

MORE THAN COLD AND HEARTLESS: THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC MILIEU OF *TRUE BLOOD*

Caroline Ruddell and Brigid Cherry

The title for this chapter is, in part, taken from the episode 'Fresh Blood' (3.11), where Pam seems on the verge of tears over Eric's plan to sacrifice himself in order to avenge his slaughtered family and destroy Russell Edgington. 'You know I love you more when you're cold and heartless,' he says to her, but this seems more an encouragement for her to stay strong than purely a description of her natural temperament (albeit that this is the persona she frequently projects). Pam can certainly appear cold and heartless in her demeanour, but she is never dispassionate. The tension in the performance always suggests strong emotions such as lust, excitement, obsession and anger, and she often expresses her irritation and impatience towards humans and others she regards as weaker or lesser than herself with sarcasm. When it comes to Eric, she is protective, devoted and (mostly) obedient, as befits the relationship of vampire progeny to maker. Being cold and heartless, it seems, does not preclude being hot and passionate. Pam thus embodies the hybrid Gothic atmosphere of *True Blood*, one that borrows from a Southern Gothic milieu and melds it together with the conventions of the popular Gothic vampire. David Punter and Glennis Byron position the Southern Gothic as a sub-genre of Gothic more generally, arguing that it 'appropriates elements of the traditional Gothic, combines them with the particular concerns of the American South, and is characterized by an emphasis on the grotesque, the macabre and, very often,

the violent' (2004, 116–17). This is a perfectly fitting description indeed of *True Blood*.

The 'Gothicized version of the American South' in Southern literature portrays 'madness, decay and despair, and the continuing pressures of the past upon the present, particularly with respect to the lost ideals of a dispossessed Southern aristocracy and to the continuance of racial hostilities' (Punter and Byron 2004, 116–17). Similarly, in discussing this Southern Gothicism, Allan Lloyd Smith (2004, 28) reflects on the socio-political mores of the region, particularly 'the legacy of slavery and racial discrimination'. *True Blood* re-enacts this legacy through the encoding of civil rights issues, and the attendant social prejudices, in the coming-out of the vampires (which parallel African-American and gay history). Moreover, as simply put by Anne Skillion in her description of Southern Gothic, the series encodes the institutionalized horrors of societies and social conventions (2001, 678) in its depiction of both human and supernatural communities. Commonly in the Southern Gothic, therefore, the grotesque and the macabre are embodied by human characters who are physically or spiritually monstrous (Boyd 2002, 321) rather than the overtly supernatural monsters of *True Blood* (though vampires do occur in recent Southern literature such as *Interview with the Vampire*, for example). Whilst it is true that such human grotesques are not necessarily central to the plots in *True Blood*, they do provide shadowy villains and representations of evil that are often more monstrous than the vampires and other supernatural creatures that inhabit Bon Temps and its environs. Characters such as Maxine Fortenberry, Andy Bellefleur, René Lenier, Joe Lee Mickens, Lettie Mae Thornton and the Newlins are all signified as grotesque in various ways and provide depth to the narrative. They populate and characterize the Southern Gothic milieu that is the backdrop to the popular Gothic figures – the vampires, werewolves, shifters, fairies, witches and ghosts – who form the central focus of the series.

Thus, *True Blood* is clearly rooted within the Southern Gothic tradition specifically, and within the broader context of

the Gothic more generally. However, it is the Southern Gothic that dominates the series in terms of aesthetics, setting and mood, primarily through the heat that the series radiates. This chapter will consider how *True Blood* renegotiates the Gothic and the Southern Gothic through its depictions of a heated climate, heated relationships and the passion that constantly simmers just beneath the surface and yet frequently erupts.

