

## Intersectionality, Sexuality, and the Exploration of Racialized Gender Identities in HBO's *True Blood*

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*This paper considers the degree to which two recurring black queer characters on HBO's True Blood series reflect the actual experiences of North American people of colour who are not heterosexual. Through a close reading of the program's discourse, visual cues, and constructed environment, this paper will examine selected instances where accurate portrayal is achieved as well as where the series falls short of an accurate representation.*

**Keywords:** *True Blood*, queer representation, vampires, intersectionality, racialization, HBO

HBO's television series, *True Blood*, has been praised for its inclusion of queer and racialized characters. By employing a visual and textual content analysis, this paper will explore the contradictory representations of racialized gender identities while making reference to contemporary research on intersectionality and vampire culture. My research identifies the sexually progressive and successful ways in which the show disrupts certain stereotypes, but amplifies others. The process of appropriating multi-dimensional identities in popular culture is particularly challenging, and the challenge is magnified at the intersections of race and non-heteronormativity. My analysis focuses on two of the recurring characters, Lafayette Reynolds and his cousin Tara Mare Thornton. I also consider discourse in the show that is vocal about non-heteronormativity. Lafayette and Tara are the only two important non-white [passing] characters on the show.

The tension surrounding vampire issues appears to be a metaphor for queer "issues," and *True Blood* codes the fear of homosexuals as definitive homophobia. For example, creator, executive producer, and occasional writer of the show, Alan Ball, explains, "the police raid on the Shreveport vampire bar, Fangtasia, in the fourth episode of season 1 . . . was meant to resemble similar raids on gay bars in the 1960s"

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(Curtis, 2010, p. 68). The main focus of this paper is to explore racialized queer identities, beginning with Lafayette. He is presented as a black gay man in southern Louisiana embodying traditionally male *and* female coded characteristics. The show's website (a true-to-life portrait of a fictional town) describes this character a

the eyes and ears of Bon Temps. He knows just about everything there is to know about everyone. He's Merlotte's short-order grill cook but he's definitely got his hands dipped in many shady sideline businesses. Some locals say he accepts sexual favours in exchange for V-blood (*Welcome*, n.d.).

The silence about his sexuality could be to keep this website either spoiler-free or conservative. Alternatively, as I argue here, this could also imply that Lafayette is defined by more than his sexuality. Stanford University professor and researcher J. M. Tyree's (2009) essay about vampire narratives in film and television, describes Lafayette as a "V-dealer," that is a person who illegally traffics vampire blood (p. 34). Tyree explains that V functions "for humans [as] a sort of magic mushroom Viagra" (p. 34). Aside from drug trafficking, Lafayette also works in construction alongside Jason Stackhouse, the Southern beau and brother of *True Blood's* main character Sookie Stackhouse. Jason Stackhouse is a white, cisgender, heterosexual, and hypersexual character. As the seasons unfold, Jason becomes Lafayette's foil. Jason eventually goes to Lafayette to acquire Viagra, at which point Lafayette urges him to use V instead. Lafayette is also an online sex worker who runs a website. When Jason can no longer afford his addiction, Lafayette asks Jason to dance for his website. Jason strips down to his briefs and Lafayette swings his hips side to side as the erotic music plays: "Do you know how much money you would make if you had your own website? Queens all over this world would pay good money just to watch you jack off" (Ball & Dahl, 2008). The lyrics in the background music go, "I like to do manly things . . . but I want to do something dirty with you."

These lyrics are from artist "Gay Pimp" and the original music video takes place in a locker room, in which the singer asks a guy in his towel to go for soccer practice, because the man says he only likes to do "manly things." In the end, the man realizes that military training, track and field, and soccer practice were never his concern and Gay Pimp bends him over. HBO is known to employ a different song for closing credits of their shows, and the song is always related to the episode. Using the song "Soccer Practice" in the episodes creates an allusion for those who know the song. Jason's hegemonic manliness is being shattered, but only because he is desperate for drugs.

