Queering Lafayette: Adapting and Subverting the Black Sissy Trope in *True Blood*

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In the first two novels of her *Southern Vampire Mysteries* series, straight White female author Charlaine Harris depicts the character of gay Black short-order cook Lafayette Reynolds as a flamboyant, delicate, effeminate sissy – one who, by the opening pages of the second novel, ends up beaten and strangled to death at the hands of a group of older White men. From the start, the text conflates Lafayette's race and his queerness to create an overall impression of vulnerability and victimhood.

Nelsan Ellis, the Chicago-born Black actor who portrays Lafayette in *True Blood*, HBO's television adaptation of the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, takes the character in a different direction, coding Lafayette's queerness as a source of his resilience and completely abandoning the sissy trope that permeates the novels. This study will examine how Ellis's portrayal of Lafayette's queerness in the *True Blood* series subverts binary views of masculinity, queerness, and race.

Defining the Sissy

Derived from "sister," a word referencing a female family member, the American slang term "sissy" denotes both the presence of characteristics traditionally coded as feminine and the absence of traits traditionally coded as masculine; as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, a sissy can be defined as "[a] boy or man whose behaviour, demeanour, or appearance is considered in some way to be effeminate or lacking in manliness, esp. one regarded as feeble, cowardly, timid, squeamish, or excessively averse to dirt" (*OED*). Additionally, a boy or man exhibiting interest in stereotypically feminine pursuits such as physical adornment, unathletic activities or needlework may also be called a sissy.

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Two factors stand out in this definition. First, it reinforces the idea of a closed male/female binary that values masculinity and demeans femininity, echoing Aristotelian claims that women are misbegotten or defective men. Second, as a creature "lacking in manliness," the sissy is, by definition, a failure.

In *Manhood in America*, feminist scholar Michael Kimmel establishes a clear connection between the tenets of hegemonic masculinity and American identity, highlighting the inherent tension between these impossible ideals (dominance, invulnerability, and individualism, among others) and the unspoken fear of failure they inspire among men (Kimmel). What was true of the Founding Fathers remains true in this first half of the 21st century: framed in the language of virility, the cult of winning lies at the heart of American identity.[1] Along similar lines, in his book, *Sissy Insurgencies: A Racial Anatomy of Unfit Manliness*, Marlon B. Ross hints at the undercurrent of violence associated with non-masculine behavior: to be a sissy is to fly in the face of American ideals of manliness and the many myths those ideals embrace – from Manifest Destiny to the myth of the Cowboy and beyond – underscoring how the sissy trope challenges the deeply ingrained masculinity of American identity:

> The sissy remains the gremlin of the American national imaginary when it comes to the rites and rights of manliness […] Sissiness haunts every sphere of vaunted masculine empowerment as a cautionary figure of the failure to win, which is assumed to result from a failure of manly drive. (Ross *ix*)

For African-American men, the dangers of both "manly" and "unmanly" behavior present significant historical challenges on and offscreen. In either case racist ideologies appropriate black bodies, demonizing the “Buck/Coon,” infantilizing the “Uncle Tom/Boy,”[2] and brutalizing both.

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[1] Masculine-coded language dominates accounts of winning irrespective of gender, as evidenced in coverage of prominent female sports figures such as Serena Williams and Megan Rapinoe. Interestingly, controversial actor Charlie Sheen's 2011 remarks around "bi-winning" have sparked a deeper discussion on the grotesque extremes to which the compulsion to be seen as a winner (and not to seem like a loser) can drive conversations around what it means to be a man. When, in an interview about the actor's supposed sobriety, a journalist asks Sheen whether he is bipolar, he responds he is "bi-winning, I win here and I win there," and continues to describe a life of drug-induced drama. For further discussion, see Nora J. Rifon, Marla Royne, and Les Carlson, Eds., *Advertising and Violence: Concepts and Perspectives*, Routledge, 2014. The interview is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emEM5H9NgTI.

Contextualizing the Southern Sissy

As Kimmel argues, [White] southern men experienced the defeat of the Confederacy and its aftermath as a “gendered humiliation” (30). It is worth pointing out that both Harris’s novels and the HBO series adaptation are set in the fictional Louisiana town of Bon Temps, firmly placing the narrative in the Deep South. As Mahoney and Katz have pointed out, regional identities are built on both a sense of commonality within a given region and a feeling of distinction from those outside the community (xi). This sense of commonality finds its roots in shared beliefs, shared history, and shared values; though, in the case of the South, questions of race (and, to a lesser extent, class) complicate the notion of a “shared” regional identity.

