Sookie's Place(s): New Roadways Into The South Of The Southern Vampire Mysteries

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SOOKIE’S PLACE(S): NEW ROADWAYS INTO THE SOUTH OF THE SOUTHERN VAMPIRE MYSTERIES

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by
Sarah Holder
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ABSTRACT

Charlaine Harris’ bestselling paranormal romance series, the Southern Vampire Mysteries is only beginning to be understood as more than a cultural phenomenon, but rather as a highly politicized and critical work of fiction that shines through genre designations such as romance, mystery, and fantasy. Much of this praise can be attributed to the series’ heroine, Sookie Stackhouse, who gracefully traverses boundaries that divide what are arguably racial and ethnic groups ever at odds with one another as they share political and social space. Her adventures therefore pose significant questions concerning diversity, equality, and nationalism, but more obviously they ask what southernness has to do with these issues of identity. The SVM situates itself between south as place and south as imaginary, insisting on the utility of this region and its attendant baggage by localizing issues plaguing American collective consciousness, such as identity politics and civil equality, class castes and poverty, racism and homophobia, violence and hate crimes. Such a south allows for the misdirection of American rhetoric, which demonizes the south as the nation’s Other, but employs its given role to effect change, to take Americanness to task. That is, here the south operates as not only a state of being (i.e. a place, an identity, etc.) but also a process. This thesis aims to locate where the “process South” operates in the SVM—in bodies, between bodies, across communities—in order to map its myriad successes and failures and thereby create a blueprint for reading the series’ “real” repercussions.
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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE UNCANNY

“Sookie and I go way back. We’re practically sisters,” Charlaine Harris writes of her most famous protagonist-detective (*The Sookie Stackhouse Companion* ix). I cannot claim this level of closeness to Sookie Stackhouse, the telepathic barmaid and heroine of the Southern Vampire Mysteries (SVM), though I have travelled with her through thirteen novels, a growing number of short stories and companion texts, and a poorly transmediated HBO drama running seven seasons, several times each. It was my spring semester of my senior year of college—as I held my preordered hardcover copy of Harris’ final Sookie Stackhouse book, *Dead Ever After*, and in the hours that followed its arrival as I voraciously sped read its three hundred pages—that it finally dawned on me that I was reading literature. I should have known by then. I was completing a degree in so-called Literature, after all. But my forays into the chick lit, fantasy, and young adult sections of the library during my school breaks were just that, a break, and I considered the SVM of the same caliber—just my most recent dose of brain candy. But there was something familiar about the way in which vampires, weres, fairies, and demons played sociopolitical games and waged private battles in these books, and something iconic about fair-skinned, curvy, blonde Sookie always at the center of these conflicts, as if they orbited around her. I couldn’t put my finger on it then, but thereafter Sookie haunted me in the same way the south had always haunted me: a something I couldn’t quite articulate, a something from which I was distinct but somehow always carried, a something that shifted and moved and happened but was gone the second I looked closer. My education in Southern Studies has always been a way for me to figure out Sookie, and in this, my final opportunity to anatomize her, I hope that I may
learn to call her not a sister but perhaps a friend.

Any critical analysis of the SVM promises to be a gargantuan undertaking, not only for the sheer amount of text the series encompasses but also for its scope: where do you even start? Perhaps that is why so few scholars have bothered to take it up, as opposed to its television adaption, *True Blood*, which has accrued much more critical attention. By the time *True Blood* was shooting its penultimate season, scholars continued to refer to early moments in the show, which seemed to promise it as a brave representation of southernness that broke the rules—that made room for black queer characters to steal the spotlight, for example—and whose popular moment was sure to *matter* to national discourse on AIDS, marriage equality, and multiculturalism (Dhaenens, Frohreich, Reyes, Lindgren Leavenworth, Gaynor). But these same critics never attempt to reconcile the show’s hopeful opening episodes with its backwards final ones, in which an exaggerated, AIDS-like disease debilitates the vampire population who then rabidly attack humans in genocidal-size waves. Other academics focused on the show’s interpretation of the SVM as a means of drawing attention to a global South, depicting vampirekind’s integration via entrepreneurship and other forms of economic stimulation (McPherson, Mutch). Such a theoretical lens is certainly appropriate for *True Blood*, which featured in its concluding episode two ruthless vampires grinning wildly for a television spot advertising their cure for this global disaster, available for purchase in a convenient and colorful can no less; but for the SVM this approach is shortsighted. An economic reading does not address what happens when integration fails, when money doesn’t remind people to forget they’re dealing with non-humans.

This “Hep-V” crisis, a colorful invention of *True Blood* writers, never appears in the SVM. The novel series doesn’t require a disease to *create* its demons, but instead depicts
realistic and extant dangers: hate groups, racism and homophobia, sexism and domestic abuse, homelessness, war, and so on; problems that have no easy fix, either political or economic. Certainly there are supernatural elements to every conflict Sookie encounters. Often it is the intervention of the supernatural into the human world that incites fear and provokes aggressive behavior, operating as a catalyst for the deeply-seated issues latent or bubbling beneath the surface of Sookie’s community. But what is more interesting, and perhaps more insightful into the workings of the south the SVM depicts, is how those supernatural elements act upon one another. Vampires may be the “newest and most recently legally recognized minority” to enter the world scene (*Dead Until Dark* 1), but they are only one of a countless number of supernatural subcommunities who populate and contribute to society, in Bon Temps and beyond, most of whom remain publicly “closeted” and only privately commune, exercise their power, and continue their traditions in the course of the SVM. These groups are not without infighting; there is as much animosity between them as between humans and the now-visible vampires, and for many of the same reasons. As often as vampires, weres, fairies, and demons (and other offshoots of these supernatural family trees) chafe against one another, vying for space, business advantage, or underground sociopolitical power; however, they also provisionally ally themselves when facing a common enemy or new threat. As Sookie develops both personally and socially, maneuvering herself through these supernatural groups about which she, like us, is clueless, she acts more and more as broker of these alliances. She is—quite literally at times—the crossroads at which supernatural communities meet, barter, and mutually triumph. By her great effort, the human and supernatural parties she learns to masterfully traverse become more and more congenial, and she attracts friends and lovers across boundaries of race and gender, a nontraditional family and network by which she creates a comfortable and safe community for
herself and her neighbors—at least for now.

*True Blood*, though attempting in many ways to recover its literally disastrous conclusion and throw together a “happy family” ending, can boast no such community. As the final shot of “Thank You” scans an outdoor table, at which sits every surviving and relatively moral character, one is instantly put in mind of who has been absented over the course of the series. While the SVM portrays the cultivation of an ever-increasing, inclusive community, *True Blood* depicts a community that is fragile, that loses its members capriciously and carelessly—to uncanny and exaggeratedly ugly diseases, for instance. The effects of social change ripple throughout the SVM, but in contrast to its televisual incarnation, the SVM maintained its trajectory towards social equality, and, literally, the numbers prove it. Let me be clear, I do not wish to critique *True Blood*, nor compare it to the SVM, which has been done (Clúa Gínes). Though I will occasionally use the show and its criticism as a point of reference, I ultimately wish to make clear why I am so emphatically for Harris’ South as opposed to (*True Blood* producer) Alan Ball’s, why I am an advocate for Sookie-in-print’s role in popular culture over Sookie-on-the-screen’s. That is, the former is interested in promoting diversity through the fantastic, while the latter seems to wish to hold it hostage with a gratuitous dose of horror. Regardless of my feelings, however, the existing scholarship on both series offers insight into how academia is currently interpreting fantasy set in the U.S. south, even if the south is not the lens through which scholars read *True Blood* or the SVM. With the exception of Clúa Gínes and Reyes, who are at least conscious that the action is set in the south or calls upon southern tropes, much of the scholarship to which I have referred ignores the south as a character in the book and television series. To quote from Lassiter and Crespino’s pivotal essay collection, these scholars treat this south as if it is “fully integrated into the national narrative” (12)—which, in the SVM, it
is. I would argue that such integration is possible because of its mélange of “all the elements
[Harris read and] loved: mystery, the supernatural, bloody adventure, and a dash of romance.”
(The Sookie Stackhouse Companion ix). In short, or to borrow from the designation under which
the SVM most often falls, the south is integrated into the national narrative when it is integrated
into the genre of fantasy.

Southern fantasy—a term I use simply to denote fantasies set in or referential to the south
or southern tropes—makes obvious how both the south (in the American imaginary) and fantasy
share “habits of Whiteness,” a phrase coined by Helen Young in her eponymous text. Young’s
articulation of the generic features of fantasy is also applicable to southern literary studies
because both hold “reputation[s] for being a eurocentric genre, that is one which is by, for, and
about White people” (1). Yet, Young argues for the more and more progressive cultural
narratives that surface in contemporary fantasy, so transforming a whitewashed genre into one
capable of speaking to real issues of identity politics, and the same can be said for contemporary
southern literature and literary criticism. Therefore, though works of southern fantasy have the
potential to reaffirm racist or patriarchal narratives, I would argue that they are equally capable
of employing their intersecting generic elements to undo those genre’s respective “habits of
Whiteness.” By tethering fantasy to a “real” place, works of this kind call into question the
south’s cultural history and its fraught relationship with American realities. By addressing this
realm of uncertainties and unrealities, new southern fantasies such as the SVM become valuable
to cultural studies, and in particular new southern studies, which aims to undo the south’s tropes
of exceptionalism (Smith). The SVM situates itself between south as place and south as
imaginary, insisting on the utility of this region and its attendant baggage by localizing issues
plaguing American collective consciousness, such as identity politics and civil equality, class
castes and poverty, racism and homophobia, violence and hate crimes. This south allows for the misdirection of American rhetoric, which demonizes the South as the nation’s Other, but employs its given role to effect change, to take Americanness to task (Lassiter and Crespino).

That is, here the South operates as not only a state of being (i.e. a place, an identity, etc.) but also a process.

Not all works of southern fantasy are interested in this “process South,” nor are many of them successful enough to permeate popular culture, even if they were. But in the SVM we are dealing with an exception, a work in which the southern and the fantastic are subtly layered, and whose appeal made Harris a bestselling author—only a few short years after she nearly gave up on Dead Until Dark, the first SVM novel, having received so many rejections for her strange book about nobody vampires in nowhere, Louisiana. This series’ exponential rise in popularity, I would argue, is as essential to a critical reading of the SVM as its representation of southernness and for that very reason.¹ Its wide attraction presupposes an audience that is aware of not only some intrinsic fictional connection between the south and the supernatural (thanks to Anne Rice, if no one else), but also the negotiation of the boundaries of identity and community that has traditionally been set in the south. The SVM inherently invites the lay reader—or any reader—to participate in a kind of critical regionalism in which the South is conjured up not as “a stable, boundaried, autonomous place but [as] a cultural history, the cumulative, generative effect of the interplay among the various, competing definitions of that region. And in so doing, [those readers] are, inevitably, contributing to that cultural history, participating in the ongoing creation of regional identities” (Powell 5). Therefore it matters that Sookie’s readers do not all identify as southerners, but are also extra-southern, non-English speaking, or even non-American (as the

¹ The mere presence of the SVM across media is formidable, available as it is in paperback, hardcover, audiobook, and trade paperback.
SVM has been translated into number of languages). The reader evokes the south even as she virtually engages in the SVM’s discussions regarding the ethical treatment of difference, at what cost a culture should be preserved when it reaches extinction, and what miscegenation and eugenics now look like. She is asked to consider the value of integration, the possibility of assimilation, and how cultures biologically and culturally distinct negotiate shared spaces while maintaining integrity or “purity,” while all the time she adventures in this nondescript southern setting. The reader, whomever she may be and wherever she may be from, virtually embodies a representation of southernness in the form of Sookie, first person narrator of the SVM, and so virtually takes part as Sookie breaks down many southern traditions and questions others.

In short, the many thousands of readers who picked up any or all of the SVM novels since 2001, when *Dead Until Dark* was finally published, have participated in its “process South,” this constructed destination in which displaced national issues reflect back on American values. What I aim to do in this project is to follow the SVM into this constructed destination, to chart its processes by mapping the “real” places it depicts. Sookie learns to travel through and beyond her south as the SVM progresses, in circuitous journeys parallel to her self-discoveries: about her romantic needs, her supernatural heritage, and her role in her community. As she leaves Bon Temps for the first time, then again and again, orbiting farther into Louisiana, west into other southern states, and further north, Sookie leaves circular tracks by which we can better understand Sookie’s dynamic development and the SVM’s treatment of American ailments. In many ways, it does not matter where Sookie goes, because she is a marker of southernness wherever she travels, a vehicle for the crucible the south represents. But it would be wrong to disregard place entirely. Just as there is an amorphous “real” south with which we are familiar, and just as there is a “real” Bon Temps to which Sookie feels anchored, there is a “spatial
dimension” to the actions by which characters and readers alike participate in “cultural politics in order to support projects of change” (Powell 8). Sookie is an actor in her community’s negotiation of cultural politics and she engages in sociopolitical conflicts with the aim that differing identities be more safely expressed and respected, “instructed by the voices and experiences of those normally excluded from powerful strands of public discourse for reasons of their race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity” (26). And so, as herself a kind of critical regionalist, or as a manifestation of the process South, Sookie is naturally linked with place.

As much as new southern studies would like to depart from place when discussing the south, place is wedded to critical language. Literal and tangible places—such as structures and communal areas, gardens and even sewers—help us define theoretical or fictional spaces. For instance, Powell grounds his study of critical regionalism by pointing to the term’s roots “in the theory and practice of architecture, landscape studies, and planning,” and his reincarnation of the term relies heavily on Kenneth Frampton’s denotation of “architecture of resistance.” This kind of architectural practice draws on an environment’s physical and social resources in order to construct something that will reflect and champion a people and place, and so literally performs what cultural tools like critical regionalism—and the process South—attempt to do by analysis. Another architectural term, moral geography, adds a legislative component to this intersection of physical and social environments by studying how a community’s ethical relationship with its shared spaces eventually becomes a means of formally regulating those spaces (Setten). Jon Smith takes note of how so many “of the key terms of postcolonial theory derive from botany: Srinivas Aravamudan’s tropicopolitans, Homi Bhaba’s hybridity, the roots and rhizomes of Gilles Delueze and Félix Guattari that underlie Edouard Glissant’s idea of root versus relational identity, even the very notion of culture itself” (126). Even more specifically “southern”
neologisms take their cues from studies of place. In *Dirt and Desire*, Patricia Yaeger is preoccupied with the literary southern landscape that participates in the dangerous habits of its inhabitants: the land’s potential for reverse autochthony, where bodies are “hurled” into soil or water, and for a kind autochthony where these bodies are somehow surfaced. Thadious M. Davis’ *Southscapes* is premised on “the connection between society and environment as a way of thinking about how raced human being are impacted by the shape of the land” (2), and, more recently, *Undead Souths* is interested in how the undead are themselves a regional landscape on which communities project abjection and Othering. Finally, to return to Helen Young’s *Habits of Whiteness*, Suburban Fantasy is a subgenre that engages more or less with the nature of metropolis. It also includes the literally suburban, but also the sub-urban—what lies beneath—both literally and figuratively. Thus, the supernatural might come from underground . . . but might equally be a product of the history of a place, be it migration, colonisation, indigenous history, war, famine, the past of the protagonist, or some combination of these. Suburban Fantasy, with its intrusions of the supernatural, can be understood as the suppressed history of modernity resurfacing. If the metropolis—the urban—always signifies modernity, the sub-urban explores what lies beneath and beyond it in the sewers, suburbs, and small towns of modern Western nations. (141-2)

These terms are transportable between their original fields and southern studies because they describe connections and symbols that place helps us imagine. Even when we unmoor these terms from tangible places or things, their wording or phraseology keeps them tethered to such a context, but in doing so they provide a foundation on which critics can build and wield this language for their own, metaphorical ends. Each of the aforementioned terms can be applied to the work that the SVM does, or, more specifically, to the work that the process South does in the SVM. By locating rhizomatic relationships, suburban fantasies, architecture of resistance, etc. in the SVM, we can better locate how the process South marks and transforms bodies, conducts understanding and constructs boundaries between people, networks across communities and
regions, and how it does or does not help the people who participate in it. We can use real maps, blueprints, or manuals as we imaginatively construct Sookie’s travels in “place” and as we attempt to critically read the repercussions. The following chapters are intended to do just that.

Douglas Reichert Powell’s interdisciplinary model of critical regionalism and Jon Smith’s model of new southern studies are the primary molds from which I wish to cast my own reading of the SVM. In each chapter I will focus on a particular setting of the SVM and “regionalize” it by addressing the conflict it features and how that conflict ripples into the “Sookieverse” (*The Sookie Stackhouse Companion* x), both southern and American. In chapter one, “Suturing the Cracks: Sookie’s Bon Temps,” I will emphasize Sookie’s hometown of Bon Temps in order to examine her relationship to place and space, family and community, and how these relationships create a pattern by which Sookie relates to the new or unfamiliar. Since the majority of the conflict occurs not only in Bon Temps, but on Sookie’s family land specifically, it is crucial to understand Sookie’s place, literally: her heritage and her inheritance. In this chapter I will be turning to unconventional research, such as landscape and garden design and death studies, as well as using literary and cultural tools to compare Sookie’s “traditional” family to the neo-agrarian ideal. Next, in “A Sociological Survey of the Supernatural: Sookie’s Shreveport and Hotshot,” I will break down the supernatural subcommunities with whom Sookie begins to familiarize herself in the SVM. I will argue that a sociological reading of these groups—their rites and traditions, conflicts and alliances, and roles in their shared community—can help us make claims about to promote and protect a multicultural south. In my third chapter, “The Amorphous Shape of the Land: Sookie’s New Orleans,” I will discuss displacement and the effect of empty spaces. The SVM’s treatment of New Orleans in “real time,” both before and after the devastation of Katrina, is, in many ways, a revisionist history of American policy
towards political and disaster-driven refugees, homelessness, and poverty, but also a pilot for how displaced persons (read: minorities) negotiate space for themselves when there is no precedent or presiding institution to aid them. My final chapter, “Reconstructing a Humid Landscape: Sookie’s Dallas, Wright, and Rhodes,” is a study of study of the obstacles hindering Sookie, and the supernatural world she has come to know, from positive change. I will turn to examples of social rupture, in which public acts of crime or violence act like seismic shifts in the foundation of the community, in order to determine how the SVM does or does not solve issues of racism, bigotry, and, ultimately, exceptionalism. My conclusion, “‘I belong here’: Back to the Garden,” will mirror Jon Smith’s rhetorical walk through “In the Garden” in Finding Purple America, in which I take one final turn in Sookie’s own garden and ask what magic has to do with anything.

When approaching regionalism, or any “mapped” construct like the south, it has always been important to understand “not only how the map is drawn but who is drawing it and why” (Powell 5). I do not wish to assume that Charlaine Harris set out to map a south when she began writing the SVM, but it is clear that one emerged nonetheless, a fantastic south whose contours and contents are worth investigating. This work, too, will draw a map, but I hope mine is as inclusive as Harris’ dares to be: one that includes an American horizon beyond the southern skyline, where the borders are found out in order to be erased. Regardless of how clear my lines are, or how well I do at questioning them, the south of the SVM matters, if not to the scholars who wish to see how region holds up in modern popular culture, then to the readers who engage with this virtual region, one that is perhaps familiar and certainly alien.
I. SUTURING THE CRACKS: SOOKIE’S BON TEMPS

“[S]outhern ground conceived as an actant also provides the kinds of liberating energies that can imagine new Souths, themselves predicated on undead foundations but with much promise for the living.”

Anderson, Hagood, and Turner, *Undead Souths*

“When you’ve been really beaten, you realize that you are just an envelope of skin, an easily penetrated envelope that holds together a lot of fluids and some rigid structures, which in their turn can simply be broken and invaded.”

Charlaine Harris, *Dead to the World*

In her essay on the crossroads as a syncretic, symbolic site in blues lore, Lorna Fitzsimmons discusses how blues narratives employed in American film, and in particular the 1986 *Crossroads* starring Joe Seneca and Ralph Macchio, “exploits [European and African] heteroglossia in order to attract African American viewers while nevertheless privileging Faustian discourses” and so attempts to suture “the master narrative’s cracks” (167, 182). Significant but less explicit in Fitzsimmons’ argument are the cultural contributions that each continent makes toward gendering the crossroads: in African religion and mythology, crossroads are a site of misogynist history and phallocentric worship, compressed into the figure of Legba in Fitzsimmons’ summary; whereas European mythology and philosophy “associated the ‘split/cracked/forked road’ with ‘the sexual terrain of the mother,’” or, in this case, Hecate (165-6). What Fitzsimmons notes, like others before her, is that “Legba and Hecate are alike in being divine mediators” (166) symbolic and (in a mythical sense) literal conduits between the human plane and the beyond. However, such a place of meeting, where these two worlds intermingle, holds potential for pain and punishment: “Plato’s *Laws* connects crossroads with retributive stonings deemed necessary to ‘deliver the city from pollution’, and there is evidence that the
Greek term for waste materials left at crossroads may have included reference to a scaffold for punishing criminals.” Likewise, in one Dahomean myth, “a crossroads is the site of [Legba’s] rape of the corpse of an old woman whom he and his brothers have murdered.”

I mention Fitzsimmons’ reckoning with this culturally loaded symbol because Bon Temps, Louisiana is not only the primary setting of the SVM’s “activity”—being our heroine Sookie’s place of residence and work—but also a place of “several important and powerful crossroads” (*Dead to the World* 75), holding historical, religious, and gendered meaning for its inhabitants and traversers. These meanings are not always relevant to Bon Temps’ human traffic, who may not recognize a flash flood as an act of war, or perceive the influence of a passing maenad who wreaks chaos as she waits for Bacchus’ return, or know of a local interdimensional portal created by a fairy prince so he might visit his married human lover. The town’s intrinsic Otherness makes it a kind of center of gravity around which supernatural communities orbit and, occasionally, meteor into the human population. But when these two planes meet, when the human encounters the supernatural, the rupture shakes Bon Temps’ foundations and, by extension, deepens its culturally fraught crossroads. Therefore, before traveling through the landscapes of the SVM, we should first interrogate this, the “ground zero” process South at which gender, race, culture, and other markers of identity intersect, to see what scaffolds are erected there.

It is my aim to show how Bon Temps is not the South, or, conversely, is as southern as any other place in America to which Sookie travels, but in order to break all easy connection between Bon Temps and “South” I must first make one. That connection, unsurprisingly, is Sookie. The white feminine is culturally intertwined with southernness, as is evident in “southern studies” as early as Cash’s *The Mind of the South*, a pivotal work that drew clear lines between
gender, race, and the South’s cultural “battle” over self-identification. Cash summarizes the rising significance of the white female body, and perceived attacks against it, by acknowledging its displacement onto a regional body:

To get at the ultimate secret of the Southern rape complex, we need to turn back and recall the central status that Southern woman had long ago taken up in Southern emotion—her identification with the very notion of the South itself. For, with this in view, it is obvious that the assault on the South would be felt as, in some true sense, an assault on her also, and that the South would inevitably translate its whole battle into terms of her defense. (115-6)

By holding these two bodies as so linked, white authorities could justify antiblack legislation and unsanctioned violence, because all oppressive behavior would be enacted in the effort of protecting their “legitimate line,” and by extension southern life itself, from the taint of blackness (116). But, in fiction as well as in reality, this relationship cannot hold. In my second chapter, I will examine the repercussions of antiblack precedence in southern cultural history for the minorities oppressed by it, but for now I wish to articulate the effect of this proto-Dorian ideal on its own pedestalled white southern lady—at least in fiction.

In her brief study of the evolution of Southern Gothic narratives (which parenthetically includes the SVM), Peggy Dunn Bailey recapitulates the significance of the Female Gothic, a genre highly concerned with the female body and how its unruliness and potential for grotesquerie require its confinement (272). Bailey shows that the white southern feminine is always at risk from without as well as within, identifiable by “the Female Gothic heroine—typically, a motherless, vulnerable young woman facing the threat, if not the reality, of confinement and/or violation . . . within structures purportedly designed for or devoted to [her] safety, especially the family home” (273). By this description, the Female Gothic portrays the white female body as itself a crossroads, where masculinity is tested and femininity bounded, but, when specifically made “southern,” also where whiteness is validated and blackness
flattened. As Cash articulates, and as Bailey implies, the white female body is cloistered away from the realities of a nonwhite south, and so it is physically and emotionally stunted not by the perceived threat of its nonwhite male attackers but instead by the real danger of its white male imprisoners. By juxtaposing the unknown Other of the female body with the domestic spaces in which that body is typically imprisoned, Bailey localizes Cash’s proto-Dorian ideal from a cultural level to a geographic or domestic level. In other words, the south allegorically identifiable as a white woman is also locatable, tucked away in her home for safekeeping. As an embodiment of the white southern feminine ideal (at least by the standard of the early 2000’s) and as heroine of a paranormal romantic saga, Sookie inadvertently participates in southern culture’s preoccupation with racial integrity and the Female Gothic’s preoccupation with inner grotesquerie. How she undoes or breaches these boundaries surrounding the female body and home, how she transcends her own crossroads, however, creates a blueprint for the process South with which she will effect change amongst her “southern” community both locally (in Bon Temps) and abroad.

In the series, it is understood that Sookie—though far from being the only one who can effect change, who can take up and embody the crossroads—is somehow set apart from her community, and it is often this enigmatic differentness that allows for her to solve the mystery before her, to defend herself or others, and to survive. How and for what purpose she is different is the foundational, prolonged mystery of the SVM, which Sookie must slowly unknot and absorb into her worldview. Therefore, before we determine Sookie’s role in the series and in her South, we should first examine what “makes up” Sookie: where she comes from, whom she comes from, and how she identifies herself.