He tries to walk away when Lafayette admits that there are "a lot of pervs in this town" (Ball & Dahl, 2008). When Jason expresses concerns that someone in Bon Temps may see this, Lafayette offers him a mask to conceal his identity. The mask allows for Jason to subvert his white, manly, construction-worker identity. Jason is

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“manly” by Bon Temps’ definitions, as well as the man in Gay Pimp’s video that says “Bro, I only do manly things.” The mask functions as a contextual liberator, as though he had entered the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1968). Putting on the mask is almost like blocking out all gender prescriptions. The mask reminds audiences that the dancer is not Jason Stackhouse, but a desperate junkie. With the mask over his face, Jason opens up, he comes towards the camera, teases in a “come here” motion, and then walks away, slapping his butt cheeks and thighs a few times. Although Tara, Lafayette’s cousin, has a crush on Jason, he sees her as nothing more than a friend. It is very likely that race is Jason’s barrier. I argue this because Jason casually and exclusively sleeps with white women.

It seems as though while Jason can be friends with a black woman, he cannot date a black woman. Laws of proximity should suggest that they could and should end up together in some capacity. Especially considering that Tara is Jason’s best friend. But Tara, a dark-skinned black woman, is figuratively invisible in this moment to both men, Jason and Lafayette. She walks in and goes unnoticed while watching Lafayette filming Jason dancing. This is until she eventually exclaims “what the fuck?,” which evolves into a nod of approval towards Jason.

Lafayette eventually pays Jason in V, and does not act on what he finds visually pleasurable. Lafayette is not uncontrollable, and he can maintain himself because he is not an animal and he is not a beast. Patricia Hill Collins’s (2004) research on black masculinity and black sexual politics is relevant here. In this scene, it is the white man, not the black underpaid working-class individual, that is being exploited (Collins 158). Lafayette exploits Jason by demanding labour for a commodity; thus, racial roles are being transgressed and reversed.

The problem with *True Blood* is its inconsistency of challenging hegemony. Lafayette is described by Dustin L. Collins (2011) as being somebody who “may wear hoop earrings and [gold] eye shadow, but he is both mature and assertive, and more than willing to stand up for himself and those he cares about even in the face of violence. He also has the muscle to hold his own against such violence if necessary” (32). This is a side of Lafayette that comes out as well, though in order to understand why, one must explore his background. Lafayette’s daytime construction and restaurant positions are his legal jobs. All of which are necessitated by his sick mother, Ruby Jean, who told his nurse, Jesus Velasquez, that her son is dead. Ruby repeatedly exclaims, “God killed him, ‘cause he a faggot.” His mother’s rejection of him on the grounds of sexuality is a reflection of the dominant ideology in Bon Temps, and offers insight into the growth and development of Lafayette. HBO is not making a progressive statement here, only reflecting a stereotype about anything that is not heteronormative. In the culture of Bon Temps, Lafayette’s mother’s description of her son as a “faggot” carries a much different implication than if it had been used by a black man about a straight man in The Bronx (Pascoe, 2005, p. 332) because context helps define the term. His mother uses it as rejection—in the mind of Ruby

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Jean, Lafayette is not “normal,” and therefore is to be scorned by God and society because of who he wants to sleep with. Lafayette is dead to her because of his sexuality. Due to the nature of this show’s debated allusions, it is important to note that Ball and HBO could have used this opportunity to portray Ruby Jean as a liberal mother, and thereby signal how society should treat their non-heterosexual or non-gender-conforming children, rather than amplifying the kinds of messaging the Westborough Baptist Church (WBC) disseminates. The aforementioned church’s motto is “God hates fags,” which the show also later applies to vampires with signage in front of a local church that reads, “God hates *fangs*.”

