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Southerner as Other: Exploring Regional Identity through the Southern Vampire

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Southerner as Other: Exploring Regional Identity through the Southern Vampire

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ABSTRACT

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Since its conception in folklore and superstition, the vampire has had an innate ability to reflect the environment of the culture that creates it. Each manifestation of this being is entirely unique to the culture in which it is born. The vampire of the American South is no exception to this idea. As a region with a particularly tumultuous history, the South has been molded by many cultural influences. Religion, sexuality, and race are some of the most notable factors to have impacted the area. Many Southern authors writing vampire fiction explore the fears, stereotypes, and prejudices of the culture with the vampire characters as a means to represent and critique Southern identity. Vampires in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls*, Scott Nicholson's *They Hunger*, Alan Ball's *True Blood*, and Patrick Lussier's *Dracula 2000* all reveal something about the culture of the South.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In her influential work, *Our Vampires, Ourselves,* Nina Auerbach explores the vampire as a means of reading cultural identity. She suggests, "[Vampires] can be everything we are, while at the same time, they are fearful reminders of the infinite things we are not" (6). The vampire dissects cultures so well because it has existed alongside humans in superstition and folklore since the beginning of time. Each time period and region manifests an entirely different vampire that embodies the anxieties, desires, and struggles which define that cultural moment. Jeffrey Cohen shares Auerbach's opinion, calling the monster "an embodiment of a certain cultural movement—of a time, a feeling, and a place" (4). These ideas can be seen in early vampire lore as well as adaptations of the myth for literature and film. For example, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871) illustrates the nineteenth-century fear of female sexuality and stars a vampire that is frightening in her ability to infiltrate the intimate spaces of the family unit. With the rise of Dracula as a cinematic vampire in 1931, the monster made its way to the United States, which opened up more possibilities for cultural interpretation. While the vampire can show up just about anywhere, there are some breeding grounds that are particularly hospitable to the undead. Vampires tend to manifest in places with rich historical presence and lands that have been host to social anxieties. As eternal and liminal being, the vampire can easily take root in contemporary American society and begin to uncover the repressed aspects of cultural identity.

The idea that the vampire reveals the essence of its time period is not a new concept; many scholars have argued that the vampire is an important subject because it mirrors the human

being. Much has been done with the vampire's role in modern America, specifically in large cultural centers such as Los Angeles and New York; however, the significant research about America's vampires often glosses over those created in the South, and if they are mentioned, it is most always in reference to Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* or, more recently, HBO's *True Blood* series. There is a noticeable gap in this subject matter that does not address the importance of the Southern vampire as a means to read Southern identity. In a region that is so rich in history and cultural anxiety, the South makes an excellent home for vampires.

The American South is a cultural patchwork, representative of the mingling of various religious and racial backgrounds. This region is often considered vastly different from the rest of the United States because it has been historically known for its conservative values and norms. Additionally, Southerners have frequently been the subject of stereotypes and other forms of marginalization due to their social and economic differences as well as general isolation from the rest of the country. Although the area is made up of multiple races and beliefs, the region is not quite a harmonious melting pot of cultures. Instead, the South has historically been stereotyped as violent, intolerant, and closed-minded. These labels often stem from the prominence of the area's conservative religions and the prejudices that still linger there. Located in the Bible Belt, the South's high concentration of Christian denominations affects the area's beliefs concerning social issues, such as representations of sexuality. In addition, the region's role in the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement places it at the center of racial struggles. In the presence of these influences, it is clear that the South cannot be defined by a single identifier. The blending of historical values and stigmatized identity constructs a complex breeding ground for the vampire. Like Southerners, the vampire's identity is shaped by many influences. It is a creature that exists in countless mediums and environments because it represents a vast array of qualities.

Historically, vampires have been influenced by social issues that are similar to those experienced by the Southerner, such as racial and social problems. The vampire figure flourishes in the anxiety-ridden, liminality of Southern culture because it has the unique ability to both reflect and critique the elements of Southern identity.

Though the Southern vampire can reveal many important regional aspects in terms of cultural studies, the research that has been done on the topic is rather limited. Most scholars are interested in studying the brooding aristocratic vampires of *Interview with the Vampire*, or the modernized undead citizens of *True Blood*. Prominent studies of these works have explored homoerotic relationships, familial ties, and political undertones, just to name a few. However, what these do not touch on is the importance of Southern culture within the region's vampire fiction. While this project intends to look at both *Interview with the Vampire* and *True Blood*, it also seeks to expand the research being done on other Southern vampire stories. Within this project, I intend to explore the Southern vampire as it reflects the region's religious influences, sexuality, and racial issues. Each of these themes impact Southern culture and are used in a number of ways in vampire literature. Many Southern authors writing vampire fiction explore the fears, stereotypes, and prejudices of the culture with the vampire characters as a means to critique and represent Southern identity. Vampires in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls*, Scott Nicholson's *They Hunger*, Alan Ball's *True Blood* (based on *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* by Charlaine Harris), and Patrick Lussier's *Dracula 2000* all reveal something about the desires and anxieties of the South. The vampire has always evoked both fear and fascination, and in the South these elements have a tense connection. For example, religion has played an important role in shaping the cultural identity of the Southerner. While the influence of religion in the South has changed as the culture has become more modernized, the

historical presence of religious beliefs has not left the region. Southern vampires have a particularly interesting relationship with religion. As true representations of Southern culture, vampires exhibit the complex nature of Christianity and the blending of religions. When the vampire is placed in a traditionally religious culture, it challenges those beliefs. Also, sexuality is often a point of repression due to the influence of religion and other concepts of Southern purity; however, stigmas from outsiders paint a different picture of sexuality in the South. Media depictions of Southern sexuality often describe it in brutal animalistic terms and sometimes suggest issues of incest or rape. In a similar way, the region is haunted by struggles with racial difference. As the vampire has always been an outsider, it easily takes on the marginalized role of the minority groups in Southern vampire fiction, particularly that of the African American. Ultimately, Southern vampires reveal the complex nature of Southern identity and create an outlet to express the issues associated with the area.

In order to understand the Southern vampire as a reflection of the complexities of the South, it is important to be aware of the cultural information surrounding the region. While the South as whole is seen as culturally distinct from the rest of the United States, there are multiple influences and traditions that are unique to certain areas within the South. The most common southern site for vampire literature and film is Louisiana, specifically New Orleans. It is a melting pot of heritage, culture, and commerce. In her article "Why Do Vampires Prefer Louisiana?," Irene Sanz Alonso states, "The particular history of the state made it a multicultural milieu where being different was the norm. Besides, the importance of the cemeteries and of voodoo beliefs, life and death coexist there in a particular harmony and with sometimes blurring limits" (2). The use of voodoo and the belief in the supernatural have deep roots in Louisiana.

Even now, the state is touched by these traditions that were brought to the United States on slave ships.

Though Louisiana has a great deal of diversity, it still experienced instances of prejudice during the country's times of racial strife. Before the Civil War, Louisiana's major business was slavery, but when the state was first founded, black citizens were granted some rights and saw less discrimination there than they did in other states. Some free black people even owned their own slaves and interracial marriages did occur; however, when the state moved from Spanish control back to the French, some of the rights of these other races were taken away. This happened to a greater extent when the slave trade evolved into a large import business (Alonso 2). It appears that it was really the American influence that created such wide-spread prejudice. Even with this historical discrimination, Louisiana is one of the most diversified regions in the South, which makes it especially hospitable for a vampire. Overwhelming cultural variety in one place allows the undead to go unnoticed. In *Interview with the Vampire*, Louis states, "This was New Orleans, a magical and magnificent place to live. In which a vampire, richly dressed and gracefully walking through the pools of light of one gas lamp after another might attract no more notice in the evening than hundreds of other exotic creatures" (Rice 40). The exotic nature of the city is a draw for Louis and his maker, Lestat, even in the 1790s, because it provides them with powerful anonymity. His statement suggests that they might not be the most exotic things in New Orleans, a sentiment that could be referring to the prevalent voodoo culture at the time.