Southern Gothic Landscape and Climate

It is the Deep South setting that is paramount in positioning *True Blood* with respect to Southern Gothic. As Fred Botting points out, 'the consistency of the [Gothic] genre relied on the settings, devices and events' (1996, 45). In part, Southern Gothic has as much to do with location, and the nature of life as determined by geography, as it does with the supernatural and the monstrous. According to Savoy (2009, 9), the American Gothic has a long tradition of attributing terrible violence to the muteness of landscape. Whereas the settings of Oklahoma, Texas and New Mexico as seen in *Carnivàle* (that other HBO series that embodies a Gothic milieu) resemble, as Raban (1996, 81) says, 'a bleak and haunted landscape', *True Blood* is anchored in the lush vegetation and humid wetlands of the Deep South. The settings of *Carnivàle* and *True Blood* juxtapose and indeed overlap in Texas, but the dust bowl of the 1930s is the polar opposite of *True Blood's* territory. The landscape of *Carnivàle* – barren, dry hardpan, plains flat to the horizon or valleys dominated by vertiginous mountains – is synonymous with the Gothic sublime landscape that overwhelms the spectator. The landscape of *True Blood* – the Louisiana of Bon Temps, Shreveport and New Orleans, the Mississippi residence of Russell Edgington and the Texas base of the Fellowship of the Sun, Hotel Carmilla and the Dallas vampire nest owing allegiance to Godric – possesses a far more closed (and claustrophobic) sense of space. In the humid, subtropical climate, the lush woodlands, swamplands and bayous clothe and conceal the contours of the land beneath. Buildings

and habitations – Merlotte’s Bar and Grill, Sookie’s home, the Compton plantation house and Russell Edgington’s antebellum mansion – are surrounded and isolated by cypresses, willows, magnolias and other distinctly Southern trees. It is in vegetation (not shadows) that monsters hide: the woods are the location for the Rattray’s attacks on Bill (‘Strange Love’, 1.1) and Sookie (‘The First Taste’, 1.2), where Maryann (who is, intriguingly, using the surname Forrester) tracks Sookie down and poisons her (‘Scratches’, 2.3), where the witch Marnie casts the decay spell on Pam (‘I’m Alive and on Fire’, 4.4); where Jason chases and encounters Crystal for the first time (‘Beautifully Broken’, 3.2). In exterior day scenes, the light is frequently tempered by shade from trees that dapple the action beneath, but sunlight is always blindingly bright.

The sun continually beats down on Bon Temps and it is not insignificant that Sookie is a self-confessed sun worshipper. Publicity stills for the series depict Sookie sunbathing in a bikini and sunglasses; this is at odds with the Gothic and with the other promotional material focusing on the Tru Blood beverage and the coming-out of the vampires. Scenes whether during the day or at night suggest oppressive heat: Sookie dresses for the subtropics in skimpy outfits – either her Merlotte’s uniform of shorts and T-shirt or her light cotton summer frocks in flower-sprigged pastel prints with spaghetti straps; at work Jason is bare-chested under his fluorescent road crew waistcoat (‘Strange Love’) or when washing the police cars (‘Trouble’, 3.5); after being tortured and shot at Fangtasia, Lafayette cools himself with a Chinese paper fan (‘Shake and Fingerpop’, 2.4); at the meeting of the Descendants of the Glorious Dead (‘Sparks Fly Out’, 1.5) several women are also seen using leaf fans while a close-up shot shows a bead of sweat rolling down Tara’s neck; and during Tara’s exorcism the humidity is palpable in the amber firelight (‘To Love Is to Bury’, 1.11). Characters are often shown being unmotivated or unproductive in the heat: Jason sleeps in his truck during his working hours supervising the road construction, while Hoyt and Lafayette toil away in the hot sun (‘It Hurts Me Too’, 3.3); Andy seeks the shelter of Merlotte’s

bar and its provision of cold beer ('You'll Be the Death of Me', 1.12); Lettie Mae lies in an alcoholic stupor ('The First Taste').

