SOUTHERN MONSTERS IN SOUTHERN SPACES:
TRANSNATIONAL ENGAGEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION

by

CHRISTEN ELIZABETH HAMMOCK

(Under the Direction of JOHN LOWE)

ABSTRACT

Vampires, zombies, and other monsters have long been written about as a narrative space to work through collective anxieties, and the latest incarnation of these paranormal stories is no exception. What is remarkable is that many of these stories have adopted a Southern setting to explore Otherness. In this thesis, I seek to explore the role that Southern milieus plays in three television shows: The Walking Dead, True Blood, and Dexter. These shows are deeply invested in the culture and history of different “Souths,” ranging from the “Old South” of rural Georgia to a new, transnational South in Miami, Florida. I argue that this trend stems from the South’s hybrid existence as both colonizer and colonized, master and slave, and that a nuanced engagement with various Souths presents a narrative space of potential healing and rehabilitation.

INDEX WORDS: Vampires; Zombies; Dexter; The Walking Dead; True Blood; Transnational; Southern literature; Television; U.S. South
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

A running joke in NBC’s television show 30 Rock’s features Kenneth Parcell, an NBC pageboy whose defining characteristic is his Southern origin: a pig farm in Stone Mountain, Georgia. Throughout the series, Kenneth alludes to his unusually long tenure as a page for NBC, constantly referencing events that happened well before the other characters were born. Although Kenneth is often the butt of sophisticated, cynical New York City jokes, his presence also evokes anxiety in the other characters, particularly in NBC executive Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin). In the episode “Blind Date,” Kenneth joins a poker game against Donaghy, who has taken all the other writers’ money. When Kenneth cheerfully and naively announces that he has “what they refer to as a royal flush,” Frank whispers to the other bested poker players: “Oh my god. [Jack] can’t read Kenneth” (1.3). From that moment, Kenneth becomes an unreadable Southern text to the rest of the 30 Rock characters, unsettling the balance of the show in a quintessentially Southern way. When Jack recounts the poker game to Liz, he reveals suspicion about Kenneth being trouble “down the line.”

In the final moments of the show’s finale, the camera zooms out from inside of a snow globe in Kenneth’s hands to him sitting at his executive desk across from a young “Miss Lemon,” Liz Lemon’s great-granddaughter:

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1 In the episode “TGS Hates Women,” Kenneth claims that an “eight-year-old Shirley Temple taught me how to roll a cigarette” (5.16).
2 Kenneth also “dies” twice within the show. First in the season three episode “The Ones,” he intentionally ingests strawberries, which he is fatally allergic to, to help Jenna reconnect with an
Kenneth: So the whole show just takes place right here at 30 Rockefeller Plaza. Is that right, Ms. Lemon?

Miss Lemon: Yes, sir. It’s based on stories my great-grandmother told me.

Kenneth: I know. And I love it. (7.12)

Immediately after this exchange, a flying car zooms behind Kenneth. As the camera pans out, more flying cars appear in front of the New York skyscrapers. This exchange reinforces 30 Rock’s “meta” attitude toward television, but also establishes as fact the running joke that Kenneth is not quite human and that Jack Donaghy’s corporate anxiety about Kenneth’s potential was well placed. The takeaway from all seven seasons is that Kenneth is an alien presence in the 30 Rock world because of his naivety, bizarre moral code, and apparent immortality. The first two qualities are clear lampoons of any rural, small-town Southerner. The third—his not-quite-human-ness—falls in line with a trend of Southern representations in contemporary television. Like many television shows, 30 Rock is set in New York City, far away from Kenneth’s small Southern town. Within the show’s imagination, the rural South exists, but only in the periphery of (and oftentimes in opposition to) the urban North. In a way, Kenneth’s character is representative of the South’s existence in the American imagination: inferior, Other, and just a

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2 Kenneth also “dies” twice within the show. First in the season three episode “The Ones,” he intentionally ingests strawberries, which he is fatally allergic to, to help Jenna reconnect with an attractive paramedic. As Kenneth retells the incident: “Sure, I was legally dead for five minutes, but I did it for true love…I might have brought something back with me though.” In season five’s “College,” Kenneth “briefly died on Jack’s balcony” when Jack has him test a new microwave. As he dies of exposure, Kenneth says, “Sir, you have to let go. At least, that’s what my Nana is telling me from that tunnel of light behind you.”

3 The South also appears in Pete’s fate. He leaves his New York life by faking his own death and moving to South Carolina. When his wife Paula finds him in the finale, he claims that he has “amnesia,” a term indicating that the South is a place where history and identity can be forgotten and rewritten. As Kreyling notes in “Towards a New Southern Studies,” this kind of “calculated amnesia” and “strategic forgetting” helps define the shift currently occurring in southern studies, one that “absorb[s] several ‘new’ discourses” like globalization and trauma studies” (4).
Little bit scary. Other recent television shows set in the South literalize this anxiety by taking the “Otherness” one step further into the realm of actual monsters like vampires and zombies.

The South presents as an appropriate venue for supernatural and paranormal stories for two reasons: one, because of the South’s association with and treatment of Othered figures and landscapes (i.e. slaves, women, the swamp, the tropics); two, because of the South’s position as an abject other of the North in the American imagination. Ultimately, there is something different about undead narratives set in the South than those set in Sunnydale, California or Forks, Washington. Vampires, zombies, and other monsters have long been written about as a narrative space to work through collective anxieties, like Occidental fears of colonial Great Britain, apocalyptic nightmares of the Cold War, the “us or them” War on Terror, and changing values about race, gender, and culture. Locating this narrative space in the South, however, does not project national fear in quite the same way Dracula explored British fears about reverse imperialism. Indeed, by wholly locating undead narratives in the Southern United States, the American imagination should be able to resolve tension about otherness—be it racial, sexual, ethnic, or gendered—inviding and inhabiting national land without ever granting this otherness access to the “real” United States. Undead narratives occurring in what Jennifer Greeson calls the “internal other,” contain and repress American anxiety about otherness into a safe place—the unironic South, where the lawless, exploitative past still reigns, where marginal spirituality

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In both Buffy the Vampire Slayer and its spin-off Angel, various characters remark on the irony of vampires living in the fictional “Sunnydale” and the perpetually sunny Los Angeles. When Angel visits a “swami” in season two, the man posits reasonable questions: “A vampire living in a city known for its sun, driving a convertible. Why do you hate yourself?” and “Why don’t you get yourself a personalized license plate that says ‘irony’?” In a similar conversation, a member of Charles Gunn’s street crew asks Angel, “Why is it that places like L.A. and Miami bring out the teeth, you suppose? I mean, you would think that the vamps would want to hang in less sunny climes, know what I’m saying?” (3.3) These nods to location are always passing,
manifests and spreads, and where political correctness has not quite taken hold (1). The South is a place utterly unlike the progressive, contemporary American spaces in which we the privileged live. Thus, on the surface, a vampire in the South hardly threatens the United States as a whole.

But the change in venue is not the only significant change in these monsters—especially with vampires, the creatures have changed—rewriting centuries of history and mythology. Even in relatively recent television shows like Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel, the idea that humans are good and vampires are bad (with a handful of very specific exceptions) remains a firm, unmoving binary. In the past decade, however, this binary has been consistently challenged and problematized. In this paper, I argue that the South provides an ideal location to break down this binary because of the inherent hybridity of monsters. Vampires and zombies necessarily exist in theoretically liminal spaces; between life and death, good and evil, human and monster, authority and vulnerability. The South, too, is this kind of hybrid, liminal space.

The South has been Othered by the rest of the country, but the South has also engaged (and still engages) in Othering of its own under the guise of embracing “traditional” values. This mutual Othering now seems integral to exploring a different kind of monster, the kind that embraces and explores the sociopolitical implications of this hybridity and liminality.

In television shows appearing after Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel, two shows generally recognized as reviving vampires for television, the South emerges from the periphery. Even in Buffy and Angel, Southern characters appear, including the Gorch brothers, Fred Burkle insignificant fodder for jokes—a very different view of setting than the rootedness that Southern locations engender.

5 The only vampires who are even capable of good in Buffy and Angel are Angel and Spike, both of whom have souls for one reason or another. Angel certainly explores the idea that demons can be good, but these demons assimilate to human culture rather than challenging the binary. The only “good” demons in these shows are demons whose human characteristics overpower their demon characteristics.
from Texas, and the First Evil’s henchman Caleb. As vampires (and other monsters) became more and more complex, the South emerged as a central location for these updated, complex gothic stories. When television shows feature undead creatures, the South no longer exists in the periphery—instead, its physical and cultural location is vital to the existence of this kind of Otherness. Because these shows serve as proxies to explore Otherness in all its forms (some more self-consciously than others), *True Blood*’s setting in Bon Temps can be attributed to more than low tax rates for filmmakers in Louisiana. Additionally, these shows engage not just with a static, stuck-in-the-past South, but an increasingly multicultural, transnational “New” South. In this paper, I seek to explore the role of “the South” (as both concept and location) in three different monstrous television shows: rural Georgia’s *The Walking Dead*, Bon Temps, Louisiana’s *True Blood*, and Miami, Florida’s *Dexter.* These three cities represent three different “Souths”—the traditional rural redneck forests of Georgia; the supernatural, “voodoo”-laden swamps of Louisiana; and finally, the literal periphery of immigrant Miami. In addition to their Southern settings, these three shows also have monstrous elements in common: *The Walking Dead* takes place during a zombie apocalypse, *True Blood* features vampires who have recently “come out of the coffin,” and *Dexter*’s titular character is a human monster/superhero hybrid. These three television shows reflect an evolution in Southern identity, contributing to a “New South” in which monsters and humans struggle to exist in a location where clear boundaries no longer exist.

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6 All three of these examples are based on literary media first—*The Walking Dead* started as comic and has become video game and novel, *True Blood* is based on the Sookie Stackhouse Southern Vampire novels by Charlaine Harris, and *Dexter* is based on Jeff Lindsey’s first novel in the *Dexter* series: *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*. I will not be discussing this remediation in detail, but the fact that each of these shows updates an older form is reflective of the cultural work they perform.
CHAPTER 2
SOUTHERN MONSTERS IN SOUTHERN SPACES

Deconstructing the “Old” South

Current discourse about Southern literature is marked by two trends: first, a push to consider the South as “abject Other” of the North (and, by extension, the rest of the U.S. imagination); and second, a push to consider Southern literature and culture in a global context, with particular respect to African, Latin American, and Caribbean traditions. Both of these trends engage with postcolonial theory, a tenuous process because of the South’s literal and metaphorical relationship to the rest of the U.S. and the Caribbean. As Deborah Cohn argues, “The U.S. South has not traditionally been studied as part of the post-colonial world” for a number of reasons (38-9). As postcolonial studies expanded, however, “scholars have begun to note how the region calls into question a number of binary oppositions upon which postcolonial theory has been predicated: it is both victor and defeated, colonizer and colonized, empire and colony, center and periphery; it is white and nonwhite” (38-9). In history textbooks and the court of public opinion, the first half of this binary—one that positions the South as a monolithic oppressor of slaves, women, and intellectual pursuit—has prevailed, perhaps not wholly unreasonably. After all, Southerners often comprise the strongest advocates for a monolithic Southern identity. The loudest of the voices might be the particular brand of Southerner that embraced the KKK, helped block federal integration efforts, and supported anti-gay comments made by Chick-fil-a and Duck Dynasty’s Phil Robertson. Of all American identities, that of the bitter Southerner is probably the most distinct. In its most stereotypical incarnation, The Southerner is white, male, racist, sexist, willfully ignorant, and heavily religious. He hunts, fishes, drinks sweet tea, hangs a
Confederate flag in his front yard while complaining about the War of Northern Aggression.

His presence in the American imagination makes problems in Southern politics and policy easier to understand, and his usefulness has lasted far beyond the reaches of the Civil War, or even the Civil Rights movement. When a polar vortex creates a traffic jam that holds Atlanta at a standstill, it is his fault. When Southern children fall behind, it is his fault.

Of course, this Southerner certainly exists, and his qualities—ignorance, racism, and an unwillingness to change—contribute to the South’s unique and seemingly intractable social problems.

7 Although comments sections are generally regarded to be the dregs of the Internet, comments responding to stories about the Atlanta traffic catastrophe during “Icepocalypse” are telling, with commenters often reinforcing the divide between “northerners” and “southerners.” On a Gawker article about Atlantans holed up in a CVS, “BrokenViewpoint” says, “Call me an ignorant Northerner but most of these states deal with hurricanes, tornados, heat waves, wildfires, etc. and they can't handle four inches of snow?” (Bluestone “Atlantans Take Shelter in CVS as Ice Storm Creates Traffic Apocalypse.”) User “macaaron” asks, “That's ironic, because doesn't everyone in the South own some bullshit super-duty quad-cab King Ranch F350 turbo diesel truck that can handle anything?” (Bluestein). On The Atlantic Article “Snow Storm Hits the South,” comments were similar. From user “disqus_qTOZu2RaTS,” a condescending jab at the ignorance of Southern cities: “What Atlanta and other Southern cities need is good education about how to drive in snowy and icy conditions. If your tires are bare, don't drive! 4-wheel drive and anti-lock brakes don't stop you from skidding! Choose routes without hills, if possible. Go slow around corners.” From “Strix,” a simple “these people are pathetic.” Notably, most of this vitriol is specifically aimed at perceptions of southerners as ignorant and reactionary. A number of commenters on both articles pointed out that I-75 resembled a scene from The Walking Dead after the zombie apocalypse.