Louisiana might have the highest population of Southern vampires, but it is not the only southern state that these creatures inhabit. The mountains of Appalachia may seem like an unlikely place to find a vampire, but there has been some supernatural literature in recent years that is set in this region. The Appalachian Mountains provide a safe haven for the vampire due to

their isolation from other parts of the country, but the small town dynamic often poses a problem. Additionally, the geographical landscape is important in terms of vampire literature. Some scholars have made the connection between the Appalachian Mountains of the United States and the Carpathian Mountains of the Ukraine. This would create a closer tie to the regionalism seen in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The darkened mountains of Count Dracula's homeland are recreated in the Appalachian terrain seen in novels like Brite's *Lost Souls* and Nicholson's *They Hunger*. The same sense of seclusion and mystery can be seen in both areas and the vampire literature that is set there. "Kindred Lands: Carpathian Ukraine and American Appalachia," a study conducted by Berea College, suggests that there are many social parallels between the regions as well as geographical ones: "Different highland regions may also show similarities in the social, cultural, political, and economic dynamics between the highland region's insiders and outsiders. There is evidence that some Appalachian insider-outsider dynamics may also manifest themselves in other highland regions" ("Kindred Lands"). This study illustrates an interesting commonality in the communal setting of mountain regions and the fear of outsiders existing within these communities. The infiltration of the outsider is a common element in the vampire myth. The villagers in *Dracula* demonstrate this fear and the forests of Appalachia offer the same kind of dread. These feelings are based on the basic human fear of the unknown and vampires thrive where this anxiety is present.

The cultural history and geography of the South are important to keep in mind as a backdrop for this research. Issues of religion, sexuality, and race are tied to the history and landscape of the South. Southern culture is formed from these varied elements, all of which influence this monster, thus making the vampire accountable for a great deal when it reflects the South's cultural identity.

CHAPTER 2

A FRIGHTENING DEITY

The American South has long been a region that is especially connected to its religious history. Many parts of the South are included in what is known as the Bible Belt, the region with the highest number of evangelical Protestants in America. Known for strong conservative principles, the South is often seen as radically religious by more liberal groups outside of the region. Like many of the area's stigmas, this description does not accurately reflect the true image of all Southern beliefs. Even though an association with religion is not characteristic of everyone living in the South, the influence of religious traditions still affects the lives of many in the region. In Southern literature, the connection to religion puts the vampire at odds with typical depictions of the Southerner. The vampire's relationship with religion in Southern vampire fiction reflects the area's fear of the corruption of religious beliefs, specifically Christianity. Some Southern vampires do this by suggesting that religion is insignificant because most are not susceptible to the typical Christian weapons such as crosses and holy water. Vampires in many of these novels and films question standard evangelical religion by their status as sacred beings; others participate in a commercialized image of faith that suggests Christianity can be bought and sold. Each of these characteristics creates a vampire that challenges Southern ideas of religion and morality. The vampire, generally representative of a departure from religious purity, is particularly horrifying in the South because the creature represents the corruption of highly valued Southern theology through the inclusion of non-Christian religions and the deification of the undead.

Religion is responsible for shaping many aspects of Southern identity. While sometimes positive, this influence has, at times, created an environment for intolerance and hate. Even Southerners who are not religious feel the pressures of living in an area with such a spiritual history. In her essay "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Literature," Flannery O' Connor writes:

> …in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological. That is a large statement, and it is dangerous to make it, for almost anything you say about Southern belief can be denied in the next breath with equal propriety. But approaching the subject from the standpoint of the writer, I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. (O'Connor)

Though her essay was published in 1960, her thoughts still resonate today. The South is often slow to change and the religion that haunts the region is very much alive in the lives of many contemporary Southerners. Her statement is applicable to other issues as well. Things like sexism and intolerance to non-heterosexual orientations are conceptions that linger in the South due to influences of religious traditions.

The characteristic weaknesses of the vampire that society has become most familiar with come from the monster's contact with Christianity. Weaknesses such as crosses and holy water are all part of the Christian tradition of the vampire character. Without the influence of Western religion, the standard idea of the vampire would be very different, if it even existed at all. Since their conception, vampires have often represented the evil of the world, but it is their history with religion that has solidified their place in the public's mind. Of the biblical importance of blood, J. Gordon Melton notes, "The mysterious sacredness of the blood [in sacrifices] was emphasized in

that God reserved it to himself. The remaining blood was spilled before the altar, and strictures were announced against the people eating the blood" (55). To some extent the belief in blood as a sacred fluid is still recognized in religions today. Many Christian denominations believe in transubstantiation, that is, that the wine and wafer of communion become the blood and body of Christ. These ideas further illustrate a primary reason why the vampire would have been considered evil; it is a creature that drinks of the blood of living things, which is reserved for sacrifices to God and other sacred traditions. By preying on the living, the vampire commits the ultimate sacrilege.

The Southern vampire is the perfect monster for its region because it probes at the anxieties about changing beliefs and the mixing of other faiths into the culture. In "The Tragedy of Southern Religion," Ernest Kurtz states:

> Yet of all the anomalies that checker the intellectual landscape of the region, southern white religion poses one of the most profound challenges to historical understanding. Scholars have often probed its puzzles: its theological individualism in a land noted for the sense of community; its pervasiveness in extent yet its narrowness of focus…the 'cultural captivity' ironically inherent in southern religion's key doctrine of 'the spirituality of the church'; its concentration on 'ordering' in a culture characterized by both hierarchy and violence; the 'civil religion' functions in a self-styled 'rebel' enclave. (217)

According to Kurtz, Southern religion has its fair share of contradictions. It is perhaps these complexities that make it especially susceptible to the invasion of the vampire. The modern vampire's role as an ever-changing cultural figure complicates its status in the South. Much of

the tension surrounding the character in the region can be traced to how contemporary culture labels evil in contrast to the religious definition.

The introduction of other religions into the Southern evangelical sphere speaks to the region's fear of difference and change. Native American traditions and voodoo beliefs are some of the most prevalent religious influences used alongside Christianity in these Southern vampire texts. A literary or cinematic vampire in a non-Christian, American social setting is a relatively rare phenomenon. Thought to have originated in pagan beliefs, vampires were quickly judged against Christian morals as those practicing paganism were Christianized. The Southern vampire is both connected to and at odds with these Christian traditions, but in the last few decades, it has mingled with other non-Christian influences. In Scott Nicholson's *They Hunger*, both Christian and Native American beliefs are shown in the vampires, or more specifically, in the way the humans assess the vampires. Ace, a fugitive and delusional crusader for God, represents a radical form of Christianity within the text; he believes God is telling him to bomb abortion clinics and kill sinners. Ace seems to be the only spiritual person in the novel, apart from the Native American influence. Nicholson's only representation of Native American culture, Robert Raintree, goes into the woods to find himself in hopes of experiencing a vision quest led by his spirit animal. His beliefs seem to have been compromised by mainstream culture because instead of using natural ingredients to initiate his vision quest, he has a medicine bag full of LSD and prescription drugs that he takes throughout the camping trip. Both Ace and Raintree exhibit a deviant version of their spirituality. Their contrasting religious beliefs complicate the standard, Christian idea of the vampire.

The novel's Native American beliefs attempt to explain the vampires as ancient spirits. Raintree refers to the vampires as "Raven Mockers," which he explains as a Cherokee legend.

Raintree calls one creature "Raven Mocker. A shapeshifter, a harbinger of death. Something supernatural that could only be defeated with powerful magic" (Nicholson 237). Christianity looms large in Nicholson's text as well and stands in opposition to other beliefs that try to dissect the vampire in different ways. The tension between Ace's radical Christianity and Raintree's drug-induced vision quest tests the malleability of the vampire myth. Raintree even references both faiths in this regard; he refers to a landmark as "Babel Tower. A sacred site for the Cherokee, which they had called Attacoa. How like the White Man to impose its own religious name on the mountain" (Nicholson 119). He describes the influence of Christianity as an imposition and a destructive force. In terms of Ace's interpretation of Christianity, this is a true statement. These ideas within the text make it especially difficult to assess the new vampire that it presents. The vampire, as the subject of the Southerner's displacement, reflects the changing religious climate as well as other fears of transformations in the region. Most vampire stories set in the South are analyzed under the lens of Christianity. Nicholson's text is interesting because it presents two belief systems which strive to identify the same creature. Also, both Ace and Raintree's faiths are used negatively, which raises the question of whether vampires must be governed by religion at all.

Another struggle with the intersection of Southern religion and the vampire is the deification of the monster. As previously mentioned, Ace sees the vampires as angels with the ability to choose worthy humans to do religious works. This is clearly an unusual description of the vampire, as the creature is most often considered evil in terms of Christianity. Ace's opinion of the "angels" deifies them and creates a space for them to exist outside of their typically immoral role. The novel presents two sides of the vampire in terms of religiosity. There is the standard vampire narrative that explains the presence of the undead as an evil omen. Many of the

humans in the text believe this. However, this traditional idea is at war with Ace's alternative angelic interpretation. The tension between these interpretations mirrors the unique effect of the vampire on the religious background of the South.

