

BLACKS AND WHITES. TRASH AND GOOD COUNTRY PEOPLE IN *TRUE BLOOD*

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When considering race and class in *True Blood*, one wonders what the Southern author Flannery O'Connor would think of the series. Of course, as a good Roman Catholic of a certain generation, the sex, violence, sexual violence and language of the series would almost certainly offend. But would this greatest of Southern grotesque Gothic writers appreciate the humour and truth within the fictional, Faulkner-esque microcosm created by Charlaine Harris and adapted for television by producer Alan Ball, both Southerners?

This essay is not a comparative study of O'Connor and *True Blood*, yet it begins with this question because the depiction of race and class in the series manifests with the same contradictory, ambivalent resonances as the best of O'Connor's work. Virtually every episode within the first three seasons proves discomfiting at times while also funny and truthful and grotesque in the Southern, O'Connor tradition, politically incorrect while satirically, scathingly contemporary. A white author presenting her unique view of faith through a collection of misfits of all races and genders and classes, O'Connor has been accused by Toni Morrison of making a 'connection between God's grace and Africanist Othering' (1993, 14). Nonetheless, O'Connor is celebrated by critics Susan Edmunds (1996) and Ralph C. Wood (1993) as unremittingly eccentric and truthful in her depictions of blacks and whites, trash and good country people. *True Blood's* presentation of inter-racial relationships

in contemporary Louisiana employs both 'the thematic of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell ... responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence' (Morrison 1993, 1), along with reimaginings and reconfigurations of race.

White author Charlaine Harris created a white heroine, Sookie, as her protagonist. This is not an inherently anachronistic, racist act and does not imply that black characters are less important or clichéd metaphors of evil and mystery. Both Harris and the *True Blood* producers appear to embrace Toni Morrison's critique of the way language can 'powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive Othering of people' (1993, xii). Their development of character and plot seems to be an honest attempt to avoid the 'almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains' (1993, xiii).

True Blood thus portrays issues of race and class with the idealism and realism inherent in the American South. Even though such portrayals have been criticized for 'undercut[ting] the reality of still pervasive racist currents in our own society' (Rabin 2010, 67), it is only through the continual presentation and evolution of multiracial contexts, however fictional, that the former ideology of pure blood/one drop can be transfigured and finally made obsolete. American film productions have been criticized recently in *The New York Times* as incorporating blacks 'in fits and starts', thereby representing 'a new era of racial confusion – or perhaps a crisis in representation' (Dargis and Scott 2011). *True Blood*, however, can be seen as a production which makes an effort to overcome 'the whiteness' of Hollywood.

Yet popular culture critic Steve Anderson (2010) found himself 'fascinated and troubled' by the opening title sequence for *True Blood*. He notes that it 'suggests a progressive vision of vampires who are seeking social acceptance in the rural Louisiana town of Bon Temps' and 'makes explicit reference to both the gay and civil rights movements', but also asserts that '[it] evokes a number of stereotypes that portray Southerners

as poor, rural, violent, drunken, religiously fanatic, highly sexualised, etc. It's difficult to see how the perpetuation of these stereotypes serves the progressive political agenda suggested by the civil rights framing of the show' (Anderson 2010). Nevertheless, these images also capture various truths about the region. Black ladies *do* wear elaborate hats to church and sing and testify and white evangelical ladies *do* pray fervently while wearing shiny gold cross necklaces. Rednecks wear seed caps and flannel shirts, capture alligators and smile gap-toothed. Everywhere there are wide spaces dripping with Spanish moss, poor people, histories of the Klan and dead possums on the highway.

Such clichés come from elements of truth and they are revisited in the series with irony, freshness and social awareness, driven by *True Blood's* producer, Alan Ball. Ball is an out homosexual as well as an Atlanta native, and these aspects of his identity have certainly contributed to the sensitivity to race and class throughout the series. While he asserts that '[w]hen I talk about themes it just comes out sounding like bullshit', he also acknowledges that he found Harris's novels attractive because they 'look at that small-town small-mindedness. The way in which certain minorities are demonized and oppressed for political or social gain' (Delaney 2009). Ball further notes that while 'the persecution-of-gays metaphor ... vampires fighting for equal rights, and religious fundamentalists trying to drive stakes through their hearts' is 'not what the show is really about', it *is* 'about archetypes, the subconscious, mythology and wish fulfilment' (Grigoriadis 2010, 54–9). Thus the 'God hates fangs' sign in the credits is a take on 'God hates fags' stance of many homophobes, the struggle for the Vampire Rights Amendment mirrors similar battles for equality in black as well as gay communities and the class delineations of good country people and white/trailer trash take on new permutations in the series, challenging viewer prejudices and ignorance.