8 In the article “Why Is the American Dream Dead in the South?”, The Atlantic writer Matthew O’Brien asks,

So what makes northern California different from North Carolina? Well, we don't know for sure, but we do know what **doesn't**. The researchers found that local tax and spending decisions explain some, but not too much, of this regional mobility gap. Neither does local school quality, at least judged by class size. Local area colleges and tuition were also non-factors. And so were local labor markets, including their share of manufacturing jobs and those facing cheap, foreign competition. But here's what we know does matter. Just how much isn't clear. When O’Brien finally answers his own question, the list sounds like the inside of a stereotypical old Southerner’s mind: race, segregation, family structure, inequality, and social capital. Although O’Brien’s reasons are largely sociopolitical, user “Hominid” reverts to essentialism in his response to the article: “The problem is that an increasing number are genetically incapable of doing that - most people are stupid, lazy, and irresponsible.”
issues. He is not, however, the only South. Defending the South against those who target this Southerner is potentially problematic, as “complaints concerning antisouthern stereotypes have coincided with denial of the region’s worst problems, a pattern that accentuates the need to acknowledge the distinctness, even where not absolute, of southern practices” (Duck 2). As Leigh Ann Duck argues in *The Nation’s Region*, however, “it is useful to examine how the substantial cultural and institutional connections between the South and the larger nation produce and are shaped by projective fantasies” (Duck 2-3). Indeed, focusing on antisouthern stereotypes by situating the “Southerner” as an old white man erases the identities and contributions of a far more diverse South—one fortified by black people, women, immigrants, and those who embrace queer identities. Scholars like Jennifer Greeson and Leigh Ann Duck have been quick to point out that the South’s transgressions against Othered groups did not only occur in the South. As Greeson eloquently puts it, the U.S. has long constructed the American South as a place to quarantine our national sins, thereby absolving the “North” (or, the rest of the country) of guilt. This displacement, she claims, “spatializes the gap between national identity and national reality—between our better angels and our frank demons—so that we may re-present the moral failings of U.S. life to ourselves as matters of geography” (4). It has long been acknowledged that the post-Civil War Reconstruction period represented a kind of internal imperialism that figured the South as an “Other” to the more civilized North. Greeson notes that even before the Civil War, “a U.S. author writ[ing] the South…assumes a position of cultural command over passive peripheral territory, the position so prized in Western imperial culture. Her perceptions are authorized; his conclusions carry the weight of Truth” (9). In *Our South*, Greeson traces the evolution of this “Truth” through representations of the South in literature, academia, and press
publications. Examining these evolutions is a useful exercise in determining how the South became a space that attracts fictional vampires and other monsters.

First, the South’s identity has always been perceived as monolithic, a quality that lends itself to simplistic battles between good and evil. This clear division between urban North and Plantation South drew upon British imperial propaganda; images of palm trees and other subtropical “inexorably bore with it precisely the colonial American associations that U.S. cultural nationalists most wished to avoid” (47). Instead of rejecting the British paradigm by embracing the South, Northern writers used these associations to define the burgeoning U.S. nation against the South. As early as 1787–long before the Civil War—Noah Webster published a map in his American Magazine that “segregated the southern states from the national body” and “had it colored in a warm yellow-green color palette that evoked southern fertility and tropicality” (Greeson 66). As a form of non-literary discourse, maps like these created (and continue to reinforce) the imaginary Mason-Dixon Line. As a publication actively engaged in the construction of national identity, this magazine reflects the imperializing and distancing impulse of Northern writers forty years before the modern abolition movement took off—despite modern insistence that slavery was the main point of contention dividing “North” and “South.”

In addition to magazines and cartography, the pseudoscience of climatic determinism further divided the cold, urban North from the hot, subtropical, agrarian South. Although the theory’s scientific credibility has long since been discredited, climatic determinism contributes to many lingering stereotypes about Southern locations and identity. In her article “Inventing the Tropical South,” Natalie J. Ring describes the influence of climatic determinism and tropical medicine on perceptions of the South. First, she invokes the work of early twentieth-century Yale geographer Ellsworth Huntington, which “discussed the connection between environment and
progress in a number of locales such as the West Indies, Mexico, South America, Latin America, India, Egypt and South America” (619). As Ring points out, Huntington drew a connection between these foreign lands and the South, “not[ing] that the southern parts of the United States suffered from ‘climatic handicaps’ too” (619). This “tropical inertia,” as Huntington called it, contributed to both literal pathologies (i.e. tropical disease) and pathologies of character, creating “a state of mind and physical constitution that sapped men’s virility, engendered backwardness and disease, and contributed to the degeneration of the white race” (619). As Ring commentates, “The U.S. South, it turns out, was equally primordial and treacherous as any distant foreign nation” (619).

The reaches of climatic determinism extended beyond science and medicine into literary representations, including character sketches of Southern farmers and seduction novels. The latter genre reflects the idea that the South is not just inferior, but also contagious and transformative to any northerner who might travel there. The former—nonfiction descriptions of Southern farmers’ daily activities—were popular in literary magazines as early as the 1790s. Greeson describes these sketches as “defined by their lack of narrative, combining typification with a sense of infinitely repeated routine to present ‘the southern planter’ as a stable, one-dimensional figure whose diurnally organized life might be encompassed entirely within the space of a few pages” (79). Greeson quotes a portion of Massachusetts Magazine’s publication, “Manner of living of the inhabitants of Virginia that draws on and constructs a number of southern stereotypes, including “paralyzed drunkenness and indolence” (80). Other sketches “also highlighted laziness…irrational violence…and ‘blackness’ and ‘brutality’” (80). Because the South was physically isolated from a northern state like Massachusetts, these sketches mediated a northern view of the South.
Seduction novels—an adaption of the British gothic mode—also mediated between the North and the South, frequently by engaging with characters that literally traveled between the two regions. These journeys were not neutral; they positioned the South as a diseased region that could literally alter the personality and strong moral fortitude of a Northern man. Greeson points to a story in *New-York Magazine* as an example. The story—entitled “Fatal Effects of Seduction”—features a young lady seduced by a virtuous man. “Suddenly,” Greeson describes, “the writer interposed a geographic shift: the apparently well-meaning Jack was detained from fulfilling his promise of marriage when ‘the ship he belonged to was ordered to the southward’” (105). This six-month detour “in that unspecified southern locale indelibly transformed Jack’s character, leaving him most uninterested in making Polly an honest woman” (105). The idea that atmosphere and location can alter both the body and mind is also reflected in Charles Brockden Brown’s work, who Greeson calls “the most important novelist of the era” (93). At least two of his novels deal with yellow fever in the U.S. South, a literal tropical disease that “poses the southern incursion on the national center as contagion” (98). This contagion, of course, serves as a metaphor for the anxiety that the South produces in the rest of the American imagination—not anxiety about what the South does, but anxiety about becoming like the South.

Even that anxiety is not set in stone. Since Brown’s seduction novels, the South has been refigured myriad times as a reaction to contemporary events. During industrialization, the South appeared as untouched, pastoral, and nostalgic, in natural opposition to northern cities. In response, William Lloyd Garrison’s abolition movement destroyed this ideal by linking the sexual sins of slave owners to the prostitution of northern, industrialized cities (Greeson 133). Of course, the most explicit manifestation of the North/South divide was the Civil War, frequently configured as the most important event in Southern history. During Reconstruction (a
revealingly titled event), the South was yet again rewritten as a colony of the north. These representations reflect more than actual, temporal change. As Michael Kreyling argues, the “South represents the necessary ‘recalcitrant, secessionist ‘splitter,’…an outland’ (AL, 235) where all the race-baiting yahoos live—a South, in short, that we would have to invent if it had not occurred ‘naturally’” (10). This “natural” occurrence represents a legacy in the United States of shaping the South as separate and inferior, old-fashioned and debaucherous, conservative and tropical. Of course, in many ways, Southerners have been complicit in this identity formation, whether it be through an insistence that The South Will Rise Again or deep racial divides that still exist within Southern towns.

Scholars and writers have long relied on supernatural or monstrous tropes to express the deeply painful history of Southern identity that includes colonialism, slavery, exploitation, and violence. The most obvious example of this is the Southern Gothic, a clearly delineated genre dedicated to the idea that the macabre and grotesque belong in representations of the South. As Jeffrey Cohen writes in *Monster Theory*, “The monster haunts; it does not simply bring past and present together, but destroys the boundary that demanded their twin foreclosure” (ix-x). This destruction of boundaries brings painful history to the fore, synthesizing it with any other attempted representations of the South. Metaphors of “haunting” and terror populate texts—both fiction and nonfiction—about southernness, often when this southernness is being negotiated against othered groups. As Susan V. Donaldson and Anne Goodwyn Jones argue in their book *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, “[S]outhern sexuality has long been haunted by stories designating hierarchical relationships among race, class, and gender…[f]rom the body of the white southern lady, praised for the absence of desire, to the body of the black lynching victim, accused of excessive desire” (1). Southern sexuality is only one facet of this metaphor.
When viewed from this perspective, the representations that Greeson describes are more than just maps, poems, magazines, and novels—they are ghosts that haunt even the most contemporary of Southern cultural artifacts.

To push this logic one step further, then, these representations are not just ghosts—they are also vampires and zombies. The most frightening qualities of the represented South—ancient land, obsession with blood and flesh, pathological consumption of human potential—fall in line with the most frightening qualities of our national monsters. The ubiquity of vampires, zombies, and other monsters in the South hearkens back to an old, monolithic, Othered South, but also reflects a shift to create a new Southern identity. While the South’s past may make it an easy target to explore anxieties about changing values, increasing diversity and globalization in a new South makes an uncomplicated presentation of good versus evil difficult (if not impossible). The monstrous elements of *The Walking Dead, True Blood,* and *Dexter* are made possible and believable by incorporating stereotypical elements of the South—their milieus are in turn isolated, deeply religious, rural, lawless, and frequently terrifying. At the same time, these television shows are necessarily an exploration of the kind of Otherness that the monolithic South purportedly rejects.

**Othered Monsters and Monstrous Others**

For at least a century, vampires fit easily within these tropes—bloodthirsty, evil, and disconnected from any former humanity. By contrast, any reasonable eighteen-year-old consumer of popular culture today does not fear vampires—at least, not all vampires. After all, in their most recent incarnations, vampires are sexy, glittering teenagers whose threat is more “bad boy” than actual mortal danger. The most popular vampires in film and television today appear as protagonists or companions for humans. Edward Cullen of Stephanie Meyer’ *Twilight* book
and film series loves and protects Bella Swan, all the while playing baseball with his family and escorting Bella to prom. Cullen is, certainly, presented as mysterious and potentially dangerous, but Meyer subverts convention by allowing her vampires to survive in sunlight and without human blood. In a telling move, Meyer also rewrote the original Twilight novel through Edward Cullen’s perspective, giving a historically Othered character the rare chance to share his own perspective.

The idea of vampire as friend or companion (or perhaps even lover) hearkens back to pre-Dracula vampires, the Romantic-era creatures described by Lord Byron and John Polidori. Vampires only evolved to be creatures of terror at the close of the nineteenth century (and British imperialism) when Stoker wrote Dracula, a novel that “safely quarantined vampires from their human prey, foreclosing friendship and opening the door to the power-hungry predators so congenial to the twentieth century” (Auerbach 7). Dracula can certainly serve as a prototype for Western narratives that treat vampires as endless meaning machines, producing interpretations ranging from fears about feminism, queer sexuality, imperialism, and race.9

Generally, Western stories that invoke vampires—and later, zombies, werewolves, witches, and other supernatural creatures—reflect anxieties about race, gender, sexuality, religion, and culture.10 Broadening these interpretations, monsters can be relied upon to

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9 Interpretations of Dracula are nearly endless, but some of the most representative include Steven Arata’s “The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization,” Carol Senf’s “Dracula: A Response to the New Woman,” and Talia Schaffer’s “A Wilde Desire Took Me’: The Homoerotic History of Dracula.”

10 Auerbach also argues that “[g]hosts, werewolves, and manufactured monsters are relatively changeless,” but the revival of paranormal popular culture over the last decade rejects this paradigm. This rewriting of supernatural or non-human creatures also extends to zombies. The book/film Warm Bodies features a “young and highly introspective zombie” who saves a human and develops a romance with her. What might have been a horror movie fifty years ago now exists as a viable rom-com for teenagers (IMDB). While zombies frequently accompany or cause an apocalypse, even The Walking Dead (which reflects this trend) pauses to deal with the ethical
consistently reflect fear of change—and, simultaneously, a desire for things to stay the same. As Jeffrey Cohen argues in his edited collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, the monster “refuses easy categorization” because of its status as a “disturbing hybrid whose incoherent bod[y] resists attempts to include [it] in any systematic structuration….And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (6). Just as the North used the South as an internal other to bolster national identity, literature and popular culture often uses monsters—both inhuman and nonhuman—to feel more secure about the construction of “normal” human identity.

While monsters often make room to express anxieties about otherness, otered groups are often frequently discussed in monstrous terms as a controlling move to perpetuate the status quo of white, male heteronormativity. The monster is “a limit case, an extreme version of marginalization, an abjection epistemological device basic to the mechanics of deviance construction and identity formation” (ix). Through this interplay of deviance and identity, “the monster is difference made flesh….Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual” (7). For example, “[t]he woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith” (9). During the period of Manifest Destiny, “Native Americans were presented as unredeemable savages so that the powerful political machine…could push westward with regard” (8). Of course, Western monsters encode blackness and darkness as evil with obvious racial implications.

implications of positioning zombies as distinctly non-human. Witches, too, have been explored as denizens of virtuous (and terrifying) female power—most prominently in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the 2013 film *Beautiful Creatures*, and the FX series *American Horror Story*. 
If Auerbach and other *Dracula* theorists are correct, then vampires—and, by extension, supernatural creatures more generally—“go where power is” (9). Since Auerbach published *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, though, vampires have undergone yet another evolution. If her statement is true about the vampires that existed in 1993, is it still true about vampires like Edward Cullen? If so, what power exists in the South that attracts vampires and other monsters as tools of deconstruction? If not, what about the South attracts this new kind of vampire?

These answers can be found by deconstructing contemporary Southern monsters. Because monsters are historically Othered creatures, pieces of popular culture that grant nuance to monsters can be read as progressive. The fact that these pieces occur in the South—perceived to be the last safe space for American racism and sexism—suggests that, at least in our cultural imagination, final lines of discrimination are falling down. Only three examples of this phenomenon are treated in this paper, but many more exist. The CW show *Vampire Diaries* takes place in Mystic Falls, Virginia. Although the show’s culture is not explicitly “southern,” the show’s pilot features a history lesson on the Civil War, reminding teenage viewers that where vampires go, a sordid past is always close behind (1.1). *The Originals*, a spin-off and prequel to *The Vampire Diaries*, takes place in New Orleans (IMDB). Of course, Anne Rice’s *Interview with a Vampire* franchise focuses on two vampires—Louis and Lestat—in New Orleans.

