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Cover Page Footnote

Nicole Myoshi Rabin is a Ph.D. student in the English Department at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. She received her M.A. from Clark University in Worcester, MA. Her research interests include popular culture, multiracial/mixed-race studies, and contemporary ethnic literature of the U.S.

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In the Western consciousness there has been a long tradition of the associations between race and evil. According to Celia R. Daileader, in her Introduction to *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth: Inter-racial Couples from Shakespeare to Spike Lee*, “Before black men were lynched for alleged sex with white women, white women were burned alive for alleged sex with a devil described as black” (1). Daileader calls attention to the historical relationship between blackness, sex, and evil that predates the literal transmission of this discourse into “race relations.” Over time this relationship has found its way into many racist fantasies, particularly those manifested within the stories of the horror genre—including vampire tales. Although race has only begun to be theorized in relation to *Dracula*, one of the most well known vampire novels published in 1897, there has been some important recent work theorizing the Count within Homi Bhabha’s category of the “not quite/not white” (Daileader 97). As John Allen Stevenson notes, “the novel [*Dracula*] insistently—indeed, obsessively—defines the vampire not as a monstrous father but as a foreigner, as someone who threatens and terrifies precisely because he is an outsider” (139). *Dracula*, the Romanian Count, is seen in opposition to the rest of the British characters—including the main object of his desire, Mina. The predatory sexual threat of *Dracula* is a common racist fantasy where racialized men exude “predatory sexual desire” that “endangers white womanhood and consequently threatens the racial purity of white [American] society” (Hamako). In most instances, this threat to racial purity manifests itself in the fear of clear racial miscegenation and a necessary drive to eradicate the one attempting to perform this racial contamination—the vampire.

Over the past two years there has been a resurgence of vampire stories in U.S. popular culture. These new vampire stories conveyed on-screen —*True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Twilight*—promote specific ideologies about race, class, and gender that are specific to our cultural moment. In “Color Blindness: An Obstacle to Racial Justice?” Charles A. Gallagher states that: “since the mid-1990s there has been a change in the way race, race relations, and racial hierarchy have been depicted in the mass media...the media now provides Americans with an almost endless supply of overt and coded depictions of a multiracial, multicultural society that has finally transcended the problem of race” (109). As examples of contemporary media, these new vampire shows also promote a society “beyond” race; so, with the historical tradition between race and vampires, what happens when the victims of vampires—in these new vampire tales—are no longer racially homogenous? Can the vampire still be read as racially other? I argue that the vampire of these contemporary stories actually becomes a symbol of multiracial identity as it is seen within the multicultural discourse that pervades American popular consciousness. For the purpose of this paper, I will be focusing specifically on issues of race and sexuality (only as they are concerned with racial purity) in the first season of HBO’s series *True Blood*—encapsulated within the first two episodes, “Strange Love” and “The First Taste.” While the series deals with a greater range of issues—gay rights, American slavery, terrorism, war,

religion, etc.—these issues remain outside the scope of this particular paper. I hope that these issues will be theorized in subsequent work on the series, but for this paper I will have to limit my consideration to the ways in which these beginning episodes of *True Blood* portrays a multicultural society on screen that undercuts the reality of still pervasive racist currents in our own society; how the show creates a multiracial identity that is at once feared and championed within the American society; and, how the show while depicting multiculturalism actually works to subtly critique this ideology.

As an instance of contemporary media, *True Blood* presents its audience with a multicultural, pluralist society. According to Naomi Zack in “American Mixed Race: The United States 2000 Census and Related Issues,” there are two different models of pluralism that developed in the United States. The first model, ethnic pluralism, “was based on a melting-pot ideal of equality and nondiscrimination in public life” (21). While this model encouraged an assimilationist approach to ethnicity, another model of pluralism “driven by race-based egalitarian projects beginning in the 1960s” also developed where groups “argued for the right to retain and have their nonwhite identities as fully functional in civic and public life” (21). These two models have combined to form our current multicultural society by developing both a “public neutrality of *ethnic* identity” and an emphasis on “public distinctiveness of *racial* identity” (21). Within these politics of multiculturalism, differences are accepted and even desired, but economic, social, and political inequalities become masked by this pluralist equality. The society of the show is encapsulated within the local bar Merlotte’s in the fictional town of Bon Temps, where the entire cast of main characters work, and are joined daily by all the other locals in their community. This society includes Caucasian and African American characters of varying social classes, both heterosexual and openly homosexual. All the characters are friends despite their racial, class, and sexual differences; the society of the Bon Temps, epitomizes the politics of multiculturalism where differences are accepted as a means for maintaining the status quo. In conjunction with the politics of multiculturalism comes the link between the multiracial phenomenon and post-race ideology/color blindness: multiracials and interracial marriage are used as examples of having reached this idyllic state beyond race (Daniel 125, Gallagher 105). In this type of society, racial injustices and inequality are thought not to exist because the dominant racial ideology of “color-blindness” gives the illusion that racial comity and egalitarian inclusion are not only imminent (Daniel 126), but already in place. In this way, *True Blood*’s presentation of a multicultural society works to undercut the prevalence of racial injustice that still exists in mainstream American society.