Action frequently takes place outside, even at night: throughout season two Maryann's orgies emphasize the subtropical climate as the folk of Bon Temps divest themselves of clothing, inhibitions and morality; Sam goes skinny dipping and runs naked in the trees after he has shifted back to human form ('Burning House of Love', 1.7); Godric relinquishes his existence by standing on the roof of the Hotel Carmilla as the sun rises ('I Will Rise Up', 2.9); and (perhaps most significantly) fairy blood allows vampires to walk (and run and swim) in the sunlight ('I'm Alive and on Fire'). The names of the Fellowship of the Sun and the Light of Day Institute play on the idea of daylight and sunshine; their logo is a flaming sun emblem and their branding colour scheme is a sunny yellow and the intense blue of a cloudless sky, while their elite members are known as Soldiers of the Sun. Water is also frequently used as a backdrop, reminding the viewer of the high humidity that the televisual aesthetics cannot literally project. Even where there are no explicit references to heat, the title sequence sets a palpable mood for each episode with its images of swamps and bayous, shacks raised up on stilts above the water, the sun shining through reeds and off the surface of the water alongside the vibrant skies of sunset, women in skimpy clothing or cotton frocks and men in sleeveless shirts. 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'.

The weather in traditional Gothic tales is often dreary and grey, reflecting the darker themes of the genre.¹ There is an interesting question here: how is Gothic's traditional gloom transformed in the light and heat of *True Blood's* Southern Gothic setting? There are two key aspects to consider in this context. On the one hand, since the majority of scenes featuring the vampire characters take place at night, interplays of light and darkness connote the literal and the metaphorical heat of the Southern

Gothic. On the other, intense, unremitting light creates the same atmosphere of threat, oppression and suffocation as darkness and shadows do in the traditional Gothic. Clearly, an excess of light can be uncomfortable, oppressive and suffocating.² Daylight scenes in *True Blood* are not only endlessly sunny, but sunlight is a constant threat to the vampires. Bill must spend the daylight hours in a dank hole under the stairs in his decaying Gothic house and in 'You'll Be the Death of Me' the sun burns his skin black when he ventures out in daylight during René's attack on Sookie. This scene itself is a good example of how the Southern Gothic elements work effectively in daylight. René is a deranged human killer and can be read as a grotesque figure. He fakes an identity with a false name and accent, he harbours rabid anti-vampire feelings and he murders the women of Bon Temps who associate with vampires (whether fangbangers or not). When he enters Sookie's house, he flaps his T-shirt and switches on the ceiling fan, remarking on the heat. 'It's hotter in here than hell on Sunday,' he says, to which Sookie explains that Gran used to leave the windows open all day but she has not felt safe doing that for a while. Ironically, Sookie is letting in the danger and violence she seeks to keep out and René brings the fires of hell with him. As Sookie reads René's mind in the kitchen, his memories of when he murdered Gran are over-exposed and bleached out in white light, contrasting with the bands of light and shade created by the half-drawn curtains. When he pursues Sookie through the woods and then the graveyard, she again catches several glimpses of René's memories and again these are bleached out.

Further intercutting between Bill waking up in his dark coffin as he senses Sookie's fear and the brightness of the graveyard creates an additional strong contrast. The screen is almost entirely black with just one side of Bill's face softly lit. It is interesting here that René – the grotesque killer – is associated with white light and Bill – the romantic hero – with darkness, reversing the usual narrative opposition. The blazing sunlight serves to emphasize the terror and the violence of the scene. René, Sookie and Sam (as he also rushes to Sookie's aid) all pass through oscillating shafts of bright light and patches of dappled