Although vampires are probably the most ubiquitous of Southern monsters, other “Others” exist in popular culture. The book and film *Beautiful Creatures* features Ethan, who “longs to escape his small Southern town” in South Carolina and Lena, a fifteen-year-old witch (IMDB, “Beautiful Creatures”). The third installment of the FX series *American Horror Story*, subtitled “Coven,” tracks a group of witches at “Miss Robichaux’s Academy for Exceptional Young Ladies” in New Orleans. The HBO show *True Detective* features a cult of Louisiana
politicians and preachers who engage in ritualistic murder of women and children. While not supernatural per se, the show’s general tone is monstrous, grotesque, and distinctly Southern.

Perhaps the most heavy-handed example of this phenomenon is Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter*, in which Confederate Southerners are configured as vampires, and slavery is literally a national “demon.” Grahame-Smith rewrites President Abraham Lincoln as a secret vampire hunter, assisted by a “good” vampire named Henry who reveals the secret history of vampires in the United States:

Vampires have been in the New World for centuries, slaughtering native tribes and early settlers. But when the Europeans arrived with their slaves, the dead saw a sinister opportunity. They built an Empire in the South. But in recent years, they pressed North, leaving death in their wake. It falls to us, Abraham, the hunters, to keep the balance, to ensure that this remains a nation of men and not monsters.

What we do, we do not for one man but for the good of all mankind. (*Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter*)

Just as Grahame-Smith rewrites America’s sixteenth president, he rewrites the South—or, perhaps, merely reinforces a version of the South that has already and always been written. The fact that vampires existed in the South is not a problem until the “balance” of the country is at stake—when the vampires and slavery pose a risk to the ethical, heroic, anti-slavery north. The real threat is not that slavery exists in the South, it is that this slavery—a “national demon”—is contagious.

*The Transnational South*

Although warm weather and bright sunshine might seem like an antithetical climate for vampires, this marriage of monster tales and small Southern towns is oddly fitting. These
Southern locations are not neutral settings—the plots and characters of shows like *The Walking Dead*, *True Blood*, and *Dexter* thrive because of Southern people, Southern customs, Southern traditions, and Southern history, for better or worse. It is important to note, though, that these Southern qualities are not just a product of the “old,” monolithic South represented in much of literature and popular culture. *That* South is an important space to explore anxieties about race, gender, and sexuality because of its ties to plantation slavery and colonial oppression. However, the South’s role as “internal other” in the United States only explains part of the connection between southern monsters and southern spaces.

Equally important to the project of breaking down these monstrous anxieties is a “New” South—one that embraces and explores geographic and cultural lines of influence between Africa, the Caribbean, Mexico, and Latin America. Of course, I use the terms ‘old’ and ‘new’ with deliberate and constant quotation marks around them. As many scholars have noted, the “old” monolithic South is a matter of representation rather than reality, while the “new” South—one that considers the region in a global context—has always existed whether people were talking about it or not. This “newness” is not so much a function of an actual “new” South but of the attention being paid to it. As Barbara Ladd argues in her article “Dismantling the Monolith,” these geographic and cultural lines of influence might have been treated as “marginal” until recently, but the “impact of colonial experience in the Deep South has been and continued to be experienced, precisely because it leaves traces” (34). Ladd posits an example of how these traces will be “expose[d]…as returning populations once again make their lives…in places from which they have been, for a time, cut off” in her example of “a student with a name like Juan Chen” (37, 34). Juan Chen’s complexion:
…might be light or dark; his features Asian, Hispanic, Caucasian, or African; he speaks like any other urban southerner, which means he sounds a little like Al Gore. He is a U.S. citizen; he is from the South—but he is also Asian or Hispanic or African—and often more significant for him than his Asian or Hispanic or African roots is his hybridity, which seems in some instances to define and in others to threaten his identity as an American, or a southerner. (34)

Ladd’s description of this hypothetical student mirrors demographic changes in Deep South states. According to a report by the Urban Institute, the largest increases in immigration occur in states described as “New Growth,” and that states classified as such are overwhelmingly southern, including Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Arkansas, and Tennessee (Fortuny et al.). As of 2008, the majority of these immigrants hail from Latin American countries—56% of them are Hispanic, coming from Mexico, Central America, or Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries (Fortuny, “Children of Immigrants”).

This is not the first wave of immigration between Latin American countries and the Deep South, however. Indeed, the South’s role in the slave trade, proximity to the Caribbean, and emphasis on agriculture contributes to a region that has always been racially and culturally diverse. Over the last few decades, Southern studies has reflected this diversity by expanding the canon of white Southern men to include literature by multiethnic and women writers. As Kreyling notes, Southern studies is currently “struggling to absorb several ‘new’ discourses: Memory and trauma studies and a new geography spurred by interest in globalization being the most prominent” (4). He claims that “[b]ecoming ‘new’ has always been a problem for a discipline with so much of its foundation dedicated to strict borders: who was white and who was not, what was literature and what was not, what was southern and what was not” (4). Indeed, the
fact that a shift is occurring at all is remarkable for a region so frequently associated with the “old,” often signifying white, traditional, non-transgressive identities.

To fully understand why postmodern monsters have made a home in contemporary Southern television, we have to start defining America “hemispherically” (Cohn, Smith 2). As Cohn reminds us in her article “U.S. Southern and Latin American Studies: Postcolonial and Inter-American Approaches,”

[T]he region is simultaneously ‘South’ in relation to the U.S. North, and ‘North’ in relation to its geopolitical south: in the antebellum years, it cherished a dream of creating a great slave empire that would include Puerto Rico and Cuba; long after the Civil War, white southerners viewed the South as conquered, occupied, and colonized by the U.S. North; and as the U.S. expanded into the Caribbean at the turn of the twentieth century, the region became part of the imperial North, which did after all exert its political muscle through the Global South, in part through the deployment of plantation discourses and modes of domination. (40)

Whether intentionally or not, The Walking Dead, True Blood, and Dexter already engage with this expanded South—to different extents and different effects. In particular, I am interested in the ways that these three shows reach past national boundaries to the “Tropics”—a geographical zone that includes Africa and the African diaspora, Latin America, and the Caribbean. To explore this, I will be using Valerie Loichot’s trope of “colonial food disease”—the idea that colonizers simultaneously consume the Caribbean while reducing the region to images of disordered and pathological eating like cannibalism, gluttony, and starvation. In her book The Tropics Bite Back: Culinary Coups in Caribbean Literature, Loichot outlines a “common strategy of resistance to colonialism…an act of ‘biting back’” (x). Through this act of “biting
back…controlling images of Caribbean people defined by food pathologies and transgressions” are rehabilitated by “reclaiming images of pathological eating as culturally productive” (x).

The applicability of Loichot’s argument to vampires and zombies involves rendering literal the metaphor of pathological consumption. This consumption of human blood and flesh is not the only common quality of vampires and zombies; the legacies of both monsters are heavily tied to issues of colonialism. As Stephen Arata argues in “The Occidental Tourist,” Dracula expressed latent anxiety about reverse colonization. Zombies come directly from a tradition of Afro-Caribbean vodun, a form of spirituality that grew out of conditions of slavery and colonialism.

The fact that these monsters migrated to the U.S. South is a bit more complex. The presence of these creatures in the region cannot be read as a simple act of “biting back” because of the central paradox of southern identity: that it is both colonizer, and colonized. The people and nations that South-As-Colonizer oppressed provided the associations that led to and justified South-As-Colony. Perhaps these television shows reflect anxiety about increasing immigration and cultural diversity in the United States. Dexter and Rick Grimes—the whitest of guys—spend much of their time fighting perceived threats to American existence. But as True Blood’s coming out narrative implies, these monsters have been in the South all along—we are only just now aware of them. These tropical monsters, then, are not an exogenous threat; they come from within. The fact that these shows often grant nuance to monsters implies that perhaps the South is no longer a safe space to quarantine national sins like discrimination. Supernatural creatures can provide enough distance to work through painful history, but the human/monster binary is no longer strong enough to hold this painful history at bay. The consumption of human flesh and
blood by vampires, zombies, and serial killers, then, becomes an increasingly complex act—one that might ultimately be nourishing for a region like the South.
CHAPTER 3
SOUTHS COLLIDE IN THE WALKING DEAD

Of the three television shows examined in this paper, The Walking Dead is the most traditionally “Southern,” featuring thick drawls, white farm houses, empty country roads, and journeys on horseback. What separates The Walking Dead from Mayberry is its post-apocalyptic plot: an infectious disease has transformed millions of humans into “walkers,” or zombies. The zombie lends itself to discussion of postmodern crises, like fragmented identities, decaying interpersonal relationships, and an addiction to technology. Ironically, this science fiction device propels The Walking Dead’s characters back into an older version of the South—a quiet, lawless world where survival necessitates tight family groups and intimacy with nature. If zombie tales critique mindless consumer capitalist culture, then The Walking Dead rejects urban, northern sites as having potential for rehabilitation. Instead, various rural milieus—the woods, the farm, the prison, Woodbury—become places of sanctuary, albeit temporary, for survivors. The survivors try desperately to recreate a distinctly “old South” lifestyle supported by an agrarian economy and heteronormative, monogamous pairing off.

Predictably, this “old South” carries with it images of slavery and colonialism. The most successful rebuilding of the “old South”—The Governor’s Woodbury—is also the most nefarious. Despite these nods to slavery and colonialism, the show itself is not particularly good on race or gender. In many instances, The Walking Dead’s treatment of race and slavery feels like a frustrating attempt at building a “post-racial America” through erasure and subsequent reinscription of racial issues onto zombies. Most of the show’s non-white characters are shallow
and subservient. Similarly, most female characters are domestic objects, washing clothes in the river while the good Southern gentlemen hunt and fight.

But *The Walking Dead* also subverts the “old” south in a number of ways—often in spite of itself. The franchise engages in a variety of media platforms, including a television show (complete with after-show commentary and an interactive website that viewers can follow along with while watching), three novels, and a six-episode video game. All of these incarnations are set in the South—a place that traditionally embraces isolation and rejects modern technology. Although this tradition is enacted in the content of the show, it is worth noting that the various forms the franchise has taken open this same South up to engagement with a global audience.

By adopting the zombie as a metaphor to explore southernness and Americanness more broadly, *The Walking Dead* also expands the South from Georgia to the Caribbean. There is little evidence to suggest that the show is aware of the zombie’s Afro-Caribbean roots or that this particular monster was born out of slavery and oppression. Perhaps without knowing it, *The Walking Dead* returns the zombie to this space by pitting it against the colonial group.

*Walker, Geek, Lamebrain, Zonbi: A Transnational Journey*

It seems unimaginable to begin a discussion of zombies without commenting on the ubiquity of zombies as a concept. As a rule, zombies can work in the service of nearly every literary device: they can be themes, motifs, characters, allegories, metonymy, metaphors, and symbols. As representational literary devices, zombies are similarly flexible, symbolizing every ill of Western society from colonialism and slavery to consumerism and a dependence on reality television. Even the spelling is elusive: depending on who is writing, the term that has evolved to signify an undead creature who may or may not eat brains might be “zombie,” “zombi,” or “zonbi.” The zombie’s roots as a feature of Afro-Caribbean religion have been carved out to
create an empty vessel to fill with Western meaning. For the most part, mainstream fiction and cinema over the last century have severed the zombie from its Afro-Caribbean roots, presenting examples of the zombie-as-metaphor at its most appropriative. The aggressive, terrifying, flesh-eating zombie of *The Walking Dead* hardly resembles its Vodun ancestor, the *zombi ko kadav*.

Despite the fact that a zombie apocalypse precipitates every event in *The Walking Dead*, the show’s characters seem unaware of the “zombie” as a cultural mainstay. No one ever mentions their zombie apocalypse plan or cracks a *Dawn of the Dead* joke. Indeed, not a single character even uses the word “zombie” to describe the mindless, amoral cannibals that inhabit and terrorize the show’s world. Different characters refer to the creatures as lamebrains, geeks, walkers, roamers, creepers, lurkers, biters, skineaters—but never zombies. This linguistic severing further disconnects the proverbial dots between Haiti and Georgia.

This severing also applies to the show’s treatment of race—an issue that the metaphorical zombie opens up for discussion. For the most part, though, *The Walking Dead* attempts to erase or downplay the racial issues of the “old South” and of the show. As Merle says in the second episode, “There are no niggers anymore…only white meat and dark meat” (“Guts”). This snide remark—from a character who consistently embodies the South’s racism—indicates that a zombie apocalypse erases race rather than highlighting it. In the first season, many of the non-white characters are killed off, zombified, or otherwise disposed of: Jacqui kills herself with Dr. Jenner, while the four-member Morales family leaves for Alabama. Indeed, the show focuses almost exclusively on white characters. With the exception of Glenn Rhee—who actually defies many tropes of Asian-American characters on television—the show’s first season suffers from a lack of diverse protagonists. The most problematic of these characters is “T-Dog,” whose name alone indicates the black stereotypes he performs. Throughout his short life on the show, T-
Dog’s race is, in turn, violently targeted and ignored. He briefly addresses this issue in a conversation with Dale:

T-Dog: I’m the one black guy. Realize how precarious that makes my situation.

Dale: What the hell are you talking about?

T-Dog: I’m talking about two good-ole-boy sheriffs and a redneck who cut off his own hand because I dropped a key. Who in that scenario do you think is going to be the first to get lynched?

Dale: You can’t be serious. Those cowboys have done all right by us, and if I’m not mistaken, that redneck has gone out of his way to save your ass—more than once. (“Bloodletting”)

When T-Dog attempts to create a dialogue about race within the show, he is immediately shut down. Dale’s response participates in the old discourse that black individuals should be grateful to white individuals regardless of their treatment.

Despite this frequent, attempted erasure, the show’s images of colonialism and slavery reinscribe this connection and complicate a nostalgic Old South. So, too, does the fact that “walkers” eat flesh—a stereotypical invocation of Caribbean roots. Returning to Valerie Loichot’s *The Tropics Bite Back*, pathological modes of consumption (like cannibalism and starvation) have always been heavily associated with the Caribbean. Loichot ties this association to Columbus’s mistake of the word “Caríba” for “caníbal” when he first arrived in Hispaniola, home to Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Since then, she says, “[t]he land of Haiti has thus been inhabited…by the word ‘cannibal’….Metastasizing from the linguistic error, Europeans and other Western colonizers, tourists, and readers have associated the Antilles with the primal act of eating” (vii). While the figure of the zombie is no longer explicitly Caribbean, the concept
will always be subconsciously associated with racial and colonial issues through the zombie’s cannibalistic impulses. As anthropologist Elizabeth McAlister notes in her article “Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies,” the zombies in American pop culture are, by and large, white-washed, while the heroes of zombie films and television shows are often African-American. She argues that this “inversion or inside-outness of earlier racial associations also presents a meta-commentary on the same subjects as do Haitian zonbi: the intersections of capitalism and consumption, slavery and cannibalism, bodily excess and race” (462). In other words, while the zombie still hints at issues important to Haitian vodun, the concept has largely been hollowed out as a space for Americans to project our own anxieties about economics, race, and individuality.