Shifting Southern Perspectives

Although the community in *Bon Temps* is portrayed in *True Blood* as predominantly working-class, their lives are infiltrated occasionally by yuppie-ish, anti-vampire evangelicals from Dallas extending their power via television ministry and wealthy but corrupt Mississippi vampire royals. This apparent contrast concurrently reinforces and redefines character and viewer judgements that some people are trash (trailer, white and black) and others are 'not trash. They [are] good country people' (O'Connor 1955). The boundaries of those assessments appear at first clear but become increasingly blurred in the series. *True Blood* demonstrates through the vampire trope the evolution of the South in terms of class as well as civil rights, a dissolving of acculturated limitations dragged like Marley's chains, a 'process of liberation from the boundaries of time, space and body [which], as a result, embodies a legacy of transformation that expresses the experience of modernity' (Abbott 2007, 215). This modernity extends into Louisiana in the twenty-first century, demonstrating the slow but inexorable shifts in tolerance and acceptance within contemporary Southern society.

As a case in point, Sookie lives in a faded, tin-roofed house with a church-going grandmother and bears respectable Louisiana ancestry. The Stackhouses have an old name and old house, making them good country folk, yet Sookie is a low-paid waitress with an undead boyfriend. While Jason is a Stackhouse, he is also a horn dog who behaves raunchily with fang-banging women, judged as trash by almost everyone; he is a 'good-looking, tail-chasing redneck' (Delaney 2009, 6). Sookie's telepathy and her affair with Bill also lead her to be viewed as crazy trash by some of Merlotte's customers. She is a blonde, mythic innocent who should be a member of the Junior League (the volunteer association for upper-class society women), but like many of O'Connor's characters, her behaviour, like her brother's, is trashy by proper social standards – although that does not stop Sookie or Jason from pursuing their own paths, a thoroughly modern intention. Even more inappropriate in terms

of traditional, ladylike affiliations, Sookie's best friend Tara is a foul-mouthed, angry young black woman ironically named (and aware of it) after the plantation in *Gone with the Wind*. Yet Tara is readily and painfully transformed into someone gently articulate in the moments when she feels securely loved – by Sookie and Gran, by Eggs in season two and by her unstable mother. Tara's cousin, Lafayette, played with camp enthusiasm by Nelsan Ellis, an African American, can be read superficially as a trashy gay stereotype, but he is also a complex and multi-layered representation of the many minority social subgroups of the south. Other characters reveal their character and class in different ways: the Newlins, for example, are wealthy, attractive Republican Texans whose adulterous, bloodthirsty behaviour betrays their inner trashiness. Sookie's employer, Sam Merlotte, owns a bar, which gives him more social status as a business owner, yet he lives in a trailer at the back and, as revealed in season three, comes from a dreadfully barbaric, backwoods family. Thus social class and racial archetypes entwine and unwind in the series.

Race and Good Country People

It is glaringly obvious that the cast of *True Blood* is predominantly white, as seen in the clientele at Merlotte's and Fangtasia (as are most US television series' casts). However, there is a range of African-American supporting characters including the sheriff's deputy Kenya, various vampires and Tara and Lafayette's mothers. Moreover, Tara and Lafayette are placed prominently, carrying important subplots through the series. The cast is 'a complex and surprising ensemble of characters ... all set against a hot, sweaty and beautifully rendered backdrop of a Southern, gothic small town' (Delaney 2009, 8). The interpersonal as well as inter-racial sexual relationships between the white and black characters offer complexity and ambivalence and, at the same time, they reflect a growing trend in the South since state miscegenation laws were rescinded by the Supreme