DESCENDANTS OF THE GLORIOUS DEAD
Sookie transforms considerably from the idealistic woman who introduces herself to us in the first pages of *Dead Until Dark*, but the method of her self-introduction makes immediately evident how Sookie regards herself in relation to her community and vice versa. “I’d been waiting for the vampire for years when he came into the bar,” Sookie begins her story, as if her life previous held no meaning; and perhaps it did not because, as she soon explains, her “disability” has kept her at arm’s reach from traditional relationships and she is eager to encounter another Other (2). This disability, this handicap without which she might lead the life of the southern belle she outwardly appears to be, is telepathy, though the nature and source of her telepathy is the riddle of Sookie’s life and the foundational, drawn-out mystery of the SVM—as is evident from the very first chapter, when the newly arrived vampire asks the question that will ripple through Sookie’s existence: “What are you?” (13). Sookie—who cleverly avoids the danger of this repeated question with her ready reply, “I’m a barmaid”—does not quite know. She knows only the confusion and ostracizing that her Otherness has afforded her and the narrative of her life and ancestry that has been filtered through the limited lens of her own telepathy and fostered by her grandmother.

Sookie’s grandmother, Adele, is both for our heroine and us as readers the exemplar of white female southerness that the SVM simultaneously honors and erodes. Consider, for instance, Adele’s own introduction early in *Dead Until Dark* as a proud member of “the Descendants of the Glorious Dead and the Bon Temps’ Gardening Society” (15). That these two organizations are mentioned simultaneously, given equal weight in Adele’s characterization, is quite telling, because they make a substantial connection between how Adele negotiates her space (or her white, female, lower-class southernness) and her place (literally, her home). She relishes the opportunity to interview Bill, the aforementioned vampire of Sookie’s acquaintance
who was turned vampire just after the Civil War, because he is able to tell her about the history
of her home and her Confederate-era family members:

Of course, Gran was in genealogical hog heaven. She wanted to know all about Jonas, her
husband’s great-great-great-grandfather. “Did he own slaves?” she asked.

“Ma’am, if I remember correctly, he had a house slave and a yard slave. The
house slave was a woman of middle age and the yard slave a very big young man, very
strong, named Minas. But the Stackhouses mostly worked their own field, as did my
folks.”

“Oh, that is exactly the kind of thing my little group would love to hear! . . .”
(Dead Until Dark 47)

It should be noted that Adele’s question organizes the conversation under the heading of class,
because registering the amount of slaves her forebears owned would affirm her position by
elevating theirs. As such, it is painfully obvious what is missing during this conversation. Instead
of addressing issues of slavery, the goals of the Confederacy, or similar concerns—which seem
to be whitewashed away by the very language with which Bill answers the question put to him—
Adele returns the emphasis to her white family members in the remainder of their conversation.
Theys are the Glorious Dead. Yet, the text makes clear that Adele is among the few who enjoy
such imaginative antebellum reconstructions (even Bill is disgusted by the title “Glorious Dead,”
and Sookie’s privately asking him more questions puts him in an ill humor). “The Descendants
of the Glorious Dead were a mixed bunch,” Sookie later narrates. “There were some very old,
very fragile members, and some not quite so old and very lively members, and there were even a
scattering of middle-aged men and women. But there were no young members, which Gran had
often lamented, with many significant glances at me” (121). Adele is the rare, enthusiastic
member of what is apparently a dwindling society. The club is not mentioned again after Dead
Until Dark.
Apart from this interview, we as readers encounter Adele more often than not in the midst of her domestic, self-assigned duties: cooking for Sookie and her brother Jason, hanging laundry on the clothesline in the backyard, or weeding in her beloved garden. Sookie relates to Bill later in the same scene that she is “lucky Gran is still spry. She does the wash and the ironing and most of the cooking” (56), suggesting that Adele does not often share these chores with her granddaughter, perhaps valuing such activity as too personal or too significant not to oversee herself. In contrast to her membership in the Descendants of the Glorious Dead, Adele’s relationship with the Gardening Society is trivial, and we are only made aware of her valued membership from Sookie’s narration; but the value of Adele’s garden is great during her life and even more significant after her death, which occurs only a few chapters into Dead Until Dark. It is also symbolic given that Sookie, according to the age she gives herself in the SVM, would have been born in the mid- to late 1970s, during the period Janet Fiskio refers to as the rise of neo-agrarianism or a resurgence of American ecocriticism emphatic of one’s “sense of place.” Fiskio cites Wendell Berry’s work as an example of 1970’s neo-agrarianism, which defined the “ideal citizen as one who remains in place, and in relation to place” (308), now being reworked in light of transnational communities, or ecocosmopolitanism (301). “For Berry,” Fiskio writes, “the foundation of a healthy farm is the household and family established by marriage,” or “the long foundation of a particular place” (304-5). Though Sookie seems literally to be born into these ideas—and her grandmother assumedly inculcated by them herself—the SVM seems to cite from Berry’s neo-agrarian ideals, only to complicate a notion of place created by the ties that bind families together and one’s connection to the land.

The nature of Adele’s death (which I will describe later in this chapter), as well as the connection Sookie shared with her, means that Adele lives on in certain ways, however. Adele
operates as the resounding conscience, the memory of virtue, that Sookie must herself imaginatively reconstruct as her belief in her own goodness begins to slowly corrode. Moments like this one, in which she is confessing how another trauma she has recently endured has, she fears, changed her even more, become more and more the theme of Sookie’s self-reflection: “I’m supposed to be a Christian, but most days I don’t feel like I can even presume to say that about myself any longer. I have a lot of mad left over. When I can’t sleep, I think about the other people who didn’t care how much pain and trouble they caused me. And I think about how good I’d feel if they died” (Dead in the Family 32). The tension of past and present, and guilt and survival, tests Sookie and Adele’s relationship, creating a “tight space” that is both damning—not only to Sookie, but also to anyone else who threatens her—and generative.

I have thus suggested that Adele’s membership in the Descendants of the Glorious Dead and the local gardening club have tied her to space and place in a way that was confining, the pressures of southernness and domesticity creating a site of tension that ultimately imprisoned Sookie in guilt as she attempts to live up to Adele’s standards—but perhaps tight space is not the right term for this metaphoric site, since Sookie, her grandmother, and the majority of the characters to which we are introduced or made aware in the SVM are coded as white. Houston Baker’s theoretical framework for using “tight spaces” in his Turning South Again is black modernism—defined by Baker largely in relation to black freedom of mobility—which is curtailed or delimited by the oppressive-to-blacks, white-empowering “tight space” of the slave ship, the plantation, segregated education, etc. But I would argue for the fittingness of “tight space” in regards to Sookie’s relationship with place and personal ancestry considering its cousin term, “bellies of the world,” coined by Edouard Glissant and expounded on by Valérie Loichot. Glissant, like Baker, took up specifically black spaces, bounded by white oppressors, but
purported that these spaces are in fact womb-like, in that they are means by which those
oppressed can create their own narratives, their own “fictive kinships.” Real families that are not
sustainable are here reorganized rhizomatically rather than hierarchically, allowing for “a
subversive, androgynous, generation-reversing grammar where patriarchs become mothers . . .
and little girls beget their fathers” (Loichot 37). I would argue that the SVM holds up to such a
grammar, and that Sookie and Adele are examples of the complicated female agency (but
agency, nevertheless) southern women are capable of exercising, even from home.

Therefore we may describe the time later in the SVM, when Sookie discovers a side of
her family, and herself, that Adele never explained during her life—her true grandfather, a half-
fairy named Fintan, with whom Adele had a relationship that begot Sookie’s father and aunt—as
a revelation of the rhizomatic. When new fantastic limbs and leaves become visible on the
Stackhouse family tree, Sookie begins to understand her Otherness and reorient her relationship
with her human and supernatural families, including Adele, and so it is even more significant
that this revelation occurs on domestic ground. In the eleventh SVM novel, when clearing out the
attic, full of antique Stackhouse furniture and belongings, Sookie stumbles upon a dress pattern
in a desk’s secret compartment in which Adele has hidden a letter, addressed,

Dear Sookie,
I think you’ll find this, if anyone does. There’s nowhere else I can leave it, and
when I think you’re ready I’ll tell you where I put it.
Tears welled up in my eyes. She’d been murdered before she thought I was ready.
Maybe I never would have been ready.
You know I loved your grandfather more than anything.
I’d thought I’d know that . . .
But I did want children so bad, so bad. (Dead Reckoning 134)

Out of personal shame, Adele only ever confessed her giving in to “temptation” in the letter to
Sookie (135). In this way, Adele’s voice lives on but continues to be characterized in Sookie’s
understanding (and ours, as readers) as human, negotiating between guilt and survival, even as Sookie simultaneously learns that she herself is less human than she imagined. Sookie forces herself to reconcile the virtuous grandmother who raised her with the woman who would transgress her marital bed for the sake of having a family, just as she must reconcile her own values with the sins she has committed in the course of the SVM.

In addition to the effect this revelation has upon her mourning for Adele and her struggle with identity, Sookie must reckon with the Fae War that Adele’s actions have inadvertently set in motion—or, in other words, Sookie witnesses how the domestic ripples through other boundaries of place. By taking Fintan as a romantic partner, and by bearing his children, Adele transgressed not only the boundaries of her marriage but also the ethnic boundaries that fairies hold dear. At the root of the fae war is this issue of boundaries, or purity, as those of mixed heritage vie for the right to choose human or non-fairy partners, while those of “pure” fairy lineage wish to close off the fairy race and maintain only unmixed bloodlines. The union between Adele and Fintan also subverts the marriage ideal of neo-agrarianism, which is insistent upon the ties to place and fellow inhabitants of that place as sacred, as patriotism itself (Fiskio 305). By stepping outside of her marriage to her husband, who has brought her into the Stackhouse name and home, Adele complicates her relationship to place, according to neo-agrarianism. But danger is not the only element that is introduced to Sookie’s life upon learning that she has been placed at the crossroads of human and fae antagonism by her part-fae lineage. Place, for instance, is what bridges human and fairy values: “‘You’ve been lying in the sun and gardening. We like the sun and sky,’” [Sookie’s great-grandfather, Fintan’s father] said, as if that was proof positive I had a special relationship with the fairy branch of my family” (Dead and Gone 145). Further, it is her
fae family who has been secretly protecting her through her supernatural mystery-solving and
misadventures, and, more importantly, whose influence earned Sookie the gift of telepathy.

Even after learning about her fae ancestry, after meeting several fae relatives, and after
reconciling this new crop of family members to her tight-knit southern community—“I’d told
them he was a distant cousin from Florida, and I’d heard from a lot of brains that ladies were
going to be consulting their family trees to find a Florida connection for my family” (Dead
Reckoning 318)—Sookie continues to wonder why she alone is telepathic and concludes that it
must not be a fae characteristic. She is right, she learns from her half-demon lawyer, Mr.
Cataliades. In fact, it is he who is responsible for Sookie’s “disability”:

“The gift I gave to my dear friend Fintan was that any of his human descendants who
possessed the essential spark would be able to read the minds of their fellow humans, as
I can . . . The essential spark isn’t easy to pin down in terms of your DNA,” he told me.
“It’s an openness to the other world. Some humans literally can’t believe there are
creatures in another world besides ours, creatures who have feelings and rights and
beliefs and deserve to live their own lives. Humans who are born with the essential spark
are born to experience or perform something wonderful, something amazing.” (322-3)

This “gift” exchanged between Mr. Cataliades and Fintan signifies an alliance forged over
drastic differences. Cataliades does not shade in his shared past with Fintan in any great detail,
but the SVM implies demons and fairies are diametric creatures in the supernatural cosmos, and,
not only that, Cataliades’ mixed makeup would further distance him from the respect of fairies.
The amalgamation of Fintan and Cataliades’ genetic material, then, Others Sookie more than
even she realizes, and it is this Otherness that has marked her with power. Though in many ways
she is the most ordinary person in her family—in her generation alone there is her brother Jason,
turned half-werepanther; and her cousin Hadley, turned vampire by her lover, the Queen of
Louisiana—Sookie’s innate tolerance, kindness, and sense of justice is what activates the latent
power that lay within all of them. Sookie’s telepathy not only predestines her for “something amazing,” but it is also what gives her the ability to perform it.

SWEET HOME

From its earliest descriptions in the SVM, the Stackhouse property has been a site always pulled in two directions: past and present, margin and center, setting and actor. Only pages into *Dead Until Dark*, the liminal, hybrid space the house occupies is attributable to its physical location, but also the symbolic, generational tug-of-war between its two residents:

I was reviewing the evening as I drove to my grandmother's house, where I lived. It's right before Tall Pines cemetery, which lies off a narrow two-lane parish road. My great-great-great grandfather had started the house, and he'd had ideas about privacy, so to reach it you had to turn off the parish road into the driveway, go through some woods, and then you arrived at the clearing in which the house stood.

It's sure not any historic landmark, since most of the oldest parts have been ripped down and replaced over the years, and of course it's got electricity and plumbing and insulation, all that good modern stuff. But it still has a tin roof that gleams blindingly on sunny days. When the roof needed to be replaced, I wanted to put regular roofing tiles on it, but my grandmother said no. Though I was paying, it's her house; so naturally, tin it was.

Historical or not, I'd lived in this house since I was about seven, and I'd visited it often before then, so I loved it. It was just a big old family home, too big for Granny and me, I guess. It had a broad front covered by a screened-in porch, and it was painted white, Granny being a traditionalist all the way. (14-5)

Here Sookie establishes the pattern by which her home will continue to operate in the series. A parish residence outside the Bon Temps city center, its location relies on privacy as well as utility: the property must provide for its inhabitants because they are situated in the margins of their community. Though Sookie eventually leaves her own mark on what has become the physical manifestation of Stackhouse ancestry, a palimpsest of personal history, she continues to respect the voices of “traditionalism” that still speak through the property, including Adele’s. It is too large, cumbersome, Sookie’s own burden of southern history as she provides for the
upkeep of this, her inherited not-quite plantation house, often alone and at great personal cost long after her grandmother’s death. But, once inherited, Sookie is free to traverse the boundaries of the house and land, crossing into territories that once belonged to the past. She may leave behind the room of children’s furniture she used well into her twenties and move into what was once her grandmother’s larger room, the master bedroom, for instance; or she may skip her tradition of tanning in the yard to grab the tools so uniformly organized by her late grandfather and weed her grandmother’s cannas beds. In fact, she must cross these boundaries if she is to survive the power the house holds.

Before we investigate this power, however, we should better map the Stackhouse property. Missing from this initial introduction in *Dead Until Dark* are more thorough directions, which author Charlaine Harris provides avid readers in the form of a map of “Bon Temps and Its Environs” (*The Sookie Stackhouse Companion*). Here, “Sookie’s House” is located on the southeastern border of the map’s inner margins, which split the map in two. Located at the end of a squiggly line, her long gravel driveway, the house sits in the middle of a perfect horseshoe of trees, beyond which are unnamed woods on one side and Sweet Home Cemetery\(^2\) on the other. (Missing from *this* map is what lies in the woods: a portal to Faery, the plane from which Fintan and Sookie’s myriad fairy relatives come to Sookie’s world. Though Sookie does not discover the whereabouts of this portal until the final books of the SVM, its location on the margins of Sookie’s property, which sits in the margins of Bon Temps, is certainly relevant.) By the map’s proportions, the adjacent cemetery is about equal in size to the Stackhouse home and

\(^2\) Harris never specifically acknowledges the change of the cemetery’s name from “Tall Pines” in *Dead Until Dark* to “Sweet Home” in later novels and companion texts, but, aside from assuming it falls under the umbrella of authorial errors that she apologizes for in her multitude of addresses to her fans, we might read some significance into the personalization of this site. The shift from a generic, geographical name to a more southern-ized, subjective one perhaps speaks to the more and more intimate relationship between Sookie and the dead (and the undead).
surrounding trees, parallel to one another like mirroring images (xii-xiii). Sookie describes Sweet Home with fondness:

Sweet Home Cemetery is the oldest cemetery in Renard Parish. There isn’t much room left for the dead, so there’s one of those new ‘burial parks’ with flat headstones on the south side of town. I hate it. Even if the ground is uneven and the trees are all grown up and some of the fences around the plots are falling down, to say nothing of the earliest headstones, I love Sweet Home. Jason and I had played there as kids, whenever we could escape Gran’s attention. (*Dead in the Family* 28)

In her narration, Sookie often relates that she was a lonely child, her telepathy alienating both to her peers and to her own parents, the latter of whom died when she and Jason were both very young. That the cemetery is here described as a kind of childhood playmate, an indulgent and elderly neighbor, relates how comfortable Sookie is with the idea and materiality of death. The lay reader may find this passage oddly gothic; and that, I would argue, is tendentious.

Suzanne Kelly explicates the fraught relationship between American culture and death studies, writing, “That human death in American culture is dealt with in way that denies it as part of nature should come as little surprise given the West’s avowed and long-standing disconnection from nature.” She further explores this “human/nature disconnection” using environmental feminists, who postulate that treatment of the dead body is one example of how American culture has fostered “a deeper and deeper antipathy toward what is seen as ‘nature’ as well as all those things aligned with nature—femininity, women, animals, emotionality, necessity, the body” (39). Kelly historicizes the various ways by which the dead body as been disposed of, from embalming to cremation. “Rural cemeteries,” for instance, “advocated the importance of humans spending time among the dead, and the value in returning to the pastoral spaces only now available outside of the town and city limits. … One now visited nature, rather than being a part of it” (44). However, Sookie *is* a part of this rural, natural world. She plays
among the headstones without displacing the literal and symbolic meaning they hold, and she seems to intuit her culture’s disdain for the dead when she reports that she “hates” the uninviting, two-dimensional burial parks in her town. Sweet Home, too, is no ordinary rural cemetery, because it has been essentially reclaimed by nature. The ground, made uneven by the roots of overgrown trees, seems to openly thrive on its disposed-of inhabitants; similarly, the broken-down fences undermine the value of boundaries that delineate the dead as separate from the living. In this way, Sweet Home lives up to Kelly’s urging, “to make death ‘greener’” (50). Reversing “the separation inherent to conventional burial, revealing the latter’s ‘unnaturalness,’ as well as highlighting the necessity of decay,” is, to Kelly, “a way of integrating death back into life. It’s a way of living in community with the dead” (50). From her childhood Sookie has communed with the dead, and the SVM itself troubles the lines between the living and dead by introducing a vampire population come “out of the coffin.” However, as Sookie continues to mourn her grandmother’s death specifically, and process her role in the deaths of other friends, neighbors, and enemies, her relationship with death becomes more and more complex. Again, for the sake of her community, as well as to survive, Sookie must further transgress the boundaries not only between past and present, but also between life and death.

Sookie learns her power to do so when she discovers what has made her home a supernatural magnet, the secret lying alongside Adele’s posthumous letter to Sookie. Enclosed is a gift once sent to Adele by Fintan: an ancient fairy item called a cluviel dor, which contains a spell that gives the holder one wish to be used for the sake of a loved one. The magic contained within the cluviel dor is irresistible to the fae, and Sookie finds herself mired in fairies, goblins, and elves from Faery clamoring to be close to her and her land. But fairy magic attracts a wider net of human and supernatural creatures too, especially those greedy to have the cluviel dor’s
magic for themselves. When Sookie begins to carry the cluviel dor on her person, having
struggled unsuccessfully to keep her possession of this rare gift a secret, she
marks herself as a kind of crossroads where life and death meet. This symbolism is heightened
by a subplot of the final SVM novel, Dead Ever After, when Cope, the wealthy father of one of
Sookie’s close friends, learns the power Sookie owns and subsequently arranges a deal with the
devil (or “a devil” [1]) in the French Quarter—“‘Evidently, meeting at a crossroads is
traditional’” (2)—to exchange his soul for the chance to use the cluviel dor for his own ends. By
striking such a bargain, Cope places Sookie’s body at the crossroads of his own soul’s forfeit.

What Cope does not know, as he bargains with a New Orleans devil for the cluviel dor, is
that, by the opening pages of Dead Ever After Sookie has already spent its power. In the final
pages of the previous novel, Deadlocked, Sookie is called to a local farm to witness a private
trial for several Weres accused of crimes against their pack. In the course of one “hearing,” in
which two Weres fight to the death with swords, the accused Were accidentally strikes Sookie’s
close friend and boss, Sam, with a lethal blow. Sookie reacts without hesitation:

In my universe, everything fell silent. I didn’t hear the chaos around me. I didn’t
hear a voice calling my name. . . . My course was perfectly clear. I reached in my right
pocket, pulled out the cluviel dor, and put it on Sam’s chest. The creamy green glowed.
The band of gold radiated light. . . .

“Sam. Live.” I hardly recognized my own voice. I didn’t have spells, but I had the
will. I had to believe that. I pressed the cluviel dor to Sam’s heart, and I put my left hand
over the terrible wound in his neck. . . . I held my breath, afraid even to blink or move.
After a long moment, or several long moments, I could feel Sam’s heart begin to beat
under my fingers.

“Thanks, Fintan,” I whispered. “Thanks, Gran.” (324-5)

Sookie never questions herself for using the cluviel dor to save Sam, although the choice
estranges her then boyfriend—another who wanted her to use it for his benefit—and complicates
her relationship with the supernatural community. (Nor is she hesitant to locate the source of her
gift in her grandmother’s illicit extramarital affair, which suggests that at this point Sookie has reconciled her worldview with the news her grandmother posthumously delivered to her.) But since Sookie employs the cluviel dor’s magic to restore life to the dead, and since she does so for Sam, who is a shifter, the repercussions are myriad and complex. Sookie notices how altered Sam is after the event, and muses that perhaps the “price of bringing back Sam from death was that he wasn’t quite the same man anymore. The experience of death had changed him, maybe forever. And maybe resurrecting him had changed me” (Dead Ever After 63). Though she discovers that both she and Sam certainly have changed, they do so in different ways. Sam feels divorced from his “natural side” by the magic that resuscitated him (18), and struggles to return to his former life. He begins to adopt vampire-like habits, such as secluding himself in sunless places (which confirms that it is magic that suspends vampires between life and death, and speaks to the difficulty for shifters to submit to such a magical existence). Sookie is thereafter known for having power over death itself, which is thought by many supes to be unnatural or otherworldly. Running errands days later, Sookie startles a young shop attendant who recognizes her immediately.

“It’s you,” she breathed. “You’re the one.”
“I’m the what?”
“The one who has such big magic. The one who raised that twoey from the dead. . . I was there,” she said, with an unblinking, unnerving intensity. “At [the Packmaster’s] farm.”

. . . “You’re scared of me,” I said, stating the obvious because I simply couldn’t think of what else to do. “But you have nothing to fear from me. You’re the one with claws and fangs.” (41)

3 Sam is not the only shifter to have this kind of magic performed on him and survive. For example, Jake Purefoy is a Were-turned-vampire to whom we are introduced in Definitely Dead. However, Sam is an even more interesting case, because he is not technically turned into a vampire. He remains, in nearly every respect, a shifter after his resurrection, and his vampire-like behavior appears to be a temporary “symptom” of the cluviel dor’s magic.
In this way, the power of the cluviel dor is not free, but ripples into Sookie’s life and community in unexpected ways. Even using the cluviel dor to restore life, something Sookie expects Sam to be grateful for, marks Sookie as alien, as “otherworldly” as the cluviel dor itself.

Though Taylor Hagood does not specifically refer to this event in his essay “Going to Ground” in *Undead Souths*, Sookie’s use of the cluviel dor to revive the dead, as well as Sam’s need as a shifter to reimmerse himself with nature before he recovers from his “undeadness,” adheres to Hagood’s interpretation of the SVM as emphasizing “the power of ground itself” (254). “Going to Ground” takes up moments in contemporary “textual-media clusters,” such as the SVM and *True Blood*, in which “the undead characters function to articulate a foundational active discourse and presence that can be conceived of as southern ‘ground’” (248). This is often literalized, such as Hagood’s reading of the first season of *True Blood* in which vampire Bill is submerged in the earth, once to hide from daylight, the second time to turn his vampire progeny. But by returning to these early moments in the televised series, and by ignoring similar moments in the textual series, Hagood does not realize the potential for his theory of “undeadness.” Sam complicates a literal or vampire-centric reading of this particular “textual-media cluster,” because he is never buried and yet it is the earth that restores his aliveness. Sweet Home Cemetery, too, is a kind of undead figure, characterized as it is by Sookie as animate, shifting and growing out of its strictures. Sookie’s use of the cluviel dor temporarily endows her with the power of vampirekind, who can make the dead live; and she herself hides in an open grave and in a subterranean basement, for example, when needing escape from various attackers—but this is not surprising, given the solace she felt in Sweet Home as a child, and the quick intimacy she feels with vampirekind.
Hagood’s “undeadness” is further complicated when put in conversation with Patricia Yaeger’s “reverse autochthony.” In *Dirt and Desire*, Yaeger redefines the fictional southern landscape as a liminal figure that absorbs the “detritus” of the grotesque play above—and always threatens to spew it back out—where predominantly nonwhite bodies exist liminally, neither alive nor dead, because they are no longer recognized or visible. Therefore, this idea of place submits to Hagood’s undead “southern ground,” and the bodies that are “hurled” into this landscape also participate in “shaping southern ground, grounding, groundedness” (*Yaeger* 17, *Undead Souths* 254). I will not pause to examine every body that is absented into the Bon Temps landscape, because there are too many to consider. However, the way in which Sookie and Jason’s parents die—or rather, are killed—speaks to where Yaeger’s and Hagood’s “grounds” meet. At a young age, Sookie and Jason are nearly drowned along with their parents when caught in their car, which is maneuvered off of a local bridge by a flash food and inundated. Sookie and Jason regard this as the tragedy of their lives, which forced them to be raised by their grandmother’s generation of the family, and which, in many ways, divided them, since Jason thereafter bought out Sookie and moved into their parents’ home and Sookie their grandmother’s. But Sookie learns from her fae relatives that it was not an accident, but rather the work of an enemy clan of fairies with powers over water that sought to end Fintan’s mixed race line. Though Sookie and Jason work through their mourning, and their parents are recognized as dead and are buried, the repercussions of their parents’ murder indicate that the power of life and death are continually worked out in this kind of “ground.” For instance, the pond behind Jason’s house (once owned by his parents) is a place of personal trauma for him, and when he temporarily disappears in the fourth SVM novel many Bon Temps’ residents assume he has drowned in it. So it is that bodies of water “are never simply sites for . . . crossing over but sites
for recycling sadness” in the SVM (Yaeger 13). Such grounds live because of the dead inside, and they repeat as motifs of this liminality or crossroads across Bon Temps.