Michonne—the most prominent black character on the show—uses this hollowed out space in problematic ways. As a black woman in the U.S. South, her body can be read as a site of violence and subjugation. Her initial appearance seems to rehabilitate this. She never speaks in her first episode, but Michonne’s appearance is striking nonetheless: she wields a katana and has chained herself to two mutilated walkers, “enslaving” them for her own protection. More than any other zombies on the show, Michonne’s neutered walkers evoke their Haitian predecessors. This projection of slavery onto another “Other” does little to heal or rehabilitate the status of black women in the south, but instead perpetuates horizontal violence between Others.

Indeed, the zombie’s seemingly endless iterations reprise these roots in slavery: the zonbi now serves as a kind of conceptual slave, constantly used by writers in fiction, cinema, history, and literary criticism to produce meaning. Of course, this conceptual slavery contains ethical dilemmas that literal slavery does not; metaphorical thinking can be an important way to work through and subvert sociopolitical problems, despite its potential to lose the vehicle in
translation. Indeed, the zombie shares this fate with other “monsters” of history, including vampires, ghosts, and werewolves. Nina Auerbach’s idea that “vampires go where power is” can be extrapolated to zombies as well (6).

The key difference between vampires and zombies, however, is that the latter is ontologically rooted in a real phenomenon that occurs within Caribbean vodun—zombis. Additionally, the zombie is “the one stock horror character that does not have a genealogy in European tradition,” tying the zombie inextricably to frequently colonized, enslaved Afro-Caribbean countries like Haiti (McAlister 462). Article 246 of the Haitian Penal Code recognizes zombification a real, punishable crime on par with murder (Inglis 48). In a similar mode, anthropologist Wade Davis claimed that “the Haitian view that a poison is deployed to ‘make’ zombies is actually true” (43). According to Inglis, Davis structures the existence of zombies as a means of social control made possible by the poison tetrodotoxin (TTX), a drug whose pharmacological powers were enhanced by “the victims...[who] strongly believe in the existence of zombies” (43). Whether a bocor’s magic or tetrodotoxin or psychosomatic effect instigates the making of a zonbi, it is clear that this “creature” exists beyond the conceptual, metaphorical world of nightmares and monsters, if only in the beliefs of vodun practitioners.

The Afro-Caribbean zonbi described above has been the basis for a hyper-productive, increasingly flexible metaphor for nearly a century. As a disclaimer, I am not arguing that zombies should be abandoned as a tool to represent or work through issues like slavery and colonialism. The ethical issue arises when a show like The Walking Dead uses the
representational zombie to the exclusion of the ontological zombi,\(^\text{11}\) forgetting that this symbolic tool also exists in the real world of Caribbean spirituality. After all, teasing out the intricacies of zombie-as-metaphor contains an inherent paradox. On one hand, the conceptual zombie has tremendous subversive power because of its symbolic ability to break down the ultimate binary: life and death. On the other, the zombie’s flexibility as a metaphor is rooted in its vulnerability as a silent, abject, subaltern figure. As Ann Kordas argues,

[T]he very nature of the creature, a voiceless being lacking a will and intellect of its own, made the zombie a blank slate upon which the concerns, hopes, and fears of white Americans could be written. Little more than an extension of the will of its master, the zombie of the American imagination and of American popular culture easily became whatever the American public wanted it to be. (16)

Kordas describes a process of cultural appropriation that extends even beyond shows like *The Walking Dead* and American pop culture into serious fiction and academic criticism. Across all genres, the *zombi* has become a metaphorical “contact zone,” to borrow a term from Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes*: “[a] social space...in which people geographically and history separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (6). The South of *The Walking Dead*, then, is a similar space, where zombies and southerners—geographically and

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\(^{11}\) I owe this distinction to David Inglis’s article “Putting the Undead to Work: Wade Davis, Haitian Vodou, and the Social Uses of the Zombie.” Inglis insists that the controversy surrounding Davis’s *The Serpent and the Rainbow* comes primarily from...

...the fear that by treating the zombie *ontologically* (as a ‘real’ entity) rather than merely *representationally* (that is, as only a symbol to be found in certain kinds of folklore and popular fiction), fundamental rules about the nature of ‘proper’ scientific scholarly conduct were broken, these in turn underpinned by deeply held assumptions about what is intellectually respectable to ‘believe in’ and turn one’s attention towards. (44)
historically separated over the last century—renew contact and reenact coercive, unequal conditions while attempting to rebuild the “old South.”

_The Old South and the “Real” South_

_The Walking Dead_ continually negotiates between the old and the new. At its core, the franchise is science fiction. The setting, however, is not one of urban, futuristic, technologically-advanced chaos. Instead, the series retreats to the rural South to explore how zombies have affected the world. This makes sense for a number of reasons. Zombies have long symbolized the pitfalls of postmodern cultural traits, like fragmented identities, decaying interpersonal relationships, and an addiction to technology. The Old South, on the other hand, presents an alternative to this postmodern existence. Rick Grimes and the group can only survive by embracing this old South and deliberately, explicitly rejecting the conditions that bred zombies in the first place.

The first season articulates this rejection most acutely; out of the four seasons currently aired on television, it is the only one that engages with science fiction as a genre. In “Days Gone Bye,” Rick wakes up in a hospital. None of the technology or equipment works—the heart monitor is silent, the IV no longer drips, and the electricity is off. This opening scene immediately rejects the hospital (and, by extension, modern medicine) as a site of healing or salvation and foreshadows that _The Walking Dead_ will not be about finding a medical cure for this disease. After leaving Morgan and Duane, Rick targets Atlanta—by far the largest city in Georgia—as a safe place. As he tells the horse he rides there, “Atlanta’s just down the road away. It’s safe there—food, shelter, people. Other horses too, I bet” (“Days Gone Bye”). Although Rick intones that he “hasn’t done this in awhile,” he climbs easily and comfortably atop the horse, galloping away toward the big city.
Back at the camp, the rest of the group discusses Atlanta. Lori insists that they “ought to put signs up on 85 to warn people away from the city” (“Days Gone Bye”). In a Southern drawl, Amy replies, “Folks got no idea what they’re getting into.” When Rick arrives in Atlanta, this warning is realized. Modern technology has turned into debris; MARTA buses, tanks, helicopters, and cop cars litter the empty streets. A lone helicopter flies across the sky, and Rick follows its trail momentarily. But this marker of modern transportation leads him to more walkers; the walkers surround him and begin to eat his horse. As Rick climbs into a military tank, prepared to shoot himself, it becomes quite clear that Atlanta is not the sanctuary it was assumed to be.

This plot line repeats itself at the end of the season, when Rick and the group return to Atlanta hoping that the Center for Disease Control will provide answers. For the first (and only) time in the show, science fiction is the dominant mode. The group meets Dr. Edwin Jenner, the only scientist left at the CDC. In the sixty-three days since “the disease abruptly went global,” Dr. Jenner has been performing tests on a subject known as TS-19, later revealed to be his zombified wife. Although the CDC appears to be a kind of sanctuary—the group gets warm food and showers for the first time in months—Dr. Jenner quickly reveals that the entire center is set to self-destruct in a matter of hours. As the group narrowly escapes the CDC’s explosion, the show once again forecloses any possibility of sanctuary or safety in an urban landscape like Atlanta.

This rejection has broad cultural implications. In her article “Dismantling the Monolith,” Barbara Ladd says that “Atlanta…is more and more a transnational crossroads. In other words, Atlanta is as viable a metropolitan centre involved in organizing regions or being incorporated into regions (i.e. economic and cultural geographies) in Asia, Africa, and South America as it is a
metropolitan centre for Georgia and/or the United States” (Ladd 39). If Atlanta is a global, transnational crossroads, then *The Walking Dead’s* explicit rejection of Atlanta represents a “recursive retreat to the local” as a response to “the homogenizing pressures of a global economy” that zombies represent (Romine 1). Seasons two through four allow this retreat to play out, as Rick and the group attempt to colonize different landscapes in an attempt to recreate the “old South”—not the South before the apocalypse, but before the conditions that precipitated the apocalypse. They enact this colonization at a farm and a prison—both of which have been intimately linked to Southern slavery.

This South—one of agriculture, loyalty, and strong family ties—has long been described as disappearing or under siege by modern society. In his book *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*, Scott Romine complicates the notion that “the Real Dixie is in jeopardy” by questioning the authenticity of a “real” South to begin with. *The Walking Dead’s* South is both mechanically and culturally reproduced; as a television show featuring the undead, the show itself makes no claims on reality. But the characters within the show exist in a dystopian present that constantly “defer[s] its imagined ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ existence to some nostalgic past or utopian future” (3). In other words, the primary group and the citizens of Woodbury try to reproduce a utopian Old South to “dislocate [their culture] from the here and now”—a distancing move made necessary by the dystopia around them (3). Romine points out that the “South is full of fakes” like plantation tours and Civil War reenactments (9). These cultural reproductions “signal a double narrative of continuity and rupture” that creates a “liminal space [where] contemporary southern narrative has found something like a home ground” (2). Through the intervention of this narrative, “the fake south…becomes the real south” (9).
The Walking Dead presents a South, then, that is both doubly fake and doubly real. As the characters actively construct new versions of the old South, the show itself draws on culturally reproduced images of the South. The rupture of a zombie apocalypse is thus met with a desire for continuity. Romine argues that the “fakes” of the South are “infinitely preferable to their originals,” but without the intervention of contemporary government policies, the material realities of the old South quickly reproduce themselves—specifically manifesting in conditions of colonialism and slavery (9). In this case, the aura of the Old South does not wither in the age of mechanical reproduction; instead, it is given a chance to renew itself under apocalyptic conditions.

Season three’s Woodbury provides the most obvious—and fraught—example of this phenomenon. Woodbury is a simulacrum of a small Southern town, complete with a clean, colorful Main Street and a strong, white patriarch known as “The Governor.” Its resemblance to a “real” Southern town is remarkable in context; in a moment of inattention, I mistook a Woodbury scene for a pre-apocalyptic flashback. Woodbury first appears through the eyes of Andrea and Michonne. Though show never implies that their relationship is sexual, they are an interracial, same-sex pairing—a departure from the other small family groups that lean on one another to survive. The pair first encounters Woodbury through Merle Dixon, the most blatantly racist character on the show. His first words to the women in the Woodbury hospital belie the too-good-to-be-true nature of the town: “Bet you was wondering if I was real. Probably hoping I wasn’t….I guess this old world gets a little smaller toward the end” (“Walk With Me”). Merle’s presence in Woodbury is the first indication that clean streets and warm beds might distract its population from underlying violence.
This first hint proves to be accurate. Throughout season three, Woodbury is revealed to be a site of violence and slavery—just like the old South it replicates. When Andrea and Michonne first arrive, they complain about being held under guard. The Governor—Woodbury’s charismatic leader—tells them they are free to leave any time after dawn. Tall, makeshift walls surround the town completely, mimicking the isolation of the old South and its conquering attitude toward the wild landscape. The safety of Woodbury (and the Governor himself) seduces Andrea completely. When she questions the reality of such a town—“It can’t be”—the Governor responds confidently, “It can, and it is” (“Walk With Me”). Although these walls serve the practical purpose of keeping zombies out, they also erase the realities of the post-apocalyptic world. After Merle shoots three “creepers,” the Governor insists that they “cannot leave them there to rot” because it “creates an odor…[and] makes people uneasy.”

Additionally, Woodbury relies on discourses of patriotism, justification, and Southern exceptionalism. The Governor says to Michonne, “We will rise again,” an evocative variation of the Confederate insistence that “The South will rise again” (“Walk With Me”). When Andrea and Michonne first tour the town in daylight, their guide’s use of this rhetoric displays how deeply invested Woodbury’s citizens are in its “safety”:

Rowan: You two were out there for a long time. And while you were, the Governor was doing this…It’s still a work in progress, but Rome wasn’t built in a day.

Andrea: That’s a bold comparison.

Rowan: I think we’ve earned it…Walls haven’t been breached in well over a month. We haven’t suffered a casualty on the inside since early winter….Our Governor set a strict curfew. Nobody out after dark. Noise and light are kept to
the bare minimum. Armed guards on the fence and patrolling the perimeter to keep the biters away.

Andrea: I saw what your patrols do last night. They had a dead one strung up like an ornament.

Rowan: I won’t make excuses, but those men put their lives at risk every day to protect this town.

Despite the innocuous appearance of the town, violence bubbles up to the surface. In “Say My Name,” the entire town celebrates by playing music and watching Woodbury citizens fight mutilated, chained walkers and each other. This spectacle of gladiator violence evokes rumors of mandingo fights in the South, in which black slaves fought each other at the pleasure of their masters. When Andrea expresses displeasure at the “barbaric” scene, the Governor insists that the fight is “staged”; that the violence is not real, but performed. This “fake” violence essentially writes over the real violence being done to real bodies by Woodbury’s leadership.

The Governor keeps floating zombie heads in a giant tank in his office. He brutally murders a camp of soldiers near Woodbury. He threatens to rape Maggie. In the comics, he also rapes Michonne, a horrifying recreation of an all-too-common dynamic between white men and black women throughout Southern history.