Court in 1967 towards a growing mixed-race and interracial population (Saulny 2011). The ambivalence in the series offers resonances of the mother in O'Connor's 'Everything that Rises Must Converge' when she sees a black woman riding her bus wearing the exact same hat. While at first disturbed (to the joy of her more cosmopolitan son), the son realizes 'this was going to strike her suddenly as funny and was going to be no lesson at all. She kept her eyes on the woman and an amused smile came over her face' (O'Connor 1962). Race in the American South and in *True Blood* is slowly transmuting into an ordinary aspect of life like gender, central to the action only occasionally. If anything serves as a connection between the two races it is a universal mistrust of the vampire community. The producers are aware of the paradox of the 'virtual reality of racial harmony ... constructed and presented as fact in popular culture, politics, and the media' (Gallagher 2006, 106). Sam is not a racist; in 'Sparks Fly Out', his challenging of Tara's decision to give Jason an alibi when he says, 'I know you carry a torch for the guy, but I don't get it, I really don't', comes solely from his vulnerability. He and Tara are off-and-on lovers throughout the series and despite her verbal abuse and inconsistent behaviour, he offers her asylum, demonstrating the reality that in the Southern United States general tolerance of inter-racial relationships and the term multiracial is becoming increasingly acceptable and is facilitating the transformation of racial identities (Delmage 2004, 5). Such *laissez-faire* interactions would be believable in some small Southern towns like Bon Temps, unbelievable in others. The African-American characters in *True Blood* vocalize the ironies behind this, mirroring the Multiracial Movement in America's stance that their various community activities are 'all created and done by mixed-race individuals and members of interracial families, with the purpose of voicing their own experiences, opinions, issues and interests' (Nakashima 1996, 80).

When Jason is arrested in 'Escape from Dragon House' (1.4) for the waitress Dawn's murder, for example, Tara gives him an alibi by claiming they are lovers, not unbelievable given her

affection for him and her on-off sexual relationship with Sam. She challenges the sheriff and his deputy with her knowledge of his legal rights and when they joke that Jason does not need a lawyer, she replies, 'Is that funny because I'm a woman or because I'm a black woman?' ('Escape from Dragon House'). Tara often uses the race card in the series and this functions as both a reminder of Southern racism as well as a character trait revealing her vulnerabilities and her knowing humour. When she claims she and Jason were together and Andy Bellefleur challenges her, she replies:

People think because we got vampires out in the open, race isn't the issue no more. But did you ever see the way folks look at mixed couples in this town? Race may not be the hot-button issue it once was, but it's still a button you can push on people.

The 'race card' is played frequently in the series, certainly frequently and ironically by Tara, yet the affection the central characters share is a more significant constant throughout the series rather than their colour. Certainly Tara is loved deeply by Sookie and her grandmother and her conflicted nature is due more to her impoverished upbringing and alcoholic mother than to her race.

Jason is equally close (though solely as a friend) to Tara and in flashback is shown defending her as a child against her violent mother. He is so close to her, in fact, that when he overdoses with V and suffers priapism in 'Escape from Dragon House', it is Tara who takes him to the doctor and who has a look at his 'eggplant'. Yet while he and Tara may not share a bed, they do share a prejudice against vampires. Jason is not happy that two of his lovers, Maudette and Dawn, have had sex with the undead and he is furious that his sister is dating Bill Compton. In 'The First Taste' (1.2) he even tells Bill that 'a lot of Americans don't think you people deserve equal rights'. Similarly, Tara mistrusts vampires, telling Sookie in 'The First Taste', 'You know they can hypnotise you,' to which Sookie responds, 'Yeah, and

black people are lazy and Jews have horns.' Their prejudice is reminiscent of Julian's mother, the Christian lady with a heart of gold and a blind eye, in O'Connor's 'Everything that Rises Must Converge'. She's a good woman, but in her assessment of the new civil rights of blacks in the 1960s South, her comments are sardonically applicable to vampires – 'They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence' (O'Connor 1962, para. 21). Like O'Connor, the underlying messages reflecting intolerance, resistance to change and an ultimately common humanity prove to be the more broadly significant themes throughout the series; issues of race (and class) help identify the Otherness but do not limit the central characters.

In particular, Lafayette shows tremendous bravery as an African-American gay man in his clothing and make-up choices, his overtly camp demeanour and his impudence, extending our perception of his homosexuality 'beyond the limiting association with self-conscious guilt or perplexity' (Hughes 2009, 143). He is an equal opportunity diva, dealing drugs to whites and partying with blacks equally, taking white sexual clients (like the hypocritical state senator named 'Duke' who comes out of his bedroom zipping his trousers and who is later subtly threatened at a political event by a be-suited Lafayette 'passing' as a Republican supporter), working comfortably with everyone at Merlotte's and showing tremendous loyalty towards Sookie. Lafayette's interactions within the Bon Temps community reflect recent comments by Professor Marvin King of the University of Mississippi, a black man married to a white woman, and the father of a biracial daughter: 'Racial attitudes are changing. ... There is certainly not the hostility there was years ago, and I think you see that in that there are more interracial relationships, and people don't fear those relationships. They don't have to hide those relationships anymore' (quoted in Saulny 2011, para. 14). This does not mean that Lafayette is assimilationist or that black identity is ignored. As he comments to Tara in 'Mine' (1.3), 'White folks is all fucked up'. In series two, his entrapment by Eric (because of his dealing in vampire blood) and chained body remind us brutally of Louisiana's slave history, but his release

and eventual recuperation also signify shifts in Southern racial discourse. We also learn in series three that Lafayette supports his mother, who is mentally ill and in a good care facility, further developing his camp persona while redefining homosociality within the series.