POUNDS OF FLESH

I have described Sookie as occupying a metaphorical crossroads between the human and supernatural, between the living and dead. But I now wish to interrogate Sookie’s person, because her body is itself a crossroads of gender, sexual, and racial identity, and so is simultaneously the site where scaffolds are erected to punish the aberrant—including Sookie. Inevitably and ironically enough, it is the romantic elements of the SVM that place the crossroads onto Sookie. I need not recapitulate the history or contemporary incarnations of the southern rape complex to speak to the significance of a white female heroine who is simultaneously mixed race and gender-queer. Kimberly Frohreich asserts that *True Blood* visually emphasizes “white male desire to control the female body”—and the same emphasis is certainly true of the SVM—but Frohreich articulates this in terms of race only, which does not quite get at the complexity of the female bodies depicted in the SVM. Not only is “race” a non-binary reality in Bon Temps, but “race” is also the term applied to non-human communities, including vampires and fairies. Further, the female bodies being bounded, as Frohreich hints at but does not articulate, are not always gendered as such nor do they always adhere to heteronormative sexual practices. Therefore a white were woman who cheats on her white half-were husband with a black male human—such as Crystal, Jason’s wife at one point in the SVM—is violating traditional sexual boundaries in myriad ways that the southern rape complex cannot explain. I will further expound on the series’ depiction of race in my second chapter, but the repercussions for white women at the center of southern racial preoccupation—like a pregnant
Crystal, who is found dead soon after her affair is found out, crucified in a public place in the ninth SVM novel—is the argument of this section.

Sookie is the target of hate and violence for a number of reasons, the predominant among them being her romantic relationships with non-humans. However, her attraction to non-humans, like the vampire Bill with whom her story begins, is depicted as natural and exciting, a direct response to the possibility of a romantic connection with him that she finds impossible with normal humans. Her telepathy, which Others her in the minds of her neighbors and customers, similarly queers her gender by providing her the ability to penetrate minds, often against a person’s will. That is, because she expresses both female and male attributes, she does not fit comfortably into heteronormative roles. Since vampires “mute” her telepathy, or because she is unable to read Bill’s mind, Sookie recognizes the potential for a partner that would allow her to negotiate her sexuality on her terms, in a vocalized, discursive, and mutual relationship in which she can express both femininity and masculinity. It is her telepathic powers, too, that thwart Bill’s ability to “glamor,” or hypnotically manipulate her, and so force him to engage Sookie in order to win her affection. To many in Bon Temps, however, any relationship between a human and vampire appears threatening. Women who take vampires for sexual partners are derogated, referred to as “fangbangers,” and this slur is hurled at Sookie countlessly throughout the SVM. But, as Frohreich reminds us, antifeminist insults are “not the only way to control human women within the narrative—another is death, or the elimination of their ‘contaminated’ bodies” (40). In Dead Until Dark, the mystery plot is centralized around a local serial killer who targets fangbangers, and who eventually comes after Sookie, but kills Adele as collateral damage when he does not find Sookie at home. Sookie returns home to find the gruesome scene that might have been hers. When attempting to describe the sight of her grandmother’s body to Jason, she
does so by imagining Adele’s agency during her attack, reading herself in Adele’s place: “‘She
was beaten up, but she had tried to fight back, I think. Whoever did this cut her up some. And
then strangled her, it looked like’” (129).

It is significant when the murder occurs: just after a meeting of the Descendants of the
Glorious Dead, at which Bill has just made an emotional address about his days fighting for the
Confederacy. Though it isn’t until much later in *Dead Until Dark* that we discover the killer’s
motives, there seems an intrinsic connection between Adele’s death and the Descendants,
because both involve a transgression Bill has made while implicating only the women who help
him. The serial killer targets Sookie because she is supposed by her community to be
romantically involved with Bill; but Adele is killed for not a dissimilar crime. Adele aids Bill
transgress time, allows him to bridge past and present by encouraging him to speak about a past
which, before then, was accessible only by imaginative reconstruction, creative history. Both
Adele and Sookie, then, commit crimes against their own southernness by affiliating themselves
with this man without time. Sookie, because she complicates the proto-Dorian ideal by choosing
the perfect, albeit dead partner—a Southern antebellum gentleman, republican farmer, and
Confederate soldier. Adele because she creates the opportunity for such a gentleman to further
complicate those ideals by telling the truth of his life. The meeting and Adele’s murder are
connected, too, because both celebrate death, the grotesque by which change is effected. Though
the meeting of the Descendants may seem innocuous, its very title indicates that there is a
glorification of war involved. The serial killer, too, revels in his power over Adele’s life by
killing her unnecessarily.

Yet, as readers soon learn via Sookie’s misadventures through the supernatural
underworld of Bon Temps, vampires *are* dangerous. Sookie encounters not only threats from
without her romantic relationships with vampires, but also abuses within them, and does not often recognize the problematic patterns that lead to her abuse. For instance, Bill lives up to the rapist trope of the vampire by regularly initiating sex with Sookie after she has experienced (or recounted) a trauma, when she is quite vulnerable: just after Sookie finds Adele dead (*Dead Until Dark*), just after Sookie tearfully tells him about her pedophiliac great-uncle who violated her for years, and just after draining her of blood nearly to the point of her unconsciousness (without her consent [*Club Dead*]). Sookie is quick to defend Bill—calling his abuses, including a terribly graphic rape scene, a “terrible incident”—justifying his actions by explaining they were out of his control, the mania of bloodlust having overcome his senses, and in this way Sookie too lives up to certain tropes of abuse. Later, in her relationship with fan-favorite, the Scandinavian vampire Eric, she is again slow to recognize the pattern by which her partner dictates their relationship. When Sookie is forced to decide whether to move forward with Eric, she realizes that what she must actually choose is whether to remain human or be turned vampire, the latter being Eric’s aim. But were she to do so, she would become just another blonde vampire progeny in Eric’s following: “Weirdly, after a moment, I could see Eric’s progression. If I was a golden blonde and Pam was a paler true blonde, Karin’s hair was at the ash blond end of the spectrum. . . . Karin was shorter than me or Pam, but just as curvy. Karin was Me 101. Eric ran true to type “(*Dead Ever After* 90). Eric is the vampire-with-fetish, and, though there was always the question of Sookie and Eric’s true feelings, after meeting Eric’s second “child” she is further convinced that love holds no sway in Eric’s motives. Significantly, however, Sookie is never liberated from

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4 It is important to note yet another male character intimately connected with Sookie who attempts to bound her behavior: her brother, Jason. The siblings’ relationship undergoes countless sudden and violent transformations over the course of the series, including one moment of physical abuse by Jason in *Dead Until Dark* that reverberates through their encounters thereafter. When Sookie emerges from a disagreement with her brother, she often recounts, “At least he didn’t hit me.”

5 Since fairy blood is intoxicating to vampires, Sookie’s relationships with vampires are always predicated on the possibility that her feelings are not actually reciprocated. Lust and love, easily interchangeable in a paranormal romance, are blurred lines in the SVM.
these alluring yet abusive “miscegenators” by any outside force, such as a white patriarch or the collective pitchforks of a Bon Temps mob. Sookie saves herself. She chooses to leave Bill when she resigns herself to the fact that his “powerlessness” to his vampire nature (as well as his personal baggage) would never be resolved; and she similarly chooses to leave Eric when she recognizes his selfishness and greed, wishing not to be collected and kept by him.⁶

Sookie is certainly not the only character abused or misled by her romantic partners. As Sookie learns more about her grandmother’s infidelity, and by extension Sookie’s fae legacy, the two grow in the reader’s awareness as similar victims of abuse. Sookie struggles through memories of her great uncle’s pedophilia, and is even tricked into a sexual liaison with a fairy disguised as a distressed Were (See “Gift Wrap” [A Touch of Dead]). Comparably, through Adele’s posthumously discovered letter, left with the cluviel dor, we learn that she too struggled not only with the sin she felt she had committed by being with Fintan but also the sins forced on her. She is clearly aware of the possibility that Fintan may have manipulated, if not raped her, by assuming her husband’s likeness, though whether she dealt with this trauma is unknowable. Regardless, it is this complicated, abusive relationship by which Adele earns her family, and it is into this secret trauma that Sookie is eventually born and, once discovered, bears witness. Adele’s virtual confession via the aforementioned letter to Sookie participates in the literary tradition of the Southern Gothic, which Peggy Dunn Bailey denotes as being fueled by the need to explain and/or understand foundational trauma, the violation or loss of which is essential to identity and survival but often irretrievable. Southern Gothic literature is characterized by obsessive preoccupations—with blood, family, and inheritance; racial, gender, and/or class identities; the Christian religion (typically, in its

⁶ Sookie detaches herself—“I think Sookie is telling us she belongs to herself” (Club Dead 269)—and moves on to other, non-vampire supernatural romances, though the SVM concludes with Sookie’s hopeful but realistic conclusion that her then-partner, Sam, may not be the “one.” But that is okay, she does not need any “one”: “I couldn’t imagine a future without him. But I also knew that if he turned away from me at this moment, somehow I would survive that, and I would find a way to flourish like the yard that still bloomed and grew around my family home” (Dead Ever After 338).
most "fundamentalist" forms); and home—and a compulsion to talk (or write) about these preoccupations. (271)

These elements are obvious through Adele’s recounting of her relationship with Fintan, and many of these are then transferred to Sookie as she struggles to understand the aspects of her identity that are wedded to her very body.

The “scaffolds” or punishment Sookie bears bodily for her Otherness (and her attraction to Otherness) are not always sexual in nature, however. Sucked into the Fae War in Dead and Gone, Sookie is kidnapped and tortured by two enemy fairies who literally remove chunks of skin and muscle from all over her body, most of which never heals, even after supernatural medical treatment and human physical therapy. In Living Dead in Dallas, Sookie encounters a transient maenad—“That was something Greek. I didn’t know exactly what, but it was wild, female, and lived in nature” (32)—who wishes to deliver a message to the local vampire population by way of Sookie’s body: “It felt exactly as though someone very strong had swung a heavy rake and the points had caught in my skin, gone deeper, and torn their way across my back. . . . I was just a living bulletin board to that bitch, that maenad, whatever the hell she was” (32-3). Sookie’s body continues to be the meeting place across genders, races, dimensions, and enemy lines; but she must bear the punishment as well as the potential of crossroads she embodies. Even so, Sookie is a crossroads for other, less physically or emotionally painful purposes. For instance, Sookie serves as an honorary shaman, a position of great esteem, for the local were pack during their time of political upheaval in Dead in the Family. In this role, Sookie is encouraged to use her telepathy—while under the influence of a ritualistic draught of a drugged liquid—to divine the hidden motives of weres who undergo public trial, and so is a kind of embodiment of justice, erecting scaffolds for others who are guilty.
As Frohreich writes, “Sookie . . . is made to represent the ‘boundary’ between humans and vampires” who is “able to bring a temporary end to the fighting between the two races” (41), but her physical diplomacy clearly contains the power to be of much greater value, to bring peace between more than just two races. As we continue to map the SVM’s landscapes, Sookie’s body remains the foundational terrain by which we may gauge the series’ trajectory toward community uplift, justice, and peace. Her person is a marker of Otherness as much as is it a marker of southerness, because she represents a process South that is comprised of all of the elements of the crossroads: a meeting place and a rupture, a construction and a dissolving of boundaries, a crucible and its consequences. She learns and tests her potential in Bon Temps, where her parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents lived all their lives; and in many ways Bon Temps is the measuring stick by which we may perceive the progress of the SVM’s process South. One of Yaeger’s “hypotheses about southern women’s writing is that it invents structures to get at this everyday world of white unseeing” (104), and, when we look closely, Sookie appears to be an inventor and product of this structure—a fictional heroine in a fantastic south, which offers to reveal something about a real, lived-in south. The structure of the crossroads, which we may consider a static template for a more mobile process South, is one means of seeing beyond.
II. A SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY OF THE SUPERNATURAL: SOOKIE’S SHREVEPORT AND HOTSHOT

“The unexpected persistence of ethnicity and race is not the only puzzle here. Equally as puzzling and intellectually challenging are the diversity of forms ethnicity and race seem to take, the variety of functions they apparently serve, and the quite different kinds of attachments that claim the ethnic or racial label.”

Cornell and Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*

“For a vampire and a Were to date was very unusual, practically a Romeo and Juliet situation. Roy must be a tolerant kind of guy.”

Charlaine Harris, *Deadlocked*

As their title suggests, the Southern Vampire Mysteries employ characteristics of fantasy and mystery, which, in combination, color in and complicate the south the series takes as its setting. Uniquely, in the SVM the south operates as both Primary and secondary world, according to Mark J. P. Wolf’s use of these terms in his work on “imaginary-world stories.” In such fantastic narratives, the plot and characterization arc by having “the main character experiencing and learning about a new and foreign culture [i.e. in the secondary world] along with the audience,” and this is made possible by a protagonist who is “either someone from the Primary World [or a world somewhat aligned with the audience’s] who is a foreigner to the secondary world, or someone from a marginal area of the secondary world who journeys into an unfamiliar part of it” (180). Certainly, it could be argued that the south Sookie inhabits is always a secondary world, about which Sookie uncovers “new” communities and truths that, in reality, have existed all along. But, more often than not, Sookie literally journeys from a familiar, non- or fantastic South into an “underground” fantastic south, and so we should distinguish these worlds. We should also distinguish them because so much of the fantastic secondary world south
Sookie uncovers remains invisible to the non- or pre-fantastic south Primary World. So Sookie’s narrative often involves traveling between these worlds in different ways—either by physically leaving Bon Temps and entering neighboring spheres of supernatural activity, or, depending on whom she is speaking to, adjusting to an appropriate register of fantastic knowledge.

Sookie’s intermediary position between worlds necessitates this chameleon-like behavior and indicates that she is at least proficient in the kind of amateur sleuthing and “ethnography” that permits her mobility. Though Sookie does not explicitly refer to herself as a detective, her role in the SVM participates in the tradition Helen Young refers to as Suburban Fantasy, a subgenre in which the protagonist is an agent of order, someone who is trained to or can intrinsically “create meaning from chaos and disorder” (142). This kind of ability is significant not only in works of Suburban Fantasy—in which what is “subterranean” to or suppressed by modernity surfaces—but also, more obviously, in works of mystery—in which detectives operate like social scientists in method and effect, “successful at least partly because of ethnographic knowledge and abilities” (Pierson 16). Because “the investigation of a puzzling crime casts light on the workings of a society by catching it at a moment of anomaly and disruption,” detectives cull a framework by which they might understand and correct this anomaly. Therefore, in a literal sense, mysteries “are potentially useful sources of information about the various groups of people dealt with by the detectives” (Pierson 17). As such, the power Sookie holds by her position—what kind of order she creates, what kind of ethnography she produces—is significant beyond the pages of the SVM.

A pastiche such as the SVM runs the risk of reinforcing the racist narratives of which its generic components are known to have been guilty. To return to her study on “habits of Whiteness” in fantasy literature, Helen Young implicates fantasy’s “reputation for being a
eurocentric genre, that is, one which is by, for, and about White people,” pointing out the
problem of “Whiteness as a default setting [which] is as much a feature of fantasy as it is of
western culture and society” (1). In particular, Suburban Fantasy, as a subgenre “concerned with
connections between race and human identity,” often poses problems when choosing which
strains of “historical continuity” to endorse (146). Similar issues are entrenched in mysteries or
detective fiction, a genre which James Pierson problematizes by pointing out the Western (read:
white) detective’s penchant for invading and undermining a non-Western community (40) under
the guise of restoring order. And southern literature “at its best is not about community but about
moments of crisis and acts of contestation, about the intersection of black and white cultures as
they influence one another and collide” (Yaeger 38), and at its worst proffers stereotypes of
regionalism, including exceptional and exaggerated antagonism on one end of the spectrum and
historical sugarcoating on the other. So what hope can we have for a series that takes these
genres as its building blocks, for a protagonist with so much literary baggage?

As discussed in the previous chapter, Sookie often occupies a space of splitting/ meeting,
and so the process South I attempted to portray occurred on or against the embodiment (regional
or physical) of this cleaving. Yet, by explicating the intersection that occurs between Primary
and secondary worlds, and between the detective archetype in fantasy and mystery, the process
South that begins to emerge works between bodies, between people, and between peoples.
Certainly, the potential for hierarchies remains (even in the very language and capitalization
Wolf iterates, Primary and secondary), but there is also potential for new schemas of
understanding that Sookie—as detective, as agent of order, as anthropologist—is poised to
reveal. Therefore, in this chapter I wish to employ a sociological reading of the work performed
by the SVM specifically in terms of race and ethnicity by disambiguating interethnic and
interracial relationships, the intricacies of which I have thus far taken for granted. The SVM’s projections of racial and ethnic identities into the fantastic are arguably its most provocative and potent narratives, not only illustrating the boundaries where communities meet and conflict but also where they splinter from traditional categorizations of identity. As Sookie sleuths her way through unfamiliar supernatural communities, she must reconcile the black-white binaries and antagonism in which her culture is steeped with brewing human-vampire tensions as well as networks and hierarchies of communities wholly new to her. The SVM’s supernatural world does not easily correspond to real-world scenarios, and so I do not wish to paint the series as allegorical in any significant sense. However, in order to understand how the SVM subverts “habits of Whiteness,” we should pick up sociological tools in order to explicate how supernatural and other non-human people groups depict a process South that effects new racial and ethnic understanding that is transportable to real U.S. issues.

First, however, we should define what we mean by “race” and “ethnicity,” terms that have been contested by sociologists for the whole of their field’s existence. Cornell and Hartmann’s Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World, published in 2007, remains a foundational text in sociological discourse on the subject and will be the predominant text from which I draw my working definitions. In Ethnicity and Race, the authors take pains to untangle the theoretical history of these terms and the “conversations” that have taken place between real-world cultural changes and sociological understanding, arriving finally at their own apt definitions. They establish that both race and ethnicity are social constructs, “products of human perception and classification.” They describe the formation of race, for instance, by writing:

We decide that certain physical characteristics—usually skin color but perhaps also hair type, stature, or other bodily features—will be primary markers of group boundaries. We
invent categories of persons marked by those characteristics. The categories become socially significant to the extent that we use them to organize and interpret experience, to form social relations, and to organize individual and collective action. . . . We give them meaning, and in the process we create races. (24)

Racial and ethnic identities often overlap, considering that ethnic groups are premised on a belief in (though not the fact of) common descent: a shared ancestry, historical experience, or, to some extent, culture (21). Members of an ethnic group may share physical similarities, but more often than not the ties between them are due to shared social patterns, including an ethnic subjectivity or self-consciousness that is developed over a person’s lifetime (19). However, the formation of ethnic identity is a reciprocal construction: “its self-consciousness often has its source in the labels used by outsiders. The identity that others assign to us can be a powerful force in shaping our own self-concepts.” However, “To claim an ethnic identity (or to attempt to assign one to someone else) is to distinguish ourselves from others; it is to draw a boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’ on the basis of the claim we make that ‘we’ share something that ‘they’ do not” (20-1). Though race is also, in many ways, a reciprocal exchange between group insiders and outsiders, the social significance of race is so powerful as to often eliminate the possibility of redrawing boundary lines. Whereas ethnicity is more obviously a fluid matrix of exchange, of assigned and asserted identities, likely to change in significance even within a person’s lifetime, racial groups are more fixed because the markers of race are present from birth, and so they are “distinct by virtue of perceived common physical characteristics that are held to be inherent” (25) and these physical traits are then assumed to be connected to social and moral attributes. More simply, race is more “salient,” or more likely to organize a person’s life, than ethnicity.

Race and ethnicity operate according to these parameters in the SVM, not only for human races and ethnicities with their own fraught histories, but also, in more complex ways, for supernatural and non-human races that are introduced through the series. For instance, the SVM
opens two years after the first “Great Revelation,”7 in which vampirekind publicly revealed its existence to humankind, and in the first pages of Dead Until Dark, Sookie summarizes the development of vampirekind as “the newest” and most recently “legally recognized” minority in America (1). Yet, as the SVM progresses, and as Sookie engages with vampires beyond the excessively pale white Bill, the complexity of the vampire “race” becomes clearer. Of course, not all vampires are white or American. Sookie meets vampires from Ireland, India, Haiti, Japan, and more, and so vampires cannot be distinguished by their national heritage, skin color, or language. Rather, what they share is a distinct physiology, which is not always easily discernible.

Though they continue to fight for social and legal equality throughout the series, vampires maintain their own organizations and networks, in whose extralegal forums private disputes are waged and settled. Therefore, vampires represent an interesting example of how race and ethnicity can overlap in influencing a group’s identity.

As vampires are the first community to reveal themselves and reckon with a human response—and as they are the first and most recognizable fantastic element in the series—their role in negotiating group culture and its relationship to a Primary World south is certainly of value. However, I would like to focus my criticism on those groups that remain largely invisible to mainstream culture by expressing their identity privately for the majority of the series’ timeframe: for example, a subset of supernatural groups under the title of “were” or “shifter.”8

As these labels imply, such groups hold intrinsic supernatural qualities that harken to mythological and fantastic lore in which humans morph into animals. Harris adheres to much of

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7 If there is a first “Great Revelation,” there must be a second. Years after the vampires “come out of the coffin,” a select group of weres and shifters—i.e. those thought not to seem too dangerous—reveal themselves to humankind in the style of the vampires.

8 I should point out that never, in the entirety of the SVM, are we given thorough cultural guides to any of supernatural groups to whom we are introduced, including weres or shifters. Sookie continues to learn more about the ways in which these groups communicate and organize, but is never granted full access to their histories or cultural resources.
this lore: for instance, weres choose primarily to “shift” into their animal form during a full moon, when they are at their strongest. However, the SVM expands on the traditional interpretations of such peoples by expanding the range of animals into which they transmute (i.e. Weres or werewolves, werepanthers, weretigers, etc.) and by these distinction they then sort themselves into groups. As such, “packs”—or those groups of distinct weres or shifters—defy typical classifications of identity, as a pack can be comprised of a network of families that may or may not share racial or religious identity, but all share a common supernatural physiology. Further, each pack is highly organized, containing its own political structures, social hierarchies, and cultural customs. Therefore, a better way of defining and treating these groups is as examples of ethnic groups rather than races. To better understand how ethnic groups such as “twoeys”—as weres and shifters are more broadly termed—create, maintain, or redraw boundaries, let us turn to examples in which class, sexuality and saliency determine ethnic identity.

ETHCLASS

In Dead to the World, the fourth book in the SVM, Sookie begins to recognize the boundaries of the twoey community when werepanthers are introduced as a new and distinct pack upon which “true Weres” look down. The werepanthers’ subordinate position in the supernatural ethnic hierarchy is due to several factors, including size and organization. Werewolves (or Weres: “Werewolves objected very strenuously to any other two-natured creatures who termed themselves ‘Were’”[Dead to the World 99]) pride themselves on a system of checks and balances that keep a rotation of leaders on an elite council, with a packmaster at its head. As Werewolf packs are significant in population, drawing on all Weres in a large,
relatively wealthy region, this leadership is meant to be representative of the breadth of the pack’s composite individuals and families, their ideologies and needs. In contrast, werepanthers, though equal in pride and ambition, are made up of a single family, whose incestuous attempts at maintaining “purity” while growing its population has resulted in an unruly pack of physically weak and culturally uncertain individuals. The distinction between Weres and werepanthers are also evidently (though not explicitly) founded in class. The packmaster of the Weres is a retired admiral, and many of its members own prominent businesses in the Shreveport community; whereas werepanthers labor primarily in a local factory or work as mechanics in failing body shops, and live in the dark spot of the parish (literally without streetlights or signs), in Hotshot. Sookie describes Hotshot as squalid, built along the axes of a crossroads, as if in fear of it.

These were small houses, none of them brick. Most of them had several cars in the front yard. Some of them sported a rusty swing set or a basketball hoop, and in a couple of yards I spotted a satellite dish. . . . In my experience, in a little settlement like this, you had the same kind of people you had anywhere. Some of them were poor and proud and good. Some of them were poor and mean and worthless. But all of them knew each other thoroughly, and no action went unobserved. (131)

The working class imagery Sookie details is in stark relief to the many middle class homes owned by Weres which Sookie later visits, and the sense of community is of relative symbolic importance to each based on these physical trappings.

Patricia Hill Collins writes, “Community, as refracted through the core idea of family, is the space to which [those ‘Others’] are assigned—in essence, the embodied, premodern, ‘dark’ side of society, ostensibly characterized by its irrationality and emotionality.” She relates this sense of community to assignments of class by expressing how “the organizational principles and interpretive meanings of community do the heavy lifting of shoring up multiple systems of

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9 The locus of Were activity in the SVM is in Shreveport, which is depicted as the most adjacent, larger city to Bon Temps. Shreveport is where the more influential vampires and more prosperous twoeys and humans reside.
social inequality” (10). Sookie intuits the negative accouterment of “community” (equated with a pack, and so a family) when she, at first glance, ascertains that Hotshot is a place where “all of them knew each other thoroughly, and no action went unobserved.” This is not a sustaining environment, she interprets, based solely on its class level. She makes no such judgment about Weres when entering the neighborhoods in which they reside, however. This example of Sookie’s inner monologue, and her subsequently unequal treatment of each respective twoey pack,\(^1\) involves her in the construction of ethnicity, and, more specifically, ethclass. A neologism coined by Milton Gordon, ethclass refers to the “sub-society created by the intersections of the vertical stratifications of ethnicity with the horizontal stratifications of social class” (51), which, by his understanding, plays a significant role in the organization and (for his purposes) assimilation of an ethnic group. When applied to the boundaries between Weres and werepanthers, the distinction of ethnicity becomes overwhelmingly class-related. Gordon expounds on ethclass by hypothesizing that “social classes tend to act differently and have different values even if they have the same ethnic background” and that, “[w]ith regard to social participation in primary groups and primary relationships, people tend to confine these to their own social class segment within their own ethnic group—that is, to the ethclass” (52).