Ultimately, though, these old Southern places do not offer the sanctuary and rehabilitation that the group of protagonists and the Governor seek. The Governor’s walls do not hold. The Greene’s farm is overrun by walkers. The prison—which the group forcefully took from its marginalized inhabitants—becomes a site of uncontrollable contagion and disease. In attempting to draw strong boundaries around an “Old South,” The Walking Dead actually reveals
the vulnerabilities of such a construction, foreclosing any romanticization of slavery or colonialism.
CHAPTER 4

NEW ORLEANS TO BON TEMPS: A TRADITION OF VAMPIRES IN TRUE BLOOD

The opening scene and title sequence of True Blood—Alan Ball’s HBO adaptation of Charlaine Harris’s Southern Vampire Mysteries series—indicate that this show is just as much about Southern identity as it is about vampires. In fact, both suggest that an exploration of Southern culture—constituted by land and people—will take precedence over the individual characters the show follows. The “South” of True Blood has a lot in common with that of The Walking Dead: racism, hot weather, and accents abound. But True Blood’s South is distinctly Louisianan—a hybrid of the Plantation South and blue-collar, black, Caribbean, Creole and Cajun cultures. In this mix of cultures, vampires are just another race vying for credibility. These are not vampires who moved to or invaded the South; as Charlaine Harris’s series title suggests, these are Southern Vampires. The show’s heavy focus on negotiating Othered identities—on the global level of civil rights and the local level of day-to-day interactions—connects this southern space to its painful history while also offering potential for redemption and co-existence.

In True Blood’s pilot “Strange Love,” two college-aged students—a fratty white boy and his tan, blonde counterpart—drive down a dark road and pull over at a poorly-lit “GrabbitKwik” after reading a sign that says “We have Tru Blood.” Country music plays in the background. As the two walk into the store, the camera highlights a small television hanging in the corner. A well-dressed blonde woman appears with a caption underneath that reads “Nan Flanagan, American Vampire League.” Her words—answered by a sarcastic Bill Maher—ring familiar:

Nan Flanagan: We’re citizens. We pay taxes. We deserve basic human rights just like everyone else.”
Bill Maher: Yeah, but come on. Doesn’t your race have a rather sordid history of exploiting and feeding off innocent people, for centuries?

Nan Flanagan: …Doesn’t your race have a history of exploitation? We never owned slaves, Bill, or detonated nuclear weapons.

In these first two minutes, *True Blood*’s politics are clear; throughout the show, vampires serve as a proxy to discuss issues of race and sexuality. The remainder of the scene suggests two seemingly contradictory positions: that the South is a final bastion of discrimination, but that Southerners make the most interesting vampires.

The camera’s focus returns to the store, juxtaposing two men: a pale, dark-haired cashier wearing all black and heavy-set boots, and an overweight man dressed in camouflage from head to toe. The students stumble into the store, laughing and touching each other. In a maliciously curious tone, Kelly, the girl, asks the cashier if “y’all have Tru Blood…for real?” In a clearly effected “Transylvanian” accent, the cashier leans forward suspiciously and converses with the couple:

Guy: You get vamps in here? I didn’t think we had any in Louisiana.

Cashier: You didn’t know? New Orleans is a mecca for the vampires.

Guy: Seriously? New Orleans? Even after Katrina? Didn’t they all drown?

Cashier: Vampires cannot drown, because we do not breathe.

When the two students express horror and fear at potentially insulting the “vampire,” the cashier laughs. From behind them in line, the man in camouflage speaks: “I didn’t think it was funny.” His accent is thick, and his camouflage hat prominently displays a Confederate flag. In any other show, this stereotypically Southern character would probably be the one cracking a joke at the
expense of a marginalized group. The man watches as the college students continue their 
conversation with the cashier:

Guy: We don’t care what you think. Dude, do you know where we can score any 
V-Juice?\(^\text{12}\)

Cashier: How much you need?

Kelly: I knew this girl who knew this girl who did vamp blood during Greek 
week. She like totally clawed her own face off.

Guy: Seriously. I can pay good money.

Redneck: Okay. You two need to leave.

Guy: Fuck you, Billy Bob.

Redneck: Fuck me? I’ll fuck you, boy. I’ll fuck ya, and then I’ll eat you.

At this point, the redneck’s fangs come out, reversing expectations about what a vampire should look like. Inherent in this reversal is the negotiation of another identity—which a Southerner should look like.

The title sequence, which immediately follows this first scene without any introduction to the main characters, continues this trend of prioritizing location and culture over the individual. For another – minutes, Ball refuses access to the main characters and chooses to focus instead on Southern landscapes ranging from swamps and forests to churches and bars. At only one moment in the sequence do we get explicit reference to the fact that this South is inhabited by vampires, when a “God Hates Fangs” sign briefly flashes. The sign, a clear reference to the bigotry of groups like the Westboro Baptist Church, is couched between two distinctly Southern tableaus: a

\(^\text{12}\) Throughout the show, the use of vampire blood (known colloquially as “V” or “V Juice”) as a drug features in a number of different narrative arcs that will be discussed later.
dead possum on asphalt and a dollar store with a trailer next to it. Death and poverty literally
surround this public announcement of hatred.

The rest of the title sequence is constituted by a cycle of images set to the country song
“Bad Things” by Jace Everett. At first, the varying tableaus feel chaotic and random, but by the
end of the song, it is clear that the sequence is repeating itself with only slight modifications. For
example, the same black women—wearing white hats and white dresses—appear multiple times
in a church. The first time, they appear in a frenzy of singing and clapping. In the second, they
watch and raise hands as a black preacher jumps up and spins around. The third time, a white
man in a priest’s uniform lays hands on their foreheads. The rest of the images are disparate but
thematically connected by a Southern “feel.” As Brigid Cherry argues in her article about True
Blood and the Southern Gothic,

[T]he title sequence sets a palpable mood for each episode with its images of
swamps and bayous, shacks raised up on stilts above the water alongside the
vibrant skies of sunset, women in skimpy clothing or cotton frocks and men in
sleeveless shirts…. [e]ven where there are no explicit references to heat. The
imagery thus constantly anchors the action in the subtropical climate of the Deep
South: light and heat, landscape and geography predominate. It is no coincidence
that Bon Temps not only translates roughly as ‘good times’ but perhaps more
significantly as ‘good weather.’ (43)

Other images continue this locative work: the sequence features a swamp, reeds, a dead crocodile
(and later, a crocodile’s jaw bone hanging from a porch), trees growing out from water, homes
on stilts, a liquor store, white cops carrying a black woman, a graveyard with a white cross, a
woman in black lingerie, a man wearing camouflage in a rocking chair, a hissing snake, cicadas
emerging from their shells, a little boy in a KKK outfit, small children on a soccer field eating strawberries, various naked torsos, two women crying and praying, a frog climbing into a Venus flytrap, a burning cross, a decomposing fox covered in maggots, a bar made visible by red light, and, finally, two men baptizing a woman. Despite the South’s reputation for a slower way of life, these images change so quickly that they disappear from view without frequent pausing. Careful examination reveals recurring themes that reflect the way *True Blood*’s constitutes southernness—alcohol, religion, nature, sex and death.

A central, repeated line in the theme song—“I don’t know who you think you are”—reveals the tenuous nature of building any kind of identity within a Southern landscape. Even scenes of healing within the sequence—specifically when the white preacher lays hands on black, female congregants—are problematized because they are spliced with images of racially-charged violence. The children eating blood-colored strawberries evoke the small boy that we saw just moments before, being primed for a lifetime of racial violence within the KKK. The repetition of viscous, blood-red images “brings to mind the blood that vampires…have always been obsessed with, but also the blood that spills from the wounds of the Civil War, from centuries of violence, suspicion, and hatred tied to the history of slavery, up to the blood shed during the civil rights movement that ended segregation” (Marrati 986-7). *True Blood*’s vampires, then, are not a subconscious proxy for racial anxieties or a way to displace violence; neither do they replace the real struggles of black or gay characters. *True Blood* never attempts to erase, recreate, or rewrite the history of the Old South. Instead, the show offers a hypothetical space that invites and arranges encounters between human and other, in which sexuality, addiction, and violence become productive tropes for working through the South’s painful past and present.
Race, Slavery, and the Civil War

Because vampires are immortal, their presence in Bon Temps literally fuses the past and the present. Bill Compton, a former Confederate soldier turned vampire who comprises half of the show’s central “interracial” relationship, enacts this erasure of temporal lines. The fact that Bill can both fight in the Civil War and share these experiences with Bon Temps’ “Descendants of the Glorious Dead” group brings a new literalism to Faulkner’s frequently invoked statement that the past isn’t even past. Bill’s hybridity signals Romine’s “double narrative of continuity and rupture…this liminal space that…contemporary southern narrative has found something like a home ground” (2). As an old, white, cisgendered, heterosexual male, Bill is a likely candidate to discriminate, but as a vampire, he also represents othered, marginalized groups. In this way, he embodies the South’s paradoxical position as both “victor and defeated, colonizer and colonized, empire and colony…white and nonwhite” (Cohn 38-9). While True Blood’s portrayal of a Southern setting is never wholly positive, Bill—and the rest of the characters—refuses an easy reading of Bon Temps, Dallas, or Jackson, Mississippi.

Leigh Ann Duck argues that “when national discourse has acknowledged the conflict between southern conservatism and national democracy, it has typically done so in ways that localize this conflict—a ‘backward South’ and a modern or ‘enlightened nation’” (3). To an extent, True Blood props up this “backward South,” relying on stereotypes just enough to make Bon Temps readable and recognizable to an external audience. Because it is set in a “small community in the Deep South, rather than in an urban environment signifying modernity…Bon Temps is an ideal location for barely concealed prejudices, buried secrets, and damaged relationships” (Cherry 49). Indeed, True Blood confronts this prejudice and discrimination head-on, through plot lines about the KKK, hate groups, miscegenation, and religious extremists. At
the same time, though, *True Blood* rejects this discrimination and prejudice as representative of the entire South, while simultaneously indicating that the South could be a space for rehabilitation. If it is “no coincidence that the threat to vampire civil rights should come from the South,” then it is also not a coincidence that these vampires still exhibit traditional Southern traits (Cherry 53).

*True Blood* embraces traditional Southern qualities in a number of ways. As illustrated in the close reading of *True Blood*’s title sequence, Southern landscape and architecture are frequently highlighted. In her chapter about *True Blood* and the Southern Gothic, Brigid Cherry argues that the latter “dominates the series in terms of aesthetics, setting, and mood, primarily through the heat that the series radiates” (41). Winter never comes to Bon Temps—characters are nearly always dressed in shorts, tank tops, sundresses, or bathing suits. Lafayette is frequently seen fanning himself (42). Jason Stackhouse and the other construction workers constantly work without shirts. The heat and humidity are oppressive and claustrophobic, tying the Gothic elements of the show directly to its Southern location and subtropical climate (42). The living spaces of *True Blood*’s main characters reinforce the Southern milieu. Bill’s family mansion is “a journey into the past…old-fashioned, unmodernized…and gloomy, filled with peeling paintwork and fading, antique furniture” (46). Both Stackhouse children live in family homes—Sookie inherits Gran’s white country house, while Jason lives in their deceased parents’ home.

Bon Temps’ preoccupation with history simultaneously reflects and deconstructs Southern stereotypes as well. For example, when *True Blood* deals directly with the KKK—which has turned its hatred against “supes”—Jason (the show’s resident dumb Southerner) charmingly mistakes the hate group’s “Grand Dragon” for another supernatural creature, asking with a sigh, “There’s dragons now, too?” (“Everybody Wants to Rule the World.”) In a similar
destabilizing move, *True Blood* locates the Plantation South within vampire culture, rather than human culture. Russell Edgington, the show’s most villainous vampire, rejects the Vampire Authority’s push to “mainstream” into human culture. Ironically (or, perhaps, fittingly), Edgington owns a large plantation in Jackson, Mississippi, where he enslaves a pack of werewolves in exchange for access to his blood. Violent, lavish, and ruthless, Russell best represents the figure of an old Southern slave master, but he is also a gay vampire.

Tara Thornton—the show’s main black character—display constant awareness of her blackness. Our first introduction to Tara is in a “Sav-A-Bunch” store, where she sits on a lawn chair and reads an economics book. When an older white lady enters the store to buy some kind of tarp, Tara quickly becomes combative and defensive. The older woman accuses her of being rude, and she replies, “This ain’t rude. This is uppity. Imma get my baby daddy who just got out of prison to come and kick your teeth in.” When her manager expresses fear at this prospect, she says, “Oh my God. I’m not serious, you pathetic racist. I don’t have a baby. Damn.” (“Strange Love”) Tara also recognizes the irony in her name, saying, “Isn’t it funny, a black girl being named after a plantation? No, I don’t think it’s funny at all. In fact, it really pisses me off that my momma was either stupid or just plain mean” (1.1). Tara’s sarcastic anger reinforces the racial divisions still present in Bon Temps, but her ultimate fate also carves out room for redemption—a turning of tables on those who have marginalized her. In the beginning of the show, Tara is hesitant to accept the presence of vampires in Bon Temps. When talking to Sookie about Bill, she says, “You know they can hypnotize you, right?” to which Sookie replies, “Yeah, and black people are lazy, and Jews have horns” (“The First Taste”). But when Tara gets turned into a vampire in season five, she relates her new condition back to slavery:

Tara: So basically I’m your slave?
Pam: Pretty much.

