hoyt has a bright future ahead of him ... and by bright I mean IN THE SUN. ... If you think I'm gonna let him wander around all hours of the night for the rest of his life with an orphan vampire, you got another thing coming.<sup>36</sup>

As also in the previous examples, Maxine Fortenberry feigns her friendliness without actually meaning it. Maxine's reaction to and sympathy for Jessica's explanation that she does not have a family anymore because she was turned into a vampire against her will is only a masquerade, a conditioned response to a sad event or statement, a social convention. Sookie explains the necessity of such fabricated responses when she informs Bill about the murder of her coworker Dawn. When Bill simply asks how Dawn was murdered Sookie scolds him "Say you're sorry!" which greatly confuses him. After his response, "Excuse me?" she then explains, "You wanna learn to fit in with people, you gotta say you're sorry. You don't

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<sup>36</sup> Nancy Oliver, *True Blood*, season 2, episode 9, 35:06.

even have to mean it. Lord knows they don't most of the time."<sup>37</sup> This statement can be interpreted as a summary of Southern hospitality and friendliness supporting Robert's argument that Southern hospitality is "all about personal and cultural performance"<sup>38</sup>.

Both the conversation between Hoyt and his mother as well as Maxine's first encounter with Jessica can be seen as reminiscent of recent history when interracial relationships or marriage were considered taboo. As Maxine Fortenberry explains at one point, "Well it's not my fault. It's the way I was raised up", she is referring to the older population of Bon Temps which still frowns upon mixed-race relationships. Although marriage between people of different race and ethnicity is no longer illegal, the relationships between vampires and humans in *True Blood* pointedly remind viewers of the still prevailing discourse of discrimination and injustice in the South. At one point, Tara explains to the town sheriff and detective, "people think just because we got vampires out in the open now, race isn't the issue no more. But you've ever seen the way folks look at mixed couples in this town? Race may not be the hot button issue anymore but it's still a button you can push on people."<sup>39</sup> This shows that not even a society in which the presence of vampires and supernatural creatures has become normalcy has been able to overcome prejudices. During Bill's talk at the meeting of the Descendants of the Glorious Dead many people in the audience regard him with wariness or even blatant dislike. When Arlene's little son Cory says to his mother "Mama. He's so white." Arlene explains to him, "No, darling. We're white. He's dead."<sup>40</sup> As this statement shows, Tara is correct in her allegation that race still is an issue. Interestingly this short conversation between

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<sup>37</sup> Brian Buckner, *True Blood*, season 1, episode 4, 26:33.

<sup>38</sup> Mehegee et al., "Decoding," 98.

<sup>39</sup> Brian Buckner, *True Blood*, season 1, episode 4, 16:55.

<sup>40</sup> Alexander Woo, "Sparks Fly Out," *True Blood*, season 1, episode 5, directed by Daniel Minahan, aired October 5, 2008 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010), DVD, 20:43.

Arlene and her son points towards an attitude that not only discriminates against another race, as in the vampire race, but also against skin color as has played and continues to play a defining role in Southern life and living. Especially in the American South, as has lately become more obvious again (see Ferguson, MO (2014), Baltimore, MD (2015), Prairie View, TX (2015)), racism is still rampant and possibly part of this region's subconscious. While *True Blood* depicts a time and society where race issues have given way to the discrimination of vampires instead, the issue of discrimination is still predominant even though redirected towards another minority group. Although the series displays an undercurrent of social criticism, it also overtly alludes to the topic of discrimination and events in African American and/or LGBTQ+ past but also recent history.

### **Conclusion**

As my analysis of short film sequences of *True Blood* shows, the depiction of Southern hospitality and friendliness in the series provides clear insight into the South's still ongoing battle with its past. The resulting attitudes and beliefs continue to be ingrained in people's consciousness even, or maybe especially, in a twenty-first century world facing new encounters and challenges. In this, for some uncanny, for others exciting, new situation *True Blood's* display of Southern hospitality serves as an indicator for people's 'true' feelings and stance towards what is seen as different or unknown. This struggle of Old versus New South leads to the construction of the South as "the Other," which then actively sets itself apart from the rest of the nation through its adherence to traditions and social conventions. Whether meant 'honestly' or used as performative acts, traditions and manners are a crucial part of Southern culture, and it is therefore not surprising that *True Blood* addresses this and uses cultural stereotype to point out larger societal issues such as the still prevalent struggle for freedom of choice and equality.

The presentation of the community's diverse and controversial reactions to the arrival of vampires in *Bon Temps* functions as a reminder of continuing inequities and discrimination for African Americans and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Similarly to the African American Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s and the LGBTQ+ struggle in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the vampires in *True Blood* constitute a minority group which fights for civil rights. The treatment of vampires as outsiders, simply because of their deviance from what is considered to be "the norm," functions as a lens to the prevailing and diverse discourse of discrimination, injustice and racial profiling.