Ethclass is a relevant interpretation by which we can examine choice of sexual and marriage partner for Were and werepanther individuals, respectively. Alcide, a prominent member of his local Were pack, for instance, is groomed to manage his father’s construction business, and so is a visible business leader as well. His long-term partner, Debbie Pelt, though not a Werewolf, is a werelynx who works as a paralegal and comes from an upper middle class family. Their class standing, then, elides their ethnic differences; indeed, no difference in class or

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\(^1\) For instance, Sookie often consciously flirts with Alcide, a mid-level member of the Were pack, whereas she does not register Calvin Harris, Packmaster, as a desirable sexual partner.
station is mentioned in regards to the match, whereas Sookie feels that she herself would be no appropriate partner for Alcide because she is working class, an insecurity that is confirmed by others frequently (Dead to the World 94, 113). Though it is understood that partnerships between Weres and non-Weres are difficult to negotiate, it is not dismissed out of hand, though for the sake of having children a union between Werewolves and any other kind of were is preferable to a union with a human. In contrast, werepanther mores regarding sexual boundaries are considerably more nuanced. Though at one point, werepanthers chose to interdict procreation with non-werepanthers (regardless of being were or not), the fruits of this ethnosexual embargo are a pack of weak or half-panthers. The werepanther Packmaster, Calvin Norris, admits, “‘The thing is, here in Hotshot, we’ve inbred too much. . . . [My niece] can only change at the moon, and frankly, even then she’s not full-powered.’ He pointed at his own face. ‘My eyes can hardly pass for human. We need an infusion of new blood, new genes’ (Dead to the World 141). In order to combat their weaknesses and improve the “stock” of the pack, Calvin propositions Sookie for a kind of ethnosexual exchange: procreation for protection (Nagel). Calvin targets Sookie for reasons of corresponding ethnicity (“‘You’re not two-natured, but you’re not exactly an ordinary woman. Ordinary women don’t last long here’” [Dead to the World 141]), but more so because of Sookie’s class. Calvin asks her about her job and about her family structure in order to ascertain Sookie’s economic standing before proposing such an arrangement, assuming that she might benefit from his offer. Ultimately, Sookie’s brother (and similarly working class character) is the chosen “infusion of new blood,” and is made half-panther by the Hotshot clan, becoming a kind of ethnosexual settler (Nagel 14). In both Were and werepanther packs, class is

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11 I borrow from Joane Nagel’s Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality in the creation of this phrase. I will return to Nagel’s descriptions of ethnosexual boundaries later in the chapter.
a powerful motivator when choosing a sexual partner and a crucial symbol of ethnic saliency, as unconscious or natural as these choices may appear (Cornell and Hartmann 205).

Ethclass also serves to interpret how boundaries between ethnic groups are blurred for political ends. The central plot of *Dead to the World* offers yet another example of ethnic expression by fictionalizing conflict between several, disparate ethnic groups and one multiethnic group. So, before discussing the ethnic repercussions of this conflict, let us first unpack the class-based boundary crossing that allows for political movement in the book. Sookie, through the course of investigating her brother’s disappearance in the fourth novel, is made aware of a quasi-pack or coven of Were witches who invade the local community seeking to extort economic and sexual resources from well-to-do supernatural ethnic groups. Only in the resolution of the book do we find out why: the coven leader, Marnie Stonebrook, was the child of witches who “ran confidence games of some kind, using their craft to make their victims more convinced of their sincerity. In Shreveport, their luck ran out. The supernatural community refused to make any effort to get the [parents] out of jail. The woman ran afoul of a voodoo priestess while she was incarcerated, and the man ran afoul of a knife in some bathroom brawl” (*Dead to the World* 286). Though it is unclear why the community denied their aid, the clear economic disparity between the supernatural community and the Stonebrooks is not only the trigger of Marnie’s anger but also the means by which she seek reparations—that is, by reversing their fortunes. Based on her interpretation of her parents’ deaths, and her method of vengeance, the coven leader equates financial comfort with worth, a notion she shares with her coven. So they first approach Eric, vampire philanthropist, politician, and owner of a popular bar, who refuses their demands only to be cursed with amnesia by Marnie. The implications of this one

12 Amnesia may seem a mild form of attack, but for vampires, who have a much clearer sense of historical identification (Gordon 53) and shared history (Cornell and Hartmann 19) than do most supernatural groups, memory
act are manifold: as Eric is intricately involved in the underground economic network of Shreveport and the surrounding area, other supernatural investors and political leaders are adversely affected, fearing a similar fate for themselves should they be forced to reckon with this enemy.

The invading coven covets not only literal materials, but also political control, and so seeks to undermine the stability of supernatural hierarchies. When their attempts to manipulate the vampires fail—Eric’s vampire allies taking pains to hide him and maintain solidarity against the coven—the witches then turn on the Were pack. They meet the same resistance: significantly, the Were council member targeted for her vulnerability (being a queer, feminist woman and so ideologically at odds with the pack’s patriarchal structure), remains loyal to her pack, defending it to the point of death, so placing her ethnic identity above all else. For the Weres, then, as well as for the other supernatural factions Marnie and her coven attempt to dismantle, the opposite intended effect takes place. The supernatural community pulls together to retaliate, and it is here we may observe how ethnic identities are constructed and reconstructed for a political purpose. After it is clear that she is being pulled into the battle waged by the coven, Sookie goes to a local bar and notes, “Every supe [or supernatural person] I’d ever met was in Merlotte’s” (174). Werewolves and weres of other varieties, vampires, and local Wiccans offended by the invading coven’s abuse of magic congregate to strategize a counterattack, blurring the lines of their ethnic boundaries in order to fight for a common goal. Cornell and Hartmann define these moments of boundary blurring as “concentric” or situational ethnic constructions, allowing for contradictory notions of identity to coexist and find expression (225). So, in a carefully timed retaliation, the

is a powerful, cohesive cultural tool. Without it, Eric forgets his own history, but in doing so he also forgets his authority in the vampire community and the precarious relationship between vampires and humans. He is, in a sense, made unaware of boundaries, and his vampire constituency is vulnerable to boundary infractions without its leader and facilitator of justice.
newly banded supernatural coalition strikes against the enemy coven’s base of operations (significantly, in a rundown, non-white neighborhood in Shreveport [Dead to the World 228]), killing the majority of offenders and effectively dismantling the offending coven beyond repair.

Though, even in this moment of ethnic malleability, we should note that class remains an implicit foundation of compatibility. The vampires who join the fight, for example, are Eric’s financial partners, while the Shreveport Were pack, as discussed above, are predominantly upper middle class. The Wiccans who participate, too, are the only local practitioners who are free enough of economic constraints that they are impervious to blackmail by the invading coven. Other witches—including a friend of Sookie’s—who are near enough to poverty to feel threatened (i.e. by a hospitalization, or by a change in the family structure) are forced to submit to the will of the invading coven and participate in activities that violate their religious ethics. Though most of these coerced witches survive, they are still considered enemies by the supernatural factions who sought to depose their blackmailers; and the coven’s willful members, those killed for their crimes, are similarly without class privilege. In fact, Sookie is the only working class character to enter the fight of her own volition and survive. The werepanthers, who had no stake in the financial situation of Shreveport business, were never asked to fight.

ETHNOSEXUALITY

Though this inner plot of Dead to the World is admittedly intricate, we can see that the basic conflict between monovalent ethnic groups and a multivalent ethnic group remains largely grounded in class disparity, or ethclass. However, we should read class as a symptom, as well as a cause, of ethnic differences. Boundaries between groups are constructed for a variety of interrelated reasons, as we have already acknowledged, but the repercussions of these boundaries often depend on which side of the line an individual falls. Greta Snyder delineates monovalent
and multivalent recognition politics, recognizing how the focus on monovalent or one-dimensional representations of race or ethnicity is harmful to that people group. “While intended to establish equitably relations between identity groups in a society, the politics of recognition has been charged with producing fixed visions of collective identities that reinforce hierarchical relations both within and between groups” (249). The harm lies in the flattening of difference, she writes:

. . . like the racist worldview, monovalent recognition movements reinforce the assumption that differences exist between identities but not within an identity—that [for example] all black people are the same. Moving beyond the symbolic confines set by the hegemonic group or ‘negating the negation’ involves highlighting the difference that exists within identity categories through demands for recognition. (254, original emphasis)

Cornell and Hartmann address similar complications in multiethnic individuals, who negotiate—often unsuccessfully—concentric identities. “Multiethnicity and multiracialism have seldom been acknowledged in some parts of the world, much less celebrated,” they explain, going on to describe the pseudoscience and social stigmas that labeled mixed parentage a “handicap,” “psychologically disturbing,” producing “tortured souls” (I need not list the incarnations of these “tortured souls” in southern literature.) In Dead to the World, disparate supernatural factions ignore the multivalence of their own ethnic identities in order to band together over their monovalence, with inherently paradoxical repercussions. “The refusal to readily accept such persons on their own terms may have given some truth to these views, producing in individuals the very behavior and discontent for which they were blamed” (Cornell and Hartmann 252):

Marnie Stonebrook, leader of the invading coven, is a primary example of the self-fulfilling prophecy of multivalent or multiethnic identity.
Though Marnie’s family is not characterized beyond her parents’ social manipulation and untimely deaths, Marnie is ostensibly descended from a mix of Were and witch kin. She is described as having uncanny senses (at one point even sensing Sookie’s telepathic “penetration” [149]) but also engages in recreational V—a drug taken from the blood of vampires which, when ingested by a human or were, heightens his or her health and strength. The amalgamation of natural, supernatural, and drug-infused physical strength seems only to add to Marnie’s magical abilities, explaining the power with which she almost easily throws the supernatural community of the region into disarray. Her manipulation via magic is, too, an evident grab at visibility and recognition, as Wicca and its ties to magic13 are unacknowledged by hegemonic or Primary World society, and dismissed as negligible in the “supernatural pecking order” (Dead to the World 99). Sookie, ever the ethnographer, is new to the beliefs (and even the existence) of Wicca prior to Dead to the World, and so we may assume that the larger Bon Temps area is similarly ignorant of the tenets of the religion. Sookie relies on the supernatural community for understanding, turning to Alcide, for instance, who explains “‘Well, they’re humans who stay human. . . . Usually, the Supes feel like witches are just wanna-bes. The kind you have to keep an eye on’” (99). Neither Alcide nor the supernatural population he represents sees the possibility of a witch threat when isolated from other forms of power; however, the combination of magic, two-natured abilities, and the drug V creates a threat that is fundamentally unrecognizable and frightening.

13 Though I may appear to use “Wiccan” and “witch” interchangeably, I do not assume the connection of religious belief and magical practice in a real sense. Harris researched the Wiccan religion in depth before writing Dead to the World, and she takes pains to disambiguate these concepts, using Sookie as a means by which she allows for this explication. However, Marnie practices both Wicca and magic, and so at times it may not be relevant or necessary to make this distinction. For the purposes of clarification, I use “Wicca” or “Wiccan” to refer to a religion or religious participant and “witch” for a practitioner of magic.
“A growing number of Americans who carry more than one ethnic or racial ancestry have become reluctant to choose among them,” Cornell and Hartmann acknowledge.

They insist, instead, on their own composite identities, presenting themselves in multiethnic or multiracial terms. Rather than subordinating one ancestry to another, many multiethnic individuals not only recognize and accept multiple ethnic ancestries but also either actively assert their multiplicity or construct a single and unique identity that recognizes the mixing that constitutes their perceived heritage. (252-3)

Marnie fits into this problematic multiethnic schema by working to create a persona that incorporates the multifarious traits and enhancements that make her exceptional; for instance, she renames herself Hallow, which by definition implies a person set apart, holy, to be revered. Yet to what end? To what degree is Marnie permitted to be exceptional, or Hallow? By the concluding chapter of Dead to the World, Marnie has been tortured for information and eventually killed, and all trace of her multiethnic coven or pack is disintegrated. Marnie and multiethnic people like her are perceived as political obstacles or “social problems” when they attempt to achieve higher levels of recognition (Griswold 119), and are treated as such. The intent to purge away Marnie and her kind is successful, evident by the resulting boundary reconstruction by which the once-allied ethnicities become separate, if not antagonistic, once again. “Us” and “them” is no longer the blurred distinction as it was in a combative state. At the conclusion of Dead to the World, having regained his memories, Eric resumes his duties at his place of business and within the vampire community. The Wiccans return to their privacy, their “secondary world” practices no longer visible. The Weres see to their wounded and deny all further social activity with their natural enemies. “I could see that the Weres and vampires of Shreveport had reverted to their old relationship,” Sookie thinks to herself (288). Each group suffer losses, but the climactic event is treated not as a shared memory but rather as a fearful
reminder of mortality; and as the supernatural culture is the only who is aware of the significance of the battle, their interpretation is the only one that matters (Griswold 116).

Marnie’s representation of a multivalent identity reflects contemporary problems of multiculturalism and transnationalism by demonstrating intersections of the global, national, and local. We must keep in mind that, with every recapitulation of the vampire’s Great Revelation, the SVM makes clear that even non-southerners, and even non-Americans, must continue to reckon with understandings of identity in light of the supernatural (The revelation itself is an act made possible by globalized communications, by which television screens around the world instantaneously share the same message in different tongues). “Reactions varied sharply, depending on the nation,” Sookie recollects in Club Dead.

The vampires in the predominantly Islamic nations had fared the worst . . . Some nations—France, Italy, and Germany were the most notable—refused to accept vampires as equal citizens. Many—like Bosnia, Argentina, and most of the African nations—denied any status to the vampires, and declared them fair game for any bounty hunter. But America, England, Mexico, Canada, Japan, Switzerland, and the Scandinavian countries adopted a more tolerant attitude. (6)

Sookie’s categorization of this catalog speaks not only to the state of tensions between the humans and vampire races, but also between human races. The dominant religion is, understandably, a significant factor in a nation’s hostile or “tolerant attitude” toward non-humans, as evidenced not only by the Islamic peoples Sookie refers to but in Christian peoples as well. Mark Shell expounds on the repercussions of literalist readings of Biblical texts, explaining how the “doctrine that ‘all ye are brethren’ turns all too easily into the dogma that ‘only my brothers are human beings, all others are animals’” (177), yet the SVM plays out these philosophies with real human and non-human (or super-human) bodies. Since these countries differ in levels of development, class, of course, has repercussions over national directives—and
when class and religion intersect, Othered bodies become “fair game.” With this in mind, the SVM seems to share Cornell and Hartmann’s recognition that “Globalization has not been uniformly integrative and homogenizing” (250).

Therefore, it is even more significant to understand why the SVM depiction of Marnie, in light of international upheaval, would be seated in a southern space. Tara McPherson acknowledges in specific regards to True Blood that, “The pleasures of the show emerge as it maps an access route to elsewhere,” however we might think that “setting such an elsewhere in a southern terrain might seem odd or even reactionary” (348, 349). McPherson uses True Blood to argue for the treatment of a south that is mapped onto global networks, a south that continues to exist televisually amongst “the tired realm of the stereotype” but that can still “set the stage for other future and perhaps call them into being” using “the contours of an expansive relationality” (349, 341). In many ways, the south is an exemplary platform by which the SVM might pursue a brand of fantasy in which racial and ethnic groups are Othered from within, having existed parallel to human communities all along, and so “highlight[s] a long history in which differences between individuals have been enforced” (Lindgren Leavenworth 40). Maria Lindgren Leavenworth describes the SVM’s setting as a southern community exemplified—“where inhabitants keep close tabs on each other and have a shared history which locks people into roles”—because its cohesiveness depends not only on intimacy between differing individuals but sudden, violent rearranging of these “roles” and boundaries when kinship (“all ye are brethren”) dictates.

Of course, the boundaries of ethnicity are impossible to find clearly defined, not in a southern community, not in an American life, and certainly not in a global perspective. But the SVM imagines for us scenarios in which it is acceptable for ethnic boundaries to be crossed and
when it is not. The SVM fictionalizes a rationalization of genocide (which Sookie and her coalition of supernatural ethnic groups enact on a small scale), for instance, through a protagonist who holds herself as morally upright, and so too is the reader who virtually participates in these worlds. Sookie is ever unpacking the events around her, and contextualizing herself in the midst of what typically appears to be chaos in order to find patterns, both as a detective and as a naturally introspective protagonist. So we may take her approach to the battle between ethnic groups as one in which the prevailing “pattern” she divines is actually a divide between people whom she knows and cares for and those she does not. For Sookie, who personally paints the conflict in terms of morality rather than ethnicity or class, justifying the “war crimes” committed by her friends is as easy as replaying the initial attacks made by the invading coven.

I thought of Eric, a powerful vampire whose mind had been stripped clean of his identity. I thought of the carnage I’d seen in the bridal shop [owned by the female Were leader], the white lace and brocade speckled with dried blood and matter. I thought of poor Maria-Star [another Were], in the hospital in Shreveport. These witches were bad, and bad should be stopped; bad should be overcome. That’s the American model.

It seemed kind of strange to think that I was on the side of vampires and werewolves, and that was the good side. That made me laugh a little, all to myself. Oh, yes, we good guys would save the day. (209)

The humor in which Sookie’s inner monologue is hedged does not negate the supposed validity of her rationalization: her enemy is “wrong,” she and her friends are “right.” It does not matter that both sides murdered, or that one effectively destroyed the other without remorse. So it is in many conflicts based in ethnicity, as Sookie points to: “That’s the American model.” Sookie need not cite from sociological scholarship to make such a claim, after having witnessed this conflict and others like it; thus the power of fiction to describe in dramatic, fantastic, even supernatural terms scenarios which Americans witness daily, if not in their own lives then by a newspaper or television screen.
Yet this clash between monovalent and multivalent ethnic groups is just one example of the potential saliency of ethnicity in the SVM. I have briefly discussed the Fae War, the bloody battle over the racial and sexual boundaries between fairies and humans—both symbolically and literally, as various stages of the battle take place first in Faery then in Sookie’s world. I have also discussed the werepanther’s coda concerning the pack’s sexual boundaries between group insiders and outsiders. In juxtaposition, it is clear how much the two groups share in common, since they respectively establish these sexual boundaries in order to maintain the health and ethnic saliency of their communities. However, the werepanther Packmaster, Calvin, recognizes that, in order to continue the panther line, diversity must be introduced the pack. In other words, the flexibility of werepanther sexual boundaries becomes more important than ethnic saliency. In contrast, Niall—the only fairy prince to survive the Fae War—and his coalition eventually decide exactly the opposite of the werepanthers, choosing to close the portals between human and fairy worlds despite the lives sacrificed for the right to keep them open to maintain freedom of sexual choice.\(^\text{14}\) Niall initially represents a more tolerant policy regarding sexual boundaries, fostering a relationship with Sookie, his mixed-race great-granddaughter, and protecting her against the fae forces who believe that “all humans with fairy blood should be eradicated” (\textit{Dead and Gone} 134). But even his most loyal followers, including Claudine, Sookie’s distant fairy cousin, make choices that help police sexual boundaries, and so live up to Sarah Ahmed’s thesis.

\(^{14}\) Another significant difference between these groups is their willingness to assimilate to humankind or the Primary World of the SVM. Sookie notes that “Fairies did not want to be known to the human world, and they never would. They weren’t like the wereanimals and vampires, who wanted to share in the planet with us. There was much less reason for the fairies to keep in line with human policies and rules. They could do anything they wished and vanish back into their secret place” (\textit{Dead and Gone} 137). Later Sookie makes another distinction, thinking to herself, “Fairies had never been human. At least vampires might remember what being human was like, and weres were human most of the time, even if they had a different culture; being a were was like having dual citizenship, I figured. This was an important difference between the fairies and other supernaturals, and it made the fairies more frightening” (192).
that “individual and collective surfaces are made in the meeting between bodies” (Lindgren Leaveworth 38). Near the conclusion of the war, Claudine reveals to Sookie that she is pregnant with a “pure fairy child”: “‘We’re not really a very fertile race, and the huge amount of iron in the world has reduced our birthrate. Our numbers decline every century. I am very lucky. It’s one of the reasons I never take humans to bed, though from time to time I would love to; they are so delicious, some of them. But I’d hate to waste a fertile cycle on a human’” (266).

Claudine’s statement regarding her sexual behavior classifies her as a kind of “ethnosexual defender,” or a person who uses sex “to protect their ethnic identity and protect themselves from ethnic and cultural invasion.” Robert Reece developed this term by drawing on Joane Nagel’s theoretical “frame for interpreting racialized sex” (Reece 105) in her provocative text, Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers, in which she proposed a number of ethnosexual identities by which we might understand how sexual boundaries are constructed and reconstructed. The primary identities she examines are ethnosexual settlers, sojourners, adventurers, and invaders—though she mentions the potential for new terminology, including ethnosexual protestors and defenders, on which Reece would later elaborate—by which we can employ “critical race theory’s strategy of ‘storytelling, counterstorytelling, and the analysis of narrative’ to challenge ‘the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture’” (Nagel 4). For Nagel, these terms encompass the reason for crossing or defending ethnic and racial boundaries, as well as the duration for which these lines are crossed or defended. For instance, an ethnosexual sojourner is a person who engages in a sexual or romantic relationship that crosses boundaries only to return to their original community at its termination, while an ethnosexual settler is someone who chooses to commit to a partner who is in a different racial or ethnic group, to the point that they
take on the identity of their partner’s group. An example of how this difference might be distinguished in the SVM is in Sookie’s personal life. We can identify her as an ethnosexual sojourner, because she engages in a number of relationships with partners who identify differently than her, including vampires and twoeys. Were she to choose to accept the invitation of one of her vampire boyfriends, such as Eric, to settle down with him and be turned vampire, she would then become an ethnosexual settler. However, Sookie chooses to break off her relationship with Eric, and by the conclusion of the SVM still identifies as a part-fae human, who does not foresee settling permanently with any partner, regardless of their ethnic or racial identity.

Ethnosexual adventures, invaders, and defenders are entangled identity categorizations. Ethnosexual adventurers engage in interethnic or interracial sexual affairs out of curiosity, to fulfill a fantasy perhaps, and do not necessarily respect or wish to engage culturally with their partners—an example being “fangbangers,” the series’ derogatory reference to human men and women who have casual sexual relationships with vampires. Ethnosexual invaders use sex as a weapon against ethnic or racial enemies, often employing rape in order to dilute the opposing group’s ethic or racial saliency or otherwise conquer them. A metaphorical example of an invader in the SVM is the werepanther responsible for “turning” Jason, who repeatedly bites him in the hope that if he is successfully made part-werepanther he will be less desirable to the female members of the pack (Dead to the World). Protestors and defenders, then, employ sex to reverse the narratives and hierarchies by which adventurers and invaders seek to establish sexual boundaries in their own favor. Claudine is an ethnosexual defender because she chooses to engage sexually with partners with whom she can continue a healthy and pure racial line. Quinn, a weretiger to whom we are introduced in the fifth SVM novel, Dead as a Doornail, is also an
ethnosexual defender. Though he and Sookie date for a short period of time, Quinn eventually chooses to create a family (though not a marriage) with a fellow weretiger (Dutch-Sumerian Tijgerin), in part because of the companionship she provides him by sharing his culture, and in part because they are two of the last weretigers in existence. The process by which both Claudine and Quinn intend to raise their offspring also reflects their identities and policies regarding sexual boundaries. In the formal arrangement Claudine establishes with her fairy lover, and in accordance with fairy tradition, Claudine intends to take primary custody of the child, though her partner will “be there to guard her during her early years” (267). Tijgerin too takes custody of her child with Quinn, according to weretiger practice, but Quinn is almost entirely excluded from the child’s life, even from the earliest months of Tij’s pregnancy, because of the chance that the child will be male and Quinn’s tiger territorial instincts will cause him to harm or kill the child (Dead Ever After).

Ethnosexual protestors are quite difficult to pinpoint in the SVM. Reece defines a protestor as someone who uses sex “as a method of resisting and/or fighting oppression; they believe that sex can be a valuable activist tool for subjugated groups” (105): “Though the general concept of what it means to be an ethnosexual protestor holds true in all cases, it manifests differently based on the social position of the people involved. The reasons why one chooses to use sex as protest and the methods one chooses will vary even though the basic idea is the same: to subvert the racial and gender hierarchy” (107). Reece points to American cultural examples of ethnosexual protest, including black-on-white rape that enabled black men to feel some superiority or power over the white culture that systematically oppresses them. In these cases, the protestors in question wield sex with these preconceived intentions, and so overlap with the aims and methods of ethnosexual invasion. However, I think the SVM performs a different form of
ethnosexual protest, one that subverts racial and gender hierarchies without employing “invasive” procedures. For example, Amelia is a prominent, recurring character in the SVM, who, like Sookie, engages sexually with a number of different kinds of races and ethnicities—though Amelia differs from Sookie by also engaging with different genders, including a white female vampire and a black male Were. She makes no explanation or defense for her romantic interest in these very different people, and Sookie never asks her to do so. Eventually, when Amelia starts a family with a (male) fellow witch, she is excited at the prospect of upsetting traditional expectations: “‘We’re going to raise the baby together. Wait until I tell my father! He’s going to be so ticked because we’re not married’” (Dead Ever After 185). In this way, Amelia uses her sexuality to make assertions about identity without force, while simultaneously downplaying her ethnic saliency.