Lafayette’s character was meant to expire at the beginning of the second book in the series on which *True Blood* is based (Crowder, 2014). Nelsan Ellis has been praised and criticized for his portrayal of Lafayette despite the fact that the actor is a heterosexual ex-marine (Hiltbrand, 2010). As both the Gay Pimp song and the writer of the article suggest, being a marine is associated with heterosexuality; when Hiltbrand writes that Ellis is “a marine nonetheless,” it underscores his masculinity. Producer Allan Ball admits, “Whenever you have a character in which one of his defining qualities is his sexuality, it’s always challenging because you don’t want to bring in someone who’s going to play that in a phony way.” This is praise of Ellis, but to reduce a character to their sexuality is unfair and oblivious to the fact that that a character has more depth than their sexuality. Ellis’s real-life concern about Lafayette’s sexuality deserves mention, as well. He mentions that when considering taking the role, “my fear at first was that my family is going to hate this. There are homophobic people in my family. They’re deeply religious.” On the one hand the show illustrates the harm that such attitudes can cause, but on the other hand normalizes heteronormativity, and squanders an opportunity to show family love, acceptance, and attitudes towards non-heteronormativity in an alternative, if not positive light. Not only is Lafayette racially and sexually othered, he is also blood-related to the only other people of colour in the show: his mother, cousin Tara, and Tara’s mother.

Sabrina Boyer’s (2011) article deals with the issues and employment of the “Other” in *True Blood*. Boyer argues that Lafayette’s identity “occupies the border between a human and a ‘monster’ who deals in the world of vampires as a job, and a sexual and racial ‘monster’ that has historically been a social outcast, often ‘captured’ and ‘annihilated’” (Boyer, 2011, p. 35). Vampires can retract their fangs, and Lafayette’s shape-shifter boss, whose bar he works at, is a white male shape-shifter; however, he can take the shape of a human, of normalcy in Bon Temps. This is the politics of Sam Merlotte’s bar, named “Merlotte’s,” as it is described by Boyer:

While [Sam Merlotte] keeps his shapeshifter status a secret, Lafayette’s working for Sam as a cook in a small Southern bar is difficult to detach from a slave/master relationship, especially since Lafayette and his cousin Tara,

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named after a plantation, are the predominant people of color in the town of Bon Temps. (Boyer, 2011, p. 37)

Thus, the show can be said to redefine and amplify racialized gender identities. In one instance, Lafayette prepares a burger, and a table of seemingly uneducated, small-town white customers sends the plate back, "because the burger might have AIDS." The discourse is as follows:

LAFAYETTE: "Scuse' me, Who ordered the hamburger, *with AIDS?*"

CUSTOMER: [snickering] "I ordered the hamburger *deluxe.*"

LAFAYETTE: "In this restaurant, a hamburger deluxe come with french fries, lettuce, tomato, mayo *and AIDS.* Does anybody have a problem with that?"

CUSTOMER: "Yeah, I'm an American and I got a say in who makes my food."

LAFAYETTE: "Well baby, it's too late for that. Faggots been breeding your cows, raising your chickens, even brewing your beer long before I walked my sexy ass up in this motherfucker. Everything on your goddamned table got AIDS." (Woo, 2008)

Cornell University's Hanson Ellis (1991) argued, "Whether by strategy or by error, the media have a commonplace tendency to collapse the category of 'gay man' with that of 'person with AIDS'" (p. 325). This is the same ideology that HBO continues to amplify with Lafayette in *True Blood*. However, Lafayette's ability to stand up for himself galvanizes audiences because he challenges hegemony while threatening the borders, positions, and rules about being masculine, of being black, and of being Southern, all the while maintaining his sass (Boyer, 2011, p. 38).

Media and Communications Professor Frederik Dhaenens's (2011) work on queer representations on television suggests that Lafayette "embodies stereotypical feminine traits while he also subverts them via performance of masculinity." Audiences also perceive the contradictions between his flamboyant outfits and his confrontational skills in this particular scenario (Dhaenens, 2011, p. 35). While the representations of subaltern characters challenge the status quo, it is also challenging for creators. In order to avoid perpetuating stereotypes and visualizing progressive and inclusive ideologies, HBO needs "to keep this imagery from slipping into a spectacle or into reductionist representations of queerness or blackness, [and] the show would need to include more diversity and critical consciousness surrounding these identity markers" (Boyer, 2011, p. 38). An addition of main characters with racialized identities, beyond Lafayette and Tara, would be a starting point.