Despite the picture of Bon Temps as an inclusive multicultural society where multiple races live harmoniously with each other, race remains at the forefront of ideological issues presented through the show with its concern over blood purity. The characters’, and show’s, preoccupation with blood and lineage works against the show’s presentation of multiculturalism critiquing a post-race ideology. From the very beginning the show’s title, *True Blood*, declares the relevance of blood purity to its viewers, and immediately begs the question as to whose blood is true or what blood is true? The term “true” has many significations. According to the Oxford English Dictionary “true” is defined as: “constant, reliable, sure; honest, upright, virtuous” (*OED*). While it may seem that these definitions pertain more to morality than race, there is also another definition that originates with Darwin: “in agreement with the ancestral type; without variation: in phr: to breed true” (*OED*). In this latter definition, the connection of the term “true” to lineage and purity is made clear in the homonym: true-bred. The definitions of “true” become linked as we ask: do only true breeds have moral blood? Although race is considered a fiction

with no biological basis, according to Naomi Zack in the Preface to *Mixing It Up: Multiracial Subjects*, “race has been a totalizing fiction...people are supposed to belong to certain races in a way that characterizes them as whole persons. The taxonomy of race has divided humankind into fictive subspecies” x). In light of Zack’s fictive whole-race subspecies, the question supposed from the show’s title—concerning the morality of true-breeds—brings multiracial issues to the foreground; in multicultural societies people of mixed blood are often considered un-whole in a dominant discourse of monoracial identification. The notion of “true blood” presents blood purity as one of the show’s major preoccupations; and this concern works to subtly critique pluralist, post-race ideologies, where multiraciality is both feared as a threat to racial purity and championed for embodying its ideals.

In conjunction with blood purity comes the issue of miscegenation. The vampire, in *True Blood*, becomes a symbol of this multiraciality. Since race is not based in biological difference, there has been a long tradition of creating and maintaining discursive boundaries between the constructed races (Ferber 46). In our contemporary multicultural society, issues of miscegenation no longer fall solely on the black/white line, but all monoracial categories must now be protected. As part of the maintenance of these monoracial boundaries comes the necessity to delimit specific characteristics as to what these monoraces are not (mixes) (Ferber 47). The main point in defining the difference, in creating the boundary, between the races within *True Blood*—humans and vampires—is the fact that vampires, and not humans, drink blood; the vampires are literally mixing blood within their bodies like multiracials. As Daileader states about Dracula, “that in speaking of the blood in his veins he alludes not only to his ancestors, but to his victims. And indeed, vampirism itself, in addition to the more obvious figuration of sexual intercourse, seems the perfect metaphor for miscegenation” (97). What Daileader suggests about Dracula’s “impurity” is also suggested about Bill (played by Stephen Moyer), the main vampire in *Bon Temps* when Tara (played by Rutina Wesley) one of the African American characters, states: “You don’t know how many people he’s sucked the blood out of over the last, how ever many, centuries he’s been alive” (“Strange Love”). Bill, like Dracula, becomes a literal embodiment of the amalgamation of blood—a symbol for multiracialism.