Tara: The more things change, the more they fucking stay the same. (“Let’s Boot and Rally”)

Although this narrative move feels like a repeating of bad history, Tara’s new identity as a vampire also gives her the opportunity to reclaim power from the racists of Bon Temps. While Tara is mixing drinks at Pam’s bar, Tracy—a blonde former classmate of Tara’s wearing a skin-tight pink dress—accuses her of making the wrong drink, just moments after gleefully telling Tara, “You’re a vampire. That’s crazy. Now you’re a member of two minorities” (“Somebody That I Used To Know”). After Tara insists that she made the correct drink, Tracy replies, “It’s fine. If you’re too lazy to fix your own mistake….You’re the same as you were in high school. All uppity.” Tara’s response synthesizes her three marginalized identities—black and Southern and vampire—to powerful effect: “Uppity? Listen, you white trash fucktwat. We’re not in high school anymore. So if you let any more of that racist bullshit fall out of your mouth, I’m gonna rip open your heart and fry it up with some grits and collard greens.” Tracy replies that she does not “live in the past” but instead “lives in the present,” but the presence of vampires in Louisiana indicates that this temporal distinction is useless. Although Pam originally chides Tara for being rude to a customer, she later chains Tracy in the bar’s basement and essentially gives her to Tara, saying “This is yours.” Pam glamours the terrified Tracy, invoking the discourse of slavery but reversing the races: “You are worthless. Your only purpose is to serve Tara Thornton….You exist only for Tara’s nourishment. You will consider it a privilege to let your racist peckerwood blood shoot into her gorgeous cocoa mouth. You are an unpaid food whore. A slave. And Tara is your master” (“Somebody That I Used to Know”). This might not be an ethical way to deal with the trauma of slavery, but it is narratively satisfying.
The show also reaches back to deal directly with “real” Southern history. In the first season, Sookie’s Gran asks Bill to come speak to her “Descendants of the Glorious Dead” group because of his time as a Confederate soldier. Bill reveals that he was turned into a vampire in 1865, the year Robert E. Lee surrendered and the Civil War ended. Using the Civil War as an origin story for a vampire opens up this painful, violent era for rehabilitative purposes. In Bill’s case, the blood shed during the Civil War nourished the creation and sustenance of difference. This nourishing potential, of course, mirrors the fact that the Civil War effectively ended slavery. As the show’s oldest human character, Gran has the potential to be a traditionally racist Southerner. Like the rest of Bon Temps, True Blood first makes Gran a recognizable Southern character: a daughter of the confederacy who makes lemonade and cake, all the while clinging to Southern mythology about the “War of Southern Independence” (“Sparks Fly Out”). Despite this, Gran is consistently open to the idea of Sookie dating a vampire shows kindness to Bill in their interactions. Furthermore, in her quasi-adoption of Tara, Gran creates a de facto miscegenated family. When Bon Temps’ mayor questions Gran about the safety of having Bill around “young folks,” Gran replies, “Sterling, we don’t have anything to be frightened of. Mr. Compton is a perfect gentleman. Frankly, I am more worried about what we might do to him.” Despite Gran’s readability as an old-fashioned Southerner, her day-to-day interactions with minorities of any kind—vampire or otherwise—is surprisingly progressive.

The scene in which Bill speaks to the Bon Temps community about the Civil War is similarly revealing. First, his talk is held at the church, an ironic move that the scene explicitly deals with. In a humorous moment, Maxine Fortenberry—one of the most grotesque human Southerners on the show—struggles to remove a cross from above the pulpit before Bill enters. When asked what she is doing, Maxine hisses at her son: “Our guest of honor is a vampire.”
Adele [Gran] plumb forgot that little fact when she booked the church for tonight. What do you think’s going to happen when he comes out and sees a giant cross?” (“Sparks Fly Out”) When Hoyt cannot answer Maxine’s question to her satisfaction, she offers a possibility: “If he sizzles up like fatback bacon in front of everybody, there’s not gonna be much of a meetin’, now is there?” Maxine finally hangs an American flag over the cross—a strangely discursive covering of Southern religion with Southern patriotism. After Bill enters the room, he dramatically uncovers the cross, an act met by gasps. He re-hangs the American flag, saying “As a patriot of this great nation, I wouldn’t dream of putting myself before Old Glory.” To the right of the American flag, a Confederate flag also hangs.

When Gran introduces Bill, she insists that the community reintegrate him not as a human, but as a Southerner: “Our guest tonight is a gentleman who—despite what you might have heard—is one of us. His family was among the first to settle in Bon Temps, and he bravely fought for Louisiana in the war for southern independence. Let us welcome one of the original sons of Bon Temps back to the town that he helped build” (“Sparks Fly Out”). As Bill speaks to the community, the words “Do this in remembrance of me” are constantly visible on the center pew. This statement, of course, evokes the Last Supper, a sacred act of Christianity that mimics the consumption of Jesus’ blood, drawing a clear symbolic link between Southern religion and the vampires it would normally reject.

The scene also pays special, conscious attention to race. When Sookie asks to sit with Tara—the show’s principle black character—she replies, “Sure, come on in. Could always use more white people.” Tara also rolls her eyes as the two white men hang the Confederate flag behind the pulpit. While Bill is speaking, Arlene’s young son leans over and whispers: “Mama,
he’s so white.” Arlene replies, “No, darlin’. We’re white. He’s dead.” Given the nature of Bill’s speech—a reiteration of Southern absolution—these conversations are particularly pointed:

It was there that we learned the value of human life, and the ease with which it can be extinguished….Uneducated as we were, we knew little of the political or ideological conflicts that had led to this point….but goin’ to war was not a choice for us. We believed to a man, that we had a calling to fulfill, a destiny handed down to us from above.

Despite the community’s relative openness to engagement with Bill the Other, they only do so when he embraces a Southern narrative of history. This scene reveals the paradoxical complexities of living in Bon Temps—the potential for transformative encounters with Otherness is present, but the return to traditional Southernness remains a problem.

“Nothin’ But the Blood”: Sex and “Eating the Other”

Blood, the prevailing trope in True Blood, is both flexible metaphor and a material obsession. Aside from the obvious—that vampires consume human blood—blood also serves as a marker of virginity, a drug for humans, the product of violence, a religious sacrifice, a healing medicine for both humans and vampires, and a catalyst for queering of identity. The political power of this blood is primarily one of commodification and pathological consumption, often involving cannibalism, violence, starvation, slavery, incest, gluttony, and hypersexuality, all of which Loichot lists as markers of a “Tropics” constructed by colonizers (viii). As discussed in Chapter Three, the U.S. South is frequently included in the imaginative tropical zone; moreover, “New Orleans [has been called] the ‘gate of the Tropics’” (xi). Loichot’s “colonial food disease” is thus translated to a colonial blood disease, one that permeates every element of True Blood’s narrative. At times, True Blood’s vampires and Southerners fall in line with these tropical
stereotypes. Eric and Nora—vampire siblings through their maker, Godric—“fight like siblings, but...fuck like champions” (“Turn! Turn! Turn!”). Jason Stackhouse experiences strange hallucinations of his deceased parents; at one point, his mother asks if he “want[s] a little sex to make it better? Not even a blow job?” (“Let’s Boot and Rally”). When the maenad Maryann wreaks havoc on Bon Temps, “the whole town...devolved to a primitive state in a matter of days” (“Frenzy”). Maryann’s influence leads to a host of “tropical” behaviors, including frenzied sex, cannibalism, and indiscriminate violence. As the citizens of Bon Temps smash food into their faces, Maryann also feeds off this orgiastic energy.

This tropical blood, however, does not flow in a singular direction; its constant negotiation and renegotiation as a symbol of power complicates the show’s politics. Indeed, True Blood recognizes the potential for mutuality and moderation in the consumption of human and vampire blood—especially when this consumption is mediated by sexuality. bell hooks writes in her article “Eating the Other” that “desire for contact with the Other, for connection rooted in the longing for pleasure, can act as a critical intervention challenging and subverting racial domination, inviting and enabling critical resistance” (1). The idea that encounters with difference and otherness have transformative potential is not wholly unproblematic, but in True Blood at least, these encounters eventually open up spaces of nourishment and healing amid a troubled Southern landscape.

Most vampire stories focus on the penetration of the human body and draining of human blood—a violent act. True Blood destabilizes this trope in its title—named for the synthetic human blood that has negated the need for real human blood. When vampires feed on humans in True Blood, it is primarily for sexual pleasure or intimacy rather than a biological need. The human characters also mirror this shift—they often objectify and fetishize vampire bodies
despite discriminating against vampire identities. In the first episode, Jason Stackhouse (who regularly expresses his general disgust with vampires) says, “You know, I read in *Hustler* that everyone should have sex with a vampire at least once.” Throughout the series, women who date or associate with vampires get called “fangbangers” or vampire groupies.

Yet there is also room for intimate, healing sexual encounters between these “interracial” couples. In the cases of Sookie and Bill, and Hoyt and Jessica, both encounters involve losing virginities—the former of a female human to a male vampire, and the latter of a female vampire to a male human. They also both involve blood in two intersecting senses: the traditional tearing of the hymen, and the drawing of blood from human veins. bell hooks says that sexual encounters are a “way to confront the Other, as well as a way to make [oneself] over...a ritual transcendence...to be changed in some way by the encounter.” Although this encounter involves an “imperialist, colonizing journey as narrative fantasy of power and desire,” it is difficult to read either Sookie or Hoyt as colonizers of Bill and Jessica’s othered bodies.

The first sex scene between Bill and Sookie is spliced with another, dysfunctional sex scene between a “real” interracial couple, Tara and Sam. The juxtaposition of the two highlights the intimacy and tenderness between Bill and Sookie. Sookie emerges from the woods wearing a long, white nightdress; her actions literally enact hook’s “leav[ing] behind white ‘innocence’ and enter[ing] a world of experience.” Sookie chooses to have sex with Bill because he erases her Otherness; she is a telepath and can hear all human thoughts, but not those of vampires. This fact makes the conversation between them even more pointed. Laying in front of a crackling fire in Bill’s gothic mansion, they kiss each other gently. As an involuntary sexual reaction, Bill’s fangs come out, the clearest mark of his difference. At this point, the music shifts from Bill and Sookie’s theme to a darker, more sinister score. Sookie leans in gently and kisses Bill again, and
the music returns to the theme. After their sexual encounter, Sookie expresses that she feels weak. Bill’s response is strangely contemporary and straightforward for such a taboo encounter: “Of course you do. I fed on your blood. You should take some vitamin B-12 to replenish.” Their pillow talk also reveals that Sookie was sexually molested by her great-uncle as a child and that she never thought she would be able to have a healthy sexual encounter. Bill’s difference provides a safe space for Sookie to express her sexuality and offers healing for the violation she experienced as a child.

The relationship between Jessica and Hoyt reverses these roles: Jessica is the virgin vampire, and Hoyt is the human. When they meet, Jessica has just been turned into a vampire after years of homeschooling in a strict, abusive household. She is only seventeen—the youngest, most vulnerable vampire on the show, and the first to show us that vampires cry tears of blood. Their relationship begins as one of rebellion; Jessica is acting out against her recent trauma and years of abuse, while Hoyt’s mother Maxine is a controlling woman who discriminates against vampires. When Hoyt and Jessica first meet in Merlotte’s, their conversation reveals to Jessica the differences inherent in being a vampire. As he describes watching her smile all day and eating chicken fried steak, she realizes that a normal relationship is out of her reach—all the while focusing on a vein pulsing in Hoyt’s. When Jessica finally orders a TruBlood, however, Hoyt exclaims, “You’re a vampire. For real? Wow, that is awesome.” They return to Bill’s house, and Hoyt exclaims with boyish delight that Jessica “gets” to live “at vampire Bill’s house.” As they kiss on the couch, Jessica’s fangs come out—a doubling of the dynamic between Sookie and Bill in the first season. Jessica expresses embarrassment, but Hoyt sweetly reassures her: “No, no, don’t do that. Don’t hide it from me, that’s natural… Don’t be embarrassed about what you are. Because what you are is great.” In a heartbreaking twist on a sweet story of
adolescent virginity, Jessica finds out that her hymen grows back every time she has sex—
causing her to bleed every time she draws Hoyt’s blood in a sexual way. These scenes, when
read alongside each other, reveal the “human” characteristics of Bon Temps’ most sympathetic
vampires—they long for mutual intimacy and satisfaction rather than violence and oppression.

Vampire blood is also commodified as a drug, frequently called “V” or “V-juice.” By
implicating vampire bodies in capitalist, consumer culture, they are made vulnerable. In the pilot,
two white Southerners—Mack and Denise Rattray—kidnap Bill in order to drain and sell his
blood. As Sookie listens to Denise Rattray’s thoughts, she discovers that Bill’s blood will draw a
premium: “He’s probably got eleven or twelve pints in him….That’s almost two hundred ounces.
I bet we could get five hundred an ounce in Dallas….That’s $10,000. Sweet Jesus.” She later
describes his blood as “thick” and fantasizes about taking the V. bell hooks says that the
“commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight,
more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling” (1). Jason’s experience of
V quite literally reflects this; he “eats” the other and hallucinates Lafayette’s instructions: “If you
can learn to control it, V will open up your mind to everything you missin’ around you”
(“Burning House of Love”). Consuming the Other necessarily involves commodifying and
controlling the Other.

This human violation of vampires, however, is more complex than it appears to be. The
most visible purveyor of vampire blood is Lafayette Reynolds, Tara’s cousin. Lafayette is a
flamboyant black man who sells both vampire blood and his own body. Lafayette’s dealing is
part of a vicious capitalist cycle; he does not sell out of greed, but to survive. As Amador points
out, Lafayette can be read superficially, but the interplay between his marginalization and
reclamation of power reveals a “complex and multi-layered representation of the many minority
social subgroups in the south” (126). Lafayette’s source of vampire blood—a young, kind, gay vampire named Eddie—essentially trades his blood for Lafayette’s physical affection, a mutual commodifying of Othered bodies. In season two, it is revealed that Lafayette sells vampire blood for Eric Northman, a vampire sheriff, and Sophie-Anne, the Vampire Queen of Louisiana. The power behind selling vampire bodies, then, is far more complicated than human oppressing vampires, or vice versa.

When donated willingly and used in moderation, vampire blood also serves as a kind of folk medicine. After Sookie saves Bill from the Rattrays, they retaliate by attacking and beating her. Bill quickly comes to her aid, opens his veins, and feeds her his blood. In a reversal of roles, Bill also feeds on Sookie’s blood when he is burned by the sun while escaping from Russell Edgington’s plantation (“Hitting the Ground”). Even as a medicine, however, the blood cannot escape its sexual connotations—human characters frequently have sexual fantasies about the vampires whose blood they have consumed, including straight male humans who consumed the blood of straight male vampires. We see this first in the season three premiere, when a shirtless Bill shows up at Sam’s hotel room after giving him blood in the season two finale:

Sam: How’d you find me all the way up in Arkansas?

Bill: You’ve had my blood, remember? Quite a bit of it.

Sam: Right. Come on in.

Bill: May I use your shower? [Unzips pants.]

Sam: There’s, uh, plenty of towels in the bathroom.

Bill: If you could spare a shirt, I’d be much obliged.
Sam: I really didn’t pack anything. This is kind of an impromptu road trip I’m on. But you could have the shirt off my back if you want it. [Unbuttons shirt and takes it off.]

Bill: Nice. Thank you. I’ll take that shower now unless you’d care to join me.

Sam: Yeah. I think I would.