Ace is perhaps the most important human in the novel because he has the most religious contact with the vampires. His background is important in analyzing his moralistic view of the creatures. Ace is known for his sense of vigilante justice; he is also racist and misogynistic. Throughout the novel, he attempts to justify his actions through God and the Bible. He is considered a "religious hysteric" by many in the book and appears mentally unstable (Nicholson 154). Although the South has a strong religious history, someone like Ace represents a polluted idea of religion; he is the embodiment of the Southern stereotype. The importance of the description of vampires as angels can be seen in Ace and Clara's differing opinions on what an angel looks like. Clara asserts, "They don't look like the angel pictures they showed us in school. Your angels are gray and nasty-looking. Those Sunday school angels were blond and white…They had big, feathery wings and wore robes and appeared in golden light" (Nicholson 218). Ace counters, "That's the trouble with people like you.…You don't got no faith" (218). Their interaction is interesting because Clara's image of angels comes from a Eurocentric view of Christianity. In Ace's mind, angels are the powerful, animalistic creatures hovering over their campsite. His angels are corrupted and dirtied; they are skewed in the same way his views of Christianity are. The angels that Clara mentions represent how religion is thought to be, but Ace's picture is less desirable and critiques her image of faith. Nicholson's vampires represent the fear of monstrous and corrupted religion. Not only do they question the necessity or potency of Christian religion, but they also demonstrate the potential for other religious interpretations which might replace the Christian ideal.

Interview with the Vampire does something similar in that it complicates traditional ideas of religion by exalting the vampire as a religious figure. In this case, Lestat refers to Louis and himself as dark angels. Throughout the novel, Lestat undermines depictions of Christianity. In contrast, the text's narrator, Louis, appears as a religious being in the text. In his living years, he was a devout Catholic, and as a vampire he still appears to have some devotion to his former faith. As one of literature's most famous sympathetic vampires, Louis constantly questions his morality. He often broods over his place between God and the devil. Lestat, in contrast, goes against the standard Southern conservatism prevalent in the Bible Belt. He claims to be the devil and also sets himself up as an equal to God. He states, "I'd like to meet the devil some night.…I'd chase him from here to the wilds of the Pacific. I am the devil" (Rice 37). Later in the text he justifies his killing to Louis in stating, "God kills, and so shall we; indiscriminately. He takes the richest and the poorest, and so shall we; for no creatures under God are as we are, none so like Him as ourselves, dark angels not confined to the stinking limits of hell but wandering His earth and all its kingdom" (Rice 89). In this passage, Lestat not only presents himself as evil by stating he is the devil, but he also suggests that he, in his immoral nature, is an ethereal being. Lestat's sentiments also label the vampire in a significant way. By referring to them as "dark angels," he gives them more religious authority. In Lestat's opinion, they appear more worthy than humans to walk God's earth. It is even more significant that Lestat studied religion as a young man and has since become disillusioned. His attitude toward vampires in a Christian religion challenges the traditional beliefs of Southern Christianity, which makes him more monstrous.

As a vampire, Lestat is particularly frightening to the South because he rejects common religious beliefs. He is seen as even more immoral due to his attitude about his place in the

world. His character is a stark contrast to Louis, his introspective companion, because Lestat is not repentant about his nature. In addition, Rice's vampires are not affected by religious items. When asked about the mythical aversion to crosses Louis assures his interviewer, "Nonsense, my friend, sheer nonsense. I can look on anything I like. And I rather like looking on crucifixes in particular" (Rice 23). Beginning most prominently with *Interview with the Vampire*, the modern Southern vampire slowly moves away from the constraints of Christianity. If vampires cannot be harmed by traditional Christian means, then the function of monsters in religion becomes ambiguous. This ambiguity threatens to break down the Bible Belt's core theologies; room is left for doubt.

In reference to the struggle of theology in *Interview with the Vampire*, Scott W. Poole theorizes:

> The mythologies and cultural meanings of these two creatures, zombies and vampires, are very distinct. At the same time, they have certain similarities that have led to their current joint reign as the undead monarchs of American popular culture. Both the zombie and the vampire draw on themes embedded in the history on theology of American Christianity and its struggles in the late twentieth century. (196)

Though Rice's novel is set in the 1800s, it was published in the late 1970s, and was made into a film in 1994. The content of the text still informs the decade in which it was made. The tension concerning American Christianity transcended the boundaries of Rice's writing because it was indicative of the spiritually changing America at the time. Poole goes on to say, "These creatures, flesh eating or blood drinking, decomposing or forever young, appeared as pop culture phenomena at a historical moment [beginning in the 1970s] when the body had become of

central concern in American culture as the vehicle of pleasure, of theological meaning, or of personal happiness" (196). As a "vehicle of pleasure" and one with elaborate ties to theology, the vampire represents the uncertainty about the human condition concerning Christianity. Once again occupying its place as an interpreter of society, the vampire of the 1970s and '80s gives insight into a culture that was attempting to understand the body. Rice's vampires exude eroticism, a characteristic that counters the influence of religion on the relative importance of the body and soul.

As a character that has been made and remade in countless literary and cinematic works, the American vampire has always been connected to capitalism and commodification. American monsters are some of the most marketable figures in entertainment, which also makes them subjects for cultural analysis. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries are eras marked by technological advancement. Due to the world's advancements, the role of spirituality has been altered. Religious beliefs have certainly not been abandoned in contemporary American society, but their influence on human behavior has shifted. Rob Latham believes, "These figures [vampires and cyborgs] metaphorically embody the libidinal-political dynamics of the consumerist ethos to which young people have been systematically habituated during the contemporary period. The vampire is literally an insatiable consumer driven by a hunger for perpetual youth" (1). Contemporary vampires seem to take a particular interest in the youth culture. Latham also suggests that the start of this connection began with the overwhelming influence of MTV. As the culture becomes more interested in consumption, it begins to deify the images of cultural excess. Vampires reflect the prevalent capitalist culture and this leaves religion to be integrated into the character in new ways. Patrick Lussier's *Dracula 2000*, paints religion as an extremely modernized concept. A reimagining of Bram Stoker's novel, the film

puts Dracula in contemporary New Orleans, where he attempts to locate a woman who shares his blood. This retelling casts Dracula as Judas Iscariot and cites his suicide in that former life as the cause of his vampirism. The idea that suicide creates the undead is a common belief in early vampire lore. This Dracula is said to hate God and all things Christian, but religious items cannot harm him. His strength in the face of religion makes him especially villainous in the eyes of Christianity. In *The Vampire Film*, Alain Silver and James Ursini remark, "The religious revisionism of the story…ironically makes the otherwise 'blasphemous' film more palatable to Christian fundamentalists who can now see in the Dracula figure another sign of the coming apocalypse" (275). As Silver and Ursini suggest, *Dracula 2000* goes against many beliefs held dear by the Christian faith; however, Dracula's past identity of Judas puts him in a position to repent or to be destroyed. Although even with the assurance that sin will be punished, the underlying tension in the plot truly comes from the commercialization of faith.

One of the most haunting things about the vampire is that it can camouflage itself in any setting. The state of the media and the commercialized world around him are a place that unknowingly welcomes him rather than forces him to conform. In this film, Dracula is not hiding, he's thriving. Silver and Ursini suggest, "As Dracula walks the streets, he finds himself at home with the debauchery of the revelers. Even his three brides can blend into Bourbon Street and ravage unnoticed in this bacchanalian atmosphere" (275). It seems that the film's central struggle pits the vampire-like society against the traditional religious views introduced through Van Helsing and his assistant.