Interestingly, it is Lafayette's sexuality more than his race that seems to be an issue for Bon Temps residents, although of course both are inextricably linked within the character. In a perverse kind of progress, the rednecks who come to Merlotte's do not address his colour as much as his homosexuality, so when he delivers a hamburger to racists who comment on his sexuality, he licks the bun and announces ironically that everything in the bar has AIDS ('Sparks Fly Out', 1.5). Strong and buff, he obviates stereotypes about passive gay queens. Charlaïne Harris has said that: 'Most of my vampires have experimented with other sexualities. ... Gay rights is just one of the social issues I'm interested in. I think that people might be less tense about it if we would all accept the fact that not everyone is wired the same way' (quoted in Solomon 2010). Just as race is a significant, evolving theme, class issues are also referenced, reflecting the contemporary trend in vampire productions to provide characters 'from every stratum of society [who] appeal to an array of psychosexual preferences' (La Ferla 2009).

The Top Rung and the Bottom Rung

The classes mix at Merlotte's and at church but would not regularly socialize, yet they *would* have the intimacy that grows amongst long-term residents in small towns. The racist, xenophobic thoughts of a chubby white customer in a sleeveless plaid shirt at Merlotte's – 'What the hell is this world comin' to? Dead fucks, niggers and regular folk all living together? If God wanted it like this, he'd-a made us look the same. It ain't good' ('Escape from Dragon House') – are presented as degenerate, an immoral counterpoint to the predominantly sympathetic central characters with a strong sense of community.

While Sookie is a white, pretty Southern heroine, she is not protected from tragedy, nor does she choose to be. Sookie's family has fallen on hard times, her parents are dead, her grandmother elderly and her brother works on a road crew. She is waiting tables with women who deal in V, sleep around and have had several husbands. Furthermore, she is not destroyed by her relationship with Bill, refreshingly contravening Daileader's interesting assertion that in the horror genre, the woman 'must die because she loves the monster. This is the pornographic secret of horror' (2005, 89). Dawn and Maudette suffer this fate at René's hands, for their monstrous sexual explorations as well as in part for their fulfilling the expectations of their lower social class. However, Sookie, despite her symbolic blonde, white virginity, offers a heroine who 'renders this symbol of innocence, well, less than innocent' (Daileader 2005, 104). She is a 'woman as the instigator and object of desire' without meeting the fate of being 'no longer an uncanny figure representing death but rather cannily dead' (Bronfen 1992, 315).

Sookie appropriates transgressive language and identity, describing herself in the novels as having 'a disability. ... The bar patrons just say I'm crazy' (Harris 2001, 2) and she is classed as a freak by many in Bon Temps. Her telepathic gift has marked her as a misfit, or even 'retarded' ('Strange Love', 1.1) by the trailer trash Mack and Denise Rattray (whose surname is certainly symbolic), and this has made her as much of an outcast as any vampire. Becoming involved with Bill Compton brings further criticism from Bon Temps' citizens as well as Jason and Tara; only her grandmother demonstrates the same tolerance for the Other that Sookie shares and emblemizes for the audience. The Stackhouses may be 'Descendants of the Glorious Dead' ('The First Taste', 1.2) who fought for the Confederate Cause, which included slavery, but the females in the family are not racist but rather pluralist.

The deaths of Dawn and Maudette, linked initially to their sexual encounters with vampires, lead another Merlotte's customer to pass unspoken (but clairvoyantly heard) O'Connor-like verdicts about Sookie and her dead co-workers in 'The First

Taste': 'You seem sad that girl is dead. I wonder if y'all were friends. If you were, that means you're probably next. Fucking fangbangers are crazy, every last one of you.' Sam runs a good business and hires Tara and Lafayette (and later his half brother), yet he too, like many of Bon Temps' less evolved citizens, blindly hates vampires. In 'Escape from Dragon House', he expresses his opinion that vampires should have their own 'separate but equal' establishments and proclaims, 'Vampires think about one thing and one thing only – drinking your blood'. Such prejudice is ironic since he is a shape-shifter who barks in his sleep. Even Sookie's co-worker Arlene, in the same episode, says, 'Ain't there even a part of you that thinks she had it coming?' Ironically, Arlene's fiancé, René, is the killer of these fangbangers, showing the dangers of throwing stones while in glass houses and there is no doubt that the narrative morality of the series condemns these judgements.

Dear Hearts and Gentle People

Curiously, vampires are – like Sookie and her grandmother – the least prejudiced, most pluralistic and multiracial in some ways of all of the characters in *True Blood* – they'll drink anyone's blood regardless of race or class. And it is Sookie's love for Bill which carries much of the thematic weight of the programme. She finds him intriguing and laughs that his name 'Bill' is not a vampire name – he does not fit the traditional stereotype. She defends him although he is shunned at Merlotte's – 'Fuck him, I'm givin' him A ... and don't microwave it either,' says Arlene when Bill orders O negative Tru Blood ('Escape from Dragon House'). Everyone whispers about Sookie seeing him, despite his attempts to mainstream into human society. Having returned to the old Compton homestead, Bill tries to restore this aspect of his human Southern heritage even as he tries to restore his place in Bon Temps.

Although we learn in series three about Bill's betrayal of Sookie through his service to the Queen of Mississippi, we also see that he is in many ways the ideal, old-fashioned Southern

gentleman from 'some mythic age of chivalry' (Culley 1976, 117), the counterpoint to Sookie's grandmother. In the novels, he 'display[s] the courtesy Gran insisted was the standard in bygone times' (Harris 2001, 31), asks to 'call on' Sookie ('The First Taste') and is admired by her grandmother. 'I promised your grandmother no harm would come to you,' he tells Sookie when they visit Fangtasia the first time in 'Escape from Dragon House' and he is first on the scene after Gran's death. He is also Sookie's first lover and thanks her for that gift. When Bill discovers Sookie was abused by her uncle, he valiantly restores her lost virtue by killing the old pervert ruthlessly and equally he kills bartender Longshadow when he threatens Sookie, suffering the guilt of becoming Jessica's maker for his crime. As Stephen Moyer noted about the character he plays in *True Blood*, 'Bill has a heart. Whether it's beating or not, he has one and he has humility' (quoted in Bennett 2010, 88). Bill Compton possesses two of the most important elements of the Southern social hierarchical structure – old blood and fine manners. This transcends many other issues of class, race and 'ethnicity' (if vampires are an ethnicity) and assists in his integration into Sookie's life.

Sookie's relationship with Bill mirrors the humanity of Adele Stackhouse, who has welcomed Tara into her home like a granddaughter as well as invited Bill to her Descendants of the Glorious Dead meeting. She is a proper lady whose experience, like Sookie's, contradicts the 'sentiment of the nobility of dependence and helplessness in women' (Tillett 1891, 124), which was swiftly rendered antiquated after the Civil War, yet which still infuses some contemporary perspectives of Southern women. Adele represents Southern hospitality and tolerance, the traditions of people linked to their region – the best of the deep heart of the Deep South. Her murder by René is a shocking reminder of the barbarity connected with prejudice and hatred. That she is murdered in her kitchen, the heart of the home, signifies the deep divisions within the community, or any community, when a minority begins to assert its right to equality. When Sookie eats 'Gran's pie', after her funeral

in 'Cold Ground' (1.6), she is literally taking into her body, as the vampire draws blood, the nutrition and sustenance of her grandmother's loving soul, demonstrating her integration within and acceptance of the vampire community.

This drive to accept the Other extends throughout *Bon Temps*. Sam's journey includes coming to terms with his gift and with his coming out as a shapeshifter, but also involves his slow acceptance of his own prejudices, particularly those against vampires. He is very like Julian in O'Connor's 'Everything that Rises Must Converge', critical of his mother's view of blacks – 'You haven't the foggiest idea where you stand now or who you are' (1962, para. 15) – and unaware of his own narrowness. When Arlene talks about the old days when one felt safe in a small town in 'Escape from Dragon House', she says, 'It's a new day now,' and Sam replies, 'Don't I know it.' He has evolved past racism and now he must evolve past this prejudice against vampires, as well as his own self-loathing about his shape-shifting nature – he must come out of both coffin and closet, as must, it is implied, the rest of America. When Hoyt Fortenberry begins dating Jessica in season two, his mother is horrified that her baby boy would date a vampire. A wonderfully grotesque comic depiction of a large, sanctimonious white woman, Maxine (a name resonating her booming personality) is reminiscent of Ruby Turpin in O'Connor's 'Revelation'. Mrs. Turpin has a special understanding with Jesus, who surely likes her best, and wickedly, humorously passes judgements on everyone as she waits in a doctor's office, blissfully unaware of the metaphor that her soul is sick:

Next to the ugly girl was the child ... and next to him a thin leathery old woman. ... She had seen from the first that the child belonged to the old woman. She could tell by the way they sat – kind of vacant and white-trashy. ... Worse than niggers any day. (1964, 87)

According to Mrs (pronounced 'Miz') Fortenberry, Hoyt is her baby who should marry a nice girl; Jessica is trash and Hoyt's

refusal in season three to date the pert churchgoer his mother has chosen and to live with Jessica instead represents the rise of the new generation of the South which is both colour- and class-blind.

Will the Circle Be Unbroken?

The hypocrisy of good Southern Christians and the unique class they embody – comprised of all social strata yet still elitist-directed – is critiqued in the Fellowship of the Sun and the way in which they are represented as hysterics. This portrayal is vividly created both by Harris, ‘an Episcopalian who has served as warden of her local church’ (Grigoriadis 2010, 57), and by the *True Blood* team. The Fellowship are the shiny white, preppie, professional new generation of self-righteous haters, carrying on their forefathers’ prejudices against blacks by transferring them to vampires. This questioning of patriarchal social structures reflects the negativity of such organizations as the Westboro Baptist Church (known for their ‘God hates fags’ banners) which is based in Kansas but which echoes the prejudices of pre-Civil Rights Act America. Their picketing of homosexual-friendly events and their burning of the Koran find a Doppelgänger in the Fellowship as well as in O’Connor’s Christians, who believe in the Lord but who also thank Jesus that he has not made them ‘a nigger or white trash or ugly!’ (1964, 91). Their debates with the Vampire Rights Amendment spokeswoman in the series mirror those of conservative American Christians with lobbyists for gay marriage and equal rights, while their financial and sexual improprieties equally advocate the position that such extremists will eventually fall.

Minorities, whether black or white, gay or Christian or vampire, battle for understanding and visibility and find some sympathetic friends in a world that changes more slowly than is ideal in both Charlaine Harris’s Sookie Stackhouse novels and in *True Blood*. The balanced depiction of races and classes within any contemporary cultural text creates a ‘seemingly

egalitarian multicultural paradigm' which is 'problematic' in that this 'melting-pot ideal avoids the challenges of race [and, we might add, class] in favour of a kind of "brown washing"', thereby denying 'the beauty there is in difference' (Kwan and Speirs 2004, 3). Damned if they do and damned if they don't, contemporary Gothic must nevertheless 'acknowledge the centrality of the uncanny' (Wheatley 2006, 6) and admit that race and class contribute to that unsettling element. *True Blood* does exactly that. Thus the advertisements for the American Vampire League, placed unexplained in various magazines in 2008 before the series debuted (see HBO 2008, 19), featured a smiling white woman of indeterminate social class with the subtitles 'Vampires Were People Too', 'Support Equality for All Citizens' and 'Support the Vampire Rights Amendment'. Such advertisements and slogans echo both NAACP and Act Up advertisements of the past while placing a woman centrally, inviting the varied discourses which inform the series.

There are good country people and evil people both urban and country, dead and undead, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, black and white, all flawed and all candidates for redemption in *True Blood*. Surely Flannery O'Connor, devout Catholic and ironist, would appreciate the juxtapositions of the grotesque and profound in both *True Blood* and Charlaine Harris's novels. A moralist with a unique perspective on grace, she would almost certainly agree with her disturbing murderer The Misfit in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' (1955, para. 140) that everyone in Bon Temps and beyond would be a better person 'if it had been somebody there to shoot [them] every minute of [their] life'. Hence the arguable limitations concerning race and class within the novels and the series may mirror the notion that 'vampire narratives may be mobile enough to touch a range of contemporary issues, but *too* mobile, perhaps, to develop them in an engaged way' (Gelder 1994, 143). Yet these limitations are ultimately overshadowed by the overall complexity of character, action and social commentary, as well as the sheer humour, lively sexuality and blood-red *mise-en-scène* within every episode.

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