Lafayette and Tara, the only regular people of colour on the show, are also often portrayed as hot-headed, confrontational individuals and are relatively contrasted against other characters, including their boss Sam. The website for the fictional town of Bon Temps describes Tara as follows: "If you hear a loud, cursing voice working

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behind the bar at Merlotte's, that's Tara. Don't worry her bark is worse than her bite. She built up a tough exterior taking care of her alcoholic mother" (Welcome, n.d.). Tara is described as a bitter malcontent whose speech is ineffective, like the bark of a dog. Cultural historian and journalism professor Roger Streitmatter (2009) argues that the reason why lesbians were invisible in television in the 1960s to 1970s was because they were stereotyped as "angry, man-hating 'dykes'" (p. 147). Tara's character fits this characterization of the situation of over fifty years ago because she is portrayed as aggressive and constantly man-hating. When Tara escapes an abusive relationship with a man, she falls in love with a woman at a kickboxing ring. Her nature has been described as aggressive and bestial by *True Blood's* copywriters. Thus, the show fails to be counter-hegemonic; rather, "these attempts at carving out and problematizing notions of difference and otherness are lost within a sea of reductionist representation that . . . likely reinforces and reinscribes stereotypes surrounding race and sexuality instead of troubling them" (Boyer, 2011, p. 38). Streitmatter (2009) points out that in the 1950s, magazines and newspapers represented homosexual men as emotionally unstable (p. 10). This was a weakness portrayed by being either extremely feminine or hysteric and physically violent (p. 10). Again, these ideologies from the 1950s are evident in *True Blood*, and are amplified through Lafayette. Boyer argues that Lafayette's race and sexuality are reminiscent of the Jungian shadow; Tara's character is similarly portrayed in a way that is suggestive of the shadow. The Jungian shadow "is the most powerful and dangerous of them all, because it contains those avatars of a primitive and bestial nature that defy rational boundaries and restraints" (Boyer, 2011, p. 38). It is in this way that Lafayette and Tara are reduced to yet another historical black stereotype: primitive and bestial in nature. Tara, played by Rutina Wesley, was actually originally cast to be played by Brooke Kerr, a lighter-skinned actress. This was discovered when HBO released the unaired pilot episode. However, I would like to theorize that the change happened in order for there to be a more obvious contrast between Lafayette and Tara versus the rest of Bon Temps, and also so that Wesley's skin tone "represented" the kind of role that Tara has in *True Blood*: dark, bestial, and primitive.

Black feminist academics Jacqueline Bobo and Ellen Seiter (1991) have argued, "within the narrow range employed by the media showing black women, three features are familiar," of which, "her relationship to white people as domestic servant" applies best to Tara because of the politics of her workplace (p. 181). Lafayette is ever-present in *True Blood*, but as previously mentioned, Lafayette's character and Ellis's contract were meant to expire at the beginning of the second book in the novels (Crowder, 2014). On paper, he was killed by characters who had regular vampire orgies where they fed and drained victims; on HBO, Lafayette is shot in the leg and held captive in the basement of the vampire bar, Fangtasia. The bar is owned by the vampire sheriff, Eric Northman. Eric is of Swedish Viking descent with a lean, tall stature, blue eyes, blonde hair, invisible eyebrows, and pale white skin.

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Eric finds out that Lafayette is illegally distributing V and imprisons him with the intention of killing him. The white sheriff leaves the black victim, who was working because of personal tragedies, in his own filth in the basement of Fangtasia. Sookie finds out and uses her otherworldly powers to find out where he is, because no one else knows that he is being held captive. Thus, Lafayette is captured by the white man (Eric) then shot in the leg by his white employee (Ginger) and is only freed by the negotiation between a white man and a white woman (Sookie). The visualization of the relation between race and captivity is absurd and loud. Even when he almost manages to escape, white authority dominates. Even the white female employee is more powerful than the black muscular captive. This experience traumatizes Lafayette, and he becomes a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder (Buckner, 2009). These representations of Lafayette highlight that HBO is only reinforcing history, and ignoring the opportunity to be able to do something different with race, gender, and sex. Tara and Lafayette are similar in many ways, however whereas Lafayette is aware, shameless, and comfortable with his sexuality, Tara is still struggling to learn hers.

