Lesbian Desires in the Vampire Subgenre: *True Blood* as a Platform for a Lesbian Discourse

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The vampire subgenre is currently a phenomenon in popular culture. It attracts all age groups and has been presented in multiple mediums including novels, films, and television series. Why is the vampire subgenre so appealing? Vampires are human-like beings of outstanding beauty, with great sexual libidos, who embody death. These characteristics intrigue human spectators by representing wonders and fears that are deeply relevant to human lives but are often repressed by morality and norms set by the dominant culture. Arguably, what is most pertinent in the vampire subgenre and attractive to viewers is the implicit and explicit revelation of non-normative human sexual desires.

*True Blood* is a television series in the vampire subgenre created by Alan Ball.\(^1\) *True Blood*’s presentation of gorgeous vampires, sexuality, and human fears has made this show very successful in attracting viewers. Set in the fictional Louisiana town Bon Temps, the series addresses the conflicts that arise in a society where predatory vampires and their human prey learn to cohabitate upon the recent revelation of vampires’ existence. Through the portrayal of vampire-human relationships, *True Blood* addresses human fears of ‘the other’ and reveals the complexity of human sexualities and sexual desires. The series presents non-normative sexualities that lead to the presentation of lesbian images and bodies and subtext to implicitly address lesbian desires. Although its depictions of lesbians are not always positive, *True Blood* is nevertheless a platform presenting a lesbian discourse in a fictional patriarchal society infested with sexism, racism, and heterosexism that reflects the realities of a Western society.

\(^1\) *True Blood*, directed by Alan Ball (HBO, 2008 – present; HBO, 2009-2011, DVD).
The Vampire Subgenre and Lesbian Visibility

Beginning in the 1930s, the vampire subgenre has persistently given exposure to implicit and explicit lesbian images. These images generally reflect the sexual rather than the supernatural. That is, instead of presenting their immortality, thirst of human blood, and great physical strength, the presentation of lesbian vampires focuses on their sexual desires. This emphasis on the sexual is expressed in *True Blood* in the two consistent and visible lesbian vampires characters: Pam de Beaufort and Sophie-Anne Leclerq. Throughout the series, Pam and Sophie-Anne are portrayed drinking blood from human women’s inner thighs. The act is shown to be pleasurable for both the vampire and human. The sexual innuendo is obvious; these portrayals reflect a form of lesbian lovemaking. Hence, instead of presenting their need for human blood to quench their natural cravings, this imagery rather reflects the lesbian vampires’ desire for a sexual encounter with a female prey. This lesbian imagery plays into straight male pornography that reduces lesbian lovemaking to oral sex. This proves that in *True Blood* the lesbian vampires are portrayed within the sexual realm rather than supernatural. Hence, the vampire subgenre, and as displayed in *True Blood*, may falter to present positive images of lesbians as they are reduced to a pornography intended for a male audience. However, research demonstrates that any lesbian visibility is positive change for lesbian audiences.

The portrayal of lesbian bodies in popular culture is empowering to lesbian identified viewers. The vampire subgenre *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, another television series in the vampire subgenre prior to *True Blood*, presented lesbian images as well. Collier, Lamadue, and

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3 Weiss, 84.
Wooten’s research on the response of lesbian viewers to the representation of lesbian images in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* demonstrated that the portrayal of lesbian images was empowering.\(^4\) Furthermore, although the representations of lesbian images were not always positive portrayals in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, lesbian viewers found it favourable to lesbian invisibility in popular culture.\(^5\) Hence, relating these findings to *True Blood* and the presentation of lesbian images, although sexualized, are empowering to lesbian viewers as it presents what is generally repressed; a sexuality that defies the norm – lesbianism.

Furthermore, the presentation of lesbian bodies in the vampire subgenre popular culture transgresses heteronormative representations of love and sexuality embedded in patriarchy which may also be empowering to lesbian and perhaps female viewers in general.\(^6\) The depiction of lesbian vampires in popular culture expresses women’s growing social and sexual autonomy causing a tension with the patriarchy; however, because the lesbian vampire is a demonic creature, this representation suggests that women’s autonomy may also be a danger to society.\(^7\) This nuances whether the portrayal of lesbians in the vampire subgenre is empowering or disempowering. Although it transgresses heteronormative representations of sexuality and sexual desires, it does so through the vilification of women. The lesbian vampire is a first and foremost a predator to women. Hence, lesbian visibility is empowering to lesbian viewers. It is a better alternative to invisibility. Lesbian visibility in the vampire subgenre is framed by a patriarchal

\(^5\) Ibid., 598.
\(^7\) Ibid., 783.
society that limits the positivity of these images yet slowly sheds norms intended to repress female sexuality.

*True Blood* transcends patriarchal norms by presenting the sexual autonomy of its female characters. When vampires are shown feeding directly from the human’s bodies, the experience is portrayed as pleasurable for both the human prey and the vampire predator. The images of the lesbian vampires Pam and Sophie-Anne, drinking blood from a human woman’s inner thigh the experience is sexually pleasurable for both participants. These acts express female sexual autonomy by showing the experience as pleasurable without a male presence. Such scenes challenge the phallocentric beliefs that imply the penis is the ultimate source of female sexual pleasure. It is through this lesbian imagery that the patriarchal order is challenged.

**Lesbian Subtext: The Ambiguities**

*True Blood* further transgresses patriarchal norms by displaying a disruption of normative marriage and the family unit. Alan Ball does this by subliminally presenting a sexual liberalism. With implicit reference to ongoing protests for equal marriage rights for homosexuals in the United States, *True Blood* features an ongoing storyline in which vampires and humans’ agitate for vampire-human unions to be recognized by the state. Further, Christian fundamentalist characters express resistance to vampire-human marriages echoing a similar resistance to same-sex marriages in real life.

The union between vampires and humans represents a challenge to the normative nuclear family by reflecting the union of people who cannot reproduce children for the

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8 J. M. Tyree, “‘Warm-Blooded: True Blood and Let the Right One In,’” *Film Quarterly* 63 (2009).
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
patriarchal state; these marriages consequently disrupt the patriarchal order. In *True Blood*, vampire-human couples are not portrayed as having the ability to produce children. Similarly, Christian fundamentalists have used the inability for same-sex marriages to produce children naturally as a crutch to characterize these unions as immoral. Through the discussion of equal rights for vampires and humans to marry in *True Blood*, Ball introduces to the mainstream a sexual liberalism that advocates for sexualities and sexual desires that may not reflect the norms of the dominant culture and thereby creates a platform for lesbian discourse.

*True Blood* also presents lesbian desires between vampires and humans as subtext. Although, *True Blood* often displays explicit lesbian images the series features a subtext of implicit lesbianism. In the episode “Mine”, for example, the vampire Diane licks the human Sookie’s face and in a subliminal sexual proposition remarks that virgin blood is the best tasting blood.\(^\text{11}\) However, Sookie is quickly ‘saved’ by Bill – her vampire lover – claiming her as ‘his’ making her only his to drink from. Further, Bill admits to having a sexual encounter with Diane once before. This lesbian encounter is disrupted by male possessiveness. This presentation is phallocentric. The male presence disrupts a lesbian encounter by portraying both Sookie and Diane as Bill’s present and passed love interests. Nonetheless, for a moment, it presents a lesbian image by portraying through subtext Diane’s desire for Sookie.

In “Plaisir d’Amour” Pam has a similar encounter with Sookie. After a vampire is staked and explodes covering Sookie in blood, Pam takes Sookie to a backroom to help her clean herself.\(^\text{12}\) The dialogue between the women suggests a sexual tension between the two women:

Pam: “Right now, what you need to do is change out of your clothes. There’s a vampire in your cleavage.”

Sookie: “Okay, ew.”

Pam: “Allow me.”

Pam reaches into Sookie’s cleavage.

Sookie: “Thank you.”

Pam: “I’m beginning to understand the fuss everyone’s making over you.”

This exchange suggests Pam’s desire for Sookie, and Sookie’s passive acceptance of that desire. Unfortunately, the scene ends when the two are interrupted by men entering the room, leaving viewers to wonder what may have happened between Pam and Sookie – how far may this lesbian encounter have gone?

Although Diane and Pam’s desire for Sookie is disrupted by the male presence, these scenes nevertheless present lesbian desires between vampires and humans. While both encounters speak explicitly to the violent nature of the vampire-human relationship, they also implicitly present sexual desire as a central aspect of this relationship. This dichotomy reflects the ambiguity of sexual attractions characterized by violence, sexual desire, and love of real life relationships.14 It is these ambiguities that reflect real interactions between women and displays a lesbian discourse introducing the erotic power of these interpersonal relations.15 Drawing from writer and activist Audre Lorde, it is the erotic power that empowers women to be conscious of their deepest feelings and avert self-effacement.16 Both True Blood encounters show that the erotic exists by demonstrating the desires these women share for one another, not in a pornographic manner, but rather by demonstrating the potential relationships these women can

13 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
form. However, the erotic is too quickly interrupted by the male presence not allowing the full exploration of the lesbian desires expressed between Diane and Sookie, and Pam and Sookie. For a lesbian discourse to remain intact throughout the series it needs to evade the pervasive interruptions of the male characters.

*True Blood* does depict one love relationship between women that cannot be interrupted by the presence of the men in their lives. In the vampire subgenre human-human relationships are generally portrayed as loving.\(^\text{17}\) Although, the vampire-human relationships mentioned above are more realistic because they demonstrate the ambiguities that exist in relationships the presentation of a loving relationship between women is also empowering. It demonstrates the possibility for women to maintain a strong bond even in the presence of men. In *True Blood* the friendship between Tara and Sookie represents a lesbian continuum. This intense bond between the women is the primary relationship in their lives and as such it resists male tyranny.\(^\text{18}\) Tara and Sookie’s friendship is not disrupted, for example, by their respective relationships with Sam. This is unusual as women are continuously placed in positions of competitiveness against each other. Hence, this relationship between two women, although they do not identify as lesbians and engage in heterosexual relationships, presents the possibility that women can have deep relationships with one another without it having to be sexual. This is at the root of the lesbian continuum and *True Blood* presents this strong bond between women to a mainstream audience.

The vampire subgenre demonstrates a variety of relationships between women presented through subtext. Although, male presence in the series often disrupts a lesbian discourse, it is

\(^{17}\) Burr, 352.
inevitably present. Examining the presence of the female characters in the series further allude to the lesbian discourse.

**The Lesbian Vampire and the Performance of Gender**

The presentation of the lesbian body in the vampire subgenre is generally framed by the dominant culture. The lesbian body in the vampire subgenre generally presents a traditional white heterosexual femininity: “while sexually active, the lesbian vampire is still visually coded as feminine: she has long hair, large breasts, pale skin, and wears floor-length, translucent dresses.”19 Hence, although the female vampire may identify as a lesbian she nonetheless ‘passes’ as heterosexual.20 The lesbian vampire may transcend the dominant culture by presenting a non-normative sexuality; however, she often reinforces gender norms through her presentation of traditional femininity.

In *True Blood* both lesbian-identified vampires, Sophie-Anne and Pam, embody traditional white femininity. Sophie-Anne has red hair framing her delicate featured white face and a slim figure.21 On the other hand, Pam has long blonde hair, a similar white complexion, plump lips, and a curvaceous frame.22 Although both women have very different appearances they both represent traditional white femininity and ‘pass’ as heterosexual. Although she does not explicitly identify as a lesbian, Diane is the closest and only representation of a black lesbian in *True Blood*. Her gender presentation is deeply rooted in stereotypes associated with black femininity. Diane styles her hair in an afro and wears animal print dresses that accentuate her

19 Weiss, 90, 91.
20 Ibid.
curves. Although she transcends the portrayal of the white seemingly heterosexual feminine vampire, her portrayal is nevertheless racist. Diane is portrayed as animalistic which is stereotypically associated with black femininity. The lesbian bodies presented in True Blood do not transcend the traditional presentations of gender and relevantly of race and heteronormativity maintained by the dominant culture. This reinforces the patriarchal frame in which this television series takes place limiting the exploration of lesbian desires.

Despite their appearances, the lesbian vampires presented in True Blood and in the vampire subgenre in general exhibit behaviours that transcend gender norms through the power relations presented between vampires and humans, and women and men. Power relations define gender and maintain fictions about gender. For example, male dominance is maintained through constructed gender differences that present women as submissive. Although Sophie-Anne and Pam embody femininity that perpetuates sexist, racist, and heteronormative beliefs, they are both powerful vampires in the series thereby transcending the power hierarchy that generally places women in position of subordination to men. For example, Pam is primary aide to her maker Eric Northman and together they implement the law of the vampire world and execute plans to gain greater power. Although, Pam is a male’s subordinate she nonetheless demonstrates great power within the vampire world as she aides Eric maintain his tyranny over other vampires in their region. Far more powerful than Eric, Sophie-Anne the vampire Queen of Louisiana is the most powerful vampire in the region. Through their possession of power Sophie-Anne and Pam challenge gender norms.

Although, the lesbian vampires do perpetuate gender norms they also nuance the power dynamics between male and female. Scholar John Allen Stevenson reasons,

It is more accurate to say that the primary fear is of vampire sexuality, a phenomenon in which ‘our’ gender roles interpenetrate in a complicated way. Female vampires are not angels turned into whores but human women who have become something very strange, beings in whom traditional distinctions between male and female have been lost and traditional roles confusingly mixed.25

This is demonstrated in *True Blood* as gender norms are presented and challenged through the presentation of the lesbian body. Although the lesbian bodies presented do reinforce notions of traditional femininity they do challenge power dynamics and present a female sexual autonomy. Hence, the vampire subgenre does ‘cultural work’ allowing the lesbian body visibility in popular culture even though it is framed by the dominant culture.26

**Conclusion**

The lesbian discourse in *True Blood* includes an exposure of lesbian images, lesbian subtext, and the presentation of lesbian bodies. The vampire subgenre is a channel presenting various non-normative sexualities and sexual desires; however, it is nonetheless framed by the dominant culture – a white, heterosexual, and patriarchal culture. Nonetheless, by allowing lesbian visibility *True Blood* proves to be progressive. With the rising interest in the vampire subgenre, it can be expected that non-normative sexualities and sexual desires will receive greater exposure in popular culture thereby transgressing heteronormative ideologies generally

portrayed in the media. After all, it is these non-normative yet recognizable presentations of human desires that make the vampire subgenre so delicious.
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