Bill: Good. We’re gonna have a nice time. I hear the water in Arkansas is very hard. (“Bad Blood”)

Sam wakes up the next morning and finds that this amusing encounter was a dream. In a similar scene, Jason drinks Ben/Warlow’s blood after being attacked by another vampire. In Jason’s fantasy, he shaves his face as Warlow watches and tenderly wipes shaving cream off of his cheeks. The mirror is foggy, and sexy music plays in the background. Warlow asks, “Do you want to do me now?” Jason nervously laughs. Warlow says, “You’ve never done this before, have you? Just relax. Do it like you do it to yourself.” When Jason cuts Warlow with the razor, he encourages him to “Taste it” (“At Last”). Jason then wakes up and gasps. These scenes provide much needed humor in a show about violence and oppression, but they also deconstruct the most traditionally un-othered characters: white, cisgender, straight Southern males. Viewers have both embraced the frequent, graphic sex and violence in *True Blood* and complained that such scenes are gratuitous. Even when these scenes feel over the top, though, this “eating” of the Other does important cultural work, encouraging encounters between Southerners, vampires, and the viewing audience.

*Authenticity and the “Real” Bon Temps*

For many of Bon Temps’ residents, then, the potential for transformation through encounters with the metaphorical and literal “blood” is realized. Hoyt Fortenberry dates Jessica
Hamby, Bill’s vampire progeny, to the dismay of his mother Maxine. Eventually, though, Maxine builds a close relationship with Tommy Mickens, Sam’s shapeshifter brother. Jason Stackhouse—who expressed disgust at the prospect of sexual contact with a vampire in season one—eventually courts Jessica as well. Andy Bellefleur, the town’s sheriff, impregnates a fairy and becomes a single father to four human/fairy hybrid girls. Characters that consistently refuse such encounters are often revealed to be performing southernness, rather than actually being southern.

The primary mystery in season one revolves around a string of racially motivated murders; someone in Bon Temps is killing off women who have slept with, talked to, or otherwise associated with vampires. Throughout the season, a number of main characters are suspected by the police, including Bill (a vampire) Sam (a shapeshifter) and Jason Stackhouse (Sookie’s brother). Toward the end of the season, the murderer is revealed to be a man named Drew Marshall, whom the community knows as “René Lanier”—a Cajun construction worker engaged to Arlene. René has the entire community fooled. When Arlene expresses contentment with Rene—in particular his “little Cajun butt”—Sookie replies bitterly: “I don’t know how anyone trusts anyone these days. They’re always keeping things from you. And you don’t even know who they are or what they are.” Her statement is prescient, as Drew’s “Cajun” accent turns out to be a mere performance—she finds a CD called “Cajun Dialect for Actors” in his home. As A.V. Club writer Scott Tobias jokes, “It’s no small irony that the most convincing Cajun character in the entire cast was the one with the fake accent” (“True Blood: ‘You’ll Be the Death of Me’”). The most violently bigoted character in season one, then, turns out to be playing at the Southern Cajun identity rather than actually inhabiting it.
The narrative arc surrounding Tara and her mother, Lettie Mae, follow a similar pattern. Lettie Mae, a heavily religious alcoholic, decides that in order to get rid of the demon telling her to drink, she needs to undergo a voodoo exorcism. To do this, she enlists the help of a “voodoo priestess” named Miss Jeanette. Miss Jeanette emerges from the woods, with a cane and old-fashioned dress. Miss Jeanette draws temporal and geographical lines to lend credibility to her con, insisting that her tools have “been in my family…all the way from Africa” and that she learned “from her mama, and she learned from hers and so on, going back a thousand years” (“Burning House of Love”). The site of the exorcism is populated by “primitive” decorations like plants and animal bones. After paying Miss Jeanette over five hundred dollars for the two exorcisms, Tara sees her working at a pharmacy, wearing glasses and a wig. Understandably, Tara lashes out against the contrived conjure woman: “I puked my guts out. I hallucinated stabbing a little girl. What the fuck kind of person are you?” Miss Jeanette—whose real name is Nancy LeGuare—describes the material conditions of being a poor black woman in Louisiana—a sick daughter, a son in prison, and “three grandbabies to care for.” She insists that “[J]ust because Miss Jeanette ain’t real don’t mean she can’t help people. You saw how it worked for your mama….Faith’s a powerful thing” (“The Fourth Man in the Fire”). To an extent, she is right. Lettie Mae does undergo a transformation, proving that a coherent lie is often more powerful than the fragmentation of truth.

The Reverend Steve Newlin, patriarchal leader of the Fellowship of the Sun Church and Light of Day Institute, is yet another example of this performative southernness. The Fellowship of the Sun/Son is organized around the idea that “God is light [and] Satan is darkness…If we human beings are the children of God, then creatures of darkness are undoubtedly the children of Satan” (“Nothing But the Blood”). The church trains its recruits (of which Jason Stackhouse is
one) in a military boot camp style to fight the forces of evil. Newlin’s Texas roots and heavy Southern accent mimics George W. Bush’s “us or them” mentality; at one point, the Reverend literally says, “I will not negotiate with sub-humans.” Unlike the citizens of Bon Temps, the Newlins are wholly unwilling to deconstruct binaries. Newlin tells Jason, “Now you’re either on the side of darkness, or on the side of light. There’s no in-between.” After his initial defeat in season two, Steve Newlin disappears. In season five, he reappears, completely rewritten as a gay vampire.

This deconstruction reveals Newlin’s hard line stance to be inherently false, and his southernness is implicated in this transformation. Toward the end of season five, Luna—a shapeshifter who can transform into humans—embodies Newlin briefly while in the Authority’s chambers. Luna/Newlin has a conversation with Chelsea, the receptionist, who is studying public relations:

Chelsea: Where’s your southern accent?
Luna/Newlin: Sometimes I like to… not have a Southern accent.
Chelsea: Really? But it’s such a part of who you are. Part of your brand.
Luna/Newlin: Yes. But sometimes I like to keep the brand evolving. So customers are more inclined to stay on their toes. (“Gone, Gone, Gone”)

Even though Newlin is not actually speaking, the flexibility and fluidity of other parts of his identity cast doubt on his southernness. This, in turn, casts doubt on a simple interpretation of the other southern characters.

The introduction of Amy, an outsider whom Jason meets in Shreveport as a vampire club, reinforces the inaccuracies inherent in a simplistic rendering of the South. Amy fetishizes the South and Jason as “authentic” while simultaneously being one of the most discriminatory,
Oppressive characters on the show—at her worst, she kidnaps a gentle, old, gay vampire and uses him as a V-producing slave. Upon meeting her, Jason immediately pressures Amy to “take the V and go to a roadhouse.” She stops him, saying “The setting is crucial”—foreshadowing that Amy’s tendencies to marginalize and abuse vampiric bodies must take place in an “appropriate” setting like her version of the South. Amy is from Storrs, Connecticut “originally,” but she comes down South looking for authenticity. She finds the South and Jason to be highly readable texts, saying: “I knew that you’d drive a truck. I knew it. I bet you work outside too, huh?” When Jason suggests that he could be a store owner or a doctor, Amy replies, “Well, doc, I love this truck. It’s authentic. It’s how a truck should be.” Amy repeats the sentiment when she first goes into Jason’s home: “God, I love your place, man. It’s very un-self-conscious. So off the grid” (“Burning House of Love”). Jason replies that he has not changed the place since his parents died. But to a northerner like Amy, this stasis locates Jason’s truck and home as simulacra of what she calls a “more legitimate time…before everything got totally out of whack” (“Burning House of Love”). As Scott Romine reminds us, “Once something is called ‘authentic,’ it already isn’t. More precisely, authenticity articulates a structure of desire and hence of absence” (4). Amy’s outsider perspective brings this false authenticity into relief and problematizes the temptation to classify Bon Temps and its people as simple, old-fashioned, bigoted, and ignorant.
CHAPTER 5

THE TROPICS BITE BACK IN DEXTER’S MIAMI

To include *Dexter* in this theoretical grouping requires that two possibilities be explored: first, that Dexter is a monster, and second, that the city of Miami is a “Southern” setting. As a text, *Dexter* does not engage with paranormal romance or science fiction in the same ways that *The Walking Dead* and *True Blood* do, but as a character, Dexter engages in monstrous behavior and with monstrous literary predecessors. Indeed, comparisons can be drawn between Dexter and the vampires of *True Blood*—Dexter stalks the night, draws and preserves blood, and engages in ritualistic murder, all in the name of vigilante justice. Likewise, *Dexter*’s proximate relationship to the Caribbean—and its particular expression in Miami through tropes of food and consumption—literally mediates between the *zonbis* of Haiti and the walkers of *The Walking Dead*. However, as a first-person narrative from the perspective of a monster, *Dexter* dissolves the boundaries between human and monster and resists an “us versus them” reading. As a hybrid creature, Dexter inhabits (and controls) a liminal space between life and death—just like *The Walking Dead*’s walkers or *True Blood*’s vampires. As I will argue in this chapter, this metaphorical liminal space is heavily dependent on qualities of another literal liminal space—the transnational South.

In *True Blood*, these dual liminal spaces and identities opened up a space for rehabilitating the “old” South in favor of a “new,” more open and tolerant South. *Dexter*’s positioning is a bit more tenuous. That the show’s titular character is a white man who fancies himself a vigilante superhero in a city like Miami opens up *Dexter* to be read as a working
through of white American anxiety about immigration in a particularly violent, reactive way.

Dexter’s justifications—that his victims are barbaric, violent, diseased, irredeemable—evoke discourses of violence in slavery and colonialism. The show’s first-person narration, however, serves as a way to de-quarantine these national anxieties, forcing “us” to face our complicity in the violence he inflicts on his victims.

Is Dexter a Monster?

Dexter seems to think so. Throughout the show, he invokes the “monster” as a descriptor, calling himself a “neat” monster and a “sea” monster (1.1, 1.2). On Halloween, while shopping for costumes with Rita and the kids, he insists that “People think it’s fun to pretend to be a monster. Me, I spend my life pretending I’m not.” Dexter’s actions speak louder than his words in this regard—he spends much of his time on the show stalking, tranquilizing, cutting, hacking, dismembering, and disposing of Miami’s criminals who he sees as having beaten the system. The term “monster” has been frequently invoked to describe serial killers in “true crime, television police procedurals, films, and even official police reports” since they became a public obsession in the late twentieth century. These monsters threaten “not only the lives, but also the values, of middle-class Americans” through their sexual deviance and homicidal activities (149).

In addition to his monstrous misdeeds, Dexter also draws from figurative language about monstrous mythology. First, his preferred environment is nighttime; the first words spoken on the series are “Tonight’s the night.” As the follow-up to this line implies—“And it’s going to happen again, and again”—Dexter’s murders almost always take place by moonlight. Indeed, the show’s first image mixes these metaphors by presenting an image of the moon reflected in the water of a Miami gutter, colored blood-red by the city lights. In Jeff Lindsay’s *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, on which the television series is based, this association is even more explicit; his
murderous tendencies are spurred on by the “Moon. Glorious moon. Full, fat, reddish moon, the night as light as day, the moonlight flooding down across the land and bringing joy, joy, joy” (1).

Of course, this preference for nighttime and moonlight invokes a number of supernatural and paranormal monsters, including vampires, werewolves, and ghosts. The werewolf imagery is particularly pronounced because of this obsession with moonlight. Dexter’s “dark passenger”—the murderous half of his split identity—is controlled by the lunar cycle. He indicates that he can only go a few weeks before a need like “a great wave that roars up and over the beach and does not recede…swells more with every tick of the bright night’s clock” (Lindsay 2). Like werewolves and the tide, Dexter essentially acts on a lunar cycle.

Dexter also has a monstrous origin story, which he frequently describes as his “rebirth” or “creation”—terms frequently used to describe the moments that vampires are turned. This origin story is uncovered throughout season one as an integral part of building sympathy for Dexter. His “dark passenger” was born in a shipping container where his mother was violently murdered with a chainsaw. Most of the first season is dedicated to the psychoanalytic exercise of revealing this memory. Finally, Dexter says: “I was there. I saw my mother’s death. A buried memory, forgotten all these years. It climbed inside me that day. My dark passenger” (“Truth Be Told”). Dexter and his older brother sat in the shipping container for days before Harry Morgan—a Miami police officer—found them and adopted Dexter. Ironically, this bloody scene that transformed Dexter from human to monster also evokes his most human reaction—Dexter faints at Rudy’s recreation of the shipping container. Doakes—the only member of the Miami PD who suspects Dexter—replies, “Something finally got to you. I guess you’re human after all” (“Seeing Red”).
But this obsession with—and simultaneous repulsion by—blood figures Dexter as more vampire than human. This obsession manifests itself in both his day job as a blood spatter analyst for the Miami Police Department and his nighttime hobby as a serial killer. As a lawyer directs Dexter during a round of expert testimony, “It’s safe to say blood is your life,” a line that can be interpreted literally (“Dexter”). Dexter, of course, takes more than a professional interest in blood, but this interest is complicated by years of unspoken trauma. Without his “normal” job and violent outlet, Dexter’s trauma might very well have taken over. In the pilot, Dexter articulates after killing his first onscreen victim: “Blood. Sometimes it sets my teeth on edge. Other times it helps me control the chaos” (“Dexter”). As part of his murderous ritual, Dexter compulsively collects and stores blood samples from his victims. Although he does not literally ingest this blood at any point, Dexter frequently describes this impulse in terms of “hunger” and “craving.” Additionally, the central mystery in season one forces these two discourses of blood to overlap when Dexter encounters a serial killer who drains all of his victims, much like a vampire. Upon seeing the body, Dexter is mesmerized:


As it turns out, this killer’s modus operandi is meant to be integrated with Dexter’s. The entire first season (and first novel of Lindsay’s series) is a tale of Gothic doubling between Dexter and his long-lost brother Brian Moser. In the novel, this doubling is explicit; the police department (and Dexter himself) suspects that he is the Ice Truck Killer because of security footage showing a man who looks just like Dexter entering the hockey rink. When Brian reveals himself, he also
peels back another part of Dexter’s narrative; they are “brother[s]...Irish twins...You were born only one year after me. Our mother was somewhat careless....In more ways than one” (Lindsay 273). This doubling plays with the Gothic genre but also reinforces the typical profile of a serial killer, one with a “promiscuous mother” (Poole 149).