shade. Even when Sookie hides in an open grave, the light reflects off her blonde hair and shimmers on the grass above her. Heat radiates overtly in the shots where Bill is exposed to the sun. The image is distorted in a wave pattern to give the impression of the air shimmering in a heat haze. Sunlight is highlighted as visible shafts of light fall between the trees, making Bill's flesh blister and burn while smoke rises from his blackening skin. After Sookie kills René – significantly via a beheading, one of the traditional methods of slaying a vampire – Sam buries Bill, literally to get him out of the light. This sense of heat and light as oppressive and overpowering is emphasized through the fact that sunlight is inimical to vampires. Again, night and darkness are associated with good, day and light with evil. Moreover, 'staying up' during the day gives vampires 'the bleeds', where they bleed out from the ears and nose even when they do not attempt to venture out into the light. Yet at the same time, the effect of sunlight on the vampire's body can be portrayed as a thing of beauty. In 'I Will Rise Up' an intense blue-white flame engulfs Godric as he stands under the rising sun on the roof of the Hotel Carmilla (where shade is impossible). Ironically Godric's end is a moment he welcomes: 'Are you very afraid?' Sookie asks him, but he meets the sunrise saying he is full of joy and wants to burn. He tells Sookie that he does not think like a vampire any more – light it seems is no longer an anathema to him.

Gothic Architecture and Style

The climate and landscape thus go against the traditional Gothic tropes of dark, labyrinthine spaces, gloomy castles and lack of sunlight, but the traditional Gothic is nevertheless present within the series. Several authors have noted that particular spaces, such as castles, vaults, dungeons and forests, are the prominent Gothic settings (Botting 1996; Hogle 2002; Kavka 2002; Spooner and McEvoy 2007; Wright 2007). In *True Blood*, the heat, humidity and endless succession of sunny days work to create an aesthetic of oppositions where the Gothic

and the Southern Gothic are juxtaposed. The graveyard and the Compton house constitute the most traditionally Gothic settings in *Bon Temps*. They also form Sookie's route to Bill. En route from her light-filled house (and the garden where she sunbathes) she must traverse the graveyard to reach Bill's dark, decaying pile, figuratively passing from day to night and from life to death as she goes to her liaisons with him. Going to Bill's home is also a journey into the past: it is old-fashioned, unmodernized (at least until season four) and gloomy, filled with peeling paintwork and fading, antique furniture. Clearly, it can be likened to the traditional Gothic castle easily identified in Gothic fiction from Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* through to Dracula's Carpathian castle (and even more recently the gloomy, labyrinthine settings of the *Saw* franchise).

Whilst other vampire residences have Gothic architectures (Fangtasia's dungeon, Russell's darkened, candle-lit dining room), these are often enclosed within or beneath open, light spaces. Sophie-Anne, the glamorous vampire Queen of Louisiana, resides in a house with large windows containing dioramas to mimic views out on to the beach and ocean and a 'dayroom' that includes a swimming pool with glass ceiling and painted daytime sky (where, in a perverse inversion of Sookie, she playacts at sunbathing), all decorated in a sophisticated pale neutral colour scheme with shell-encrusted walls and many crystal chandeliers. Scenes set in Sophie-Anne's house are usually set at night, but the amount of light negates the darkness. The overall impression is that of a Malibu-style residence that invites rather than blocks out light. This complements Russell Edgington's antebellum residence. Beautifully maintained, filled with ancient and rare antiques, decorated in a predominantly cream and faded pastel palette, again with large crystal chandeliers reflecting the light, Russell's house is reminiscent of an aristocratic European dwelling signifying the height of wealth and power. Both these locations are light, open architectures in strong contrast to the Compton house's decaying, faded Southern Gothic, but also at odds with the urban modernity of Fangtasia.

The vampire bar contains many elements that capture a popular contemporary Gothic aesthetic: the colour of the interior design and decor is predominantly red and black, there are skull and cross motifs on the stage lighting, and Eric sits in a throne on the raised dais surrounded by swagged red brocade curtains, while Pam stands beside him dressed in black leather corset and gauntlets. Running counter to the popular goth aesthetic, however, the bar is also brightly lit by sleek, contemporary uplighters and table lamps, vibrantly coloured neon logos cut through the dark colour scheme, there are rope lights all around the bar, kitsch posters of vampires biting the Statue of Liberty on the walls and a merchandise stall near the entrance. Sookie imagines it as being what a vampire bar would look like if it were a ride at Disneyworld. And in a sense, it is all a façade. Eric and Pam are play-acting at what they expect their human clientele (tourists and fangbangers alike) might think a vampire bar would look like. This embodies a subcultural goth (as opposed to literary Gothic) aesthetic.