Other instances of commercialism in the film can be seen in the setting, as it is littered with neon crosses and colorful Christ figures lighting up rooftops. In several scenes a crucified Jesus is perched on a building and surrounded by neon lights; he seems to dwarf the Mardi Gras

revelers in the street below. While the structure is a symbol of Christianity, it is also a representation of popular culture. This image of a commercial Christ undermines the accepted sanctity of Southern religion. In one pivotal scene, Dracula has a dialogue with the neon structure and asserts his place in the new world. The vampire starts with a repentant tone and posture, but he quickly becomes defiant. On his knees, Dracula begins, "It was my destiny to betray you, because you needed me." He then moves away from the gaze of the inanimate eyes; he twists his mouth into smile which shows his fangs, a symbol of his corruption. He continues while gesturing to the people in the street, "Now, I drink the blood of *your* children, but I give them more than just eternal life; I give them what they crave most—all the pleasure you would deny them, forever" (*Dracula 2000*). This scene is significant not only because Christ is depicted as a social and economic construct, but also due to the vampire's new relationship with Christianity. In his past, Dracula was clearly connected to Christianity and even seems to have some reverence for that past, as is seen when he is kneeling at the foot of the cross. However, this newly modernized vampire assesses his role in society outside of Christianity. He puts physical distance between himself and the cross as a means to assert his power in a world that commercializes everything; Judas's greed is accepted as the norm in contemporary society. The scene depicts a vampire that has learned his value in a culture of excess. The world of the film is a place where religion and vampires have the potential to hold equal weight. To a "Christ-haunted South," this is a rather frightening prospect. The film has a traditional ending, with good triumphing over evil, but the real threat—commercialization—is still present. Dracula's interactions with culture and his infiltration of Christianity mirror the fear of change in Southern ideology and religious values.

The Southern vampire reflects the fears of integration and change held by a "Christ-haunted" culture. Christianity has always been a strong force in the American South. Though its role has changed over the decades through commercialization and other contemporary influences, the structure of the faith is still present in the culture as private rather than public influence. The Southern vampire embodies the fear of outside religious influences as well as the change within Southern society. The vampire forces these anxieties to the surface as it represents the inability to define good and evil through Christianity. This is problematic because the vampire has always been so closely tied to Christian customs. These works create space to experience change within traditional Southern religion. The fear of outside faiths, the redefinition of the vampire as spiritual being, and the commodification of religion in the world of the vampire all contribute to the exploration of Southern identity. These themes suggest the changing atmosphere of Southern religion in contemporary representations of the region.

CHAPTER 3

DEVIANT SEXUALITY AND THE SOUTHERN VAMPIRE

Southern sexuality is complicated by such factors as religion, regional customs, and outside stereotypes. All contribute to the conception of sexual identity in the South. Images of sexuality in this region seem to have emerged in two distinctly different ways. On one hand, it has been tainted by stereotypes of violence and inhumanity. Generalizations made by those outside the area and media representations such as James Dickey's *Deliverance* (1970) and Rob Schimdt's film *Wrong Turn* (2003) have perpetuated these ideas which associate the region's sexuality with brutality. The other image of Southern sexuality is that of exalted virginity. Often influenced by religious beliefs, the cherished idea of purity in the South comes from within the culture. Virginity, especially in women, has traditionally been highly valued in the South. The sexuality presented in Southern vampire fiction reflects the region's contending ideologies related to the representations of the violent sexuality and the eternal virgin concepts. The Southern vampire embodies the fears of sexual corruption in the South, demonstrating the parts of the Southern experience that form conceptions of sexuality in the region. In this chapter, I explore the contrasting reflections of sexuality in terms of victim arousal, childhood sexuality, and pansexuality.

Sexuality and the vampire have always been two closely associated topics; however, this connection does not mean that all vampires express themselves through the same kinds of sexual acts. Some texts do not have vampires engage in copulation at all. Other authors let the penetrative act of being bitten stand in for traditional sex. Even still, there are myths that allow the vampire to have intercourse like any human. Regardless of the type of sexual contact, the

vampire has always been considered a sensual being. The overtly sexual nature of the vampire contrasts with the taboo idea of sexuality in the South.

In order to put representations of sexuality in a Southern context, an exploration of the cultural perceptions of the South is pertinent. Southerners have often been considered violent cultural oddities; this stereotype partially comes from the "redneck" and "hillbilly" labels that have been used to describe the region in various mediums, particularly in reference to people from Appalachia. No group in the South seems to be as othered as Appalachians. According to Ronald D. Eller in *Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes*,

> Always a part of the mythical South, Appalachia continues to languish backstage in the American drama, still dressed, in the popular mind at least, in the garments of backwardness, violence, poverty, and hopelessness once associated with the South as a whole. No other region of the United States plays the role of the "other America" quite so persistently as Appalachia. When my family left West Virginia to migrate to Ohio for a period in the 1950s, most white Southerners were labeled hillbillies; hillbillies in the 1990s are not just Southerners, they are Appalachians. (ix)

Eller depicts an Appalachia that has been forced to bear the weight of the stereotypes that once labeled the entire South. These images of violence and poverty invade many depictions of the Appalachian way of life. Such stigmas come from those living outside of Appalachia, or the South, who make generalizations based on the media's influence. David C. Hsuing in *High Mountain Rising: Appalachia in Time and Place* explains that "the idea of Appalachia as a distinct region and culture came about when Americans outside the mountains felt a need to square the 'otherness' of Appalachia, as described by visitors to the region, with their

assumptions about the unified and homogeneous character of American civilization" (103). Appalachia's otherness develops from the attempts of outsiders to categorize it as distinct from other parts of the United States. Since Appalachia is set apart from other regions and is exposed to cultural and geographical isolation, the area's vampires behave much differently than those from other places.

The Appalachian region is particularly affected by Southern stereotypes, especially concerning religion and sexuality. In *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case*, Helen M. Lewis and Edward E. Knipe describe many of the stereotypes that are attributed to Appalachia: "apathetic, fatalistic mountain people"; "backward and primitive" (14). Many of these labels have come about due to the exploitation of the region for its workers and natural resources. Lewis and Knipe refer to this exploitation as American colonialism. The image of "mountain people" further others the already stigmatized cultural body of Appalachia. By their being relegated to the hills and mountains, they are being pushed to the margins of society. Perpetuating these stigmas divides the country into misrepresented conceptions of civilization and wilderness; the rest of the United States is supposedly civilized cultivation, while Appalachia seems characterized only by rebellion and the untamed wild. This description can also be applied to the rest of the South; the swamps and small towns of the lower Southern states represent the wild unknown as well. The portrayal of an untamed Appalachian identity as seen by outside American culture profoundly affects the study of Southern vampires. The stereotypes of untamed Appalachia often deal with themes of excess and brutality. With this in mind, it becomes clear why the vampire is able to reflect the fears and stigmas associated with Southern sexuality.

In addition, the vampire embraces the perversions of atypical sexual practices. Appalachia's traditional morality rejects the overtly sexual nature that the vampire evokes. In

addition, this morality denounces the violent, animalistic sexuality presented in the region's stereotypes. Interestingly, the vampire depicts both of these images, which contributes to its place as liminal and cultural being. With the presence of sexual stereotypes, any sexuality in the region can be labeled as deviant. The tension that this creates ultimately causes the repression of sexual identity; these urges are then displaced onto the vampire, a figure just monstrous enough to act out the South's fears as well as its desires. One way the cycle of repression is exhibited is through victim arousal. In vampire fiction, it is common for the reader or viewer to identity with the victim rather than the vampire. This connection, while demonstrating sexuality through violence, also places readers in a temporarily monstrous role, allowing them a liminal space to embody the aroused victim. In "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Jeffrey Jerome Cohen theorizes that monsters can create "escapist fantasies," which allow people to express feelings that would otherwise be repressed. He notes, "Through the body of the monster fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space" (17). The vampire acts as a liminal state for Southern culture to express sexual repression and other the stereotypes that have been attributed to Southerners. The monstrous label ascribed to the South, especially Appalachia, is then projected onto the vampire along with the complexities of sexual repression. Maria Lindgren Leavenworth builds on Cohen's ideas: "[The liminal] space, then, is figured not as the monster itself, but as the audience's temporary existence" (36). The viewer temporarily inhabits the place of the victim, further complicating the presence of erotic arousal. In this instance, the vampire represents the unspoken desires of a culture that experiences sexual repression.

Scott Nicholson's *They Hunger* (2007) seems completely aware of influential media representations of the South. Although his text is perhaps overly stereotypical in its human

characters, Nicholson's vampires are anything but predictable depictions of the undead. *They Hunger* introduces an entirely new vampire figure, one that does not resemble the aristocratic Draculas or the romantic heroes usually found in vampire fiction. Instead, these Appalachian vampires are animalistic and retain almost no semblance of their human features. The text describes these winged monsters as "leathery, grey-skinned creatures" (87) and "[their] high-pitched noise [as] the combination of a bat's squeak, a dying woman's wail, and the death gargle of a hanging victim" (191). The humans later discover that these vampires are blind; they hunt their prey using echolocation, which relates them more to bats than to humans. Their impairment makes the physical connection all the more important during their feeding. Throughout the novel, the humans' conversations in the novel are deeply rooted in popular culture, as they make reference to Count Chocula, *The X-Files*, and Mick Jagger. The background of stereotypical commentary and media references gives the text ample motivation to introduce Southern stigmas. For example, McKay, one of the human campers, begins playing "Dueling Banjos" on his harmonica; the other campers immediately understand the reference. Farrengalli, another camper, thinks, "*Deliverance*. The Burt Reynolds movie where the guys on the canoe trip get stalked by hillbillies" (Nicholson 82). It is scenes like these that set the backdrop for the novel; a reader is already tainted by the cultural stereotypes presented.