Dexter’s father—Detective Harry Morgan, who appears to Dexter as a “ghost” and guide throughout the series—also connects *Dexter* to *Frankenstein*, perhaps the best-known monstrous tale in Western literature. Douglas Howard sees this association most strongly in the figure of Harry Morgan, Dexter’s because he essentially creates Dexter-as-monster by intervening in his life. First, he rescues Dexter from the shipping crate where his mother is murdered; and second, he creates “The Code”—a way for Dexter to murder without getting caught. Harry is, “like Victor Frankenstein, another man who would be God through the act of creating, and Dexter becomes yet another cultural variation on the Frankenstein myth, where the sins of the creator are revisited upon the creation and give birth to a different kind of monster” (22). Stephanie Green draws on this argument to unpack the cultural implications of such a dynamic, saying that Dexter “explores what happens when education aims to turn the monster child into self-appointed judge and executioner” and asks its audience “to empathise with the rejections, blows, prejudice, and shocks that lead to the monster’s defiant and alienated existence” (22).

This is where *Dexter* departs from traditional monster tales and falls more in line with *True Blood* rather than *The Walking Dead*. Because of Dexter’s first-person narrative, traumatic backstory, and choice of victims, the figure of the creepy, degenerative serial killer is rewritten to be a sympathetic antihero. The least legible qualities of most serial killers—asocial tendencies and
sexual sadism, in particular\(^\text{13}\)—are noticeably missing from Dexter’s persona. He holds down a steady, respectable job, is close with his sister, brings doughnuts to the police officers every morning, and dates a beautiful, broken divorcee with two children. Although Dexter is a monster, his Otherness is not readily apparent to anyone other than Harry and Brian—both of whom were privy to his trauma.

Of course, his Otherness is readily apparent to the audience. Dexter’s monstrous side is not so much revealed as foregrounded; he murders Mike Donovan in the pilot before he talks to Deb, takes Rita out on a date, reveals his childhood trauma, or shares doughnuts with his co-workers. This unabashed murder “asks the audience to identify with the serial murderer in a way that no other imaginative reconstruction of the genre has ever done before” (Poole 163). When Dexter forces Mike Donovan to look at the corpses and photographs of his child victims, Dexter is also justifying his murder to an audience—the show’s first attempt at building complicity in the viewer. Although Dexter is a serial killer, *Dexter* “represents two warring discourses united in the same terrifying figure…inherent monstrosity [versus] sickness and psychosis…evil monsters [versus] insane maniacs who have suffered childhood trauma” (151). Pity, however, is not enough to stomach *Dexter*’s violence week in and week out; the show’s first-person narration goes beyond pity to encourage active support of Dexter’s crimes.

\textit{“But I’m hungry for something different now”}: *Dexter’s Tropical Miami*

So what are the implications of this complicity? Like *The Walking Dead* and *True Blood*, focusing on Dexter’s physical location—Miami, Florida—is vital to unpacking this question. *Dexter* the show and Dexter the character certainly lack key traditional Southern characteristics

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\(^{13}\) Poole notes that the FBI “declared a firm link between serial murder and sexual sadism” in their original profiles of serial killers. “For reasons not at all obvious, alternative sexuality had to be part of the serial killer’s profile” (151).
that *The Walking Dead* and *True Blood* share. There are few Southern accents, flannel shirts, or pick-up trucks. Indeed, although Florida is quite literally the most Southern state in the continental U.S. (and Miami its southernmost city), its presence within a monolithic southern identity is dubious. In casual discussions of the South—at least in my personal experience—Florida is never included because of its high number of Yankee and immigrant transplants and an inability to make decent sweet tea. Miami is the most international city in the United States, with more of its population born in a different country than any other city on earth (Wilson and Singer 3).

Despite this, *Dexter*’s Miami retains key features commonly associated with Southern culture, including tropicality, degeneracy, violence, cannibalism, incest, and hybridity. This discursive rendering, of course, is nothing new, having been used for centuries to justify colonialism and slavery. As Ring argues, “Florida, in particular, was often portrayed as a bountiful tropical paradise. Yet underneath the allure of Southern tropicality there lurked a dark side, a dangerous and pestilential character that needed to be tamed” (Ring 622). Dexter is both responsive to and an active participant in this “dark side” of Miami—he uses his own dark side (and a discourse of justification) to keep others from doing the same. Dexter’s presence in Miami can, then, be read as either problematic or progressive.

On the one hand, Dexter renders himself a god-like figure who regulates life and death in Miami. For Dexter’s white male victims, this judge/jury/executioner routine is relatively straightforward. But when Dexter takes down Latino characters like Hector Estrada—the drug cartel leader who killed his mother—and Miguel Prado—a well-esteemed Miami prosecutor—the complicity is slightly more fraught. Poole points out that Dexter “implicates us in the crimes of a murderer…at a time when the President of the United States could refer to himself as ‘the
decider’ in matters of war and peace…who gets to live and who gets to die” (164). This implicit connection to George W. Bush—arguably the most Southern president the U.S. has ever elected—also has racial and cultural implications. Dexter chooses his victims on the basis of the Code created by his father, Harry. This Code is propped up by Dexter’s family values—he cherishes and protects his sister, creates a family unit with Rita and her kids, and has a son with her. Poole argues that these choices do not “humanize him so much as Americanize him, giving [Dexter] a traditional family unit that makes his other, secret life seem both comprehensible and compartmentalized” (164). These values also southernize Dexter. While Dexter is certainly not “old South,” he does seem—at least to some extent—to be regulating or taming the “new” South that Miami represents. Dexter’s Code is based on a system of ethics, but he purposefully avoids the kind of bureaucracy that weighs down U.S. immigration and justice systems. When the police (led primarily by Cuban-American characters) fail, Dexter takes out the trash. This combination approach could be read as an exploration of white American anxiety about cities like Miami, where 64% of the population is Hispanic (U.S. Census Quick-Facts).

Throughout the show, Dexter makes it clear that his presence in Miami is not coincidental, but practical. Dexter says of his fellow police officers, “Salt of the earth, these people, and they work hard” but notes that “with the solve rate of murders at about 20%, Miami is a great place for me…to hone my craft. Viva Miami” (“Dexter”). Dexter’s reliance on the material conditions of Miami also reinscribes stereotypes of the Tropical South, its landscape and its people. First and foremost, Dexter’s Miami is diverse—a welcome sight on cable television that reflects Miami’s actual population. The Miami Police Department is comprised of multiple Latino characters (many in leadership, like Lieutenant LaGuerta and Angel Batista), Asian forensics expert Vince Masouka, and black Sergeant James Doakes. Throughout the show,
Miami’s bilingualism is showcased; conversations between Latino characters frequently appear in untranslated Spanish. Although Dexter and Debra both reference their lack of Spanish fluency, Dexter is comfortable with the hybrid “Spanglish” that Angel uses in their conversations. For example, in Dexter’s first on-screen conversation with Angel, they move back and forth between English and semi-translated Spanish:

Dexter: Very clean.

Angel: Yeah, but he didn’t finish. No terminó.

Dexter: Looks pretty completo to me, Angel. [Dexter walks away.]

Angel: Hey, Dex, dónde va? Where you going?

Dexter: Hey, no blood. No trabajo.

This linguistic hybridity is promising and lends itself to an alternative reading—that Dexter exists symbiotically with Miami, protecting its potential victims of crime in exchange for its low murder solve rates and the shelter of its swamps. For a liminal, hybrid human monster like Dexter—who breaks down ethical lines between good and evil and forces his audience to do the same—such a liminal, hybrid, peripheral space is vital.

* Dexter* leans on the unique characteristics of this space just as heavily as *The Walking Dead* does on the “old South” and *True Blood* does on Bon Temps. Miami—its landscape, culture, food, and people—foregrounds everything. Indeed, before any murder takes place, Dexter talks about Miami nightlife. His first voice-over narrates a scene of Miamians eating, dancing, and kissing. As he watches them, Dexter says, “Miami is a great town. I love the Cuban food. Pork sandwiches—my favorite. But I’m hungry for something different now” (“Dexter”). This brief introduction highlights multiple features of the tropical south—ethnic diversity, an obsession with food and consumption, and an association with violence. Through the rest of the
season, Dexter meditates on his own eating habits and those of other Miamians. While going on a date night with Rita, he describes a feature of Miami nightlife, breaking the shells of seafood for consumption: “Needless to say I have some unusual habits, yet all these socially acceptable people can’t wait to pick up hammers and publicly smash their food to bits” (“Dexter”). He also notes that bananas are his “favorite tropical fruit. The perfect driving food next to a pulled pork sandwich” (“Crocodile”).

Examining Dexter’s title sequence—like that of True Blood—is also a fruitful exercise. If title sequences “instantly create a distinctive visual and thematic identity for the film or television program,” then Dexter’s implies a participation and complicity with the tropical features of Miami rather than distance or resistance to them (Karpovich 27). Also like True Blood, Dexter’s title sequence plays with images of food and blood. The sequence follows Dexter getting ready—shaving himself, cooking and eating breakfast, getting dressed, and walking out of his door to sunshine and palm trees. The scene plays at a sense of banality and evil; the blood dripping from Dexter’s nicked face looks exactly like the sauce he drips onto his fried egg. The close zoom of the camera adds an element of violence Dexter’s breakfast, particularly when he slice a grapefruit in half and squeezes its juice. Indeed, the sequence opens with a scene of violence; before even waking up, Dexter slaps and kills a mosquito on his arm. Karpovich reads this action as a “curiously apt metaphor for the protagonist” (30). Dexter is:

[S]imultaneously dangerous and fragile, and utterly compelled to seek out and feed on human blood, despite the fact that humans usually fight back and, more than often, kill mosquitoes. Dexter swats the mosquito with a precise, well-aimed, deadly blow, without even opening his eyes. We are only five seconds into the series at this point, but the central theme is already established: Dexter Morgan
disposes of parasites, with a deadly efficiency. Moreover, we, the audience, are also already complicit in identifying with Dexter’s actions: which of us has never killed a mosquito? (30)

But Karpovich misses key symbolism in Dexter’s mosquito—it is an inherently tropical creature, one that represents both the pathological consumption and contagion of Loichot’s colonial food disease. Dexter may be the mosquito, but he also tames the mosquito with relative ease. The title sequence hints at a key paradox in Dexter: he participates in and contributes to stereotypes about the tropics by being a monster that consumes both food and blood at a remarkable rate. But as a white man—the face that he shows to the imaginary Miami featured in the show—he also defeats those around him who illegitimately consume the blood of Miami citizens.

This paradox is reiterated in Dexter’s engagement with the swamp—a “feature of the landscape that has been linked profoundly and uniquely to the American South” (Wilson ix). As Wilson argues, the swamp is a kind of internal other to the Southern landscape, just as the South is an internal other for the rest of the United States. As an Othered landscape, “the swamp…remains a space resistant to inclusion in a distinct Southern narrative of practical agrarian idealism” (xvii). This resistance to inclusion is paired with fear; the swamp “represented a mysterious and demonic realm for white Southerners” (xviii). The swamp is featured in a similar way throughout Dexter: he saves a young boy from being murdered by Jeremy Downs there, and he discovers the bodies of a dozen young girls left there by Boyd Fowler (“Popping Cherry”; “Hello, Bandit”). The scenes imply a tenuous relationship between Dexter and the swamp; it is a place of violence that he prevents and discovers. But the swamp is also a place of sanctuary and growth for Dexter; he first hunts deer with Harry there, an act of bonding with his adoptive father that also prepares him for his violent outlet later on. This dual nature reflects the
swamp’s historical significance, as the swamp was “a forbidding but welcome place of escape for runaway slaves” (xviii). In many ways, Dexter not only engages with the swamp, he is the swamp—traditionally considered to be dangerous and degenerate, but also a site of subversion and hybridity.

This imaginative configuration can be applied to Miami more generally. In their examination of Miami City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami, Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick argue that:

Miami is not a microcosm of the American city. It never was. From its very beginnings a century ago, the Biscayne Bay metropolis possessed an air of unreality, a playground divorced from its natural habitat by the deeds of Yankee developers. For a while it seemed that no fantasy, no matter how farfetched, could not be enacted here. (XI)

Dexter’s preoccupation with Miami reflects this sentiment. When he sees the Ice Truck Killer’s first victim, he says, “There’s something strange and disarming about looking at a homicide scene in the daylight of Miami. It makes the most grotesque killings look staged, like you’re in a new and daring section of Disney World—Dahmer Land” (“Dexter”). Aside from distancing the corpse from its victim, this line also evokes Baudrillard’s discussion of the simulacra in relation to Disney World—yet another Florida destination spot that peddles fantasy instead of reality (“Disneyland Company”). Whether or not Miami is part of the South proper, these descriptions feel like those of Greeson and Romine; Dexter’s Miami is an imaginative, un-real space to quarantine anxiety about Otherness—Dexter’s and the city’s. If Miami is a “multilingual, multicultural experiment,” then Dexter’s experiments with narrative sympathy and identification with an Othered voice are particularly fitting. As Dexter comments, “The whole city of Miami
reinvents itself every three years” (“Let’s Give the Boy a Hand”). Just like Bon Temps, then, *Dexter’s* tropical Miami is used as an imaginative, experimental space to enact fantasies of justice and revenge.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

Indeed, each of the shows discussed in this paper enacts some kind of fantasy—whether a
nostalgia for the Old South, a queering of that same space, or a desire for revenge to ameliorate
traumatic memories. To varying extents, they deal with issues of race and colonialism alongside
fears about penetration, contagion, and infection. None of these fantasies are unproblematic, and
they all reflect a desire to contain and repress monstrous anxieties in a South with a strong
border. To the extent that these fantasies are problematic, they are also unsuccessful. Each of the
Souths within each of these shows is constantly negotiated and renegotiated. Every time The
Walking Dead builds a fence around its new “old South,” the walkers—or other humans—invoke
and contaminate. True Blood’s Southernness is revealed to be performative and flexible. At first
glance, the choice to set The Walking Dead, True Blood, and Dexter in the South feels like an
attempt to quarantine these fantasies of Otherness into a safe, well-bounded region. But the fact
that these disparate Souths all existed contemporaneously on television works to deconstruct the
region. The monolith cannot hold, but the deconstructed space that remains is promising, even if
it is being explored by proxy through monsters.
REFERENCES


Ring, Natalie. “Inventing the Tropical South: Race, Region, and the Colonial Model.”