Another example of an ethnosexual protestor is, of course, Sookie herself. Though she technically “sojourns” through her interracial relationships when we take account of her narrative as a whole, Sookie’s choice of sexual partner has little to do with an attempt “to blend into the ethnic community in which [she] establish[es] sexual liaisons” (Nagel 15). On the contrary, as demonstrated in chapter one, Sookie’s gender and sexual identities are more obviously constructed as a result of the “Otherness” she must negotiate within herself. Sookie crosses ethnic and racial lines in order to find compatible sexual partners, because she cannot in her human and even fairy communities. Sookie’s narrative, then, is not only about her social mobility across ethnic and racial lines, but also her sexual mobility. This mobility is perceived to be threatening by much of the human, hegemonic Primary World community in which Sookie participates. She is targeted and threatened countlessly for her association with vampires, who are racialized by humans as lesser and, of course, dangerous. However, by the conclusion of the
SVM her tolerance towards other ethnosexual sojourners, protestors, defenders, and even adventurers, as well as her consistent ethnosexual policies in her own personal life, eventually earn her the respect of her community. Though we, as readers, are aware that there will always be members of Sookie’s Primary World that do not share her “essential spark,” who are incapable of recognizing or respecting a secondary world, there is a dynamism to Sookie’s community—from Hotshot in the darkest reaches of her parish to the “bright lights” of Shreveport—that reflects Sookie’s own ethnosexual journey.

Even as we suspend our disbelief to follow a narrative full of twoey, vampire, fairy, and witch characters, we must attend to their ethnic significance and correspondence to personally-held, perhaps subconscious ideas concerning difference and “Otherness.” Cornell and Hartmann, and many sociologists like them, concur regarding the nuances of race and ethnicity by frequently pointing to case studies we may or may not recognize, in order to illustrate how the “idioms of ethnicity and race are unusually powerful.” As such, they allow for identities that are not prominent, are expressed privately, or are such a small community as to be marginalized or flattened entirely. In other words, they create room for identities that do not “exist.” As do the SVM. Identity in the SVM is often irrevocably intersectional, an admixture of human races and ethnicity and supernatural races and ethnicity, in addition to gender and sexuality; and so it demonstrates a splintering of the black-white binary often projected onto the south and undermines the “habits of Whiteness” evident in fantasy (Young), mystery, and southern literature and culture. Yet the SVM also realistically portrays the difficulties not only of expressing identity but also the danger of crossing boundaries of identity. Enacting an ethnic identity, or fictionally constructing one, carries with it a weight of connotations and conflicting symbols, which are often expressed through stereotypes and discrimination. “In their implied
references to physicality, blood, biology, or descent, [ethnicity and race] suggest something
deeper and more compelling than convenience or utility or search for meaning. But even their
implied primordiality is a construction; it is not part of the world out there, but part of the story
we tell about it” (Cornell and Hartmann 265). That is, not only does the SVM demonstrate
examples of racial and ethnic identity construction, but, in doing so, the series also reinforces
why they are so important.

These identity constructions and their attending meanings are often self-conscious, but
can also participate in the very cultural models that discriminate against them; and like Cornell
and Hartmann, Nagel and Reece assert that counternarratives, or case studies and models of
behavior that subvert racist hierarchies, are not always successful in effecting change. “Though
one may be able to achieve a symbolic victory or alter his or her situation through interracial sex,
racism and patriarchy are structural issues that require structural solutions,” Reece writes (115).
Helen Young notes a similar trend of dismissing structural issues by taking individual cases as
endemic in fantasy media-culture: “The presence of people of colour in a genre-culture space
does not in and of itself work to change its habits of Whiteness when they do not have agency—
the ability to act autonomously, to choose to act or not act, to not be acted upon” (156). She
continues, “Thus, if an imagined world includes characters of colour, which are constructed
using the same stereotypical signs as in dominant culture, that imagined world reinforces the
structure of the culture in which it was created, and as a result does not work to break Fantasy’s
habits of Whiteness” (161). The SVM’s performance of race and ethnicity is, in many ways, an
unfortunate compromise. For example, characters are characterized according to the hierarchies
of American (read: white) privilege: white characters are not given racial descriptors, while non-
white characters are (Rothenberg). These failings have been pointed out by a number of critics
who champion its transmediated version, *True Blood*, which placed a more significant number of non-white actors at the fore, over the literal one. However, the number and diversity of characters represented in the SVM imagines a South that is richly complex and subtly nuanced, where a process South is constantly in motion between people and peoples, transforming them as well as their boundaries. In other words, a process South is more evident in the book series because it both participates in the cultural whitewashing of American “white optics” (Woolfork) and undoes it by offering countless opportunities to reverse ethnocentric thinking. Fantastic and mysterious narratives can say something new about the south by demonstrating that this region is always learning about itself, as exemplified by Sookie who journeys between worlds, and even “[t]hese stories have consequences” (Cornell and Hartmann 265).
III. THE AMORPHOUS SHAPE OF THE LAND: SOOKIE’S NEW ORLEANS

“Does disaster have a future?”

Kroll-Smith and Madsen, “Disaster, Time, and Dialogue: A Couple Lessons from Hurricane Katrina”

“[Sookie:] Northern Louisiana is pretty darn different from southern Louisiana in several fundamental ways: it’s the Bible Belt without the pizzazz of New Orleans; it’s the older sister who stayed home and tended the farm while the younger sister went out partying. But it shares other things with the southern part of the state, too: bad roads, corrupt politics, and a lot of people, both black and white, who live right on the poverty line.”

Charlaine Harris, A Touch of Dead

In Southscapes, Thadious Davis “acknowledges the connection between society and environment as a way of thinking about how raced human being are impacted by the shape of the land” (2), lighting on the fitting and critically ubiquitous example of Hurricane Katrina. Certainly, Louisiana’s southernmost areas were not the only devastated by Katrina, yet the state, and New Orleans specifically, was cast as the primary, if not sole victim in the Katrina media narrative. “Since Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana has become the central focus of discourse on race and poverty, civic responsibility and governmental neglect,” Davis writes. “Yet Louisiana, and New Orleans, in particular, did not always present the face of poverty, entrapment, and despair. In fact . . . Louisiana, like the South today for which it may be read as emblematic, retains a power to command attention and analysis in the present surge of new studies of American regions” (187), considering the state’s nuanced history as both an exotic Other and a battlefield of civil rights legislation. Here Davis, like other students of Hurricane Katrina and its repercussions through art and media, contextualizes Katrina within the cycle of southern cultural history rather than treating it as the outlier event it might appear to be. The devastation of the
2005 storm revealed the racial disparities of New Orleans’ infrastructure and resources, but rather than implicating southern (read: American) society’s role in the dehumanization of black lives the environmental disaster instead shored up this pattern, as national media messages echoed rhetoric that “demonized and slandered” Katrina’s most powerless victims (187).

Davis’ account of Katrina’s aftermath is not new, but rather the consensus amongst Katrina sociologists and cultural critics. In their overview of the “Katrina Bookshelf”—“Imagine The Katrina Bookshelf as a composition and each book on The Shelf a movement, a part of the composition that is more or less complete in and of itself” (360)—Steve Kroll-Smith and Rachel Madsen all but list the myriad works of ethnography and analysis produced on Hurricane Katrina and its victims since 2005. Though certainly, as they write, “Each has its own voice and reaches its own resolution” (361), there are trends in the Bookshelf that make some “resolutions” almost indisputably clear. The predominant resolution is that race is the most influential variable in determining the extent of the damage to a Katrina victim’s person, property, and “place”—or their relationship with family and culture—which, by extension, affects that victim’s likelihood to return to their home area. The impact of race on these factors is not exactly linear, of course; but since race often overlaps with other, significant socioeconomic conditions, it appeared as though non-whites were somehow targeted by the storm, when in reality they were more likely to occupy the areas most damaged. Another noteworthy resolution is that the timespan of any study of Hurricane Katrina plays a role in the conclusions it may draw. When conducted immediately after Katrina, a study was more likely to pay attention to race, for reasons I have just mentioned: “It is moments of mayhem, after all, that often reveal the deep grammar of our personal lives and social arrangements. . . . Here, when all is close to chaos, we can learn a great deal about emergent groups, human ingenuity, transient communities, the goodness of others, and, perhaps
at times, depravity” (362). An approach with a “long look,” or studies that follow Katrina survivors for significant periods of time after the storm, is more interested in “what life is like surviving in what we might call a postpositivist culture, one rife with problems that defy solutions” (365). Variables emerge beyond race to complicate relationships between Katrina-affected regions and the nation, including kin and friendship networks that stretch beyond the south (as well as beyond American borders) and estrange ideas of what “refugees,” and migrants in general, look like.

But, to Kroll-Smith and Madsen, the best Katrina research is premised on the notion that “no disaster begins at impact” (361): “Disaster recovery—however well intentioned—is predictably driven by predisaster understandings, practices, and social relations that routinely work to recreate and sustain resilient patterns of social and spatial inequality”(365-6). In other words, disasters exist in—and so must be read within—context. For instance, the destruction due to the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, to which Hurricane Katrina is often compared because of similar issues of disaster preparedness and post-disaster reconstruction, is rarely interpreted along regional or racial lines. Therefore, how do we recognize “recovery”? Is an area or people “recovered” when it or they return to the racially or socioeconomically divided lines to which they were previously organized? Is “recovery” a measurement of change or similarity? Kroll-Smith and Madsen problematize “recovery” in a rhetorical sense, writing:

"There is the idea of recovery that extends past the impact and emergency stages. But does recovery come to an end with that incantation “recovered?” There is admittedly a kind of magic about this word. Invoked, it has a particular effect. At the very least, it invites us to stop inquiring into this particular calamity and look to the next combustible episode on the horizon. . . . There is always the next disaster. (362)"

They imply, then, that recovery is an ill-fitting term, or at the very least one that cannot be applied without considering a kind of disaster chronological spectrum or cycle, which should
account for “predisaster understandings, practices, and social relations” as well as the long-term effects of post-disaster trauma, displacement, and aid. Jim Downs, too, takes issue with “recovery” by not only regionalizing the idea but also historicizing it. He reminds us that “the events and discourse that followed the hurricane's disastrous impact—the massive dislocation, the failure of the Federal government to respond promptly, and the sharp rise in poverty—are not new; a similar pattern can be traced in the aftermath of the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves in the 1860s” (16). In addition to the failures that occurred on national-regional lines, Downs makes parallels between post-Civil War and post-Katrina racialized victim-blaming and illuminates the impossibility that every facet of black life can be “recovered” after such radical events (17). Just as slaves were not given the aid or guaranteed the rights that Reconstruction was intended to provide, and just as they were often suddenly removed from the intricate and supportive network of kin by emancipation, so too were non-white Katrina victims disqualified from basic resources (let alone compassion), painted as criminals who sought to ransack their own destroyed city or as indolent freeloaders when removed to safer places.

Yet, Downs ends his refresher course optimistically, concluding that, by the national attention directed to the south via Katrina, “reconstruction might finally come to the entire South” (18). In other words, the failed post-Civil War project aimed at stabilizing a defeated and reorganized region, in Downs’ estimation, might finally succeed in light of Katrina, which earned national and international attention and resurfaced long-latent issues of systemic racism. In 2006, when Downs’ “Reconstructing the American South—After Katrina” was published, and when Harris was negotiating her own post-Katrina “Sookieverse” while writing All Together Dead, optimism may have seemed warranted. My aim in this chapter is not to contradict Downs’ hopes for Reconstruction, or to argue for the kind of recovery realized by a post-Katrina south...
(in reality or in fiction), because neither tack would be fruitful. Rather, to return to Davis’ claims that Louisiana is somehow “emblematic” of southernness, I wish to read Hurricane Katrina not only as a literal means by which “the shape of the land” exposed—and, worse, was utilized for—racialization but also metaphorically as an extra-southern force by which the process South reveals itself as participating in a network of time, places, and people in the SVM. Though these networks exist before disaster or radical change occurs and long after those affected have “recovered,” events such as Hurricane Katrina demonstrate how and why they operate. As a kind of alternative-history set in the present, and as a series with great stakes in its Louisiana setting, the SVM is a viable case study for charting these connections. Therefore, in order to understand how time, place, and people network through the SVM, we should not separate our analysis into the plot of the SVM pre- and post-Katrina, as if comparison might yield something other than more circular conversation about disaster and recovery. Instead, I will take up subplots and characters that include this transition but span a longer time period, and that involve networks reaching beyond family and, more importantly, beyond the south.

SPARE BEDROOMS

In Ten Years after Katrina: Critical Perspectives of the Storm’s Effect on American Culture and Identity, Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenik describe “what is at work in the creative output on Katrina—it represents a series of efforts to construct a coherent narrative out of the chaos and wreckage of a cataclysmic event” (7). Understandably, many of the artists and authors Marotte and Jellenik are interested in experienced Katrina in firsthand ways—surviving the storm, swept away in the post-Katrina diaspora, still wrestling with the devastation on a personal as well as cultural level. What they produce, then, is in some way a reliving or retelling of the storm. The SVM provides quite a different angle to the Katrina crisis. Though arguably the
series is itself “in search of deeper understanding about a world where the hurricane happened and our place in it” (7), it does not engage with the storm directly, or does not attempt to portray the trauma through first-person experience. Sookie travels to New Orleans in the 2005 in which Definitely Dead is written and set, but she returns safely before the storm hits, and what little personal experience we learn is gleaned through brief accounts provided by secondary and tertiary characters. For Sookie, then, the storm is indefinable, and she can only regurgitate the rhetoric in which others have painted it: “Incident, catastrophe, disaster, apocalypse—pick your word; they all would serve” (Dead and Gone 116). To further complicate Marotte and Jellenik’s thesis, the “world” of the SVM where Katrina happened is not one, but several that intersect (i.e. the Faery portal, tucked away in Sookie’s woods, or the many sociopolitical engagements that determine boundaries or establish alliances between human and supernatural communities), and so Katrina reverberates differently through each. Therefore, the SVM’s “understanding about a world where the hurricane happened” is multilayered.

First, I would like to grapple with the “human” experience of Katrina by following Sookie’s journey from Bon Temps, southward to New Orleans, and back with other New Orleanians in tow—and how this journey parallels the many other New Orleans narratives in the SVM. Before Definitely Dead, in the separately published short story “One Word Answer,” Sookie learns the first news of her estranged cousin, Hadley Delahoussaye, since she “vanished into the underworld of drugs and prostitution years before.” Sookie immediately describes Hadley as lost by coloring her in terms specific to the location of this “underworld”: “I had her high school junior picture in my photo album. That was the last picture she’d had taken, because that year she’d run off to New Orleans to make her living by her wits and her body. My aunt Linda, her mother, had died of cancer during the second year after Hadley’s departure” (81).
Before we learn more about Hadley’s situation, our sympathy is directed to those left behind, slighted by Hadley’s seeming selfishness, of which Sookie is party. New Orleans is cast as the idol to whom Hadley’s humanity is seconded—so captivating as to keep her from her own dying mother—and so it is fitting that, just after this interior characterization, Sookie is informed that her cousin recently chose to be turned vampire by her female vampire lover. Since this lover is the Queen of Louisiana, Hadley’s position in New Orleans is significantly elevated by her decision.

Every vampire territory had a king or queen, and with that title came power. But the Queen of Louisiana had extra status, since she was seated in New Orleans, which was the most popular city in the United States if you were of the undead. Since the vampire tourism now accounted for so much of the city’s revenue, even the humans of New Orleans listened to the queen’s wants and wishes, in an unofficial way. (88)

However, a position close to such a powerful entity does not ensure Hadley’s safety, but rather earns her the enmity of the queen’s former favorites. The news sent to Sookie by the Queen of Louisiana is intended not to reunite the cousins, but rather to inform Sookie that Hadley has been staked and is now permanently lost to her and her family.

The implications of this flood of information speak to the relationship not only between Hadley and her family but also New Orleans and northern Louisiana (as they exist in the SVM), which are depicted as diametric or as poles. For instance, Sookie recalls that Hadley “had been my physical opposite in most ways. I was robust and blond, she was thin and dark. I was strong, she was frail. She’d had big, thickly lashed brown eyes, mine were blue” (85); yet these contrasts extend beyond their person. Though it is never explicitly stated, the SVM implies that Hadley pursued a life in New Orleans in order to try to escape the poverty and conventionality of her hometown. When Sookie asks why she, and not her brother Jason, is the designated executor of Hadley’s estate, Hadley’s lawyer informs Sookie that Jason once denied Hadley when she
reached out to him for help in the past: “‘He ignored her request, so she’s ignoring him’” (85). Since only a few years pass between her call to Jason and her ascendance to the Queen’s “handmaiden,” Hadley’s pride is clearly enmeshed with her financial security. Sookie later learns that Hadley’s feelings for the Louisiana vampire queen were, at least in part, genuine, but Sookie’s initial characterization of her cousin indicates that Hadley values security over her own humanity. Similar can be said for the city in which this bargain occurs. Sookie ventures down to New Orleans in order to settle Hadley’s estate, and when she does she notices the vampire trappings that confirm the transformation both Hadley and her city have undergone. In Hadley’s refrigerator, for instance, is a six-pack of synthetic blood, and New Orleans was a city of the night now. It had always been a place with a brawling and brazen nightlife, but now it was such a center for the undead that its entire character had changed. A lot of the jazz on Bourbon Street was played these days by hands that had last seen sunlight decades before. . . . I sat on a chair on the gallery and listened for a while, and I hoped I’d get to see some of the city while I was here. New Orleans is like no other place in America, both before the vampire influx and after it. (170)

Sookie’s observations point to how Hadley and New Orleans have stepped out of linear time. After becoming a vampire, Hadley would have no longer aged or changed, so her sense of time must have been drastically transformed by her new, potentially immortal body. Similarly, the New Orleans Sookie once knew, having visited well before the “vampire influx,” is now a place whose historical chronology has been disrupted. When a tourist is able to access a different era or culture simply by entering this or that Bourbon Street venue, because inside are vampires who knew and carry markers of that time or place, the city she visits no longer exists in (only) its own present space. Like Hadley’s body, New Orleans is changed into something no longer human, and in a matter of pages Hadley transforms in our understanding from a person lured to the freedom and grit of New Orleans to a kind of embodiment of the city. Because of this personal
projection, New Orleans, then, is characterized as a city that is willing to bargain away its very “character” in order to be “queen.” The dynamic between Hadley’s southern city and Sookie’s northern, rural area of Louisiana is confirmed by a New Orleanian when, upon arriving at Hadley’s apartment, Sookie meets Hadley’s former landlord who reacts physically to Sookie’s telling her she’s from Bon Temps: “Amelia snorted. She had the born city dweller’s contempt for small towns” (161).

In “One Word Answer,” Sookie becomes responsible for the weight of grieving her now-foreign cousin, but is also gifted with the mystery of her demise. As she asks more and more pointedly about the details of Hadley’s last moments, Sookie unravels the coups by which a prestigious member of the vampire queen’s court, Waldo, lured Hadley away from the safety of court in order to stake her and, as a result, punish the queen for replacing him as her favorite. Waldo accomplishes his plan by preying on Hadley’s pride, encouraging her belief that she might be related to the famous voodoo priestess Marie Laveau, and proposing that they conjure her spirit in order to confirm the women’s kinship, since “‘the blood of the dead can raise the dead, at least temporarily. For conversational purposes, you understand’” (92). Sookie never discovers what happens at Laveau’s gravesite. Sookie doubts her cousin’s claim to Laveau’s lineage, and Waldo digs at Hadley by implying to Sookie that their ritual took place and failed (“Her intent was not pure enough” [93]). What is more significant, however, is that the very possibility of being connected with Laveau, with New Orleans itself, was enough to motivate Hadley to put herself in harm’s way. Yet, Hadley fulfills her own notions of Laveau-like grandeur when she herself is later conjured. The witches of New Orleans—including the snorting landlord, Amelia—perform a service for the Queen of Louisiana by conducting an “ectoplasmic reconstruction,” a magical process by which a specific event from the past is recovered and
replayed for the observer, the past visually overlapping the present in order to glean information that is otherwise inaccessible. The witches cover the area in and around Hadley’s home, and Sookie, the vampire queen, and her entourage witness Hadley in her last evening as a vampire in order to verify whether Hadley committed a crime before she was staked. Sookie describes the “reconstructed” or reanimated Hadley as if she were Laveau, raised for “conversational purposes”: “I was so shocked, I almost spoke to her. When I looked for just a second longer, I could tell it wasn’t really Hadley. . . . She looked like tinted water, walking” (220). In her reanimation, Hadley answers a different question that that of her lineage—instead confirming that she did, in fact, betray her queen by committing the crime of which she has been posthumously accused—yet she is likened to the voodoo queen by drawing Sookie and the New Orleans elite toward herself, even after death.

Sookie visits New Orleans for only a short time in Definitely Dead, yet her role in settling Hadley’s estate—as well as sleuthing through the secrets Hadley took to her grave—has repercussions throughout the SVM, particularly because this sixth SVM novel ends just weeks before Hurricane Katrina washes through New Orleans. Not knowing the timeliness of her decision, Amelia (true New Orleanian and mid-level witch) follows Sookie back to Bon Temps, and so further establishes the network between Bon Temps and New Orleans, of which Sookie is a kind of facilitator. It is Amelia who forces Sookie to play a more active part in aiding other Katrina victims; though, both directly and indirectly, all of “Bon Temps was feeling the storm’s effect, and had been ever since Katrina had hit land. Our little town was still crowded with people who had fled from the south” (All Together Dead 9). Amelia invites her witch mentor, Octavia, to occupy a spare bedroom of the Stackhouse residence since, months after Katrina’s
devastation, the elderly Octavia is still relying on the kindness of her relatives. However,

Amelia’s offer is extended unbeknownst to Sookie:

“Amelia told me about . . . your very kind offer.”
Ah-oh. What offer?
I nodded wisely, as if I had a clue.
“I’ll be so glad to be out of my niece’s house, you have no idea,” the woman said earnestly. “Janesha has three little ones, including one toddler, and a boyfriend who comes and goes. I’m sleeping on the living room couch, and when the kids get up in the morning, they come in and turn on the cartoons. Whether I’m up or not. It’s their house, of course, and I’ve been there for weeks, so they’ve lost the sense that I’m company.”

I gathered Octavia was going to be sleeping in the bedroom opposite me or in the extra one upstairs. I was voting for the one upstairs.

“And you know, now that I’m older, I need quicker access to a bathroom.” She looked at me with that humorous deprecation people show when they’re admitting to a passage-of-time condition. “So downstairs would be wonderful, especially since my knees are arthritic. Did I tell you Janesha’s apartment is upstairs?” (From Dead to Worse 233)

Octavia’s presence is a minor nuisance to Sookie from this moment on, though Amelia and Sookie attempt to engage Octavia so that she feels contributive to the household.15 In this way, the SVM acknowledges the often-uneasy relationship between Katrina refugees and the networks on which they rely for support. That Octavia’s own niece could not accommodate her for more than a few months before she became invisible, a piece of furniture blended into the background of the young family’s daily life, speaks to the discomfort of non-evacuees, who cannot empathize with the dramatic (and traumatic) event experienced by the evacuees who rely on them. In his study of the makeup of extended-family households of New Orleans after Katrina, Michael

15 Though Sookie does not make this connection for herself, we may assume that another reason why Sookie endeavors to be considerate to Octavia is Sookie’s own experience with displacement. In the fifth SVM novel, Dead as a Doornail, Sookie’s house is set on fire by an enemy vampire, and she loses a great deal of her family’s belongings. For instance, the kitchen, which we will recall is a significant setting in the SVM, is almost entirely ruined, and must be rebuilt as well as refurnished. The Bon Temps community does a great deal to help Sookie after this traumatic experience: she is offered a place to stay, cooked for, and her sturdier neighbors assist Sookie with clearing away the burned portions of the house at almost no cost. Therefore, it is no surprise that Bon Temps would be willing to shelter Katrina evacuees, or that Sookie would agree to Amelia’s offer.
Rendall notes that elderly family members are often unsuited to the flexibility required to adapting to new living situations, and as a result are often forced to go without the care required for their daily existence. As such, elderly evacuees were most likely to return to New Orleans when the necessary resources were reinstated.

Octavia lives with the two women until the ninth SVM novel, when more and more survivors are finally able to establish contact with family and friends and Octavia is given the opportunity to return to New Orleans. In Dead and Gone, Octavia hears from her long-time neighbor and friend, Louis, whom she assumed did not survive the storm. After calling her and ensuring that she, too, has survived, Louis comes to fetch her; and, upon his arrival, Sookie describes Louis as “one of the blackest men I’d ever seen, and his face was tattooed with circles around the eyes,” though, after this first impression, she notices that “he looked calm and agreeable” (116). After asking Octavia to accompany him back to New Orleans, he defends the state of the home to which they’ll be returning to the Amelia and Sookie, as if asking for permission: “I have electricity. There’s a lot to do, but I have light and heat. I can cook again. My refrigerator’s humming and my street’s almost clean. I put my own roof back on. Now Octavia can come home with me to a place fit for her” (116-7). The women agree to Octavia’s leaving, of course—Sookie goes so far as to breathe “a profound sigh of relief.” After the two evacuees leave, however, she and Amelia wonder at how the two older black lovers will fare in New Orleans.