The stereotypes explored by the human characters establish the lens through which the victim arousal can be read. Though the novel's creatures are not the typically sexualized, romantic vampires, some of their victims are still strangely aroused during the feedings. Agent Sampson, their first victim, depicts his attack in oddly sexual terms:

> there must have been dozens of them….It was touching his shoulder now, not with a finger, but with something softer. Even with the numbness, he could feel

> its velvety texture, with just enough abrasion to tickle him. It was the moist sandpapery flesh of a tongue…The tongue played around his wound as if wielded by a lover in the early stages of oral sex. Sampson, despite the horrifyingly pleasant sensation, would have slapped it away, but his arms had become as heavy as his head. The drowsiness returned, and his groin flooded with warmth. He had an erection. (Nicholson 95)

Several things in this passage exude the violent sexuality of the vampire and the arousal from the victim. First, it is interesting that the act is a pack killing rather than a lone vampire. Their interactions with him are described more like an orgy than an act of violence, which is deviant in that it represents sexual excess. Additionally, his description of light-headedness suggests that their feeding is killing him, but he is still unexplainably stimulated by it.

Other characters describe similar experiences. A young, pregnant girl named Clara is also taken by the vampires. Her attack is described in stating, "The [vampires'] hands moved over her belly, up to her swollen nipples. They pinched gently, and she felt her nipples grow larger…She moaned despite her discomfort….The hands…now went along her legs, caressing the insides of her thighs. Gentle, soothing, arousing, the sharp fingernails tracing along her flesh, applying just enough pressure to mark the skin" (Nicholson 367-68). The simultaneous feelings of attraction and repulsion are evident here. Again, that a human experiences pleasure while being slowly killed by these vampires goes against standard tenets of sexual normalcy. By this point in the novel, the reader is aware that Clara enjoys sado-masochistic experiences and sometimes even allows herself to be put in life-threatening situations simply to be aroused. Her sexual preferences, while considered deviant on their own, become even more perverse when paired with the animalistic descriptions of the vampire.

Victim arousal in *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) appears to be a more positive experience for the human than for the characters in *They Hunger*. While the victims in Nicholson's text are confused by their attraction to the vampire's feeding, the human in *Interview* understands his position as a victim. When Claudia and Louis are in Paris, the vampire Armand gives Louis a human boy as a gift. The boy willingly allows Louis to feed from him and is even described as excited about the encounter. Louis states:

> Never…had I experienced it, this yielding of a conscious mortal…He was offering it to me. He was pressing the length of his body against me now, and I felt the hard strength of his sex beneath his clothes pressing against my leg….I sank my teeth into his skin, my body rigid, that hard sex driving against me, and I lifted him in passion off the floor. Wave after wave of his beating heart passed into me as, weightless, I rocked him, devouring him, his ecstasy, his conscious pleasure. (Rice 230)

Louis's experience with the mortal boy goes beyond satiating his hunger; their reactions mirror human intercourse. The boy delights in being used by Louis and he has obviously played this role for other vampires because Louis remarks that he has bruises on his neck prior to their encounter (Rice 230). The setting of this scene is an interesting backdrop to the context of their sexual arousal. The art in the room depicts scenes of "the bloated coffined corpses" (Rice 228) and "the sleeping corpse of a woman ravaged by a vulture with a human face" (230). These horrific descriptions contrast with the victim's positive feelings of arousal, making the moment of sexual gratification even more corrupt. Their sexual experience plays on the Southern anxieties concerning deviant sexualities. The background for the encounter serves to illustrate a corruption of typical sexual practices.

Another important element of sexuality in Southern vampire fiction is child sexuality. It is important to note that the presence of vampire children is extremely uncommon in vampire literature and film. The vampire children in *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) and *Lost Souls* (1992) suggest something particular about Southern sexual identities. Sexually aware child vampires represent a mixing of the prized virginity and brutal sexuality of the South. These two concepts appear to be in binary opposition, but in vampirism they mingle, creating a monstrous illustration of purity and perverse eroticism. The sexual nature of these children also alters the structure of the parent-child relationships in the texts, often leading to incestuous bonds. These child vampires are disturbing examples of incest and pedophilia, which inform the complexities of Southern stereotypes. As purity is highly valued in the South, the idea of children acting out the horrific stereotypes of unnatural sexuality is particularly monstrous.

In *Interview with the Vampire*, Claudia, a perpetual five-year-old, grows intellectually while her body stays the same. It is clear that her mind is becoming sexually aware, as she is said to be advancing towards womanhood, but her body will never reach the same maturation. Claudia's character reflects the corruption of childhood through sexuality; she is simultaneously woman and child. Her journey into vampirism begins motherless, as her biological mother has died of the plague. Louis feeds from her, but it is Lestat that gives her an immortal life. This act begins the perversion of her childhood innocence. By making her a vampire at the age of five, Lestat has stunted her sexual and physical growth; Claudia will never experience puberty, or have an adult sexual life. Instead, she understands the world as an adult would, but cannot experience it physically. This corrupts the Southern idea of female purity because even though she will be forever virginal, she has the mind of a vampire, which is associated with sexual excess and arousal through violence. *Interview with the Vampire* demonstrates the connection

between Claudia's violence and her sexual curiosity. After many decades of being together, Claudia asks Louis, "What was it like…making love?" He responds, "I think that it was a pale shadow of killing" (Rice 209). She struggles to understand her sexuality, and can only experience it through violence. In fact, because Rice's vampires are not able to have traditional sex, they do seem to get erotic satisfaction through blood and the brutality of biting. The vampires' deviation from standard sexual intercourse, paired with Claudia's "youth" is another example of a corrupted sexual experience in the eyes of traditional Southern norms.

In addition, Claudia fills the role of daughter to Louis and Lestat. Lestat refers to her as he and Louis's daughter, creating a nontraditional family structure. When Claudia attempts to recall her relationship with her mother Lestat states, "You're our daughter, Louis's daughter and my daughter, do you see?" (Rice 85). This further complicates her sexual development. Her relationship with Louis is a father/daughter connection as well as that of two lovers. Louis's descriptions of her sexual growth show that he is aware of her as a lover, as well as a daughter:

> But her mind. It was a vampire's mind. And I strained to know how she moved towards womanhood….Yet more and more her doll-like face seemed to possess two totally aware adult eyes, and innocence seemed lost somewhere with neglected toys and the loss of a certain patience. There was something dreadfully sensual about her.… (Rice 102)

In this passage, he seems concerned about her loss of interest in her childhood toys, but also fascinated by the new sensuality she exhibits. Their relationship suggests an incestuous tension though it is never consummated through sexual contact. She often refers to him as a lover and he alternates between thinking of himself as a father and as a mate. Louis explains, "…[S]he lived to put her arms around my neck and press her tiny cupid's bow to my lips and put her gleaming

eye to my eye until our lashes touched and, laughing, we reeled about the room as if to the wildest waltz. Father and Daughter. Lover and Lover" (Rice 101). The role confusion in this novel creates not only an indecent parent-child relationship but also an unfulfilled sexual connection—first, because Rice's vampires cannot have sexual intercourse, and second, because Claudia's growth stops before she reaches adulthood.

Being taken from her mother at such a young age is another factor that seems to affect Claudia's sexual growth as a woman. Louis mentions that Claudia is moving towards womanhood, but he seems confused as to how this is happening because it contrasts with her appearance as a child. When she is first made a vampire, she still has the mind of a young girl; she is interested in dolls and being mothered, because she has just recently been removed from her old life where her mother was a prominent figure. Living with Louis and Lestat as her pseudo-fathers deprives her of any feminine influences. This drives her to seek out the absent familial connections through her victims. Louis affirms, "[Claudia] did not kill indiscriminately. She fell into demanding patterns. Poverty began to fascinate her.…She seemed obsessed with the women and children.…Claudia had a family…which she took one by one" (Rice 104). Claudia's interest in families, especially women and children, illustrates her corrupted idea of the journey to womanhood. It is the relationship between the mothers and children that arouses her curiosity, because that part of her life was left unfinished. By killing these women, Claudia is replacing interactions with her own mother.