Drawing on several scholarly sources, Educational Leadership for Diverse Learning Communities specialist Tricia Kress argues that regionalizing the South as degenerate Other should be read as an expression of hegemonic power by the rest of the country, one that establishes a binary relationship between the two:

> The South is thereby constructed as “America’s opposite, the negative image, its evil twin” (Griffin, 2006, p. 7). As the disadvantaged side of the binary, the South is “defined in opposition to the North/nation” (Winders, 2005, p. 392). Consequently, if America is ideologically constructed as a mythical beacon of progress, mobility, individuality, equality, and reason, the South, as its opposite, is the antimodern, backward, degenerate region. With its bruised history of slavery and racism and its unsuccessful (and disloyal) attempt at secession from the nation, the South is geographically bounded as a historical “problem.” (Kress 109)

Much as hegemonic masculinity thrives on excluding the unmasculine Other, so hegemonic national identity preserves itself and its ideals by regionalizing the South. R. Bruce Brasell, a specialist in southern and queer cinema, notes that through a certain national lens, the South can be viewed as inferior to the rest of the United States, marked by its failure to live up to national ideals

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[2] For a more thorough discussion of Black stereotypes on screen, see Donald Bogle’s *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Continuum, 1990.

(35). If, as Kimmel suggests, the fear of failure – and of the feminization it implies – drives hegemonic masculinity, then we can perhaps interpret the Southern stereotype of the gun-toting tobacco-chewing racist homophobic straight White male redneck as a reactionary response to this Othering of the South as the "sissy" (the defeated, unmanly inferior) of the US.

The Sissy and the Vulnerable Black Body: Lafayette in the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*

In *Dead Until Dark* (2001), Harris describes the diminutive, gay, Black short-order cook, Lafayette Reynolds, as a loner almost exclusively confined to his place of work, Merlotte's Café, stripping him of a personal life outside his subordinate position as a back-kitchen cook. First-person protagonist Sookie Stackhouse introduces Lafayette thus: "Through the window into the little kitchen I could see Lafayette Reynolds, the cook, flipping burgers and sinking a basket of fries into hot oil. […] He winked at me with a sweep of his thick, false lashes. Lafayette wears a lot of makeup. I was so used to him I never thought of it any more" (50). From the start, then, Lafayette is at once set apart from the others and ignored by them, marked by his "sissy" appearance as framed through the kitchen window in Merlotte's Café.

The town's treatment of Lafayette's queerness further marks him as othered. Sookie points out that the other female staff members want nothing to do with him: "Dawn had never gotten along with Lafayette, whether because he was black or because he was gay, I didn't know ... maybe both. Arlene and Charlsie just accepted the cook, but didn't go out of their ways to be friendly. But I'd always kind of liked Lafayette because he conducted what had to be a tough life with verve and grace" (115). Lafayette serves as a foil to Sookie, showcasing her empathetic superiority to her coworkers: she has "always kind of liked him" and interprets his effeminate appearance and sassy remarks as evidence of his "verve and grace." And yet, while he has clearly come out of the closet, Lafayette never comes out of the kitchen: Sookie's assumption that Lafayette's life must be hard does not stem from any actual knowledge about his past; in a novel ostensibly centered on notions of family, community and tolerance, readers learn next to nothing about Lafayette's family, his community, or his past.

If the first novel of the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* underscores the solitary, othered nature of the queer Black sissy, the second, *Living Dead in Dallas* (2002) shifts focus to his vulnerability and expendability. When, in the opening pages of the novel, Lafayette's corpse is discovered in the back of the

Sheriff's police vehicle in the parking lot of Merlotte's, Sookie as narrator treats the body as a problem, initially focusing not on the loss of a human life but rather on the disturbance of her expectations: a day off interrupted, a car where it does not belong, a door that will not shut. Upon finding the car, even supernaturally empathetic Sookie at first experiences only frustration and disgust:

> I shoved the [car] door to, but it would only give an inch. So I pressed my body to it, thinking it would latch and I could be on my way. Again, the door would not click shut. Impatiently, I yanked it all the way open to find out what was in the way. A wave of smell gusted out into the parking lot, a dreadful smell. Dismay clutched at my throat, because the smell was not unknown to me. I peered into the backseat of the car, my hand covering my mouth, though that hardly helped with the smell. "Oh, man," I whispered. "Oh, shit." Lafayette, the cook for one shift at Merlotte's, had been shoved into the backseat. He was naked. It was Lafayette's thin brown foot, its toenails painted a deep crimson, that had kept the door from shutting, and it was Lafayette's corpse that smelled to high heaven (8).