Similarly, costuming expresses the Gothic within a contemporary context. As Catherine Spooner writes: 'At the beginning of the twenty-first century clothing is viewed as playing a much more integral role in its relationship with the body and the self, in which the subject is not only articulated through dress, but dress also articulates the subject' (Spooner 2004, 2). Pam's appearance, for example, is both a direct comment on her character and a remediation of the popular Gothic. As Eric's progeny, second-in-command and business partner she spends much of her time in Fangtasia. Providing spectacle for the human clientele, Pam wears clothes that echo popular conceptions of the vampire. They are black or red, tight-fitting, revealing and made of leather or lycra. Similarly, when Jessica returns from staying with Eric and Pam at Fangtasia ('You'll Be the Death of Me'), she is wearing a 'baby Goth' outfit (a teen version of Pam's vampire wardrobe) of black lace bodice, tartan micro-mini skirt with studded belt, stockings with suspenders showing, a studded black choker, black bows in her hair, multiple black bracelets and wrist

bands, black boots and excessive amounts of black eyeliner. The body and dress are thus integral to the Gothic narrative. As Spooner suggests, 'Gothic garments articulate the body in terms of a range of characteristic Gothic themes: sensibility, imprisonment, spectrality, haunting, madness, monstrosity, the grotesque' (Spooner 2004, 4). Pam's Fangtasia costumes, and Jessica's to a lesser extent, fashion their bodies as Gothic subjects which express the themes in Spooner's list. However, Pam on returning Jessica to Bill is the exact antithesis of the Goth; she is wearing a pale blue, Chanel-style suit and pearls, and has an 'it' bag casually slung in the crook of her arm. Intriguingly, Pam dislikes the Gothicized vampire attire – this is as much her work uniform as Sookie's Merlotte's T-shirt and apron. When not working in public, Pam wears pastel pencil skirts and knitwear or a pink leisure suit and Ugg boots.³ In 'Scratches', Eric describes her as 'extremely lazy but loyal'. But Pam does not appear to be lazy, simply exhibiting a conventional (if not particularly feminist) female sensitivity to clothing and appearance. She is dressed in a frilled pink satin blouse, tight pink and beige tweedy skirt and pink patent ankle-strap shoes with five-inch stiletto heels; she is immaculately made up with red lips and black eyeliner, her long blonde hair in Veronica Lake waves. It is a trendy, retro 1940s film star image, but one entirely unsuited to searching the woods for the creature that attacked Sookie: 'Let him do it,' she says, referring to Chow, 'I'm wearing my favourite pumps.' Bill also forces Jessica to change her clothes, telling her that he will not have her 'going out dressed like a slattern'. Indeed, Jessica's usual wardrobe – in common with elements of both Sookie's and Pam's – consists of light and citrus-coloured strappy tops and summer frocks. All three women's wardrobes are in summery colours and suitable for the warm climate.

In this break with many examples of the vampire genre, the vampire characters are not coded as vampires through their dress unless they are performing their identities for the benefit of consumerism. In contrast, it is also interesting to note that Nan Flanagan wears classic professional clothing when appearing

on television, but dresses in an edgier vamp style in private. To ensure vampires are accepted, she projects the 'face of corporate America' in the media. As Abbott argues: 'The vampire is in a constant state of disintegration and renewal, and it is through this process that it is intrinsically linked to the modern world, which is also perpetually in the throes of massive change' (2007, 5). Characters such as Pam and Jessica thus renegotiate the Gothic in a contemporary, and Southern, context. Costuming, therefore, parodies popular ideas of Gothic fashion, but it also subverts the traditional Gothic. In the first season, Sookie wears a long, white, flowing dress when she runs to Bill after Gran's funeral and in season three Franklin Mott forces Tara to wear an ornate white gown. Such costuming is a parody of the virginal Gothic heroine. Tara is anything but submissive or cowed by Franklin and Sookie does not run from the monster but directly to him.