“A witch as strong as Octavia can’t take care of herself?” [Sookie asked.]
“Good point. But did you see those tattoos?”
“They were something, weren’t they? I guess he’s some kind of sorcerer.”
Amelia nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure he practices some form of African magic,” she said. “I don’t think we need to worry about the high crime rate in New Orleans affecting Octavia and Louis. I don’t think anyone’s going to be mugging them.” (118)
This conversation between Amelia and Sookie is a loaded one, if we consider its racial implications. Having never met Louis before, Amelia only assumes that Louis practices a style of magic that is different from her own, her justification based solely on race. Also, by implying that Louis’ practice of magic would be a deterrent from crime, Amelia further assumes that his supposed Africanness somehow makes him more dangerous than any threat against him. In this way, Amelia speaks to the nation’s popular response to post-Katrina realities. Marotte and Jellenik, among others, capture this response by concluding that, even a few days after the storm hit land, “everyone knew what Hurricane Katrina was all about: poverty, racism, and government ineptitude. And perhaps reducing the storm and its effects to a series of basic talking points stymied and pigeon-holed the Katrina narrative” (186, 188). That narrative, as depicted on the national media, participated in coded racism by entertaining the masses—that seemed to necessitate journalists “condense complex social processes into dramatic sound bites”—with generated spectacle at the expense of non-whites (Masquelier 741).

In her provocative rhetorical explication, “Why Katrina’s Victims Aren’t Refugees: Musings on a ‘Dirty’ Word,” Adeline Masquelier expounds on the power of mediated rhetoric by focusing on the terminology used by journalists to refer to Katrina survivors, emphasizing how their language was not only inefficient but also alienating and dehumanizing. Though privileged America found the word “refugee” offensive because it contradicted the “image of power, prosperity, and self-sufficiency” with which they identified, to non-white Katrina survivors the term indicated a separateness they could not overcome. Masquelier, both personally and professionally devastated by Katrina’s impact, comments on the handicap of being misidentified in this way: “Calling them refugees at a time when they more than ever needed to belong took away their citizenship, and by implication, their right to be part of the national order of things”
(737). She goes on to point out that in a linguistic sense, or “[f]rom a structuralist perspective,” “refugees constitute an aberration; they are an expression of liminality, a zone of pollution” and “danger.” However, Masquelier also acknowledges the flip side of this rhetorical agency. Language remains for Katrina victims “the only device that remained to regain control over the definition of frail selfhoods.” Therefore, Amelia’s admission that Louis’ “African” sorcery and Octavia’s command of witchcraft would ensure their survival is not off the mark. Since Octavia and Louis share a similar racial identity, and since they share a practice that involves meditation and incantation, their reunion participates in the tradition Masquelier outlines as “self-affirmation” or self-reconstruction.

Amelia’s ties to New Orleans continue to affect Sookie, involving her in “aid” to the affected region in complicated and compromising ways. For instance, Amelia is the daughter of the influential New Orleans builder-mogul, Copley Carmichael, and, though their relationship is fraught, Cope visits Amelia with some frequency while she is a resident of the Stackhouse home. Not only is Amelia cut off from her primary source of income by Katrina’s devastation but Cope too suffers great financial losses, the extent of which he keeps private. So, when learning that Amelia’s new roommate is intimately connected with the vampire world, Cope manipulates both Amelia and Sookie in order to use Sookie’s network to reestablish his own. Using his daughter’s loneliness, Cope makes himself vulnerable to Amelia and presumes on her relationship with Sookie by not only asking Amelia to mediate his request to Sookie but also asking Sookie to mediate his wishes to the presiding vampire community in New Orleans: “‘he wants to reestablish his business link with the vampires,’” Amelia tells Sookie. “‘He wants an introduction. He was hoping you could, like broker that’” (From Dead to Worse 205). It is Sookie’s refusal to help Cope that motivates him to instead broker his own connection with a
New Orleans devil to whom he sells his soul, as discussed in chapter one. In exchange for his soul offering, Cope asks to return to his successful position in the New Orleans business world; but since he offers the soul of his bodyguard, Tyrese, as well as his own, he is entitled to a “signing bonus” with which Cope seeks to presume on Sookie’s fae network as well (*Dead Ever After* 4). Again, as we know from chapter one, Cope’s desperate grab at Sookie’s cluviel dor fails, but it is significant how New Orleans operates in the “downward path” that eventually puts Sookie, as well as his own daughter, at risk (198). Like Hadley, who trades her humanity for a seat at the right hand of the queen while at the height of her pre-Katrina power, Cope trades his humanity to restore the influence he lost after Katrina.16

In this way, the SVM continues to characterize the rural Bon Temps and cosmopolitan New Orleans as intimately connected, the two places creating a line where a tug on one end can create a tear on the one. Bon Temps is a crossroads parallel to New Orleans, where connections are forged or disbanded, deals made or unmade. Yet New Orleans plays a direct role in the process South by which the Bon Temps community learns lessons of tolerance and empathy, as Bon Temps takes in human and supernatural survivors driven out of New Orleans by the hurricane. As Sookie’s relationships stretch across this imaginary line, her network sprouting new and complex limbs, so too does her understanding of family and identity see great transformations. In so doing, she demonstrates a kind of process South that effects change at the junctions where people and places unexpectedly meet.

16 It is also worth noting another connection between these two members of Sookie’s network, because it is Cope who, wishing to unnerve Sookie, divulges Hadley’s closest kept secret: her young human son, currently living in a small town halfway between Bon Temps and New Orleans. Sookie thereafter investigates the existence of Hadley’s son, Hunter, and fosters a relationship with him. This connection is important not only because it characterizes Sookie as a kind of mother to this now-motherless boy, which valorizes Sookie in the eyes of her community, but also because Hunter is a telepath like Sookie. The SVM concludes when Hunter is about to start elementary school, so Sookie’s motivation to mentor Hunter’s telepathy is a plot line left largely unresolved.
DISMEMBERED QUEENS

The human network depicted in the SVM is comprised of surprising connections and increases in range and complexity as the series progresses, but is often limited to southern spheres, as exemplified by the ties between Bon Temps and New Orleans. In comparison, the supernatural network, which operates not only between parts of Louisiana but also regions of the country, is nearly unrecognizable—not only because the supernatural domains remain largely invisible to human populations, but also because the organization of these networks do not align with traditional family patterns or humanitarian purposes. Vampire and “twoey” evacuees could not expect to be so easily welcomed into other communities of their kind, for instance. The boundaries of groups as private and structured as theirs are not flexible enough to allow unfamiliar persons to pass between them, as we determined in chapter two. As such, their stories belong to the “second-wave fictional narratives of Katrina” as outlined by Marotte and Jellenik: “In this fiction, Katrina is the catalyst for universal stories—stories of the ways that people remember and fight for their way of life, stories of the ways that cultures live and die, stories of life and death itself. In short, it’s not about a hurricane” (197). Transcending the local, or even the regional, second-wave Katrina narratives do not set out to trouble our understandings of race or class, or make claims for how areas affected by the storm have or have not “recovered.” Rather, they make connections between experiences. One way to chart this experiential network, then, is to examine parallel “stories of life and death” amongst the SVM’s supernatural communities, moments where members are in positions to make decisions for their very survival—moments preceding and following Hurricane Katrina.

Louisiana’s vampire queen faces many such decisions during her reign in the SVM, targeted as she is for her powerful position in the vampire community and the financial success
afforded to her by the human and vampire tourism industry. After the events that unfold in “One Word Answer,” Sookie is further acquainted with the structures and hierarchies of the vampire community, particularly the portion of it that would take Sophie-Anne Leclerq as its queen. Over eleven-thousand years old, Sophie-Anne is respected for her age and her tested leadership, but her ability to communicate telepathically to her vampire progeny and her brief experience as a human make her relatable not only to the Hadley who eked out an existence in New Orleans “by her wit and her body,” but also to Sookie, who later earns Sophie-Anne’s friendship. The common, quite human experience they share is exploitation: Sookie and Hadley were both molested by their great-uncle as children, and Sophie-Anne was raped and sold for her body in rural Lotharingia (Definitely Dead 235). Knowing this, Sookie’s allegiance lies with the vampire queen who survived her situation, triumphing over her abusers when turned vampire (even if Sookie owes Sophie-Anne no allegiance, being human), rather than Sophie-Anne’s new husband, the vampire king of Arkansas. Vampire marriages are often formal ties that indicate political and financial obligation between states or larger clans, which can consist of several states in an American region, in which the two married vampires continue to preside over their individual states but “visit” with their spouse for vampire rituals and pay due recourse in times of inter-state vampire wars. However, it is clear from the beginning of Sophie-Anne’s marriage to Peter Threadgill that his aim is not alliance but absorption. Even Peter’s vampire subjects, including Felicia, suspect his manipulation: “‘He’s never pleased with what he has. It’s not enough that he’s the oldest, strongest vampire in the state. Once he became king—and he’d schemed for years to work his way up to it—he still wasn’t content,’” Felicia explains to Sookie. “‘Then [Louisiana] finally agreed to the alliance. After a week of celebrating, the king grew sullen again. Suddenly, that wasn’t good enough. She had to love him. She had to give up everything for
him”” (123). What is unsaid in these more and more desperate qualifications of Louisiana-Arkansas alliance is what Peter will do if his thirst for sovereignty is not sated.

Hadley, then, is wielded not only by Waldo but also by Peter to manipulate Sophie-Anne, even after her death. The jealous Hadley, afraid of the consequences of the Louisiana-Arkansas marriage in regards to her relationship with the queen, takes and hides one of Peter’s gifts to Sophie-Anne, and by the consequences of Hadley’s selfish act Peter finds his opportunity to strike at Sophie-Anne’s power. Sophie-Anne’s bodyguard explains the political significance of the gift, a diamond bracelet, by playing out what would happen should she never recover it:

“[Peter] would have accused the queen of breaking her side of the contract, which held that all gifts must be held in honor as tokens of the marriage. He would have brought suit against the queen, and she would have lost almost everything and been dishonored. He was ready to go either way, but when the queen was wearing the second bracelet, he had to go with violence.” (315)

Without the justification of the missing bracelet, Peter incites his Arkansan subjects to attack their Louisianan hosts anyway, and countless vampires are killed in the bloody battle that ensues. Sophie-Anne, whisked away from the violence of the court, encounters Peter and orders that he be staked before he can complete his coups. But even this decision, forced upon Sophie-Anne—the decision to kill or be killed—has consequences. Firstly, there is a fine to be paid for staking one’s vampire spouse; secondly, there is the matter of Sophie-Anne’s right to inherit Arkansas. But matters such as these are beyond even a queen’s power, decided by a national vampire judicial system, which will decide Sophie-Anne’s fate at the next vampire clan summit. Even more directly, though, these matters are affected by Hurricane Katrina, which sweeps through the Gulf Coast only weeks after Peter’s final death. The storm shifts the power of Louisiana and its queen in sudden and dramatic ways. For instance, Sookie’s residence in Bon Temps is within “Area Five” according to vampire political boundaries and was once the “economically weaker
half of the state” (All Together Dead 2-3). After Katrina, however, the vampires of Area Five are required to use what relative little they have to prop up the ruined south:

“A delegation of New Orleans leaders came to visit our queen in Baton Rouge to ask that she return to the city,” Andre said . . . “The human leaders think that if the vampires will return to New Orleans, tourism will pick up again.” Andre fixed Eric with a cold gaze. “In the meantime, the queen has talked to the four other sheriffs about the financial aspect of restoring the New Orleans buildings.”

Eric gave an almost imperceptible inclination of the head. Impossible to say what he felt about being taxed for the queen’s repairs. (8-9)

The few vampire Katrina evacuees who choose to reside in Area Five, and not in Baton Rouge with the queen, are interestingly left out of this decision: “Eric hadn’t decided what to do about the undead refugees, and they hadn’t been invited to the meeting” (6). In this case, Katrina survivors occupy exactly the position indicated by the chosen term, “refugee”: a liminal space, without access to their former rights (Masquelier).

When invited to the subsequent vampire summit to answer for her crime, then, it is this financially lacking and politically vulnerable Sophie-Anne who must answer, attended by the silenced and uncertain vampires who have survived as well.17 Yet Sophie-Anne’s political maneuvering does not fail her. She fortifies her position by naming her bodyguard king of Arkansas and gains clout amongst her clan by bartering away what is left of her domain so that, when the trial finally takes place, Sophie-Anne is declared innocent. Yet again, however, the queen’s temporary triumph is met with disaster: members of an anti-vampire hate group bomb the hotel hosting the vampire summit, and Sophie-Anne barely survives, losing both her legs, left to exist in a state which even her vampire physiology cannot heal. Though she is now free to draw on Arkansas’ resources for help, they are not enough to both sustain the loss brought on by

17 Significantly, too, Sophie-Anne must leave the south to attend the summit, since vampire clans are organized according to north-south sections of American states, rather than the cultural regions with which humans identify. The chosen setting for this particular vampire convention is Rhodes, an imaginary city setting of the SVM which Sookie knows little about and never regionalizes.
Katrina and defend her broken body. Soon after, more power-hungry vampire leaders come for Sophie-Anne, who finally too helpless to overcome her exploiters, and she dies at their hands. As a result, Louisiana and Arkansas are subsumed, ironically enough, into the king of Nevada’s territory. The sheer speed at which these monumental political upheavals occur, and the uncanniness of southern states such as Louisiana and Arkansas’ being “bought up” by the seat of Las Vegas, should not be overlooked. Vampire communities are shaped and reshaped according to very practices Sophie-Anne demonstrates, such as marriage, death, and invasion; and each involve a decisive compromise to survive, which Sophie-Anne does at this, the end of her reign. It should not be lost on us what the south’s being “recovered” requires. Nevada is in the undeniable position of being able to resuscitate a drowned New Orleans with its cash infusion, being that Las Vegas is as much a tourist destination for humans and supernaturals as New Orleans once was. To step into this position, however, requires stepping over Sophie-Anne’s amputated body. Therefore, to momentarily forego Marotte and Jellenik’s prescription to not read the local or regional into such second-wave Katrina narratives, what can Sophie-Anne’s dismembered and ultimately penetrated body mean to the region over which she used to reign? How does she exemplify a post-Katrina south?

To answer this, we should examine another, parallel example of supernatural leadership whose decisions constitute life and death. In From Dead to Worse—the same novel in which we meet Octavia and in which Nevada vampires stake Sophie-Anne—Sookie is drawn into the local Were pack’s internal feud: when several female Weres are discovered dead, the two competing

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18 The Nevada king sends an emissary to the state of Louisiana who is a self-styled king himself, or, more accurately, a big Elvis fan. Elvis is a recurrent and significant cultural icon in the SVM, not only because he seems to be the only human figure whose fame ripples into the vampire community, but also because, as only few know, he is still “alive.” Sookie learns from her vampire connections that he was turned just after his overdose, making him a brain-damaged and so unwieldy vampire. In this form—under the alias “Bubba”—he is often instrumental to the activities of the supernatural world in which Sookie moves. Therefore, this emissary’s preoccupation with “the King,” to the point of creating an Elvis-themed bar in Shreveport, is unmistakably ironic to the reader, and serves as yet another example of how Nevada’s claim over Louisiana participates in the south’s commodification.
alpha Weres are at a loss as to whom to blame and instead turn on one another. Asking Sookie to mediate their meeting, and inviting the rest of the pack to witness, the two Weres agree to discuss the sensitive situation rather than attack each other without evidence, and discover a third rival:

“I thought if I picked off a few key bitches, you two would kill each other off,” Priscilla said. “Too bad it didn’t work.”

“Who is this?” Alcide asked Furnan again.

“She’s the mate of Arthur Hebert, a packleader from St. Catherine Parish.” St. Catherine was way south, just east of New Orleans. It had been hit hard by Katrina.

“Arthur is dead. We don’t have a home anymore,” Priscilla Hebert said. “We want yours.” (133)

Female packmasters are rare amongst Weres, yet Priscilla assumes her husband’s mantle in order to try to secure a place for her ravaged community. She puts herself and her pack in danger to do, however, and when the invaded Were pack seeks retribution for their losses Priscilla is literally torn apart. The majority of her pack is killed, and the few that survive are immediately asked to swear their allegiance to the victors or lose their lives as well. In other words, some part of this pack does find the space to begin again after Katrina, but their absorption into another community comes at the cost of losing their previous one almost entirely.

When compared to the vampire queen with whom we are very familiar by the time of her demise, Priscilla is not a relatable figure. She is willing to kill other women and put her own family at risk, gambling for power rather than asking for help. Yet both leaders exemplify the universal elements, the narratives of struggle and of “life and death itself,” that second-wave Katrina stories celebrate. It is significant, too, what these women are both fighting for: a life beyond Katrina. Yet their respective positions ultimately require both their lives, implying that Katrina’s “recovery” is moot. Instead, the south, embodied by the Queen of Louisiana herself, is torn apart, limbless, and killed to make room for a kind of outside investor who commodifies her
“parts.” It is no coincidence that the “American model” for vampire organization is patterned after a kind of business-minded public policy: “‘It’s an attempt to regularize the vampire world so it looks more palatable to humans. If the American model catches on, the vampire world will resemble a huge multinational corporation more than a loosely ruled collection of vicious bloodsuckers’” (*Definitely Dead* 149). The south, as embodied by Priscilla’s coups, is also subsumed and regularized. The Were pack who accept the surrender of Priscilla’s last community members does not accommodate them in any way, as their actions necessitate no more compassion than what has already been bestowed, according to Were customs. In this way, the supernatural networks affected by Katrina are, in many ways, forces that care little for preserving or “recovering” whatever south has been lost to the storm. On the contrary, the process South at work here is as much about power dynamics as it is about connection. Consider characters such as Sophie-Anne and Priscilla, who combat both successfully and unsuccessfully the patriarchal forces in their lives. Consider the exchange between Cope and Sookie—one holding a kind of influence over the other, then vice versa. Consider Octavia’s journey as an evacuee, from couch, to spare bedroom, to shared home.

Sookie summarizes her outlook on her post-Katrina environment in *From Dead to Worse*—after the Nevadan vampire invasion and Were turbulence which would later contribute to Priscilla’s plan—by acknowledging,

But what happened in my little corner of northwest Louisiana wasn’t an epic story. The vampire war was more of the nature of a small-country takeover, and the Were war was like a border skirmish. Even in the annals of supernatural America—I guess they exist somewhere—they were minor chapters . . . unless you were actively involved in the takeovers and skirmishes.

Then they became pretty damn major.

And everything was due to Katrina, the disaster that just kept on spreading grief, woe, and permanent change in its wake.
Sookie here describes how Katrina magnifies the dynamics of the SVM’s settings and people, straining supernatural networks and expanding human ones. In this way, Katrina exemplifies not only how the process South works in the body, or within a particular community, but also how it works between communities across distance and time. These networks are complex, layered, and always in flux, as is the process South. This is obvious in how people and places make connections—for instance, Queen Sophie’s ties to Arkansas and other vampire state leaders—and disconnections—like when Sophie’s body is physically and symbolically torn apart, in an outsider’s effort to “buy up” the struggling south she represents. Sookie herself engages in a network that spans the state of Louisiana, but in doing so she experiences a south that reaches out to the rest of the nation in both familiar and uncanny ways. Sookie also witnesses the malleability of time, which stretches out, shortens, and replays over the present (in the form of Hadley, for instance). The SVM’s representation of these networks, between places and periods of time, speaks to how areas of the south and periods of the south’s history become decontextualized and commodified for cultural and political ends, but also how the south can serve as a bridge between individual and regional experiences. In other words, this process South can be edifying to the bodies and communities it involves, or not. Regardless, it is a means by which the south effects and is effected by change, on a local and national level.
IV. RECONSTRUCTING A HUMID LANDSCAPE: SOOKIE’S DALLAS, WRIGHT, AND RHODES

“Different, and frequently conflicting, ways of being-in-the-world are the theme of moral geographies.”
Gunhild Setten, “The Habitus, the Rule, and the Moral Landscape”

“India would find some young woman, and the state of Louisiana would pass a bill to enable them to get married legally. No one would ever, ever make lesbian jokes or misquote scripture at them . . . as long as I was fantasizing.”
Charlaine Harris, Deadlocked

In the early to mid-2000’s, both architectural critics and southern studies scholars drew attention to the structural inequalities of their respective fields by employing the same term: critical regionalism. Though its tenets had been relevant to architectural discourse for decades, Kenneth Frampton popularized this term in the 1980’s, writing in response to an “era of aggressive foreign intervention” and “resurgent nationalism” (Eggener 229, 30). Critical regionalism, by Frampton’s now-ubiquitous definition, sought to unyoke globalization and modernity. Instead, the term was intended to invoke or recognize the modern (or, more accurately, the postmodern) in the regional and local, engaging the architect’s “particular geographical and cultural circumstances in deliberate, subtle, and vaguely politicized ways” (228). Critical regionalism sought to undermine what was false or aggrandizing in contemporary architecture—“placeless homogeneity,” “superficial historicism,” and “normative, universal standards”—by participating in a kind of “architecture of resistance” which would benefit the local community in terms of both cultural and sociopolitical representation by its ongoing and carefully self-conscious methods. Work in this style took cues from the immediate physical and
social environment in progressive, radical, and defamiliarizing ways, even as it sought to recapture the sense of autochthony seemingly lost under the waves of globalization. As 21st century critics began to note, however, such work often succumbed to the very forces it sought to resist. “Identifying an architecture that purportedly reflects and serves its locality, buttressed by a framework of liberative, empowering rhetoric, critical regionalism is itself a construct most often imposed from outside, from positions of authority,” wrote critic Keith Eggener in 2002. In other words, the very use of the term “critical regionalism,” which was applied with more and more frequency in regards to non-Western or postcolonial regions, was guilty of reaffirming Eurocentric or colonial hierarchies because the authority implied by its use belonged not to the “architecture of resistance” itself.

Southern studies, or “old southern studies” as it began to be designated, was guilty of confirming the same hierarchies, both along a north-south axis and across a white-non-white binary. A year previous to Eggener’s “Critique of Critical Regionalism,” Houston Baker Jr. and Dana Nelson edited and prefaced the special issue of American Literature that would help redefine the study of the south. They proposed a “new” southern studies—which, in comparison to the original aims of architectural critical regionalism, was diametrically opposed—disinterested in autochthony or a particular sense of place, sentiments which propped up Eurocentric privilege and distracted from the Americanist or global South perspectives which were increasingly valuable, if not necessary, to the field. Yet, new southern studies continued to employ the same language as architectural critical regionalism, which saw a contemporaneous global resurgence. In 2004, the exemplary global South edited collection, Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies, echoed Eggener’s very language concerning critical regionalism’s “central paradox” or “delicate balance” between “monumental binary oppositions: East/West,
traditional/modern, natural/cultural, core/periphery, self/other, space/place... It is the tension arising from this problem—the struggle to resolve it more than its eventual resolution—that fuels critical regionalist discourse” (Eggener 234). In Look Away! Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn took up the South’s own binaries, or its occupying “a space unique within modernity: a space simultaneously (or alternately) center and margin, victor and defeated, empire and colony, essentialist and hybrid, northern and southern (both in the global sense)” (9). For them, the tension arising from the south’s paradoxes was as just as generative, and explicating it was the new work of southern studies.

Architecture’s critical regionalism was definitely exported as a term to cultural studies in 2007, with Douglass Reichert Powell’s eponymous text. Like its architectural incarnation, Powell’s interdisciplinary slant on critical regionalism was similarly invested in a self-conscious, ongoing, and often contradictory process, which could span place and peoples in its amorphous non-borders. “When we talk about a region,” Powell asserts,

we are talking not about a stable, boundaried, autonomous place but about a cultural history, the cumulative, generative effect of the interplay among the various, competing definitions of that region. And in so doing, we are, inevitably, contributing to that cultural history, participating in the ongoing creation of regional identities. (5)

Powell’s recapitulation shared a similar purpose to its original form as well, supporting “projects of change” that are “instructed by the voices and experiences of those normally excluded from powerful strands of public discourse for reasons of their race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity” (8, 26). Yet, Powell’s theoretical export did not resolve the tension within the term itself nor address the tension between the fields he wished to merge. How do we reconcile southern architecture’s role in the development of critical regionalism with new south southern studies, for instance? Eggener goes so far as to call Lewis Mumford’s The South in Architecture, published in 1941, “the ur-text of critical regionalism” (235), but of course Mumford’s
groundedness, his belief in the potential of place to “reflect the current conditions of culture in the region” (qtd. in 228), flies directly in the face of new southern studies’ directive to “look away,” to unmoor from an exceptional south. In other words, what makes Mumford a quintessential critical regionalist is what makes him an “old”-style southernist. Powell might have demonstrated how critical regionalism can remap difficult cultural terrain, but in regards to the south—this region that can no more be ignored than it can be defined—the lines he proposed become even more nebulous.

I would argue that this same tension—between boundary markers, between place and placelessness, between “monumental binary oppositions” (Eggener 234)—exists in our theoretical tool, the process South, and that, though imperfect, it may prove to be equally as provocative and generative. As my previous chapters have demonstrated, the SVM’s process South certainly participates in a kind of Powell-style critical regionalism that becomes obvious when we “read” the various settings of the series, analyze the structures that hold its communities in place, and trace the boundaries between them. Though they have not experienced equal tenure in academic or critical discourse, I make a comparison between the process South and critical regionalism because they are both relevant to a study of the SVM and, of course, at the center of the SVM, Sookie. I implied in chapter one that Sookie is, in many ways, a kind of child of neo-agrarian principles, her character having been born just after its ideological revival in the 1970’s and 80’s and raised by a member of her family who ostensibly held these values dear. If so, then Sookie is also a child of critical regionalism. Though we cannot assume that Sookie was ever directly exposed to its brand of architecture, the term’s circulation in its literal and metaphorical forms coincides with the publication of the SVM, beginning with Dead until Dark in 2001, the same year that Keith Eggener would “critique” critical regionalism but
ultimately argue for its continued relevance. “By attending more directly to these ‘states of mind,’ by heeding the voices of those responsible for building particular cultures, architects among many others, rather than imposing formulas upon them,” Eggener concludes, “we might come to understand better the richness of internal, local discourses in their full range and complexity” (235). The SVM is teeming with such “richness,” and so the process South’s participation in critical regionalism, in surveying the locals and locales of the SVM, remains an appropriate and valuable project. It must also be a self-adjusting one, not only to meet the criteria of critical regionalism but also to account for the seismic activity that occurs beneath the surface of the SVM’s settings. Sometimes boundaries fail. Sometimes the gaps between communities appear too great to bridge. Sometimes injustice occurs, and there is no “architecture of resistance” that can reconstruct the damaged area.