As a symbol of multiraciality, the vampires are depicted as having to navigate issues created in a dominant discourse of monoracial identification, such as passing. In opposition to the human, “Mixed-race people are seen as inferior, and almost inhuman” (Ferber 53). We learn early on in the first episode “Strange Love” that vampires are held in a position of the subordinate race. A vampire advocate tells Bill Maher, “We’re citizens. We pay taxes. We deserve basic human rights just like everyone else.” According to Werner Sollors, in *Neither Black nor White Yet Both*, “passing is found in every race situation where the subordinate race is held in disesteem...passing oneself off as a human person with all the rights and privileges thereof” (248). In American society, the tradition of passing originated with slavery and the One-Drop-Rule where mixed race (black and white) slaves would pass themselves off as white in order to escape the harsh realities of slavery. Similar to real race relations in American society, in *True Blood* passing becomes a means by which vampires can attempt to enjoy the same rights as their human counterparts. The Vampire League advocate states, “Now that the Japanese have perfected synthetic blood...there is no reason for anyone to fear us...we just want to be part of mainstream society” (“Strange Love”). The advocate makes clear that the main reason for humans to fear vampires, the defining line of the boundary between these races—that vampires would drink human’s blood—was their main point of difference; but, that this difference is no longer an issue because the synthetic blood allows vampires to forgo this need and “pass” in the

mainstream human society. In this traditional definition, Bill fits the model of passing as he disassociates himself from the subordinate race—by literally giving up blood—in order to be a part of the human mainstream and enjoy the “rights and privileges thereof.”

Passing in a multicultural society must be rethought in the “real” world, however. The very terms of passing are redefined, as multiracials who can legitimately claim access to multiple racial groups that are no longer legally subordinate to each other, are forced to pass and fit within the boundaries of the recognized essentialist racial categories depending on specific situations. Like multiracials in American society, in *True Blood*, the vampires’ subordination is provisional, since vampires actually do hold physical power over the life and death of humans; and, in this sense they could legitimately overtake humanity. With this reconsideration of the power dynamics in the human/vampire relationship, the more contemporary sense of passing can be considered in the fictional world of *True Blood*. The vampire—who has access to both human and vampiric lineage (where subordination is situationally contingent)—becomes more symbolic of multiracial passing where Bill must choose to assert one lineage over the other. The vampire inhabits both the traditional and more contemporary notions of passing, demonstrating the ways in which the vampire can be seen as a symbol of multiraciality both in its past and its present. In this way, *True Blood* provides a critique of passing, as the vampire (the multiracial) must literally give up blood and part of his lineage in order to claim a *whole* identity within the mainstream.

As a symbol of multiraciality, vampires are not only forced to “pass,” but are also highly feared within the society. As Abby L. Ferber points out in “Defending the Creation of Whiteness: White Supremacy and the Threat of Interracial Sexuality,” “mixed-race people are far more dangerous than other nonwhites. Because interracial sexuality threatens the borders of white identity, mixed-race people become the living embodiment of that threat... mixed-race people signal the instability and permeability of racial boundaries; the regulation of interracial sexuality is required in order to secure the borders” (54). Ferber’s point about the maintenance of white supremacy is directly linked to the policing of these essentialist racial categories because in the discourse of multiculturalism the monoracial categories are accepted and subsumed as long as white power is maintained through racial purity. With the growing population of multiracials in our contemporary society, maintaining white power becomes increasingly difficult because multiracials cannot easily be determined as non-white. This issue of policing the boundaries of essentialism and whiteness, against the threat of multiracials, is crucial in understanding how *True Blood* presents vampires, and thus multiraciality, as the ultimate threat.

Vampire Bill, along with the other vampires in the show, is highly feared in Bon Temps. Bill’s first introduction to the show’s viewers in “Strange Love” is also his first introduction to the local community. He enters the bar as Tara says, “Do you know how many people are having sex with vampires these days? And some times those people disappear.” Tara’s statement brings together the fear of sexuality and race, as sex with the “other” can lead to a literal “disappearance;” but, this disappearance is also metaphoric and racial—to have sex with the multiracial “other” is to risk the disappearance of racial purity. It is important to note that Tara, one of the African American characters, is the one to make the connection between sex and racial disappearance; her minority status in the dominant discourse of race, subverts the historical tradition of Caucasians fearing black/white miscegenation as a means for protecting their own racial power. As Tara makes the declaration against vampires, it positions African Americans and Caucasians in multi-racial solidarity against the vampires promoting the post-race ideology

that disassociates the viewer from the realities of racial injustice. Tara's claim clearly marks not just interracial sex, but specifically sex with the multiracial as the ultimate threat to the disappearance of racial purity for all essentialist racial categories.