Sookie describes the discarded, naked body stuffed in the back seat like so much trash, down to the corpse's foul stench. Tellingly, when the other waitresses arrive on the scene, one expresses astonishment that the sheriff "let a black queer sleep in his car" and audibly wonders "who's gonna cook for us? People come in, they'll want lunch" (6). Aside from the lingering odor of his corpse, Lafayette is forgettable, expendable. In fact, in the description of the scene, what most stands out – textually and metaphorically – is Lafayette's thin, brown foot with its painted toenails: clearly venturing to the "wrong" (read: female) side of the gender binary comes at a terrible cost.

No matter their level of gender conformity, any discussion of mutilated, naked Black bodies resonates particularly strongly in US culture;[3] even more so in stories set in the South, where, as Patricia Yaeger points out in *Dirt and Desire*, "this literature provokes the uncanny presence of disposable [Black] bodies" (Yaeger 67). In the passage describing his murder at the hands of a group of White men, Lafayette's slim brown body becomes the locus of sexual and sadistic violence:

> I could taste the flavor of Eggs's thoughts. He was remembering Lafayette, thin brown body, talented fingers, and heavily made up

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[3] For a more thorough analysis of the racist spectacle of mutilated black bodies, see Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940*, UNC Press, 2009.

> eyes. He was remembering Lafayette's whispered suggestions. Then he was choking those happy memories off with more unpleasant ones, Lafayette protesting violently, shrilly […] I reached in another direction, wormed into the head of Mike Spencer, found the nasty tangle I'd expected, found that as he rolled Cleo's breasts in his hands he was seeing other brown flesh, limp and lifeless. His own flesh rose as he remembered this. Through his memories I saw Jan asleep on the lumpy couch, Lafayette's protest that if they didn't stop hurting him he would tell everyone what he'd done and with whom, and then Mike's fists descending, Tom Hardaway kneeling on the thin dark chest… (256)

Lafayette's gendered and racialized torment is rendered more pathetic by his longing to belong to the very group that first uses then disposes of him. Throughout his brief presence in the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* series, Lafayette remains firmly entrenched on the sissy side of the binary. His onscreen counterpart resolutely reclaims the term and refuses the binary outright.

From Text to Screen: *True Blood* in the Obama Era

By the time HBO aired the first season of *True Blood* in September 2008, the nation was on the brink of a sea change: Barack Obama, a biracial Black man, had just secured the Democratic nomination as presidential candidate; same-sex marriages and civil partnerships were growing in some states, and LGBT representation was on the rise, particularly on HBO.[4] By 2010, LGBT people could serve openly in the military and, following the passage of the Matthew Shepard and George W. Byrd Hate Crimes Prevention Act, race and sexuality-based acts of violence were recognized as hate crimes.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Alan Ball[5], creator and showrunner behind *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001-2005), would agree to take on the adaptation of *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* series. As Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris aptly points out, from the opening scene of the first episode to the images accompanying Jace Everett's 2005 country song, "Bad Things,"

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[4] According to a 2008-2009 GLAAD Network Responsibility Index, 42% of HBO's total programming hours featured LGBT representation, as did 24% of ABC's total network hours – a substantial increase over previous years. See https://glaad.org/publications/nri2009/. Accessed 11/11/2023.

[5] Known for his outspoken support of screening LGBT characters, openly gay writer, producer and showrunner Alan Ball has made a career of challenging the binary in all its forms.