In this final “geographical” survey I wish to examine both the failures of critical regionalism, of a process South that cannot maintain its trajectory toward tolerance and multiculturalism, and its successes—moments where Sookie and other members of her community successfully erode the foundations of unsound structures and instead erect “architecture” that resists, that champions “projects of change”—in the SVM. Though I have often chosen private settings and domestic moments in my previous analysis, I will now turn to more public scenarios in which dialectic identity construction is more explicitly dramatized, in which two or more parties attempt to delineate boundaries (or shore up their respective structures) in full view of, and often with the participation of, their community. These examples are marked as crucibles of critical regionalism, of the process South, by motifs of “humid time.” In his essay, “Humid Time: Independent Film, Gay Sexualities, and Southscapes,” R. Bruce Brassell neologizes humid time as a chronotope of intersectional oppression, when the physical and social environments
compound to stifle and threaten non-white and non-normative identities. Though Brassell imagines humid time as a visual analysis of southern film, his term is easily transportable into works of literary pastiche, including the “revamped” southern gothic—a genre Brassell nods to in his essay, and one into which we can easily fit the SVM. If we can imagine “architecture of resistance” to refer to a kind of structure in which a place is bettered, its parts reorganized to reflect a particularly local optimism, then we may imagine “humid time” to be the force that tests these structures, when the community’s mettle either emerges from the crucible or rusts into uselessness. Humid time is attached to specific dynamics of oppression in the SVM, identifiable by the chasms created when layers of identity (race, religion, sexuality, and gender) break down in an individual or within a community. For instance, this kind of “humidity” is specifically locatable in or between persons who are explicitly oppressed by preexisting social and political structures, such as queer or female persons, or other vulnerable bodies, such as infants or children. Let us first examine, then, how humid time operates in bolstering these preexisting structures, both to the detriment and benefit of the community depicted in the SVM.

UNWILLING OFFERINGS

The victims and oppressors (or facilitators) of humid time, of course, are never entirely separate categories, just as the architects of critical regionalism are often unexpected or unrecognized. However, as we will examine in this section, humid time marks the bodies of its participants as separate or representative of their community quite legibly, by means including but not limited to violence. For a quintessential example of humid time and how it singles out its victims, making them receptacles of communal desires and punishment, we should turn to the character of Lafayette, the local bar and grill’s queer black cook. Lafayette experienced great popularity in his transmediated incarnation, True Blood scholars falling over themselves in
anticipation of his character’s potential to break barriers of representation in television (Dhaenens, Lindgren Leavenworth, Reyes). The “AIDS burger” scene in the first season of the HBO series, when Lafayette bests a group of white antagonists with his rhetorical wit and physical strength, circulated in media studies discourse for years after its airing—nearly to the series’ conclusion—casting him as an “archetypal hero whose final words to the defeated villains chiefly function to underscore the hero’s moral and physical superiority, and [queering] Lafayette’s heroic identity by letting him express his final words in a campy manner” (Dhaenens 110). Critic Frederik Dhaenens, like others, here prophesies Lafayette to be an intersectional icon, capable of overcoming racism and homophobia simply by expressing his black male queerness. We must assume, however, that such critics did not continue to watch Lafayette as he journeyed through True Blood’s latter seasons and became more and more a character resigned to the margins, his provocative narrative arc abandoned for stale queer tropes. Lafayette’s existence in the SVM is never so iconic, nor does it aim to be. Rather, he is a tertiary character with whom we as readers are only fleetingly familiar in Dead until Dark, and whose peripheral existence is wrenched to the forefront upon his death early in the second SVM novel.

Lafayette’s murder serves as the framing mystery of Living Dead in Dallas, foiled against the central plot in which Sookie is called upon to help find a vampire whose absence has upset the power of the ruling vampire community of Texas. Just before this summons, Sookie discovers Lafayette’s naked body in the backseat of a car left at Merlotte’s—her description lingering on the image of his “thin brown foot, its toenails painted a deep crimson” (8) and her self-reflection returning to pity of this figure who had experienced a “doubly hard time of it” (9)—and her role in finding the body requires her to answer police questioning about her relationship with the deceased as well as her knowledge of his possible last activities.
I tried to recall his exact words. “He said he’d been to a house where there were all kind of sex hijinks going on.”

The two men gaped at me.

“Well, that’s what he said! I don’t know how much truth was in it.” I could just see Lafayette’s face as he’d told me about it, the coy way he kept putting his finger across his lips to indicate he wasn’t telling me any names or places. (14)

Though it becomes clear that Sookie is not the only one Lafayette confided in, the fact that no one believes Lafayette’s narrative — “I don’t think there are too many biracial, bisexual parties in Bon Temps” (15) — is telling. By denying Lafayette credibility, and, more specifically, by dismissing the possibility that a white person’s home could have been the setting of Lafayette’s sexual play, let alone his murder (14-5), the police and other community members incriminate the victim rather than his murderer. The case, unsurprisingly, stalls until Sookie returns from her travels, having assisted with patching up a troubled community only to discover that the one she left is even more deeply fraught. Sookie takes it upon herself to consider whether such dangerous “hijinks” could have, in fact, taken place, and postures herself as a sexual deviant equal to Lafayette—a female “fangbanger”—in order to infiltrate the private group responsible for his death.

Yet Sookie is not the one who ultimately reveals the circumstances of Lafayette’s death. Rather, it is the transient maenad, Callisto,¹⁹ who ritualizes the mystery’s revelation in the same way that she did the “tribute” of Lafayette’s life. Callisto gathers the group of Bon Temps neighbors—ranging in age, gender, race, and sexuality, regardless of the popular notion that “that kind of party shouldn’t happen” (14) —and confronts the man who invited Sookie, funeral director and parish coroner Mike Spencer.

¹⁹ This maenad is the same creature who brutally maimed Sookie to send a message to the local vampire community of Bon Temps and Shreveport, as discussed in chapter one. A maenad is a supernatural but hominid female creature who serves the god Bacchus, described as “neither evil nor good, she just is” (239). Callisto is the only figure in the series that practices a religion beyond Christianity or Wicca, as far as Sookie knows.
“You don’t remember my first visit?”
“No, ma’am.”
“But you’ve made me an offering before.”
“I have? An offering?”
“Oh yes, when you killed the little black man. The pretty one. He was a lesser child of mine, and a fitting tribute for me. I thank you for leaving him outside the drinking place; bars are my particular delight. . . . I love the violence of sex, I love the reek of drink . . .” (268)

Mike does not admit to the murder, but only because the madness Callisto inspires is a kind of unconscious state under which Mike and his fellow partiers acted out their basest impulses. We cannot assume, therefore, that Mike acted entirely alone, but his being singled out is ironically fitting, not only because he has produced his own clientele but also because he is an influential white member of the parish who killed a poor black homosexual man with impunity. After thanking Mike and his following for their offering, Callisto again causes her madness to fall upon them and they die in a tendentiously vague thrall. Sookie averts her eyes from the scene, her telepathy causing her to vicariously experience their mania, indicating that, though the group performs its grotesquerie on the outskirts of Bon Temps, their actions hold consequences for those that survive them. It does not matter whether Callisto physically took part in the group’s death or whether they killed one another while under her influence. Regardless, they have fulfilled Callisto’s purpose: “The world is full of woods and people that need to learn their lesson. I must be paid tribute. They mustn’t forget me. I’m owed” (271).

Callisto, then, is an external force, a personified process South, that acts upon Sookie’s community in order to expose its hidden sins, while Lafayette is made its proof, its scapegoat. Such patterns continue in the SVM long after Living Dead in Dallas, and so reinforce the danger of ineffectual, unequal structures. In the series’ ninth novel, Dead and Gone, Sookie discovers
yet another naked dead body in the parking lot of Merlotte’s: this time her werepanther ex-sister-in-law, Crystal, crucified.

“She was pregnant,” I said. “She was pregnant.” That was all I could think about. I wasn’t amazed that someone would want to kill Crystal, but I was really horrified about the baby.

I took a deep breath and managed to look again. Crystal’s bloody hands were panther paws. The lower part of her legs had changed, too. The effect was even more shocking and grotesque than the crucifixion of a regular human woman and, if possible, more pitiful. (56)

Sookie’s somewhat calloused response is due to her uneasy relationship with her brother Jason’s wife who, restless in her marriage, engaged in an affair with another man in the novel previous. According to werepanther ritual, when a marriage is broken the witnesses receive the panther community’s punishment in place of the bride and groom, because they have vouched for their respective parties. Therefore, Crystal’s unfaithfulness involved Sookie, who vouched for Jason, in the process of breaking the marriage by obligating her to physically punish Crystal’s uncle and packmaster Calvin Norris, who vouched for her. Yet Sookie witnessed not only to the nuptials and the ritualized separation, but also literally witnessed Crystal’s affair, stumbling upon her in bed with Dove Beck: an employee of Jason’s, a non-panther, and a black man. It is the interracial element of Crystal’s affair, as well as Crystal’s unfaithfulness, to which Sookie refers when registering how unconcerned she is at finding her former sister-in-law murdered. With this in mind, we should take pause at Sookie’s concern for the unborn baby also killed by Crystal’s crucifixion. Prior to her relationship with Dove, Crystal experienced several miscarriages with Jason, yet the description of Crystal’s body at the time of her death implies that she might have finally experienced a healthy, successful pregnancy. This is unsurprising according to the series’ characterization of werepanther pregnancy, which is not only the physically demanding experience of standard were motherhood but further complicated by the genetic disadvantages
woven into the werepanther population by repeated inbreeding. We as readers should assume that Dove fathered this child because, by procreating with him, Crystal would have given herself the best opportunity to bring a child to term. However, her pregnancy also marked her as an unfaithful wife, an interethnic adventurer, and she appears to be murdered as punishment. Her unborn child, crucified by proxy, implies that no child of Crystal’s should exist, regardless of its parentage, whether half-black or half-panther.

Crystal’s case, like Lafayette’s, is never officially solved. The Bon Temps police never discover Crystal’s murderer, and it is only in the course of the Fae War that Sookie herself hears her attackers and Crystal’s fairy crucifiers bragging about their act: “‘We found your brother’s house one day, and there was a gift outside in the truck. We decided to have some fun with it. We followed your scent to where you work, and we left your brother’s wife and the abomination outside for all to see’” (Dead and Gone 255). To these fae, Crystal’s child is an “abomination” not because of its possible interracial makeup but because of its possible interethnic one. That is, because the baby’s parentage would be panther and non-panther (regardless of the father, since Jason is a made half-panther and so not full-blooded), these fae antagonists categorize the child as mixed and therefore impure. The “hate crime” of Crystal’s crucifixion, as it becomes labeled by the local parish officials as well as federal officers (57), is a war crime as well, belonging to an entirely separate battle over boundaries than the racist historical precedence to which the human community’s hatred of Crystal belongs. Yet, beyond the extreme violence of the act, it ultimately matters very little who finally killed Crystal, because it is evident that Crystal doubly offended the boundaries or structures in place around her. Crystal, like Lafayette, is a receptacle of the desires and fears that comprise the societal structures in which she lived, and, though neither of their deaths are explicitly authorized by their community, the ineffectualness of those
in authority to bring about justice on their behalves indicates that these structures, though weakened, still stand.

The act of crucifixion is certainly symbolic in Crystal’s case, but less so for religious reasons than cultural ones. However, crucifixion is a repeated motif in the SVM, a near-constant threat of punishment for unsanctioned boundary-crossers. After Crystal is publicly witnessed in her half-changed state, assumed to have been punished for one of her myriad social and sexual crimes, copycat crucifiers attempt to similarly punish Sookie; yet even this attempt on her life by this particular method is not a first for her. During her time sleuthing in *Living Dead in Dallas*, Sookie is captured and nearly crucified as part of an anti-vampire demonstration by an extremist Christian association, the Fellowship of the Sun, at their church in Dallas. However, just as she begins to feel that she has been abused into resignation, she comes across one of the vampires with whom she would have been crucified: Godfrey, the missing vampire she was commissioned to find in the first place.

“Tomorrow I will atone for my sin publicly,” Godfrey said. “Tomorrow I greet the dawn. For the first time in a thousand years, I will see the sun. Then I will see the face of God.”

Okay. “You chose,” I said.

“Yes . . . All vampires are damned and should all meet the sun. We’re a taint, a blot on the face of the earth. . . . Vampires are an abomination.” (154)

Unlike Crystal, Godfrey chooses to be an offering, a kind of atonement for the sins of vampire-kind. Godfrey confesses to Sookie about the sins he has committed—“‘I killed children’” (155)—and insists on carrying out his decision to self-immolate via public crucifixion come the dawn. Sookie manages to convince him to postpone his decision by pointing out her own unwillingness, let alone blamelessness, appealing to his sense of guilt by accusing the Fellowship of the Sun of the same crimes from which he wished to be cleansed. “‘And you think lots of
people would enjoy seeing that, a young woman executed without any kind of trial? That they would think it was a valid religious ceremony?’” Sookie asks him. “‘You think the people who planned this terrible death for me are truly religious?’” (156) Godfrey grants Sookie her safety, choosing to commit suicide more privately and thereby avoid a public act that would appear to speak on behalf of both vampire- and humankind. Though Godfrey eventually retracts his offer to be spectacle for the Fellowship of the Sun, he nonetheless participates in the reinforcement of harmful structures, insisting on the moral boundaries between vampire and human life in a manner parallel to the hate group. Godfrey is at once like Callisto, a manifest process South who exercises his power to cleanse by exposal, and like the cross on which Crystal was hung, a child-killer and a dividing line, stunting his own life of “abomination.”

Godfrey, then, is an example of how layers of identity often crack, revealing chasms that appear too great to cross. His self-hatred is due not only to his own crimes but also his own disconnectedness, implied by Sookie’s internal monologue upon noticing her savior’s foreign-looking tattoos and “heavily accented” English: “I had no idea what kind of accent it was. Maybe his original language was not even spoken anymore. What a lonely feeling that would be” (153). Godfrey is certainly an ancient vampire, and Sookie’s conclusion is valid, since it is likely that he is the sole extant member of the culture into which he was born. Therefore his unwillingness to continue existing is, at least in part, a reaction to his ability to express an identity apart from vampire. In Dead as a Doornail, the fourth SVM novel, another Merlotte’s cook, Sweetie Des Arts, is similarly stranded in her identity, and unwillingly so. According to Sweetie, a rogue Were bit her after she injured herself in a car accident, and so she becomes half-were. Thereafter she is alienated from her family—“‘the first full moon after that, my hands changed! My parents threw up’” (244)—and her partner, and so learns to hate the nature forced upon her, choosing to
leave her home to travel from town to town, mapping the underground shifter community in order to find targets of her own. In the course of three years, Sweetie kills twenty-two weres and injures another forty-one before Sookie enters her crosshairs and thwarts her spree through Bon Temps.

“...Maybe this dog is a human, someone you know . . . And Heather Kinman was just as bad. She turned into a fox. And the guy that works at Norcross. Calvin Norris? He’s a damn panther.”

“And you shot them all? You shot me, too?" Sookie responds. “]There’s just one thing wrong with your little vendetta, Sweetie. I’m not a shifter.”

“You smell like one,” Sweetie said, clearly sure she was right.

“Some of my friends are shifters, and that day I’d hugged a few of ‘em. But me myself—not a shifter of any kind.”

“Guilty by association,” Sweetie said. “I’ll bet you got a dab of shifter from somewhere.” (243)

Sweetie, like Crystal’s fae crucifiers, believes ardently in the value of ethnic purity, and displaces her self-hatred onto others, even those who are not guilty of sharing her identity.

Sweetie recounts to Sookie her method, getting to know the local bars before scanning “the churches and restaurants too. The day care centers,” implying that her mission to “[clean] the vermin off the face of the earth” involves razing the extant were population as well as eliminating its future (244). Like Godfrey, Sweetie fears her own identity and the loneliness in which it imprisons her, and like Godfrey she dies as a result. She too is the cross, attempting to thwart a new generation that challenges boundaries. Sweetie’s changed hands, Godfrey’s unreadable tattoos, Crystal’s pregnancy, and Lafayette’s blood-colored toes mark them as separate from their respective communities and as subjects of the oppression of humid time.

Each are fraught representations of identities that do not fit comfortably into categories of identity, that stretch too-thin across boundaries, that fear and are fearsome and so are attached to structures of oppression—often literally. Each life cut short (even relatively speaking) depicts
how a community might thwart Otherness from effecting change, how a minority remains a minority, or, worse, how a minority’s numbers are lessened. They are also alike in that they never see justice. Humid time erases them.

MORAL LANDSCAPING

Of course, scaffolds are not the only structures that are erected between layers of identity. We should also consider the effects of “moral geography,” a term related to critical regionalism or “architecture of resistance” because it too encompasses the intersection between physical and social environments. Gunhild Setten demonstrates this intersection, for instance, by explicating European regions that undergo great transformations at the hands of the communities that have inhabited them for generations, acknowledging the “dialectics and contradictions inherent in the production of the landscape” that are themselves self-conscious and ongoing processes. Therefore, “rules and regulations for appropriate behaviour are the result of these contradictions” (389), not only in the region’s relationship with the physical landscape itself but also with its social one, between people and peoples. Therefore, we may borrow this theoretical tool to denote regulations of the social landscape, both formal and informal, that are negotiated between individuals, or a community, and their authorities. Again, the delineation between such parties is blurry at best. Often it is the community who serves as the authority over the individual, bounding her behavior, and so this dialogue is localized or regionalized. Equally often, a community of individuals—whose morals oppose one another—fall under a greater authority, such as the government, that dictates regulations that do not reflect a consensus, should that community arrive at one. Moral geographies trace the terrain between social strictures and political legislation, and so is a useful tool if, like Tia Gaynor, we wish to make clearer connections between fictional policies depicted in the SVM (or True Blood) and American
sociopolitical realities. More generally, however, moral geography can help us to imagine moments when humid time affects a community in ways that maintain a trajectory toward a “morality” that includes safety and equality, either by effectively toppling harmful structures or by building into the landscape architecture of resistance.

For an example of this kind of “reconstruction,” let us turn to a scene in which contradictory identities are layered into a community’s intervention in the domestic. “Small Town Wedding”20 chronicles Sookie’s trip to Texas with her friend and employer, Sam Merlotte, for a wedding in the Merlotte family. What precedes the events in “Small Town Wedding,” however, is the second “Great Revelation” in which weres “outed” themselves publicly, after the fashion of the vampire’s coming out of the coffin, to great confusion. Unlike the vampire community, that kept itself almost entirely invisible until the mass revelation, the weres are established, respected members of their communities whose secret supernatural characteristics meet hostility when publicized.21 Sam’s family, we learn, suffered greatly from the impact of the were revelation, as Sam and his mother are both shifters—a rare type of were capable of transforming into any animal of their choice. Sam’s mother outs herself to her family by changing into a dog during the televised announcement, only to be shot by her husband out of fear and hatred; Sam’s brother is dumped by his fiancée, her family afraid of the biological

20 “Small Town Wedding” is a novella published separately from the SVM series but features chronologically in between the tenth and eleventh novels. It is included in The Sookie Stackhouse Companion.

21 The American government responds to the were revelation in ways that are complex and telling. Sookie is of the opinion that “the U.S. policy had been formed by shifters in place within the system, because it was overwhelmingly favorable” at first (Dead and Gone 68). Less then a year later, however, Congress begins to create policies that treat weres as condemningly as vampires, for instance considering legislation that would force all weres to formally register and allow for the government to bend privacy laws in their regard (Dead in the Family 76). Though such a bill does not pass through Congress by the conclusion of the SVM, Sookie’s reaction to its possibility speaks to contemporary American issues of nationality: “‘It would be awful to think your own government was spying on you,’ I said. ‘Especially after you’d been thinking of yourself as a regular citizen your entire life.’ The enormity of the impact of this piece of legislation was still sinking in. Instead of being a respected and wealthy citizen in Shreveport, Alcide (and the other members of his pack) would become like . . . illegal aliens” (77). Interestingly, no representatives of Christian religions issue a formal statement on their stance toward weres, as far as we as readers are aware.
consequences of their union; and Sam spends much of the preceding novel, *Dead in the Family*, trying to put his family back together again. Therefore, “Small Town Wedding” begins as a celebration. After much deliberation (and genetic counseling), Sam’s brother rights his relationship with his fiancée, and they agree to marry after all. Relationships remain quite fragile, as Sookie learns, and so she steps into her role in the nuptial event as not only Sam’s date but also Sam’s fellow mediator as they negotiate the vestiges of fear and distrust between his family and community members.

It is no coincidence that Sookie notices to herself how far removed she is from Bon Temps, Louisiana, when she enters Sam’s hometown of Wright, Texas, in racial terms: “There were lots more brown faces than I was used to seeing, though even Bon Temps had experienced an upsurge in its Spanish-speaking population in the past decade. Some were identifiably Native American. There were very few black faces. I’d really traveled somewhere different” (*The Sookie Stackhouse Companion* 11). By these lines, “Small Town Wedding” foreshadows this act of looking for difference instead of similarity, because, apart from these relative demographics, Sookie discovers that Wright is no different from Bon Temps in size, conservatism, or concentration of supernatural populations. Sookie’s commentary here appears neutral, but such differences in race and ethnicity echo in Wright’s supernatural minorities, who have become highly conspicuous since the revelation. Sam’s family is even more conspicuous, given that his mother’s injuries at the hand of his stepfather sparked moral debates amongst the community, debates that are further exacerbated by the wedding-to-be. Soon after arriving in Wright, Sookie notices the community’s rising antagonism towards her and the Merlotte family. The Merlottes’ neighbor, Jim Collins, for instance, takes more and more opportunities to incite them to anger, posting a sign in their yard, facing the house, saying, “DOGS BELONG IN THE POUND” (24).
Sookie, as the amateur sleuth that she is, reads this as a clue or, at worst, an omen. Sookie goes to the local animal shelter and finds that Collins and other anti-were community members have killed every dog housed there. She is understandably horrified, but not as much as the weres who begin to arrive on the scene and who call upon their friends and pack members to come to the Merlottes’ aid, all of whom are certain that the pain will not end there.

The makeup of this growing pro-were group is significant. For instance, Sookie’s friend and former love interest, weretiger Quinn, arrives at the animal shelter soon after Sookie and introduces her to Togo and Trish, two weres that foil the couple at the center of the growing unrest. Sookie describes the French-Caribbean Togo in contrast to all-American Quinn—a tall, pale, bald man with purple eyes, as distinctive in his human form as he is when changed into his tiger form—as though the two are “a pair of amazing bookends. Quinn’s friend was a huge man, a coal black man, with his hair in short dreads. He looked like some exotic animal, and, of course, he was” (26). Sookie learns that Togo is a nomadic were who “roams through every few weeks,” and who, when in Wright, stays with Trish. Trish is not only white and an independent divorcee, but she is also quite older than Togo, and so her nontraditional, transracial relationship with him marks her as an outsider in the Wright community (29). The recent were revelation only cements their social alienation, and so they are empathetic to the plight of the Merlotte family, pooling their resources amongst fellow were activists for their aid.

Sookie too meets a foil of herself, as this growing were awareness causes doubts not only in the hearts of the family members watching the young bride and groom endure this tension but also in the pastor who agreed to marry them. As she helps with the final arrangements for the ceremony, Sookie learns telepathically that Brother Arrowsmith is “a conflicted man who couldn’t decide what God wanted him to do when faced with a situation he couldn’t interpret
scripturally. . . . He had always liked Bernie, Sam’s mother. For that matter, he liked Sam, but when he looked at Sam, he now saw something subhuman” (39). Sookie herself has doubts about her role in the midst of this domestic and communal upheaval, thinking to herself, “I could legitimately claim this was not my fight” and asking herself whether she could be capable of deserting the Merlottes. Yet she answers herself immediately, “No I couldn’t. . . . I’d already taken a side, and there was no point in reviewing it” (30). Sookie relives her moment of doubt via Arrowsmith’s inner monologue, but recognizes the danger of seeing difference rather than similarity, or humanness, in others. Sookie is too shocked to hesitate, nor check the pastor’s faltering against her own Christian ideology, but acts on the information she has gleaned from him:

“You need to take a stand on this.”
“What?” he said. . . .
“You know what’s happening here is wrong. You know this is hate, and you know God doesn’t want hatred to happen here.”
See? I was like the voice of God. But I felt compelled.
Something shifted behind Bart Arrowsmith’s eyes. “Yes, I hear you,” he said. He sighed. “Yes.” He turned to go into the church. (40)

Sookie’s intercession marks her as a mediator, like Pastor Arrowsmith, whose role it is to receive information (via prayer, scriptural interpretation, or telepathy) and advise. By referring to herself as a kind of “voice of God,” Sookie humorously points to the power of moral geography to facilitate humid time that equalizes, that rationalizes away fear.

On the day of the wedding, Wright has swollen in size: the streets are packed with hundreds of protestors, and the Merlottes fear that they will not be able to travel safely to Gethsemane Baptist church—as if there were any further allusions to crucibles of conflict necessary—only blocks away. Outside of the vehicles, in which the groom, the bride, and their families endeavor to reach their destination, friends of the Merlottes’ (like Quinn, Trish, and
Togo) walk arm-in-arm, literally clearing space for their gradual movement; and as they move in this way, they are joined by more and more weres and non-were allies. A brawny, all-female were motorcycle gang, self-labeled as the Biker Babes, stand as guards along the way; Quinn meets Dutch-Sumatran Tijgerin, another were-tiger, as they push back hostile protestors; and Trish intercepts a sign-made-weapon as more protestors attempt to break the cars’ windows. The importance of this moment of intercession, between individual supporters and a community of antagonists, speaks to both the boundaries under negotiation and the means by which they are negotiated. Here the community wishes to intervene in the legal marriage between two humans—and yes, Sam’s brother is fully human, because only firstborns carry the were genetic marker—by obstructing their path with bodies (the dead bodies of the martyred dogs, but also the living human bodies of the protestors). Here too are architects of resistance employing their bodies (mixed-race bodies, gender-queer bodies, and the bodies of transracial couples) as defenses against emotional and physical attack. Quinn speaks to this moment when he addresses the crowd of protestors before him, just after Trish receives her blow to the head, and in so doing reverses the growing aggression by calling attention to some of the bodies who have already been traumatized:

“There are children in this car!” Quinn called. “Human children! What examples have you set them?”