Additionally, considering the vampire's feeding as an erotic act sets up a perverse relationship with these temporary mothers. Later in the novel, two maids go missing from Louis and Lestat's residence—a mother and daughter. Louis asserts, "There they lay on the bricks, mother and daughter together, the arm of the mother fastened around the waist of the daughter,

the daughter's head bent against the mother's breast, both foul with feces and swarming with insects" (Rice 106). This scene shows the disturbing way in which Claudia understands familial relationships. She cannot seem to reconcile her stunted childhood with the adult world. Because she is still forced to physically play the part of a child, she cannot experience any normalcy in her relationships with others; even her victims perceive her as a small girl and she must use their ignorance to her advantage. Therefore, she continually remakes the mother/daughter connection that she hungers for in her choice of victims, ultimately blending the sensuality of vampirism with her corrupted childhood. Candace R. Benefiel suggests, "The fangs of the vampire possess the penetrative function and power of the phallus, the life-giving fluid is received into the body through the vagina-like oral cavity. The vampire gives immortality through blood being sucked from it, an image paralleling maternal nursing" (268). Child vampirism prevents Claudia from ever being a mother herself. She supplements this need with her killing, but ultimately, she knows she cannot enter womanhood as she was biologically intended. When she discusses the prospect of making more vampires like themselves, she is aware of her limitations as a child vampire. She laments, "Can you picture it?...A coven of children? That is all I could provide" (Rice 199). She can never procreate as a human woman. In some sense, she is actually void of sexuality because she can neither represent childlike purity nor adult sexuality.

Other variations of child vampires exhibit more explicit forms of sexuality. Unlike Claudia, the vampire children in Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls* (1992) are born with an inherent sexuality. This perhaps makes them more transgressive because they were not led to the sexual nature of vampirism through violence; instead, they learn to combine sex and brutality on their own. Depictions of child vampirism, incest, and pedophilia are abundant in this novel. At times, these issues make up the central conflicts of the plot. Though this study focuses explicitly on the

vampires of *Lost Souls*, the humans in the text mirror the incestuous and highly sexual actions of the undead. This parallel between vampires and humans completes the Southern backdrop of the stereotypical and the traditional. Brite portrays many Southern stereotypes just through the setting and character interactions. For example, when Christian, the oldest of the novel's vampires, drives into Missing Mile, North Carolina, the town is described as full of "trailers, broken-backed shacks…weed-choked family graveyards…heaps of rusted scrap metal" (Brite 124). As he drives farther into town he sees a dirty child dressed in mangled clothing and holding a dead rat. The text states, "There was something wrong with the symmetry of her face. Her eyes were unevenly spaced, her forehead too low, the line of her brow crooked. Christian realized he was looking into the face of profound retardation" (Brite 125). The description of the setting casts light on some common stereotypes about Southern poverty. In addition, the child's condition perhaps alludes to suggestions of incest; figures like her are often associated with Southern culture. Just as Scott Nicholson uses human conversations and prejudices, Brite makes use of setting and stereotypical characterizations to set the stage for the issues of Southern identity. Other instances of incest in the background of the novel include improper father/daughter relationships and some cases of sexual violence. These scenes help develop the theme of sexual deviance throughout the text.

One of the main characters in the novel is Nothing, a fifteen-year-old vampire hybrid, who is struggling to find his identity, both sexually and otherwise. The vampires in Brite's world are not made, but born from human women. These vampires always kill their mothers during child birth, which leads to "families" without mothers. In fact, the book is almost completely comprised of male characters. Though much older than Claudia, Nothing is still an example of child vampirism. The nature of his aging process is not clearly explained, but it seems as if

vampires grow to a certain age and are then frozen in time. As an adolescent, Nothing attempts to understand his sexuality; his interactions with other teenagers his age include a great deal of experimentation. At the beginning of his story, Nothing is not aware that he is a vampire, though he sometimes cuts himself with a razor blade to drink the blood. When he meets three older vampires, Zillah, Molochai, and Twig, the four begin a road trip to New Orleans and Nothing progressively learns of his vampirism. Nothing's interactions with his fellow vampires is primal and centered on sexual gratification. The vampires also teach him to equate sex and brutality through drinking one another's blood. Nothing becomes a lover to Zillah, who he later discovers is his father. The two continue to be lovers even after they learn that they are father and son. Even before their true connection is revealed, the novel expresses their sexual interactions in terms of a parent/child relationship. For example, when Zillah put his mouth to Nothing's throat he "did not bite but had to suck like a baby before he could sleep" (Brite 141). *Lost Souls* is rife with these kinds of comparisons that go beyond the perversion of childhood, but also attack the idea of familial normalcy. Since vampires do not originate in the same way as humans, their concepts of parent and child are the same as that of creator and the created: who occupies these roles does not seem to matter.

Nothing is raised as a human for the first fifteen years of his life, so he is aware of societal norms that no longer affect the older vampires. Though he knows their incest goes against standard morality, he chooses to explore his sexual identity through any means available to him. The text affirms, "But [Nothing] could not disgust himself. He could not make himself ashamed. He knew these were things he was supposed to feel, things the rational daylight world would expect him to feel…In a world of night, in a world of blood, what did such pallid rules matter?" (Brite 228). Nothing's lack of disgust with being his father's lover shows a breakdown

of social rules. The vampire creates a space where sexual limitations do not apply, but Nothing, newly inducted to the world of the vampire, is still faced with the remnants of these social norms. Nothing and Zillah's bond perverts standard familial ties and disrupts any possibility of the former's being able to cultivate a normal sense of sexuality. As Nothing is in an impressionable stage of his sexual maturation, the incestuous bond, as well as his vampirism, stunt his growth toward manhood. His sexual behavior can first be traced back to his initial experimentation with his human friends. They corrupt their innocence at such a young age that Nothing needs that sexual contact to feel accepted. As a child vampire, he receives this acceptance through learning violent intercourse and human sacrifice.

As a symbol of limitless eroticism, the vampire's sexuality is a fluid concept. Because it is not governed by the same social rules as that of human beings, it crosses the boundaries that govern genders and orientations. Benefiel points out, "Homosexuality or heterosexuality seem irrelevant to the nature of vampirism, and unduly limiting" (268). It is perhaps more correct to suggest that vampires participate in a kind of pansexuality and gender fluidity. These definitions in Southern vampire fiction are representative through sexual excess and a fear of the unknown. The vampires in *Lost Souls* are frightening to Southerners because they represent the undefinable and the idea of sexual chaos. The influence of slavery and religious denominations has created a South that wants to define people based on race and sexuality. Because the vampire does not allow such categorization, it reflects the fears of a region that cannot understand its monsters.

Lost Souls illustrates the vampire's sexual fluidity in a number of ways. First, Brite's vampires are described as androgynous beings. Zillah is sometimes described as having an "androgynous face" (5) or being "slim as a girl" (82). He and the other vampires do not discriminate between genders; Christian, Zillah, and Nothing explore their sexuality with both

men and women. In addition, the novel contains many orgies, which blurs lines of sexual orientation and normalcy. These deviant behaviors make them difficult to categorize, a characteristic Cohen attributes to the monster. He affirms, "[The] refusal to participate in the classificatory 'order of things' is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so, the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (Cohen 6). The vampire is dangerous to the South because it refuses to accept labels. With a history of issues with "passing" and widespread religion, the South has not completely moved away from its fear of difference. Brite's vampires attack the standards of Southern culture by refusing to be characterized by their sexual identity.

These vampires represent more than their pansexuality; they also illustrate typical vampiric excess. Everything Zillah, Molochai, and Twig do is characterized by greed or gluttony. They drink liquor, eat sweets, and consume blood constantly. The mixture of these things mirrors their sexual experiences. In fact, at times all of these vices join together to form an orgy of excess. Their sexual actions are especially deviant because they are ultimately corrupting the sexual experiences of an adolescent. They condition Nothing to believe he must drink blood and be violent to have a complete sexual experience. Their sexual encounters include human and supernatural partners. This dynamic shows the corruptive nature of this kind of vampire on Southern sexuality. When Zillah has sex with a human women they are immediately addicted to his brutal intercourse. He impregnates two women, which is basically promising their death because all human women die giving birth to vampire babies. His seed causes the destruction of these women, just as the vampire destroys Southern ideals of virginity and exudes the animalistic, excessive sexuality that is present in the stereotypical image of the South.