Ball continually draws on contemporary concerns even as he erases the boundaries between fact, fiction, and the supernatural:

> *True Blood*'s combination of historical clips, eerie special effects and photos in Digital Kitchen's title credits powerfully evoke other seminal images from either the Civil Rights era archival footage or from celebrated films on southern unrest during the 1950s and 1960s. […] The contiguity of the color picture of the abandoned car with the black and white archival photo of a young boy in Ku Klux Klan attire already foregrounds a compelling visual grammar, which foreshadows the dark confrontational forces at work in the series' South. (Paquet-Deyris)

The same opening sequence underscores the contradictions inherent in the religious South, juxtaposing shots of charismatic Church revivals with bodies locked in a sexual embrace, or images of lewd pool-playing with full-immersion baptism. A close-up on a sign reading "God Hates Fangs" evokes the intolerant pronouncements of the notorious Westboro Baptist Church[6] and other hate groups concerning the queer community, while the opening scene of the pilot, featuring a confrontation between a White frat boy and a White redneck vampire, subverts audience expectations (Paquet-Deyris). The community of Bon Temps undergoes similar erosion of the binary present in the adapted text, as evidenced in *True Blood*'s treatment of Lafayette.

Lafayette On Screen: Subverting the Sissy Trope

From his first appearance on screen (S01E01, 10:48) Lafayette contradicts the sissy trope without flipping to the other side of the binary. Dressed in a sleeveless red mesh tank top, chef's apron, patterned head scarf and earrings, he swivels his hips and bats his heavily made-up eyes as he shakes spices onto the grill. His femininity is on full display as he sways his slim, muscular body, clearly at ease with himself and with those around him.

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[6] Founded in 1955 in Topeka, Kansas, the Westboro Baptist Church, an unaffiliated Primitive Baptist organization, is widely considered a hate group. It has especially garnered media attention for its slogan, "God Hates Fags," a message so integral to the Church's identity, it figures in their domain name (https://www.godhatesfags.com/). Accessed 1/1/2024. For more information on the group's hate-based actions, see the Anti Defamation League's website, https://www.adl.org/resources/news/westboro-baptist-church-legacy-hate. Accessed 1/1/2024.

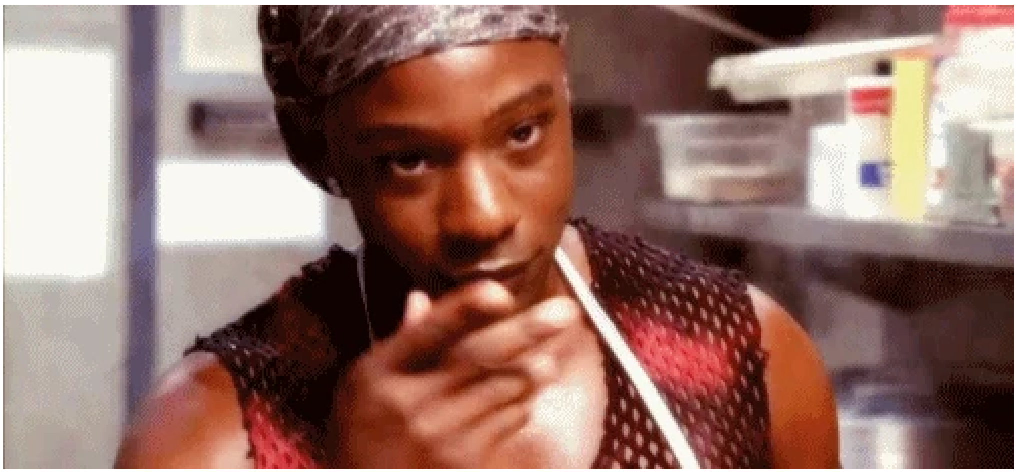

Figure 1: Lafayette Reynolds S01E01, 10:48

In a significant departure from the adapted text, the camera starts next to Lafayette on the kitchen side of the restaurant before panning around him to show Sookie placing an order. Lafayette's sassy feminine banter includes not only Sookie ("Ooh, Sookie! Chicka chicka bow-wow! You look like a porn star with that tan!") but Arlene and Dawn as well, prompting teasing responses from both[7]. All four share the bond of mutual labor in the service industry—a bond that extends to Lafayette agreeing to drop a few onion rings on the floor before giving Sookie her order for an obnoxious client. Later, we see Lafayette working on a road crew alongside Sookie's brother: not only is he out of the closet, but he is also out of the kitchen and at ease among a group of construction workers who are equally at ease with him.