Some protestors looked ashamed. One woman began crying. But most seemed sullen and resentful, or simply blank, as if they were waking up from a trance.

“This woman has lived here for decades,” Quinn said, pointing at Trish, whose hair was soaked with blood. “But you harm her enough to make her bleed while she’s protecting children. Let us pass.”

He looked around, waiting to see if he’d be challenged, but no one spoke. (55)

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22 It is also significant who is absent. Though Sam is well connected to the Wright police force, the precinct refuses his family official protection. Therefore, the only barrier between Sam’s family and the mob ever-more thirsty for blood are his fellow weres.
The bridal caravan proceeds to Gethsemane, and the two are married without further incident.

In “Small Town Wedding,” the plot revolves around the union between two ordinary humans, yet the romance of the narrative is marginalized in favor of a more pointedly sociopolitical conflict. In fact, many of the characters own up to how insignificant the wedding itself is, apart from its success. Sookie considers whether the explosive protestations (incited by members of the Fellowship of the Sun) and growing were support weren’t both taking up the Merlotte family drama as a “test-case” or “model for future events” in were-human social politics (62), whose anticlimactic ending might speak to the possibility of a future, more tolerant Wright—and, possibly, region. Whatever the implications, Sookie observes and participates in this moment of boundary-making between individuals and their society, in which persons of supernatural descent (whether they have supernatural characteristics or not) are cultural Others whose right to marry or start a family (as it turns out the bride and groom have accidentally already done) is as vulnerable as it has been for transracial or queer couples in American history. Sam’s brother and his fiancée—whom I have purposefully described but not named, because does it matter?—overcome their own personal obstacles in their decision to marry, but must confront larger forces as they attempt to do so, and so are heroes in their own right. However, they are not alone. Aiding them are other “architects” willing to help delineate the boundaries in question with their own bodies, the diversity of which is indicative of the momentousness of this quite ordinary and legal circumstance of marriage. That Biker Babes, weres here coded as gender-queer if not lesbian, stand alongside Trish and Togo, a transracial and intergenerational sometimes-couple, communicates the potential for an intersectional reading of these bodies-as-texts. With this in mind, “Small Town Wedding” exemplifies the public, dialectical process of
moral geography, in which Sookie and her “neighbors” advocate for equality and tolerance amidst a confused and hateful community, and ultimately succeed.

Yet Sookie succeeds in less public—though equally as repercussive—moral geography lessons as well. Like Lafayette, and like Crystal, Sookie often falls under attack for her sexual choices and even her expression of femaleness. Being a woman—and, more specifically, being feminine—marks many of the SVM characters for a fate that is more bounded, more landscaped, than their male or masculine counterparts. The problem of femininity comes to a head in the final pages of the SVM, when Sookie’s few extant enemies band together, literally kidnapping her away from a dance with a supernatural date, intent on ending her at last. In the getaway van, Sookie looks around at her three assailants: Johann Glassport, disreputable lawyer and notorious woman-abuser; Steve Newlin, former leader of the Fellowship of the Sun, who blames Sookie for his wife’s accidental death after the Wright protest; and Claude, Sookie’s gay fae cousin, who became a tortured prisoner of the prince after the Fae War. Sookie, uncertain why Claude now leads this attack on her life, learns that he felt slighted by her sexual preference, which did not include him.

“You never wanted to sleep with me,” Claude pointed out.
“Well, damn, Claude, you’re gay! Why would I want to have sex with someone who’s fantasizing about beard stubble?”
Neither Claude nor I considered what I’d said anything extraordinary, but you’d have thought I’d stuck a cattle prod where the sun don’t shine on the two humans. (Dead Ever After 323-4)

The exchange between Sookie and Claude incites the homophobia of Glassport (“‘I think less of you . . . I do not want contact with you’”) and Newlin (“‘And I think you’re going straight to hell with the imps of Satan . . . You’re an abomination’” [324]), but their shared hatred of Sookie nearly overcomes their oppositional morals until Claude makes an arrogant mistake: “‘Then we
have to have a serious discussion,’ Claude said, and his voice became sexy as hell. ‘A very serious discussion about how we all have the right to find someone who wants to have sex with us.’ The voice oozed over us like warm caramel” (325). By successfully seducing the men—who become visibly aroused by Claude’s hypnotism, and so marked as equal to Claude, to Sookie—Claude unintentionally reveals that misogyny and homophobia are one and the same, and so Glassport and Newlin, enraged at the idea of sharing Claude and Sookie’s guiltiness, turn on Claude in an attempt to regain their masculinity and, in doing so, create an opportunity for Sookie’s escape.

This scene provides not only an example of how humid time can effectively unfound a structure—such as one built on misogyny and inequality—but also how architecture of resistance might lay a new foundation. Sookie is the sole survivor of this brief struggle, as her three attackers die soon after witnesses to her kidnapping discover her: Newlin from injuries sustained during the fistfight, Glassport and Claude shot by Sookie’s finders. The reason for the three’s antagonism against Sookie is also what ensures her influential role in her community. Her femaleness becomes valuable because it is what ensures that she is seen and heard, both at the time of her assault and when her “neighbors” put an end to her assailants. In other words, the protection owed to her by the proto-Dorian idyllic relationship between white men and white women, rather than imprisoning her, here frees her. But of course, Sookie has been subtly influential in her community all along, in ways that undo the racist and sexist parameters of the proto-Dorian ideal, and these neighbors, most likely unaware of her telepathy, are also unaware of her choice to use her “queerness” for them. After the hotel bombing in Rhodes in All Together Dead, Sookie and another telepath join together to search for survivors in the rubble, using their power to scan for brain activity; however, their success garners the unwelcome attention of
federal agents, who thereafter search for Sookie in an attempt to use her powers for their purposes. Sookie never confirms her telepathic abilities to the agents who arrive at her doorstop—notably a “Special Agent” from Rhodes, which is nondescript non-southern city, and an agent from New Orleans, who attempts to gain intimacy with Sookie over their shared southernness—but internally debates whether to relinquish her local position for a national one, choosing between being unpopular in a relatively inconsequential but supernatural region or being influential in matters of great (perhaps even international) import.

Yes, there would be some good I could do. But whatever I could achieve would never meet the expectations of the government. And I’d never be free again. I didn’t think they’d hold me in a cell or anything—I’m not that paranoid. But I didn’t think I’d ever get to live my own life as I wanted.

So once again, I decided that maybe I was being a bad Christian, or at least a bad American. But I knew that unless I was forced to do so, I wasn’t going to leave Bon Temps with Agent Weiss or Special Agent Lattesta. (112-3)

Sookie’s decision affirms the consequence of critical regionalism. She knows that she could not be successful in this space being offered to her because it would disconnect her from the local, from the context necessary for the success of her moral landscape. It is tempting to read her choice to remain in Bon Temps as a proposed hierarchy, south over north, or as an acknowledgement that the region for which she is willing to live and fight is an exceptional one. Rather, Sookie’s internal debate is over whether to be a tool, used by others, or to be an architect herself, and so I would argue that the critical regionalism in which her internal debate participates should be read instead as advocating for resistance rather than acquiescence, for structures that respond to challenges rather than reinforce inequality.

The SVM is full of such reconstructive moments, and not all of them quite so dramatic—or relevant to Sookie personally. For instance, Sookie telepathically follows the relationship between local (human) police officers, Kevin and Kenya, as their feelings develop for one
another in spite of their family’s antagonism. Kevin, a petite, laconic white man, fears his mother’s disapproval of Kenya, described as an “Amazonian” black women with many older, well-muscled brothers. As the SVM progresses, readers become acquainted with and champion, via Sookie, Kevin and Kenya as they finally confess their love for one another, come out to their families, and ultimately move in together, happier than ever. Another example can be found in *From Dead to Worse*, the eighth novel in the series, when Sookie’s roommate, witch and Katrina refugee Amelia, goes on a first date with Sookie’s friend Pam, the stereotypical lethal, blonde vampire, at the local bar. What might seem humorous to the reader is the fact that Amelia has broken her vow of celibacy she made to her boyfriend-turned-cat when she begins to date Pam, a casual relationship that fizzles out almost as soon as it heats up, but this quite–public start to their affair garners them a significantly mixed response from the locals. As Pam and Amelia leave the bar to continue their date elsewhere, Sookie, waitressing at the time, notices how “Their departure was followed by more than one pair of male eyes. If corneas steamed up like glasses do, all the guys in the bar would be seeing blurry” (113). That is, all but one table, which is comprised of Fellowship of the Sun members who appear offended by the transracial and queer moment just witnessed. One asks, “‘Did I just see what I thought I saw? . . . I think I saw a vamp come in here, just like she had a right. And I think I saw a woman acting happy to walk out with her. I cannot believe it’” (114). The customer then looks at Sookie “as if I were sure to share his outrage.” Instead, Sookie counters, “‘I’m sorry—you see two women walking out of a bar together, and that bothers you? I don’t see understand your problem with that.’ Of course I did, but you have to play it out sometimes” (114). Sookie here intervenes on behalf of her friends’ right to enter—or leave—a bar with impunity, and confirms the moral geography of their act with hers, as small as it may be.
Let us not forget that Sookie is an imperfect architect, however. She is the same woman who refers to Wright as a “dustier [and] browner” place than Bon Temps (The Sookie Stackhouse Companion 38), and who reads Togo as an “exotic animal” (26), first based on his appearance—which she justifies by adding that, in fact, he is an animal, a were. Sookie negotiates with her own morals as she fights for personal justice and advocates for the equal treatment of others (in both senses of the word), but, like the SVM, she often falls prey to anti-racist identity conflation: what Jafari Allen, for instance, describes as the potential for anti-racist, LGBTQ allies to collapse key distinctions between layers of identities in their attempts to assimilate or equalize Othered groups. Easy-to-spot antagonists, like the Fellowship of the Sun and its constituents, surface to delineate boundaries of the moral landscape, as do architects such as Sookie—but even she must reconcile her Christian values or morals with her actions and the actions of others. The process of resistance is just that, a process. Therefore, the process South remains just as visible in moments where resistance fails as when it succeeds. Yet we should not discount Sookie as a singularly apt architect-heroine, who thrives in humidity. Though by no means exceptional or impervious to the threats of humid time in the SVM, Sookie is a figure literally drawn to “sticky” situations and metaphorically enamored of the Louisiana heat, consistently characterized by her tanning and other outdoor activities, and the SVM concludes in the peak of July’s heat. Though she admittedly finds friction with her undead partners, she knows she will inevitably choose against becoming an ethnosexual settler, and refuses every offer to become a vampire herself—she would miss the sun too much, she often concludes. Her ultimate, most-satisfying connection is with a shifter, drawn as she is to “the heat of Sam, the warmth of him, it was like the sun was soaking into my body” (Dead Ever After 311). Sookie’s dependably tanned body—and sexual spark with Sam—mark Sookie’s person as one that endures through humidity,
in spite of the recurrent threats against her body and her community. She too is the process
South, capable of blurring lines for the sake of Others and for solidifying boundaries to protect
the vulnerable. She demonstrates how the process South can participate in the positive (or
“moral”) effects of critical regionalism, by bearing witness to the failures of inadequate (i.e.
racist or sexist) structures, and by submitting herself and her community to architecture of
resistance that champions equality.
“I BELONG HERE”: BACK TO THE GARDEN

“In future years, I’d hoped to make the footpath truly pass through, instead of just alongside, a subtly landscaped area, with redbuds, dogwoods, red buckeyes, and, someday, American chestnuts all brightening the woods above the trail. Ideally, people would not realize the area is landscaped at all.”

Jon Smith, *Finding Purple America*

“I found I always felt better when I was outside: more whole, somehow. (And that was good, because there was a shitload of yard work to do.)”

Charlaine Harris, *Dead Ever After*

With every revisiting of Jon Smith’s surprising detour in the concluding chapter of *Finding Purple America*, from his highly conceptual arabesques through new southern studies and shuffling footwork with the “post-hip” to the localized tour of his tangible Birmingham home garden, I am more and more delighted. Somehow it seems inevitable that a complex and decidedly divisive text like Smith’s would end by strolling through pretty flora, and somehow it seems fitting now to take a stroll of my own, though I will have to borrow Sookie’s less tangible garden in order to do so. I do not make a parallel between Smith and myself in order to argue for my own pivotal place in new southern studies but rather to point out the failings that surely exist in “Sookie’s Place(s).” “In the Garden” is, in my reading, Smith’s final acknowledgment of place, the literal element of southernness paramount to southernists of yore and fatal to new southernists. Smith negotiates this line by balancing his personal objectives for his garden project with a conclusive sweep through postcolonial discourse, using language that is wedded to and metaphorical of place, and so emerges unscathed. My own negotiation of place aside, I want to acknowledge that funny thing that has been missing from my discussion, the element that is fodder for popular culture but seems antithetical to cultural academics, which is
how magic operates in bringing the south of the SVM to life. There is a reason I have avoided the topic for this long. Magic is not foundational to the SVM’s brand of fantasy, but rather one component of a complicated fantastic structure that has been built onto and into this south. The majority of characters to whom we are introduced never deal with magic directly, let alone know or understand it. Though it most certainly exists, the value of magic is a point of disagreement amongst the SVM’s supernatural cosmos: it is the very lifeblood of some; while to others it is unnatural, because it is separate from and often antithetical to the earth; for those who practice its arts, it is perceived as a neutral force whose results reflect the practitioner’s motives, for good or for ill; and there are permutations of magic beyond these that are never explained in the SVM. So how can we account for magic’s ambiguity, and should we account for it at all?

If this question is recognizable, it is perhaps because new southern studies resounds with such ambiguity: how do we know what the south is, and should we try to know it at all? We might say that the south exists, but what it looks like and how it works, for how long and to what end, are questions whose answers are all up for grabs. Certainly magic and the south operate quite differently in the SVM, but perhaps one has something to say to the other. For instance, the enigmatic nature of magic often deflects the attention of the reader away from its power or how that power is used, just as the south is often a site of critical attention beyond which real problems or progress are obscured. Both are wielded, magic for the sake of influence or safety, the south for the purpose of conjuring “racial allegories” and cultural references (Woolfork). More specifically, in terms of the SVM, magic and southernness are images and rhetoric entangled in Sookie’s last, prophetic words in Dead Ever After, and so this admixture is something to which we should attend. To demonstrate where magic and southerness finally overlap, I will explicate a very specific kind of magic that seems to intend for Sookie to occupy a
particular kind of South. In chapter one, I gave brief mention to one expression of magic that Sookie inherits from the fae line of her family: the cluviel dor, an object containing one wish to be used on behalf of a loved one. After exhaustive internal debates about how to use such an object—or whether it should be used at all—Sookie releases the cluviel dor’s magic to control life itself, placing it on the body of her fallen friend, Sam, and willing it to bring him back from the dead. The final novel of the SVM, then, opens the morning after this dramatic resurrection, when Sookie finds that her land has also been resurrected by magic and is now in permanent bloom. The grass is “extraordinarily green,” her three sickly tomato plants turned “lush and green-leafed, sagging against their frames with the sheer weight of their fruit.” The multiple-generation garden filled with “roses, daisies, hydrangeas, [and] pear trees,” which Sookie admits to having left unattended, is now “laden with brilliant flowers” (19-20).

Sookie realizes whom she has to thank for such abundance when she remembers how her fae great-grandfather, Niall, just before closing the portal to Faery, “made some mysterious signs over [Sookie’s] head, and closed his eyes, just like a priest giving a blessing [causing] something [to] change in the house, the land” (Deadlocked 308). The fae magic Niall bestows upon Sookie’s land is, at first, delightful to Sookie, who immediately sets to work canning, making tomato sandwiches, fried green tomatoes, and salsa, and further arranges vases for nearly every room in her large house. Yet, in many ways, the gift is an ill-fitting one. The garden’s overstatement is a realized ideal—one that Jon Smith pokes fun at “In the Garden” by pointing out that, as much as every southern gardener wishes to portray the values of conservatism and continuity, their practiced result is often a simulacral, “giant overstuffed floral-print sofa” kind of landscape (128), such as the one Sookie here describes. However, Sookie is aware of such gardening simulacra throughout the SVM. The habits of characters who pay close attention to
their yardscapes, like Adele or Sam, are considered antiquated or ridiculous by onlookers; and over the course of the SVM, Sookie herself repeatedly laments to us as readers the amount of work required to maintain her property that she cannot afford. Also, though she does not dislike cooking, Sookie soon exhausts her recipes and worries that her neighbors will grow suspicious of her should she dole out any more dishes to them. This new excess, that she can neither consume alone nor give away fast enough, begins to feel as burdensome an inheritance as the cluviel dor. Further, Sookie does not articulate or question Niall’s magical investment, but we as readers are left curious as to the purpose of its bestowal. Is it to reward Sookie for her role in the Fae War? Is Niall compensating for the local fae presence that he removes to Faery, never to return? If so, then the garden is substitutive of (or payment for) a great number of human and supernatural persons who have been killed or absented for some greater good—at least, according to Niall. Certainly, fairies have drastically different attitudes toward war and death than those that Sookie holds, but regardless of why it is given there is an implicit threat in her land’s magical renewal, because it is already so richly invested in bodies that have been buried or disappeared there. If Niall’s magic brings her tomatoes back to life, what could it do to the dead underneath?

The Stackhouse property is a site pulled between life and death: located between Bon Temps and its oldest cemetery, between the Faery portal and the town’s vampire; cobbled together over the generations of its inhabitants, both human and supernatural. Over the course of the SVM, as traversers attempt to tap into Faery’s power or wreak havoc on the civilization Bon Temps represents, they are inevitably trapped in the crucible created between these poles. As a result, countless bodies are lost, half-buried or completely dissolved into Sookie’s woods, garden and driveway. Basim al Saud, for instance, is a Were discovered dead in Sookie’s woods in Dead in the Family. While hunting by permission on the Stackhouse property, Basim encounters a
fairy desperate to kill Sookie out of revenge for the death of a loved one during the Fae War, which he has been led to believe Sookie facilitated. Basim attacks the fairy in order to get the nonexistent reward he was promised, but dies at the fairy’s more powerful hands, and the body is barely covered by earth and left to rot until Basim’s fellow Were and Sookie discover him. The fairy, later finding his moment for revenge but seeing that two vampires might beat him to it, kills Sookie’s attackers, but, before he can deliver a blow to his target, is killed himself. All these bodies, killed in the course of just one novel in the SVM, collide with one another on Stackhouse property, but not one leaves any trace. With the exception of Basim, whose body is removed from the woods, the remaining bodies simply disappear into the earth (since vampires and fairies decompose so quickly) and are soon forgotten.

Patricia Yaeger describes this absenting by the landscape as a kind of reverse autochthony, in which the southern environment engulfs (specifically black) bodies “without proper rituals, without bearing witness to grief, without proper mourning” (17). I would argue that the Stackhouse garden is such a site of reverse autochthony, even though it disengages from the historical trajectory to which Yaeger refers. The bodies disappeared into Sookie’s landscape are not all black, nor have they experienced the continued and systemic oppression of non-white Americans; however, they are all non-human, and so carry similar cultural significance in the cosmos of the SVM. “Despite difference in sexuality and skin colour,” Maria Lindgren Leavenworth writes of the series, “the common denominator in the [SVM] becomes humanity and a sharp contrast forms in relation to the non-human (or used to be human)” (40). In other words, because humanity operates as the dividing line between “us” and “them,” we may transport “reverse autochthony” to the absenting of non-human bodies in place of black bodies—as well as to the threat that these bodies might be even more likely to be spewed back out. But I
would argue that what separates the deceased makeup of Sookie’s garden specifically is not non-whiteness or even Otherness but intent. Recall Sookie’s first antagonist in *Dead Until Dark*, who wished to bound Sookie’s sexuality by ending her life. Recall Murry the fairy who, incited by the imminence of war, threatened Sookie for her mixed blood while she was gardening. Recall Basim’s fairy killer, and the two vampires he happened upon. These, among others, represent a force-made-manifest that is thrown into the earth for an entirely different reason than Yaeger’s reverse autochthony denotes. Bodies such as these are not silenced for their Otherness or stifled to suppress change. Rather, by disposing of them, or by witnessing their disposal, Sookie demonstrates a reverse autochthony that changes the landscape for the better, that effectively stifles fear and hatred.

Yaeger paints the phenomenon of reverse autochthony as particular to literature by southern women, who interrupt the “insistent, languid connection of change with the sudden eruption of monstrosity” in their own writing (4). Though we may look to Charlaine Harris, the author of the SVM, as participating in the tradition Yaegar outlines, Sookie too authors the grotesque on which her home stands. She is responsible for killing more people than I have mentioned, even more are killed on her behalf, and other bodies, individuals with no connection to Sookie, simply appear and disappear on her land—it is perhaps this blend of human and supernatural decomposition that contributes to the landscape’s previous state of unruliness, which Sookie once found difficult to manage. The dead are not seeds that can be grown or harvested on their own, but one way of reading the influence of Niall’s magic is as a kind of activation or catalyst, readying the bodies for recycling. (It wouldn’t be surprising, given the fairy penchant for cannibalism.) Unlike Sam, these bodies never rise from the ground or resume their former lives when magic is sown into their ground, but they are undeniably enmeshed in the
earth from which this new abundance grows and so are part of the magic that nourishes Sookie and her neighbors, that decorates their homes. In this way magic is necessary to transform a landscape into something sustainable (indefinately, for who knows how long this magic will last?).

But magic is also what makes Sookie’s home recognizable as a realized, mythical South: a complicated inheritance, a contained Eden, and a repository for past sins. In this thesis, I have attempted to break down this very South in order to describe instead a process South, a mobile crucible for American issues that participates with but does not rely on a particular place. Yet the magical favors Sookie receives at the end of the SVM attempt to confine Sookie to her place and so complicate the trajectory toward which the SVM’s process South maneuvers its participants.

The cluviel dor, a gift of love from Fintan to Adele, alludes to the uneven if not manipulative exchange that their relationship must have realistically resembled. In chapter one, I sketched out the similarities between Sookie’s and Adele’s traumatic background; yet the cluviel dor, this souvenir of Adele’s prolonged emotional and physical abuse and the physical representation of Sookie’s repeated endangerment, tethers both Adele and Sookie to their shared home, the site of much of their respective trauma. Adele places the cluviel dor in an old, unassuming piece of furniture disguised away in the attic, and later one of Sookie’s first hiding places for it is amongst her makeup. Both seek to disguise this magical object within the domestically invisible, but in so doing they tie themselves to these markers of the feminine domestic, of “home.” Niall’s magical blessing on Sookie’s land, too, is an investment in place, because it assumes that Sookie or her kin will always be the recipient of her property’s bounty. Sookie’s Eden does not follow her wherever she goes. It is site-specific. Therefore both pieces of magic are proto-Dorian idyllic attempts to create a south that safely encapsulates the women for whom it is intended.
Significantly, however, both fail. The cluviel dor ironically endangers both Adele and Sookie, the latter of whom chooses to use its power to save neither fairy nor human but shifter; and the new plenty of Sookie’s land does not guarantee her immobility. Sookie repeatedly proves—both to herself, as well as to us as readers—that she an independent heroine whose tolerance and penchant for embracing “new things” will always overcome her conservatism and the coerciveness of her community. The SVM tendentiously ends without any promises or declarations, save one: that, after all of her travels and battles, and for all of the ones to come, “I would flourish like the yard that still bloomed and grew around my family home. I’m Sookie Stackhouse. I belong here” (*Dead Ever After* 338). But why does Sookie belong here? Sookie’s final self-identification with her magicked land might seem to depict a detour from the SVM’s employment of a process South, but I would argue that it is instead a confirmation of the south that has been successfully processed or reconstructed—brought to life—by the conclusion of the SVM. As we take this final, flora-strewn survey of the SVM’s landscapes, we must finally note the unrealities that a fantasy like the SVM both creates and undoes in its southern setting; and it is this multivalence which magic serves to demarcate. The south is locatable in non-southern places and spaces *because* its existence is familiar and loaded with tropes, such as the Edenic garden owned by a pretty, blonde, proto-Dorian ideal. We can choose to see through this reflective layer of mythic South in order to perceive the inner workings of the process South underneath, or, more literally in this case, we may recognize what Niall’s magical flourishes actually conceal. By this reading, we can further treat the disappeared bodies that resist Niall’s magic as the truths of old southern studies. Though the SVM holds the potential to reanimate oppressive narratives and hierarchal structures, it instead champions new growth. The landscape may be as unruly as ever, but only because its sterility has been recycled into fertility.
The SVM depicts a long and complicated narrative—of which magic is only a sliver—and I have applied a critical reading in broad brush strokes. Sookie’s final statement could be read a number of different ways, I am certain, and there are further avenues of study by which the SVM, and we as critical readers, could only benefit. For now, the SVM is like Sookie’s place: half-excavated, still-blooming. But Sookie will continue to reach readers who, upon first encountering this meandering series or when picking it up a second or third time, are only vaguely aware that there is a northern, rural Louisiana and who know the south only by its fictional and televisual conventions. The process South, whether it is recognized or named as such, will continue to exist for these eager lay readers as the parameters by which they virtually participate in Sookie’s adventures in southernness, and is a ready tool waiting to be applied to other works of southern fantasy by equally eager critical readers.
WORKS REFERENCED


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