Sexuality in the South is informed by many cultural elements. While the traditional views of purity still linger in the region, stereotypes of violence and excess alter the way sexuality is viewed when depicted in a Southern setting. The vampire's main role in terms of Southern sexuality is that of deviance and excess. Southern vampire fiction often connects the region's ideas of purity and the animalistic nature ascribed to Southerners. Ultimately, this serves to further corrupt the South's traditional norms of Christianized sexuality. Popular culture has painted a picture of the South that creates tension between ideas of chastity and the development of a functional sexual identity. Southern vampires represent this tension through aroused victims, sexualized vampire children, and fluid depictions of gender and sexual preference. Each of these elements cast the South's othered sexual identity onto the vampire. Being a creature constantly associated with limitless sexuality, the vampire easily slips into the role of monstrous lover and predator.

CHAPTER 3

THE UNDEAD MINORITY

More than any other region in the United States, the South is connected to its history. It has been shaped by countless events, often resulting in antagonism between races. The South's former dependence upon slavery and the continued segregation of African Americans still colors the culture and the way those outside the region view it. Much of the racial struggle in the South is due to multiple races' living within a shared space and under the pressures of these prejudices. This is a concept that is true both historically and contemporarily. Though the South has come a long way in terms of equality, racism still prominently lingers in the region. Southern vampires offer opportunities to critique the area's persistent racism and other instances of prejudice. At their core, vampires represent deviations from cultural norms. As true outsiders, vampires are a versatile device used to explore the complexities of Southern culture. Southern vampires have the unique ability to take on the role of the marginalized group within society, which lets the monster delve further into the issues of race present in the South. For Louis in *Interview with the Vampire*, his position as outsider is the only lens through which he can understand the experiences of marginalized Southerners. Equally telling, the vampires in *True Blood* make up the new minority that is attempting to find equality among pre-existing Southern groups. In these instances, the vampire allows for a critique of traditional Southern issues; by using a fictional, yet recognizable, monster the writers of these texts illustrate the true nature of racism and marginalization in the South.

The region has been impacted by many cultural influences that make its projection onto the vampire even more unique. Much can be said about Southern identity based on the historical events and social changes the South has experienced. The Southern vampire helps to define this

identity while assessing what it means for supernatural literature in the region. In Charles W. Joyner's article "Southern Folklore as a Key to Southern Identity," he states, "Historians appropriating the tools of psychology, sociology, and literary criticism, have variously defined the essence of the South as agrarianism, individualism, conservativism, and violence" (211-12). The tendency to equate the South with violence is likely due in part to the role of the Southern states in the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement, as well as various other influences. Joyner goes on to suggest that the central theme in Southern history is "racial integration" and that this concept "has been closer to the heart of the Southern experience than is customarily understood" (212). These racial issues are part of what forms the Southern conception of the vampire. Racism easily gives way to other kinds of prejudice, such as sexism and homophobia. Vampires in Southern literature and other mediums reflect the fear of integration of all kinds. Cohen deals with these elements as he outlines the creation of the monster and its purpose. He states:

> The monster of prohibition exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot—must not—be crossed. Primarily these borders are in place to control the traffic in women, or more generally to establish strictly homosocial bonds, the ties between men that keep a patriarchal society functional. (13)

The South's past issues with racial segregation and its typically patriarchal structure lends itself well to Cohen's theory. There is an underlying fear that these boundaries are going to be violated in some way. In some cases, this fear perhaps creates more of a historical issue, than a contemporary one; however, it would be inaccurate to state that the South is not still plagued

with these concerns in many respects. Sometimes these cultural tensions are passed down to modern generations which continue to perpetuate intolerance.

While the Southerner faces discrimination from those outside of the region, those of non-white races have historically been faced with internal prejudice from within Southern culture. *Interview with the Vampire* is set in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and at the start of Louis's story, he owns a plantation and many slaves. As a white slave owner, Louis is in a position of opposition with his slaves. He appears very concerned about the differences between his white European background and the foreignness of the multiple groups of African peoples that work for him. When Louis is a human, the gap between the two races is frightening to him. His description of their behavior and customs emphasizes their place as an othered group. Of these slaves he comments:

> But in seventeen ninety-five these slaves did not have the character which you've seen in films and novels of the South. They were not soft-spoken, brown-skinned people in drab rags who spoke an English dialect. They were Africans. And they were islanders.…They were very black and totally foreign; they spoke in their African tongues,…and when they sang, they sang African songs which made the fields exotic and strange, always frightening to me in my mortal life. They were superstitious and had their own secrets and traditions. In short,… they had not been robbed yet of that which had been characteristically theirs. They tolerated the baptism and modest garments imposed on them by French Catholic laws; but in the evenings,…the slave cabins of Pointe du Lac were a foreign country, an African coast after dark, in which not even the coldest overseer would want to wander. No fear for the vampire. (Rice 49-50)

His mortal assessment of the slaves paints them as terrifying; their customs are far removed from his white, aristocratic lifestyle. Furthermore, he points out that they speak in "African tongues." The plural reference indicates that there are multiple nationalities labeled under the African heading. As a vampire, he seems to be suggesting that his slaves represented many different African peoples and the oppressive nature of slavery had grouped them together, which ultimately suppressed their individuality and sense of self. It appears that his vampirism has allowed him to see slavery for what it is. Once Louis is a vampire, he is also an othered being, which lets him assess slavery from a different point of view.

Vampirism is beyond race and does not adhere to any human social standards, so Louis's transformation has opened his eyes to the reality of being an outsider. Interestingly, Louis begins his description by comparing the modern-day conception of slavery to that which he witnessed as a slave owner. He makes reference to the romanticized idea of enslavement by stating the slaves he knew were not like those seen in media representations. The slaves in the "films and novels about the South" seem to embody the Americanized idea of Africans, one that does not depict a true image of the multicultural blending that occurred on plantations in the eighteenth century. In addition, Louis's discussion of the interactions between the Africans and the French Catholics is especially telling about the nature of slavery at this time. Once he is a vampire he sees that forcing the slaves to conform to French Catholic customs is depriving them of their heritage in an attempt to erase their African identities. His original role as a white planter of European descent obstructs his view of the lower classes, specifically of other races. In 1795, he is part of the southern majority, but after he is sired by Lestat, his vampirism places him in the role of the outsider. He is able to see the truth about the slaves only when he no longer functions within the South's racial hierarchy.

Later in the novel, Louis again refers to his human idea of the slaves. He admits, "I had several extremely intelligent slaves who might have done his [the overseer's] job just as well a long time before, if I had recognized their intelligence and not feared their African appearance and manner" (Rice 27). Louis's interactions with the slaves, both while he is mortal and after he is a vampire, present the struggle of race in the South. In this case, the vampire critiques the perception of slaves held by his human self. As a living, white Southerner, he conforms to the cultural norms of his time period. The African slaves were frightening in their difference, and these feelings of fear lead to the monstrous labeling of this group. According to John Block Friedman's work with medieval "monstrous" races, "Many of these peoples were not monstrous at all. They simply differed in appearance and social practices from the person describing them" (1). Freidman's comments on monstrous labeling provide a possible explanation for the fear that Louis feels as a human interacting with his slaves. Louis is representative of the majority of Southerners at this time that likely shared similar views about the slave population. His description of their customs as foreign and mysterious lends itself well to Friedman's theory. The African people are considered monstrous because the white Southerners do not understand their culture; they are different, and their difference is understood as inferior. Friedman's text also explains that men stigmatized as "monstrous" were "not supernatural or infernal creatures, but varieties of men, whose chief distinction from the men of Europe was one of geography" (1). This also affects the othered identity of the slaves during this time. The fact that they had come from Africa rather than Europe made them strangely exotic, and ultimately threatening.

Louis's character is used as a means to both represent and critique the institution of slavery within Southern culture. On one hand, his reflections on his human memories present the historical problem of a fear of the unknown. On the other hand, his vampire self is able to point

out the flaws of this idea. While Louis's experiences with slavery are no longer applicable to the status of racial dynamics today, the ideas his critique raises are still relevant to the tensions lingering in contemporary society. Southerners have certainly not forgotten the influence of racism in the region, and the vampire aids in bringing up these issues in a familiar way. By discussing racial inequality from the prospective of another outsider, Rice provides an interesting outlet for common cultural anxieties.