The sissy as other is traditionally characterized by exclusion and failure. Yet, in *True Blood*, while fully embracing his queerness and his blackness, Lafayette remains an integral part of the community. In Ball's version of Bon Temps, Lafayette has ties to family as well as to the admittedly small local community of color. In the first episode, his cousin Tara, Sookie's best friend, invites a shirtless, overall-clad overweight White male patron at the bar to appreciate the irony of a Black girl being named after a slave plantation, seconded by Lafayette, who coos that he likes a big man. The cousins clearly watch out for one another even as they spar like siblings. Lafayette can be considered as part of the Merlotte's family as well, protecting Sookie from supernatural creatures on more than one occasion. Lafayette's connections to the community extend beyond the living: once united with his Hispanic brujo boyfriend, Jesus, Lafayette discovers that he can speak to the dead, allowing him to draw on his ancestors as well.

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[7] The full scene is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cz3zi8sweYA&list=PL_BveLxvS8SwR3-4IytzdfHUWiz-xQkFF&index=3. Accessed 1/30/2024.

Interestingly, when Lafayette does encounter homophobia and rejection, the perpetrators are outsiders. In an iconic scene in the episode "Sparks Fly Out" (S1E5), three White male out-of-towners attempt to harass Lafayette by refusing to eat the food he has prepared, claiming the burgers might have AIDS. In the following exchange, Lafayette refuses to be othered by their rejection and claims his legitimacy as a member of the Merlotte's family.[8] The dynamics of the dialogue demonstrate Lafayette's refusal to become a victim at the hands of Southern White men coded as traditionally masculine:

Arlene [*talking to Lafayette*]: Oh, come on now. It's not worth it.

Lafayette: What did they say?

Arlene [*in a low voice*]: He said...the burger....

Lafayette: What did they say, Arlene!?

Arlene [*reluctantly*]: He said the burger might have AIDS.

[*Lafayette removes his earrings, his apron, and grabs a plate of food*]

Arlene: Lafayette! Oh, fudge!

[*Lafayette walks over to the table.*]

Lafayette**:** 'Scuse me. Who ordered the hamburger, [*puts plate on table*] with AIDS?

Redneck: [*laughs and pokes his friends*] I ordered the hamburger deluxe.

Lafayette**:** In this restaurant a hamburger deluxe come with French fries, lettuce, tomato, mayo, AND AIDS! DO ANYBODY GOT A PROBLEM WITH THAT?!

Redneck**:** Yeah! I'm an American, and I got a say in who makes my food!

Lafayette**:** Well baby's 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 mother fucker. Everything on your goddamn table got AIDS.

Redneck**:**You still ain't making me eat no AIDS burger.

Lafayette**:** [*leans in*] Well all you gotta do is say hold the AIDS. Here. [*licks the hamburger bun*] Eat it! [*jams the bun in the redneck's face, and punches all three*]. Bitch, you come in my house, you

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[8] *True Blood* Season One, Episode Five ("Sparks Fly Out) 35:15-36:05

> goin' to eat my food the way I FUCKIN MAKE IT! You understand me? [*Pause*] Tip your waitress. [*sashays away*]. (35:15-36:05)[9]

The beauty of the scene lies partly in the way Lafayette references other subordinated groups in his response. Taking off his earrings, a gesture associated with women (especially women of color) preparing to fight, Lafayette draws a parallel between the historic invisibility of the LGBT population in the service industry and the history of enslaved people of color's servitude to Whites. Additionally, Lafayette defends himself "like a man" without sacrificing any part of his queerness, fluidly passing from explosive violence to shade-throwing composure, further emphasizing the trio's abject failure in their attempts to exclude him.

The shot/countershot structure of the sequence alternates low-angle shots of a fearless Lafayette with high-angle shots of the rednecks, emphasizing Lafayette's superiority while minimizing the impact of the outsiders. Fully claiming his place in the restaurant ("my house," "my food"), Lafayette ends his speech by putting the rednecks back in their place: they are customers, not members of the community. Background shots of the reactions of the other patrons, particularly those of Sookie's brother, straight White male Jason Stackhouse, provide White spectators with an ally with whom they can identify, allowing them to reject the three redneck homophobes and join in Jason's applause.[10]

As cathartic and affirming as this scene may be, it would be a mistake to think that *True Blood*'s Lafayette is impervious to the trauma of being a gay Black man who questions gender binaries in the South – even in a South rife with supernatural creatures. Lafayette's reclaims the rednecks' insulting remark about his food and AIDS, turning their fear of contamination against them first by evoking the unseen omnipresence of the gay community across the service industry, then by breaching the physical separation between his mouth and theirs: first, licking mayonnaise off the burger bun, and, then, smashing it into the mouth of one of the rednecks. Yet, this rousing scene belies the underlying trauma of the AIDS epidemic and its effects; Lafayette remains poised between both truths.