Sex is one thing the show does not lack—at least heteronormative sex between white men and white women, that is. Lafayette maintains a long-term relationship with his mother's nurse, Jesus, and Tara leaves behind her life in Bon Temps after an abusive relationship with a man to start a new life in season 4. The way non-heterosexual sexuality is presented in *True Blood* is problematic. This is evident when one considers the frequency of sexual activity in the show. Culture website *Vulture* delineated thirteen categories of sex among thirteen characters from *True Blood* (Cotton & Zalaznick, 2011). Jason has the most sexual encounters and these are primarily heterosexual relations. Sex with a vampire and other mythical beings is also more frequent than queer sex. Remarkably, Lafayette is never shown having sex. In their *most* intimate scenes, Lafayette and his boyfriend are shown passionately kissing. There are two different symbols on the chart for non-homosexual sex: graphic and non-graphic. But the accounts that have been included in the infographic are inaccurate since there is nothing beyond kissing and verbal seduction. It is also important to note that apart from the case of Tara and Lafayette, homosexual sex is visualized only while under the influence of V. The infrequent visualization of intimacy between Jesus and Lafayette is usually in a darker space, making it more difficult to see.

Tara is an exception. She and her partner (Naomi) are seen wrestling in bed. Tara and Naomi are in a same-sex partnership, and met at the kickboxing club. But even in their most intimate scene, they are not completely topless or bottomless, whereas Sookie, the white, heterosexual lead, is always nude during intimacy. Sookie's scenes, moreover, involve (nearly) full frontals, and her romances happen almost anywhere, even in unusually well-lit graveyards. By contrast, Naomi and Tara's bedroom is dim, and they keep their bras on. Lafayette and Jesus do not ever remove

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their shirts, but the two active women can be almost nude. This double standard is for the audience to enter the male gaze with the lesbian relationship.

Although HBO is known for promoting sexual liberation, with *True Blood* this is largely limited to heteronormative sexual binary. Ron Becker argues that this show's gay characters "conform to the demands of a commercial medium steeped in hetero-centric genre formulas," which cater to their advertisers (pp. 125-126). Yet, *True Blood* should be exempt from this as HBO is a premium paid subscription service. Despite that fact, however, the show remains grounded in hegemonic and historical racialized gender identities. Anything within the binary is acceptable on the show, even lesbian sex, because that is often attractive to straight men, but gay sexuality must be kept clothed and in the dark. In this way, HBO falls short of the mark when presenting intimacy in non-heterosexual relationships. If *True Blood* would like to be all-accepting, then one might expect its racialized and queer characters to be presented in a less stereotypical manner. The other homosexual encounters occur either during dreams or within vampire royalty—but only with one gay King and his consort. The dreams occur when a human has taken in a sufficient amount of vampire blood, usually in an effort to survive. The blood has regenerative qualities that are operative, prior to turning a human into a vampire. In one instance, Sookie's love interest, Vampire Bill, and Sam Merlotte have a homoerotic scene, with explicit language, but it is limited to discourse and does not portray any actual sexual activity (Buckner, 2010). This would be a remarkable deviation from the heterosexual sexuality that *True Blood* generally portrays, except for two points: first, Sam's cell phone rings and wakes him from a dream, thus rendering this intimacy something unreal; second, lighting is used here to signal licit and illicit sexuality, and provides Sam the satisfaction of "it was just a dream". They use lighting as a vehicle to gauge allowed and inappropriate sexuality. The closeness between the two men in this homoerotic dream sequence is barely visible, suggesting HBO may be inadvertently catering to the more conservative and even homophobic audiences. Why is there a distinctly visual double-standard between the portrayal of heterosexual intimacy and non-heterosexual intimacy? HBO's *True Blood* does not fully embrace the staging of non-hetero-normative relationships.