Beyond the historical gaze of Anne Rice's vampires, modern vampires also make compelling expositions of Southern racial issues. Contemporary anxieties about race relations are perhaps even more important because they are rooted in ideologies of the past that are still permeating twenty-first-century Southern society. Racism's profound impact on the South has left lingering wounds in the region. Louis's vampire identity allows him to clearly assess the immorality of slavery. Similarly, the vampires of *True Blood* illustrate the unfortunate struggle of a marginalized minority. The vampire as a powerful, positive embodiment of stigmatized groups is a fairly recent development. In the past, the character sometimes represented certain people that were thought to be monstrous, but the image of an attractive vampire that embodies marginalization and critiques the majority is a new concept. *True Blood* presents an interesting view of vampires and racial issues through relatable vampire characters. Bon Temps is a tight-knit, occasionally violent place. The community members internalize traditional Southern values and are, at times, openly prejudiced; however, it is interesting that these intolerant tendencies are not usually aimed at typical minority groups in the South such as African Americans or homosexuals. Instead, the people of Bon Temps have strong opinions about the integration of vampires into their town. As it has been noted previously, *True Blood* is commonly thought of as a social commentary on prejudices towards contemporary minority groups. Their place in

American society is constructed in a way that parallels them with other types of equality movements. This idea is most clearly illustrated in the language used by advocates for the vampires. The vampires rally for equal rights and make appearances on talk shows discussing the normalcy of vampire/human interactions. Vampire spokeswoman, Nan Flanagan, appears on multiple episodes as a voice for her people; she makes a number of compelling arguments about the equality of humans and vampires. To combat the prejudice from the human community, Nan often must point out that vampires are not the sum of the myths believed about them. Something similar can be seen in past discussions about race; African Americans have had to cast off the stereotypes used against them to suggest a similar kind of equality. One of the most unique elements about the vampire's "racial" position in American is the way it affects other kinds of prejudices within the series. As most of the negative energy is placed on the vampire citizens, common racial and sexual prejudices seem to fall out of sight, and while they do sometimes arise, they are muted by issues of vampire equality. In Bon Temps, the vampire stands in as the marginalized minority group. Throughout the series, there are several instances in which the white, human Southerners other the vampire by pointing out their differences. These scenes mimic similar exchanges that would commonly discuss race.

In "Sparks Fly Out," a pivotal episode of Season One, the vampire Bill Compton gives a speech to the Descendants of the Glorious Dead, a group of historians that attempt to keep the memory of the Civil War South alive in Bon Temps. Their name itself helps to lay the groundwork for the racial dialogues that take place in the town. During Bill's presentation, one of Arlene's children suggests to her that Bill is "so white." Arlene retorts, "No, darling, we're white, he's dead" ("Sparks Fly Out"). The distaste for the vampire is quite obvious here, and though not everyone in the town feels negatively towards Bill, the scenario presented here

mirrors the structure of traditional racial prejudice. Arlene feels that she must separate her and her family from the monstrous perception of the vampire. Vampires, as representations of the African American community, are labeled as non-white and potentially dangerous. Arlene's behavior can be seen in other townspeople as well. Citizens of Bon Temps are clearly trying to distance themselves from the traits of the vampire. Separation is key in this exchange; if they can define themselves in contrast to the vampire, then they can further other a group that they find inferior, particularly in terms of morality. With the burden of conservative religion weighing on the South, it is not surprising that the people of Bon Temps seek to distance themselves from something that has long been considered evil.

Ultimately, the truly frightening thing about Bill and other vampires like him is not their difference, but that they are a likeness of human beings. The fact that they are nearly human makes them all the more threatening to their mortal neighbors. Arlene seeks to point out a physical difference by qualifying her "whiteness" against Bill's "whiteness." The town's vampire activists constantly bring up the vampire's humanlike qualities, which only leads the prejudiced humans to seek out ways in which they can be distanced from the vampire. In order to claim their Southern white identities and, in turn, cultural superiority, many *True Blood* characters participate in same act that Arlene is perpetuating with her child; they pass down harmful, intolerant ideologies to successive generations. The scene presents an interesting contrast for the series. It begins with Adele Stackhouse assuring the crowd that Bill is just like them and is a "son of Bon Temps" ("Sparks Fly Out"). This is juxtaposed with Arlene's dialogue and similar comments from other humans. As they are told of Bill's human qualities, they immediately find ways to define themselves in contrast to him.

This evolving definition of vampire identity makes human and undead relationships the new interracial relationship. The citizens of Bon Temps view these unions in a similar way. In fact, the humans barely object to news of black and white unions. Instead, they project their negativity onto vampire and human couples. The discrimination of these couples is depicted through the character of Maxine Fortenberry. While she finds it culturally acceptable to be openly intolerant of vampires, she is aware that she must not voice her notions of racial prejudice. In "I Will Rise Up," an episode of Season Two, Maxine's son, Hoyt, accuses her of being filled with hate when she disapproves of his relationship with a vampire. He proceeds to make a list of the groups she dislikes, which includes Methodists, Catholics, and people who do not tend their gardens; however, when he suggests that she is also racist against African Americans, she states, "That's a secret" ("I Will Rise Up"). Her reaction proves that the prejudice against vampires has become socially acceptable in the Southern culture of Bon Temps, while it is now more taboo to admit traditional forms of racism. Maxine claims it is her upbringing that conditioned her to be racist. Maria Lindgren Leavenworth explores this scene as well. She states, "The personal history cited here is illustrative of the social and cultural practice by which she has been instructed to hate African Americans, but she is not ignorant of the changing times making statements to this effect impermissible. Her view of vampires…is on the other hand not an emotional reaction she strives to hide" (41-42). *True Blood* demonstrates the movement from one form of prejudice to another. The vampire now carries this burden. Leavenworth goes on to suggest, "Discourses of racial segregation and sexual prejudices…work as a backdrop to fearful feelings towards vampires. Reactions to the new minority group in many ways mirror the previous structures, evoked by long histories of contact between bodies, and reiterated by those who have something to gain from hate and fear" (40). The humans in *True*

Blood use the prejudices against vampires to encourage fear and hate. The characters claim to strive for religious purity and label the vampire as an evil being; however, the series demonstrates that the humans are usually far more immoral than the vampires.

Ultimately, it seems that the feelings towards vampires in the series demonstrate the normalization of African Americans in the South and the discrimination of vampires. This shift is a critique of Southern issues with race and how easily these ideas are spread throughout a community, and eventually an entire region. The vampire, as an othered figure in the South, is horrific when it taps into issues of racism that are ingrained in the fabric of Southern history. However, when that image of fear is inverted to allow a culture to assess itself in a mainstream environment, such as the structure of *True Blood*, the character has more impact. The vampires in the series connect with audiences and encourage feelings of tolerance. As appealing, humorous, and human figures, the vampires elicit the audience's sympathy and make the humans the real monsters.

Racial inequality, while a permanent mark on American history, is an ever-evolving issue within contemporary society. The modern Southern vampire brings to light the region's racism and opens up new lines of discussion on the topic. In *Interview with the Vampire*, Louis's vampirism allows him to see beyond his human role as a plantation owner. His outsider view as a vampire critiques the nature of racial intolerance and his sentiments about his misjudgment of his slaves is applicable to lingering racial issues in modern-day Southern culture. Additionally, *True Blood* provides a contemporary perspective on deep-seated racism in the South. The show's vampires take on the identity of the new outsider. Bon Temps turns its racist opinions on the vampire, which presents racial struggles in a new way. Audiences can sympathize with the marginalized vampires, and in turn, with many othered groups. The vampire is an appropriate

figure to explore stigmatized races because it thrives on the edges of mainstream culture. As a creature which straddles the borders of society, the Southern vampire can restructure the way the region views the racial Other.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The culture of the American South is rich with history and tragedy. Considering the region's complex past, it is the ideal location for a vampire to thrive. Vampires perhaps work so well in this environment because they have so much in common with the Southerner. Each is a historically marginalized figure that has, at some time or another, carried the burden of the Other. In addition, the vampire and Southerner share a similar liminal space, because they represent the blending of many cultural influences. The South's connection to religion, sexuality, and race paint it as a space full of tensions and contradictions. The vampire, too, exists in such a space, as it embodies a number of different belief systems and superstitions. Identity is a fluid concept for both of these groups, making the latter perfect for cultural exploration.

One of the world's most unique monsters, the vampire has a long history as the embodiment of culture. From Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to Alan Ball's *True Blood*, vampires have provided humans with a means to decipher the cultural mind. The Southern vampire, while still a figure for regional reflection, also occupies new ground in the world of monsters. As a genre that seems to be just making its way into the public eye, Southern vampire fiction is only beginning to show its true potential. This study reveals a small portion of what the Southern vampire can convey, but there is certainly more work to be done to unmask the Southerner vampire.

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