Passion in the Southern Gothic Community

Environment, both natural and man-made, thus becomes a signifying presence of Southern Gothic themes. Locating the action in a small community in the Deep South, rather than in an urban environment signifying modernity, is pertinent. Bon Temps is an ideal location for barely concealed prejudices, buried secrets and damaged relationships. The series is preoccupied with the general struggle of day-to-day living, personal problems and poverty. Heat, and the continual blazing sunshine beating down on the community, becomes a metaphor for the slow and sticky way the human characters navigate their lives; they are continually waylaid and slowed down by their emotions and physical desires. Andy is a drunkard and later a V addict, he curses frequently, is curmudgeonly and overly suspicious of people he dislikes. This means that he is frequently unsuccessful at his job. He learns about Maryann's orgies ('Scratches') but is distracted by his obsession with the pig, Daphne's shifter form, and when he accuses Lafayette of killing Miss Jeanette,

Terry has to remind him that he was a more dignified police officer when they played cops and robbers as children ('Hard-Hearted Hannah', 2.6). Maxine Fortenberry is a busybody and a domineering mother who harbours strong prejudices against those who are different, especially vampires. Hoyt calls her 'a mean, prejudiced, old, control freak' ('Evil Is Going On', 3.12). She is depicted as wilfully ignorant (attempting to move and then cover the cross when Adele Stackhouse invites Bill to speak at a meeting in the church), rude (calling Jessica a vampire tramp and a devil slut), prone to exaggeration (claiming she could have been killed when there were merely people in the road), conniving (engineering Hoyt's relationship with an 'acceptable' girlfriend after he temporarily breaks up with Jessica) and vindictive (threatening to ban Hoyt from her house, disinherit him and eventually replacing him with Tommy). The narrative of *True Blood* often returns to the characters' personal lives and the secrets they keep from one another. Lafayette does not speak about his mentally ill mother, though he clearly cares for her. Sam hides his identity as a shifter and his past, which eventually catches up with him when his calm demeanour cracks and he savagely beats up Calvin Norris ('Everything Is Broken', 3.9). It is revealed that even Bill has been spying on Sookie for Sophie-Anne all along ('Beautifully Broken'). Characters also lead double lives. Miss Jeanette is a fraud, masquerading as a voodoo witch doctor to fleece clients whilst also working in the pharmacy under her real name of Nancy LeGuare. René is really Drew Marshall from Bunkie.

Writing on American Gothic literature, Eric Savoy argues that 'Gothic texts return obsessively to the personal, the familial, and the national pasts to complicate rather than to clarify them, but mainly to implicate the individual in a deep morass of American desires and deeds that allow no final escape from or transcendence of them' (2002, 169). Within the context of the Southern Gothic, *True Blood* can therefore be read as a critique of the American Dream. Although Sam is one of the more successful characters in terms of his businesses, owning Merlotte's and managing a row of houses that various characters

rent from him, his personal problems impact on his ability to maintain his professional life. Sam tries and fails to live up to the concepts of success implicit in the American Dream. In series three, his estranged family move to Bon Temps after he has tracked them down. His mother, father and brother are 'po' white trash', causing Sam considerable embarrassment with their drinking and fighting. Under the surface, however, he is not so dissimilar from them. He has a criminal past, breaking into houses using his shifter powers, then violently beating the man who ripped him off and shooting him and his girlfriend ('I Smell a Rat', 3.10). This is at odds with his status as one of Bon Temps' most stable and moral members, always considerate and helpful to his neighbours. These events in Sam's life are interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it is the secrets in his life that provide the narrative drive for much of his presence in the series. Secondly, these secrets render the characterization problematic; Sam is an ambiguous character who is not simplistically good or bad in a Manichean sense. Thirdly, Sam is a very Gothic character, haunted by his own past and his passions, as indeed are many of the residents of Bon Temps.