Throughout the series, the camera captures Lafayette crossing liminal spaces: doorways, mirrors, computer screens, and even the space between the living and the dead. This liminal fluidity reflects what Brigid Cherry sees as a particular admixture of race, history, and identity in Southern Gothic television, linking this idea to Adrian Parr's perspective on national trauma:

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[9] The full scene can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7l-VVxCLo8. Accessed 1/1/2024.

[10] I am grateful to Anne Cremieux for this observation.

> The past is not so much a tangible terrain, a demarcated and identifiable space, or a monumental time that acts as a warning or reminder both in the present and for future generations, but an admixture of times that affirm the present and future and in so doing encourage a more nomadic subjectivity that identifies with a variety of subjectivities. (Parr, qtd in Cherry, 467.)

In the vampire/werewolf/faerie-laden world of *True Blood*, this nomadic subjectivity builds on a kind of cumulative liminality where multiple boundaries are simultaneously crossed and binaries of all kinds risk collapse. Within this world, Lafayette's nonconforming fluidity contains multitudes, subverting the sissy trope by placing masculine and feminine characteristics on equal footing, navigating past and present in a region haunted by past and present trauma.

Vulnerability, Trauma, and Queer Survival

As discussed earlier, in Harris's text, Lafayette's gender nonconformity is negatively coded as lacking in manliness and infected with femininity while his Blackness further marks him as Other. Perceived as disposable prey by the straight White men who beat him, sexually abuse him, kill him and dump his naked body in the back of a car, Harris's Lafayette serves as locus for gendered and racialized trauma, both of which haunt the American imaginary. In *True Blood*, Lafayette's sassy fierceness does not protect him from trauma borne of vulnerability. His responses to that vulnerability set him apart from his textual twin, underscoring his refusal to play either the victim or the superhero. Lafayette continually vies for agency over his own commodification. In a constant state of financial instability, he takes on several risky, illegal ventures in addition to his legitimate jobs, trading sex work for vampire blood to sell and performing sexually suggestive acts over the Internet for money. No matter the situation, Lafayette never loses his drive to survive.

The racial and queer power dynamics at the heart of Lafayette's attempts at agency shed light on the ambiguity surrounding the interplay between dominated and dominant, as Laure Blanchemain Faucon makes clear in her analysis of a scene from Season One, Episode Three. At Lafayette's behest, straight White male Jason Stackhouse dons a rubber mask of Laura Bush and dances in his underwear in front of a webcam in exchange for vampire blood.

Unbeknownst to both, Lafayette's cousin Tara watches the scene from behind a curtain.[11] Faucon draws our attention to the multilayered scopophilic resonances of the scene:

> The scene […] inverts power relations in terms of gender and race at the same time. The presence of Lafayette's shirtless body on screen further confuses the spectator. As a sex-worker, he is usually the one performing in front of the camera and subordinated to a predominantly white male clientele. The *mise en abyme* reminds us that his body, like Jason's, is also on display, even in this scene, for the paying audience of HBO. Although seemingly debunking white male domination, this scene also suggests that the reversal of the forces of subordination is far from complete. (77)

By analyzing certain contradictions in the scene, Faucon points out the pitfalls of applying an unnuanced intersectional lens to interpretations of the queer gaze. At the same time, the scene complexifies its exploration of the gaze by layering homosocial trust and transactional exchange: Jason comes to Lafayette looking for Viagra, tacitly confiding in Lafayette about his sexual performance anxiety. Lafayette's flirty remarks ("hello hotness," etc.) and exotic attire (a silk headscarf, gold lamé pants and nothing else) inspire no homophobic hysteria on Jason's part.