*True Blood* presents and re-presents queer people and relationships in ways that are contradictory. This occurs in two ways. In *Bon Temps*, there is actual homosexuality and homophobia, discussed above, and then there is the underlying allegory of "coming out of the coffin" and "coming out of the closet." Vampires are presented as having the same challenges as people who openly declare their sexuality. Yet, there is no mention of transgender or transsexual individuals in *Bon Temps*. The writers appear to be equating vampire rights to civil rights, and more specifically LGBTQ rights. The term "fanger," and "fangbanger" are thrown around as the word "faggot" in a derogatory way because such identities are not hetero-normative or appropriate. HBO flaunts its progressiveness, but "Admittedly, True



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Blood's tones often clash, using the vocabulary of gay rights to serve a central heterosexual love affair, although probably the show desires a more universal view of civil rights" (Tyree, 2009, p. 34).

The second season of *True Blood* focuses on the Fellowship of the Sun, an extremist conservative church that seeks to "[protect] humanity from the iniquity of vampires," and showcases the dominant ideologies of the WBC, in the vampirical context. On the analogy of vampires with the LGBTQ community, entertainment journalist Maxine Shen (2009), in an article on the then-upcoming second season, cites the author of the book series, Charlaine Harris: "When I began framing how I was going to represent the vampires, it suddenly occurred to me that it would be interesting if they were a minority that was trying to get equal rights." The journalist juxtaposes that statement with an opinion from the show's creator and Executive Director, Alan Ball: "to look at these vampires on the show as metaphors for gays and lesbians is so simple and so easy" (Shen, 2009). Ball continues, according to Shen, by suggesting that the metaphor could be seen as homophobic because vampires kill. He argues that this is problematic, a position shared by many queer theorists: "The 'good vampires,'" describes Lauren Gutterman of the City University of New York's Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, "are those that are able to contain their appetite for blood and sex and the 'bad vampires' are those who kill people, drink their blood and are hyper-sexual" (as cited in Shen, 2009). Boyer suggests, "placing the story of revealed vampires and other supernatural beings within the South does not seem without intent. Rich with a cultural and political history of repression, racism, and a steep rejection of outsiders, it is meaningful then that the vampires we engage in the show are situated within this context." This is how the writers end up creating vampires striving for rights and integration into society in a way that mirrors the struggle of black and LGBTQ rights movements (Boyer, 2011, p. 38).

There is also the problem of the fear of vampires intersecting with homophobia itself. Reverend Steve Newlin's father was murdered by vampires and he seeks to avenge his death through the extreme Fellowship of the Sun church. Throughout season two, he recruits members with a message of vampire-hating and equates that with God-loving; he equips and trains these followers with silver bullets and weapons for vampire destruction. They set up a giant stake and actually succeed in killing one of the oldest vampires, who turns out to be Sheriff Eric's maker, Goderich. It is more of a martyrdom (or suicide) than murder, however, because thousands of years old, Goderich is exhausted with the church and vampire-phobic society.

Eventually, Reverend Newlin is kidnapped and disappears until the first episode of season five. Presumed to be dead, he returns as a vampire and visits Jason and explains, "now that I've been blessed with immortality, I've finally got the strength to say it: I am a gay Vampire-American, and I love you, Jason Stackhouse" (Buckner, 2012). Jason thanks Newlin for the "nicest 'I love you'" he has ever received, but

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does not reciprocate the sentiment. Unlike Lafayette's own mother, Jason, also a resident of Bon Temps, is able to be open-minded and accepting. Although this seems progressive, the black queer characters continue to miss out on character development in relation to their own relationships.

Political economist Eileen R. Meehan (2002) evaluates gendered audiences and finds that from the 1950s until now, despite the feminist movement, men continue to be an overvalued audience. This is unjust in a world where women continue to strive for equality. All of this suggests that HBO should better reflect audiences by embracing a more contemporary direction by developing characters that are more layered and complex. Not simply because of the premise that representation matters, but also in their best capitalist interest, because racialized, trans, disabled, and/or queer people not only exist, they are consumers too.

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