In capitalizing on these tensions and the intrigues of small town life, *True Blood* is sensational in its depiction of sex and violence. Misha Kavka, drawing on William Patrick Day, suggests that 'the Gothic tantalises us with fear, both as its subject and its effect; it does so, however, not primarily through characters or plots or even language, but through *spectacle*' (2002, 209). Spectacle abounds in *True Blood*, and is evident on an episodic basis where sex and violence feature prominently. There are frequent heated sexual scenes such as those between Jason and his various partners, as well as between Sookie and Bill (and Sookie and Eric in season four). There is also a distinct sexual tension between Sookie and the werewolf Alcide. There are links between sex and violence with explicit and bloody imagery in René's murders, in Maryann's orgies and in Eric's murder of Talbot. In this respect, it is significant that the majority of Bon Temps residents are easily caught up in Maryann's primal chaos. The residents may be in thrall to and possessed by Maryann,

but their orgies can be read as an outburst of all their pent-up passions, angers and desires.

In a similar way, the series often features scenes of bloody havoc relished by the vampire characters, capitalizing on the gore factor of the horror genre. When Eric kills the prisoner in the Fangtasia dungeon in 'Nothing But the Blood' (2.1), the scene is awash with the noise of screams and tearing flesh as well as blood and gore – it spatters over Lafayette and strings of blood and flesh stretch from victim's neck to Eric's mouth; in the following episode ('Keep This Party Going', 2.2), his mouth and chin are completely covered with dried, encrusted blood. When Lorena has been torturing Bill in 'Hitting the Ground' (3.7), she looks particularly Gothic in a glamorous black and white outfit, with heavy black eye make-up and her face streaked in blood. In a narrative thread that spans over 1,000 years, Russell's slaughter of Eric's family using werewolves, Talbot's demise and then Russell going berserk and hijacking a news broadcast ('Everything Is Broken') all emphasize the blood-lust and passions of the vampires. Russell relishes the blood when he tears out the newscaster's spine. His hand entirely covered in thick dark blood, he tosses the spine casually over his shoulder and licks the back of his hand slowly with relish and satisfaction. His emotions change rapidly from triumph – 'Mine is the true face of vampires' – to seething anger – 'Why would we seek equal rights? You are not our equals' – to malice – 'We will eat you after we eat your children' – and finally to scorn – 'Now time for the weather. Tiffany?' An excess of gore also marks the killing of vampires: when Bill stakes Longshadow, when Eric kills Talbot and when Sookie stakes Lorena while Bill holds her down, torrents of blood gush from the mouth and the vampires explode in a red mess of blood and guts covering the space and the characters in blood. It should be noted, however, that these sequences are often accompanied by an ironic or comic tone. 'There's vampire in your cleavage,' Pam tells Sookie after Longshadow's death; after Eric has killed the V-dealer he asks Lafayette if there is blood in his hair (it is in foils where Pam has been bleaching it); Russell scoops up the remains of Talbot ('Everything Is Broken')

and carries them around in a crystal bowl until Sookie pours them down the waste disposal in Fangtasia ('Evil Is Going On'). Botting argues that Gothic conventions have been repeated so consistently as to be clichéd and at times 'ridiculous' or excessive (1996), while Jerold E. Hogle suggests there is a tendency for Gothic literature to be 'satirized for their excesses' once they 'become relatively familiar' (2002, 1). The parodying of excess in *True Blood* is central to understanding its remediation of the Gothic. Its mode of address in this respect is often self-reflexive, acknowledging that its audiences are likely to be knowledgeable about certain Gothic conventions and tropes. Comedy, excess and heated scenes, both violent and sexual, combine to create an ironic tone in keeping with the HBO brand.