This trust does not extend, however, to business: Lafayette requires payment for the vampire blood he provides, stating "ain't nothing free in my world." It is worth noting here that Lafayette's motives are financial rather than cruel: streaming Jason's toned body in his tight white briefs will make money. Peering through a sequined curtain, Tara secretly observes the scene, mirroring (some) spectators' initial confusion and eventual pleasure in the spectacle, while, hidden behind a mask of a former First Lady known for her conservative values, Jason feels free to perform in front of the camera, undercutting the potentially emasculating subservience implied in being required to dance like a circus animal.

Despite his occasional financial, romantic, or supernatural success, traces of generational trauma persist in Lafayette's experience through various forms of economic and bodily appropriation. As a medium with the ability to speak to the dead, Lafayette serves as conduit between the living and their lost loved ones—for a fee. In later seasons of the show, consensual transmission becomes forcible possession, mirroring racialized narratives of early Zombie films in which a White figure of authority uses magic to control (mostly)

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[11] The full scene is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTF4a63O0wU Accessed 1/30/2024.

Black bodies. Marnie, a dead middle-aged White woman at the head of a local coven, possesses and instrumentalizes Lafayette, forcing him to release his boyfriend's Mexican demon power then stab him in the heart.

Finally, in a reverse twist on racialized possession, Lafayette's body is appropriated by Mavis, an early 20th century Creole woman whose married White male lover, fearing the possible repercussions of miscegenation, killed and buried their baby before killing her as well. Mavis steers Lafayette to the bedside of a White baby boy and steals him, relinquishing him only when her own baby's bones are uncovered and both can rest in peace. Through a certain lens, Lafayette reclaims his appropriated body by enabling Mavis and her child to reclaim theirs.

Lafayette's physical vulnerability is most striking when, in an oblique allusion both to sharecropping and to the disproportionate number of Black men incarcerated for drug possession in the 1980s and 90s, blindingly White vampires Pam and Eric imprison and torture Lafayette for dealing vampire blood, then force him to continue selling it while turning the profits over to them. When Sookie discovers him shackled to a wall in the dungeon of Fangtasia, the camera lingers on his chained, bruised half-naked body in a way that explicitly recalls the dehumanizing conditions endured by enslaved Black people before the Civil War (and during the successive waves of racial violence that followed).[12] More faintly, the scene's visual emphasis on Lafayette's battered body may echo Harris's descriptions of his demise. Unlike his textual counterpart, however, Lafayette defies total reification: even in the depths of abjection, he refuses to be defined by others. In an often-quoted scene, Lafayette (still in chains) balks at being characterized as a prostitute: "Oh, don't get it twisted honey cone. I'm a survivor first, capitalist second and a whole bunch of shit after that. But a hooker dead last! So if I've got even a Jew at an Al Qaida pep rally's shot at getting my Black ass up out of this motherfucker, I'm taking it!" (S2E2 "Keep This Party Going," 06:39-06:42).

Conclusion

By the time *True Blood*'s almost universally abhorred final season aired in 2014, the promise of the initial Obama years was fading, far-right Republicans controlled the Senate, and the mirage of a post-racial America seemed more far-fetched than Bon Temps' ever-expanding mix of vampires, shapeshifters, fairies, witches and ifrits. What, then, can we take away from Nelsan Ellis's gender nonconforming performance as Lafayette?

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[12] A 2020 article from *Smithsonian Magazine* puts the number of Black victims of racial violence between 1865 and 1950 at nearly 6,500 (Fox).

Ellis reclaims the sissy trope not by balancing between masculine and feminine sides of the gender binary, but by de-hierarchizing them and erasing the barrier between the two, opening up space for Parr's "variety of subjectivities" (Qtd in Cherry, 467). Additionally, Lafayette's constant queering of the binary, as evidenced by his continuous interaction with liminal spaces and ever-revolving states of being, can be understood to be both overdetermined and indeterminate: he is firmly anchored in (and haunted by) the painful cultural kudzu of the Deep South while refusing to be reduced to the margins of the Southern Gothic. Short order cook, chef, entrepreneur, sex worker, drug dealer, webmaster: Lafayette's refusal of any categorization but his own underscores both his uniqueness in the American televisual landscape of the early 21st century and his ties to a larger American queer tradition of self-discovery and possibility. As Whitman writes, "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.) / I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait on the door-slab."[13]

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