The fear of the multiracial, Bill, is most obviously manifested in the desire to police his interracial relationship with the symbol of white womanhood, Sookie (played by Anna Paquin). Sookie, the main female character, is blonde, white, telepathic, and presented as virginally pure. In the episode "Strange Love" we learn about Sookie's purity through her first interactions on screen. The audience sees Sookie, wearing a white t-shirt (and she continues to be shown in white for almost the entirety of the show's season); the associations between the color white and purity have a long tradition in Western consciousness, and this association is clearly used by the director in presenting Sookie in white clothes. In the bar, the head chef Lafayette says to Sookie, "They [men] ain't scared of you hunny-child. They scared of what's between your legs." Sookie responds quickly in a tone of disapproval, "Lafayette, that's nasty talk. I won't listen to that." As Lafayette continues to make sexual remarks, the other two waitresses (Dawn and Arlene) make sexually suggestive remarks back, waving their asses and pushing their breasts together. As Sookie watches her three co-workers, her face is shown in a look of horror and disgust directly linked to their sexual interactions. Sookie's comment to Lafayette and her disgust over the others' sexuality positions her in opposition to them as pure of sexual perversions. She later on makes more direct claims about her virginity, "I have no sex life." While these interactions set Sookie up as virginally pure, her whiteness is directly linked to purity in more than just a sexual sense.

Along with her sexuality, Sookie's purity is also linked to the "whiteness" of her race. The audience learns from her grandmother in the second episode, "The First Taste," that Sookie is a "descendant of the glorious dead," a group of white Americans who trace their lineage back to white men who fought for the Confederates in the Civil War. Her pure "whiteness" is further linked to her lineage through her telepathic abilities. Her grandmother tells Sookie that her grandfather also "knew" things about other people ("The First Taste"). In her discussion of white women in the horror genre, Daileader notes, "This whiteness is, moreover, always symbolically linked to her necessary death—as a harbinger and sign of fatal illness, and/or the signifier of her other-worldly nature, her status as one... 'above or apart from the earth'" (79). For Sookie, her telepathic ability, linked to her pure "white" lineage, sets her "above" and "apart" from the rest of her multicultural community; and, it is this otherworldliness that makes her the most necessary object of protection. This critical need to protect Sookie is directly tied to the fact that her whiteness will also ultimately be the link to her death (at least the death of her racial purity). In this sense, Sookie as a symbol of both racial and sexual purity must be protected by the pluralist, multicultural society against the multiracial threat.

As a symbol of racial and sexual purity, Sookie must be protected by the multicultural society from racial contamination or dilution. In order to protect her, the society must work to police her sex with the multiracial vampire. In historical racist fantasies, "the fate of the [white] race hinges upon the white woman's sexual and reproductive acts" (Ferber 53). After Bill has been introduced to Sookie in the first episode, Tara says to the Caucasian bar owner Sam, "I could help you keep an eye on Sookie. Did you see the way she was looking at that vampire?" Tara and Sam form an alliance to police Sookie's sexuality against the vampire, demonstrating how the pluralist, multicultural society of the town is actually protecting racial purity from the multiracial contaminant. Since African Americans and Caucasians stand in solidarity in protecting Sookie from interracial sex with the vampire, the "fate" of *all* essentialist racial

categories can be said to “hinge” upon Sookie’s “sexual and reproductive acts.” Throughout the first two episodes, and the rest of the season, Sookie’s relationship with the vampire is closely monitored and policed by the members of her community. During one scene, where Bill and Sookie are shown holding hands, Sookie says, “Do you realize that every person in this establishment is staring at us?” Bill responds by saying, “They’re staring because I am a vampire and you are mortal.” While Sookie’s comment makes the audience aware of the community’s watchful monitoring, Bill’s response links the community’s visual policing to the threat of the interracial relationship between Sookie and Bill—a vampire and a human. In this scene, the audience is made aware of the multicultural community’s desire/need to monitor Sookie and Bill, since the fate of racial essentialism seems to be resting upon her sexual and reproductive acts.

While multiracials are feared for their threat to the racial purity of essentialist racial categories, they are also championed as symbols of a melting-pot form of pluralism—a sort of post-race ideology. According to SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Spears in their Introduction to *Mixing It Up: Multiracial Subjects*, “in contrast to the history of oppression and elision of mixed-race people, the current rise in multiraciality signals, for some, a utopian progression toward racelessness. According to this logic, the ideal is for all of us to eventually become one brown race” (3). This utopian vision of multiraciality is what Rainer Spencer, in “Beyond Pathology and Cheerleading: Insurgency, Dissolution, and Complicity in the Multiracial Idea,” calls the “cheerleading trope.” This trope is defined by the idea that multiracials “represent the personal embodiment of racial love and harmony,” where they are “themselves proffered as the solution to centuries of racial discord” (106). In this championing, or cheerleading, multiracials become objectified, and sometimes commodified, “reducing their worth to the racial value of their parent’s sex act” (Rainer 107). So, while *True Blood’s* own obsession with blood purity critiques the pluralist view of multiracials as inhuman, objects of fear and contamination, the show also critiques the objectification, inherent in the championing of multiraciality in a melting-pot or post-race ideology.

In alignment with this “cheerleading trope,” the vampires in *True Blood* are literally desired for their blood, which holds unique qualities that benefit the human race. In the first episode, “Strange Love,” a local couple, the Ratrays, are shown attacking Bill in the woods. They have him hooked up to an IV line and are draining his blood because “V juice,” we learn later in the show, is a drug similar to ecstasy. The Ratrays desire for the blood as a drug, demonstrates how the vampire blood is already being commodified and sold for profit within the show. Sookie comes to Bill’s rescue, scaring off the Ratrays. In the subsequent episode, “The First Taste,” Sookie is beaten by the Ratrays for interfering with their collection of the vampire blood. After being rescued from the beating by Bill, Sookie is shown almost lifeless—passed out, bruised, and bloody. When she comes to, Bill tells her to drink his blood. At first she is hesitant (she fears it’ll make her a vampire), but Bill forces her to take his blood. Within a few moments, Sookie says, “Wow. I feel completely healed.” Bill says, “You are.” Sookie asks Bill if human doctors know that “V juice can do this?” Bill responds, “No. We want to keep it that way.” In this second scene concerning vampire blood, where Sookie quickly heals from drinking the blood, we see the real power and potential of the vampire blood that goes beyond recreational drug usage; the blood is as a healer and savior. Bill’s desire to keep the properties of his blood a secret from the mainstream shows a desire to keep the blood itself from becoming completely objectified and/or commodified. If the doctors found out about the blood’s potential, the vampires would be completely reduced to their blood and its power. Since the blood is an

amalgamation, the vampire a multiracial, the cheerleading trope of multiraciality and its pitfalls become clear. This reduction of the vampire to a blood object with healing powers, is reminiscent of the ways in which multiracials themselves are championed for “healing” and/or “curing” racial discord. This objectification and commodification of the mixed blood renders the body that contains it completely detached from its identity; the mixed body becomes a thing of racial value only in its power to dissolve racial discord and its symbolism of that racial harmony. In this way, *True Blood* highlights the dangers of championing multiraciality within a melting-pot pluralist and post-race ideology where actual racial injustices and inequalities become glossed over as multiracials symbolize racial harmony.

Although the contemporary stories of vampires are no longer overtly concerned with the white versus non-white dichotomy typified by *Dracula*, these contemporary vampire tales are still extremely race conscious. In a popular culture where audiences are bombarded with images of a “multicultural society that has finally transcended the problem of race” (Gallagher 109), these new vampire tales have had to adopt the ways in which they approach race relations. As Tara pointedly states in a later episode, “Escape From the Dragon House,” “People think just cause we got vampires out in the open now race isn’t an issue no more.” Like Tara’s comment suggests about vampires, many people in our contemporary society believe that race is no longer an issue: on the one hand, this belief is based on the idea that there are multiracials “out in the open” who embody the ideals of, so-called, color-blindness; and, on the other hand, this belief comes from the contemporary model of multicultural pluralism that gives a false notion of racial equality while maintaining the public and civic distinctiveness of the fictive whole, sub-species of races. By presenting a multicultural society and victim pool in *Bon Temps*, aligning the vampire with multiraciality, and showing how multiracials are both feared and championed, *True Blood* works to critique the post-race ideology promoted through melting-pot multiculturalism and shows the ways in which racist fantasies (especially concerning the multiracial) still pervade our popular consciousness. Like Tara, *True Blood* critiques the post-race position in our culture: that the existence of multiracials does not equate racial justice, equality, or harmony. In fact, *True Blood* highlights new issues concerning race in our multicultural society—racial essentialism in particular—that are still of great concern if we are to truly attempt to move towards a post-race society that does not simply elide the problems of racial equity, but works to challenge them.

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