Popular and traditional Gothic tropes and conventions are utilized in *True Blood*, but the setting provides a particularly Southern context where the Gothic is negotiated and remediated within a contemporary environment (albeit one that cannot be unhinged from its past). In his discussion of Southern Gothic, Lloyd Smith describes the South as neurotic and declining (2000, 122) and perhaps this is an apt description of vampire, as well as human, society in *True Blood*. So it is perhaps no coincidence that the threat to vampire civil rights should come from the South, from both outside the Vampire League – the Fellowship of the Sun – and from within – Russell Edgington, the Vampire King of Mississippi. Good times and good weather are certainly experienced by many of the characters, but their pleasures are entangled with the Southern Gothic elements of the series, where characters cannot escape their past, are oppressed in numerous ways, and the 'monstrous' is an everyday attraction and disturbance.

Notes

- 1 In contrast with *True Blood*, *Twilight* fits this more traditional Gothic where the heroine Bella undertakes a journey (literally and psychologically) from the hot deserts of Phoenix to the vampire-infested, damp and chilly Forks, Washington in the North-West of America. Here the setting is one of constant mist and overcast skies.

- 2 In the film *Insomnia* (1997, Erik Skjoldbjærg, Norway/2002; Christopher Nolan, USA/Canada), for example, the unending daylight hours of the extreme northern latitude are as eerie as the film noir darkness and shadows they replace.
- 3 In the novel *Club Dead* she is described by Sookie as 'Alice in Wonderland with fangs' in reference to the light blue and white outfit she wears when visiting Sookie's house (Harris 2003, 18).

Bibliography

- Abbott, Stacey. 2007. *Celluloid Vampires: Life after Death in the Modern World*. Texas: University of Texas Press.
- Botting, Fred. 1996. *The New Critical Idiom: Gothic*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Boyd, Molly. 2004. 'The Grotesque.' In *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People*, ed. Joseph M. Flora, Lucinda Hardwicke MacKethan and Todd W. Taylor. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 321–4.
- Burns, Margie. 1991. 'A Good Rose Is Hard to Find: Southern Gothic as Signs of Social Dislocation in Faulkner and O'Connor.' In *Image and Ideology in Modern/PostModern Discourse*, ed. David B. Downing and Susan Bazargan. Albany: State University of New York Press, 105–24.
- Harris, Charlaune. 2003. *Club Dead*. London: Orion.
- Hogle, Jerold E. 2002. 'Introduction: The Gothic in Western Literature.' In *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerold E. Hogle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–20.
- Kavka, Misha. 2002. 'The Gothic on Screen.' In *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerold E. Hogle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 209–28.
- . 2004. *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction*. London: Continuum Books.
- Punter, David, and Byron, Glennis. 2004. *The Gothic*. Malden, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing.
- Raban, Jonathan. 1996. 'The Unlamented West.' *New Yorker* (20 May): 60–81.
- Savoy, Eric. 2002. 'The Rise of American Gothic.' In *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerold E. Hogle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 167–88.
- . 2009. 'The Face of the Tenant: A Theory of American Gothic.' In *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*, ed. Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 3–19.
- Skillion, Anne. 2001. 'Southern Gothic', in *The New York Public Library Literature Companion*. New York: Free Press, 678.

- Smith, Allan Lloyd. 2000. 'Nineteenth-Century American Gothic.' In *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter, 109–21. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Spooner, Catherine. 2004. *Fashioning Gothic Bodies*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- , and McEvoy, Emma. 2007. *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*. Oxford and New York: Routledge.
- Wright, Angela. 2007. *Gothic Fiction: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Copyright © 2012, I.B.Tauris. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCOhost