

“Between Memory and History”: The Nineteenth Century in Jewelle Gomez’s Vampire Novel *The Gilda Stories* and the TV Series *True Blood*¹

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Abstract: *This article examines two American vampire narratives that depict the perspective and memories of a main character who is turned into a vampire in the US in the nineteenth century: Jewelle Gomez’s novel *The Gilda Stories* (1991), and the first season of Alan Ball’s popular TV series *True Blood* (2008). In both narratives, the relationship between the past and the present, embodied by the main vampire character, is of utmost importance, but the two narratives use vampire conventions as well as representations of and references to the nineteenth century in different ways that comment on, revise, or reinscribe generic and socio-historical assumptions about race, gender, class, and sexuality.*

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In the twentieth century, the European vampire found a home in the USA, and the conventions of vampire narratives were adopted, developed, and changed in American vampire films, TV series, and novels—not least in

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Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* from 1976, which is one of the first novels to give a vampire the opportunity to tell his or her own story (Dyer 65; Day 35, 43).² The vampire's point of view can be used to offer an extended historical perspective since it often belongs to somebody who has existed for a long time; the vampire can be imagined as an eyewitness to and a participant in the past as well as an embodiment of the past in the present and somebody who is able to convey history. In *Interview with the Vampire*, for instance, Rice's vampire, Louis, was a plantation owner of French origin on a plantation near New Orleans at the end of the eighteenth century, when he was turned into a vampire, and is interviewed by a young man with a tape recorder in a twentieth-century San Francisco after having traveled extensively in Europe. Louis, then, functions both as a remembering subject in Rice's novel—his identity, as well as his narrative, is built on his memories—and as an embodiment or trace of the past for the reader as well as the interviewer. Somewhat perversely the undead vampire provides a link to a living memory that historian Pierre Nora, in "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," laments as a feature of the past that has been replaced by sites of memory, not least in the form of archives of taped oral history. In other words, the vampire's perspective collapses the dichotomy that Nora establishes between an authentic collective folk memory and history as a "problematic and incomplete" representation of the past (8).

In this article, I will examine two American narratives that depict the perspective and memories of a main character who is turned into a vampire in the US in the nineteenth century, one narrative that begins in and one that is entirely set in Louisiana in the deep South: Jewelle Gomez's novel *The Gilda Stories* (1991), and the first season of Alan Ball's popular TV series *True Blood* (2008).³ In these two vampire narratives the nineteenth century

2 Joan Gordon remarked in the late 1980s that "[v]ampires in fiction presently enjoy a rebirth in popularity," which she suggested had to do with the fact that "we [now] see the world from their vantage point" ("Rehabilitating" 227, 228). In the past thirty years, readers and viewers have indeed grown accustomed not only to having access to the blood-deprived victim's and the vampire slayer's perspectives, but also, or instead, the vampires' points of view in American novels—in addition to Anne Rice's vampire chronicles—such as Whitley Strieber's *The Hunger* (1981), Jody Scott's *I, Vampire* (1984), Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls* (1992), and Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* (2005); in American movies such as *Blood Ties* (1991), *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), and *Vampire in Brooklyn* (1995); and in American TV series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Angel* (1999-2004), and *Moonlight* (2007-2008).

3 There are few narratives in which the main vampire character has his or her origin in a nineteenth-century USA: many of the vampires we encounter in American vampire narratives originally come from outside

is significant in terms of both memory and genre. Memory has at least as much to do with space as it has with time, and the South is one of the most common settings for American vampire narratives. One reason is the gothic potential of the institution of American slavery, which lasted the longest in this region. As Cedric Gael Bryant puts it, “[c]hattel slavery is a monstrous gothic economy precisely because, *de jure*, it made the slave owner a machine, a producer of property, profits, and pleasure bound by no other strictures than supply and demand and lust. The unassailable right to ‘consume’ his human property and profits in almost any manner imaginable is what differentiates masters from slaves” (549). Slavery undoubtedly plays a central part in how the nineteenth-century US is remembered today, and, as Teresa A. Goddu has convincingly argued, “slavery haunts the American gothic” (*Gothic America* 3), a genre or mode to which Gomez’s novel and Ball’s TV series could be said to belong. In *Contemporary Gothic*, Catherine Spooner points out that gothic themes are “just as pertinent to contemporary culture as to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the Gothic novels first achieved popularity . . .,” and two of the themes that she brings up are central to my discussion of *The Gilda Stories* and *True Blood*: “the legacies of the past and its burdens on the present” and “the construction of peoples or individuals as monstrous or ‘other’” (8). In both narratives, the relationship between the past and the present, embodied by the main vampire character, is of utmost importance, but, as I will argue, the two narratives use vampire conventions as well as representations of and references to the nineteenth century in different ways that comment on, revise, or reinscribe generic and socio-historical assumptions about race, gender, class, and sexuality.

What interests me, then, is how genre conventions and the nineteenth century are remembered through the all-American and forever young main vampire characters in the two narratives: Gilda in *The Gilda Stories* and William Thomas Compton, also known as “vampire Bill,” in *True Blood*. Gilda is turned into a vampire before the Civil War, and Bill Compton in

the US, and they often pre-date the American nation; or they are born in the US in the twentieth century. Thus, the reason why I focus on the TV series instead of Charlaine Harris’s novel *Dead until Dark* (2001), on which the first season of *True Blood* is based, is that the novel—which has a first-person narrator—lacks the vampire’s point of view and that there are a number of nineteenth-century details in the series that are not to be found in the novel. An excellent example of a vampire novel that deals with slavery and is mainly set in the antebellum South is George R. R. Martin’s *Fevre Dream* (1982), but it does not provide the vampires’ points of view and it lacks a present and/or future setting.

1865, on his way home after having fought in the Confederate army. In my discussion of the two narratives, I will focus on references to the Civil War, the scenes in which Gilda and Bill are turned into vampires, and their memories of family and slavery. That their history and memories as well as the vampire figures themselves are strongly inflected by race, gender, class, and sexuality may be obvious in the case of lesbian African American Gilda, who is born into slavery, but I will show that the same is true for Bill Compton and discuss what this uncanny resurrection of the antebellum Southern gentleman may mean.

In addition to first-hand memories of the antebellum South, both Gilda and Bill have mirror reflections, unlike many a vampire in novels, movies, and TV series. Referring to this common vampire convention—the vampire without a reflection—in “Vampires, Anxieties, and Dreams: Race and Sex in the Contemporary United States,” Shannon Winnubst states that “[h]e can never become a subject in the ways that Lacan has read subject formation, for the vampire does not have the one necessary condition to become an upstanding, rational, straight, white, male body-in-control: it has no mirror reflection” (8). She continues, “The vampire is thus neither subject nor Other. The vampire, that crosser of boundaries extraordinaire, is forever haunting because he is forever beyond the grasps of straight white male subjectivity” (Winnubst 8). In contrast to this convention and its consequences on which Winnubst elaborates, Gilda’s and Bill’s mirror reflections not only help them to pass as living human beings at different stages in their long lives as undead, but can also be seen as fixing them as raced and gendered subjects with distinctive sexual orientations. As Miriam Jones points out in her analysis of *The Gilda Stories*, there is a moment when “the category of ‘vampire’ ceases to be a fluid marker of ‘otherness’ and becomes a fixed subject position on a political and historical grid” (154). I would suggest that this statement applies to Bill Compton in *True Blood* as well as to Gilda in Gomez’s novel.

The Gilda Stories spans 200 years, from 1850 to 2050, and each chapter is set in a different decade and a different place in the USA. In shifting the spatial as well as temporal setting, Gomez’s vampire novel illustrates how slavery and the racism that grew out of it haunt the entire nation, and not only the South, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴ Nev-

4 Goddu observes that the gothic is often seen as Southern or regional rather than national in the American literary tradition as a way for the American nation to distance itself from its haunted history: “Identified

ertheless, as I have indicated, the first chapter is set in Louisiana in the 1850s. Thus, Gomez stakes out a claim on what could be called American vampire territory in the nineteenth-century part of *The Gilda Stories*. The protagonist in the shape of the runaway slave girl—the Girl—is turned into a vampire and inherits the name Gilda from the white 300-year-old Old-World vampire woman who initiates the process, which is completed by her female Native American companion, Bird. The novel charts African American vampire Gilda's adventures and her quest for a new family parallel to and intersecting with African American and women's history in the USA, as well as the lives of people from other and overlapping marginalized groups that have often been cast as monstrous or "other," such as Native Americans, lesbians, gays, transgender people, and prostitutes.

The civil rights of marginalized groups are also an issue in the TV series *True Blood*. In this TV series it is the vampires who constitute the minority group fighting for civil rights and acceptance in American society, but, as many reviewers of the show have observed, there are obvious resonances with the ongoing gay civil rights struggles in the US (Keveney; Lowry; Rhodes; Tucker). There are also images, scenes, and comments that play with vampires as a kind of racial other and invoke the civil rights struggles of the 1960s as well as racist fears, such as the fear of miscegenation and the sexual prowess of the "other."⁵ *True Blood* is set in the present in

with gothic doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation's 'other,' becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wants to dissociate itself. The benighted South is able to support the irrational impulses of the gothic that the nation as a whole, born of Enlightenment ideals, cannot" (*Gothic* 3-4). In this way, "the imaginary South functions as the nation's 'dark' other"; it contains and "neutralizes the gothic's threat to national identity" (Goddu, *Gothic* 76). Alan Lloyd-Smith's *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction* (2004) is a recent example of this regionalizing way of reading (at least some) American gothic fiction: "Recently Toni Morrison has developed a new kind of southern Gothicism, from the non-white perspective, to express the atrocity of black experience in the South in *Beloved* (1987), in which the nightmare past is reexperienced through a 'spiteful' haunted house and the revenant of the murdered child" (Lloyd-Smith 61-62). Contrary to Lloyd-Smith's assertion, *Beloved* is obviously an example of national rather than Southern gothic: it is set in Cincinnati, Ohio, and, as one of the characters in the novel points out, "[n]ot a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (5).

- 5 Two articles in film journals also comment on these resonances: "*True Blood* positions itself as a loose but obvious allegory about the mainstream acceptance of so-called 'alternative lifestyles'—it's about tolerance and integration of many kinds, using the vitriolic American debate over gay marriage as a touchstone, while linking it with the Southern reaction against civil rights" (Tyree 32); "*True Blood* ... is pure Southern Gothic that has moved into adult mode in its TV incarnation, with its graphic sex scenes and its use of the vampire to signify 'the Other.' ... [T]he series plays with idea of 'interspecies mixing' as miscegenation—a metaphor that encompasses sexual fear and potency, as well as a social critique" (Backstein 38). I would argue, though, that its social critique and allegorical impact are severely limited and sometimes undercut

Bon Temps, a small fictional town in northern Louisiana. The plot lines that Alan Ball has adapted from Charlaine Harris's novel *Dead until Dark* (2001) are telepathic waitress Sookie Stackhouse's romantic and sexual affair with vampire Bill Compton; her relation to her boss Sam, who turns out to be a shapeshifter; her interactions with the vampire community headed by a Viking vampire called Eric; and a series of murders of sexually active women—who have had or are suspected to have had sex with vampires—and Sookie's grandmother, who is apparently killed when mistaken for Sookie. Ball has expanded the references to the vampires' civil rights movement, developed the part of the gay African American cook Lafayette, built up a plot line around people's and especially Sookie's brother Jason's use of vampire blood as a drug, and added a number of characters, including Sookie's African American friend Tara, who is one of the main characters in the series. Another significant change from novel to TV series is that although Sookie has a central part also in *True Blood*, she is not the only viewpoint character, and she is not the narrator. Unlike in Harris's novel, we have access to other characters without Sookie's telepathic eavesdropping in the TV series, and most importantly for my discussion here, we are privy to lead vampire Bill Compton's memories about being turned into a vampire in the nineteenth century.

The Civil War functions as a catalyst in Gilda's and Bill's becoming vampires. In *The Gilda Stories*, the slave girl, who has run away from a plantation in Mississippi, spends most of her teenage years in an "establishment" called Woodard's in New Orleans and in a farmhouse outside that city, both of which belong to the 300-year-old vampire Gilda and her vampire companion Bird. The young women who work at Woodard's puzzle the Girl and confound stereotypical assumptions of prostitutes by being self-assured, outspoken, and politically aware. As time passes, there is more and more talk "about abolition and the rising temperatures of the North and South" (Gomez 25). Discussions about war do not please 300-year-old Gilda, who has experienced the devastation of many earlier wars. Even though "her abolitionist sentiments had never been hidden, she didn't know if she had the heart to withstand the rending effects of another war" (Gomez 32). So, the impending war makes her decide to end her own long life. As she does not want to leave her partner and lover Bird alone in the world, she

not only by the series being so easily classified as *Southern gothic* (see footnote 4), but also by the characterization of Bill Compton.

starts the process of turning the Girl, who is now a woman, into a vampire, but only after making sure that the Girl understands at least part of what this process will entail and gives her consent. In their conversation the war comes up again, and Gilda emphasizes the futility of blood spilled on the battlefield, instead of being shared. The African American Girl maintains, “But the war is important. People have got to be free to live” (Gomez 45). Her memories of being a slave as well as her escape add weight to her statement, while the long life and experience of the vampire woman lend authority to her conclusions. Thus, in Gomez’s novel the Civil War is figured first and foremost in terms of a means to end slavery, the classed and raced system of which the Girl has been a victim, and whose effects in the shape of residual racism will have an impact on her life in the US long after slavery has been abolished.

In *True Blood*, which as indicated is set in the present, events from Bill Compton’s nineteenth-century past are most explicitly dealt with in the fifth episode of the first season: “Sparks Fly Out.” In this episode, he gives a talk about the Civil War at a church meeting; he is invited to do so by Sookie’s grandmother, who belongs to a club called Descendants of the Glorious Dead, whose members are very interested in Southern antebellum and Civil War history. In church, she introduces Bill as “one of us. His family was one of the first to settle in Bon Temps and he bravely fought for Louisiana in the War for Southern Independence. Let us welcome one of the original sons of Bon Temps back to the town that he helped build. I give you First Lieutenant, William Thomas Compton.” When Sookie first mentions the name of the club, Bill expresses strong disapproval: “The Glorious Dead? A bunch of starving, freezing boys killing each other so the rich people could stay rich. Madness.” Like 300-year-old Gilda in Gomez’s novel, he is no supporter of war—or at least not of this particular war. In church, in contrast to the Confederate nostalgia expressed by Sookie’s grandmother and intent on “mainstreaming” in modern American society, the first thing Bill does is to take the American flag—which some concerned citizens have wrapped around the cross to shield him from it, assuming that vampires cannot abide this religious symbol—and return it to its place by the altar, whereupon he states: “As a patriot of this great nation, I wouldn’t dream of putting myself before Old Glory.” Bill’s talk about the Civil War—which brings up the soldiers’ ignorance of “the political or ideological conflicts” behind the war, their sense of a “calling” despite this ignorance, the danger of wounds and the cold winters—is interspersed with comments and reac-

tions from people in the audience. These serve as comic relief and highlight Bill's sophistication as a speaker, but they can also be seen as a commentary on what he actually says. Counterpointing his statement, "Uneducated as we were, we knew little of the political or ideological conflicts that had led to this point," a child in the audience says to his mother, "Momma, he's so white!" She answers, "No darlin', we're white. He's dead." But, it is indeed true that Bill Compton is so white, so American, and so different from the parodically stereotypical rednecks in the audience, who have brought a garlic press that they aim at him during his talk. He has class, as somebody who belongs to one of the old white families should; he is a more American, updated version of the Southern gentleman. On the other hand, the whiteness of Bill Compton can also be read as having contributed to his and his fellow soldiers' ignorance of what was at stake in the Civil War, in stark contrast to the politically aware prostitutes in *The Gilda Stories*, not to mention African American Gilda.

After his talk, the mayor gives Bill an old photograph of him together with his wife and two children, which, as I will show, plays an important part in helping to establish Bill's conventional gender role and sexual orientation. Importantly, this photo together with a nineteenth-century cast iron toaster that Bill keeps by his fireplace bring back memories of his being turned into a vampire by a war widow when he was on his way back to his family in the aftermath of the war. Part of his talk in the church—an anecdote from the battlefield in response to a question asked by a person in the audience—and his interaction with the war widow are presented as flashbacks, which emphasizes that these are Bill's memories; this is his perspective.⁶

The nineteenth-century scenes in which Bill and the Girl are turned into vampires are also played out very differently in terms of gender and sexuality, as well as vampire conventions. This process in *The Gilda Stories* is devoid of phallic attributes or symbols; as Kathy Davis Patterson states, "[t]he stereotypical phallic fangs and penetrating bite are absent, as are the telltale bite marks that brand the person a victim." After having given her consent to be turned, the Girl "heard a soft humming that sounded like her

6 In contrast, in Harris's novel on which the TV series is based we only have Sookie's first-person perspective and the battlefield anecdote—no family photo, no toaster, and no story about how Bill became a vampire, which happens in 1870 in the novel, that is, five years after the war is over. In fact, most of what I discuss in this article are Ball's changes or additions, introduced in the TV series.

mother,” and she “curled her long body in Gilda’s lap like a child safe in her mother’s arms.” She is clinging to the vampire woman, who kisses her forehead and neck where the Girl has felt a sharp pain, and sinks “deeper into a dream.” Then Gilda tells her to drink: she holds “the Girl’s head to her breast and in a quick gesture opened the skin of her chest” (Gomez 46). The Girl, although an adult, is described here as a “suckling” child. After the exchange of blood, 300-year-old Gilda goes on caring for her as if she were a child, holding her, carrying her up to bed, sleeping beside her, bathing and dressing her when she wakes up. Then she tells her that Bird will “complete the circle” and leaves her to walk to her death in water and sunshine. Bird is enormously upset by what she sees as her lover and companion’s abandoning her, but she finally exchanges blood with the Girl, which makes her transformation into a vampire complete. Referring to this and a later, highly erotic exchange of blood between the Girl/Gilda and Bird, Ellen Brinks and Lee Talley, and later Lynda Hall, have discussed the implications of 300-year-old Gilda and Bird as the Girl’s vampire mothers, and the Girl being turned into a vampire to become Bird’s sexual partner. They point out that Gomez problematizes or breaks the incest taboo (Brinks and Talley 165; Hall 401). Brinks and Talley observe that “[i]n Bird and Gilda’s eroticism, they experience what it is to be a mother, sister, infant, child and lover in relation to their partner (and to themselves)” (165), and Hall highlights the depiction of “a blurred lover/mother/child, with desire circulating between women, independent from men” (Hall 401). Thus, Gilda, like many vampires, breaks sexual taboos, but she also challenges or perhaps rather bypasses some entrenched vampire conventions, such as a male perspective, penetration, and female sexuality as a “treat for the man” (Dyer 63).

In stark contrast, the flashback in which we learn how Bill Compton became a vampire is replete with phallic symbols—guns and fangs—and monstrous heterosexual female promiscuity. It begins with a ruddier, roughed-up Bill running to a house at night. He is wearing his uniform, and when nobody inside responds to his requests for help, food, and water, he breaks into the house with the help of his rifle. This could be seen as rape imagery; but there is immediately a gun pointed to his head and a woman’s voice says, “Do not move. I will shoot you.” He is next seen by the fire eating and drinking, talking to the woman, who appears to be a war widow, about the war being over and trying to find out where he is. When he rejects her attempt to kiss him and her invitation to stay the night, she says that he is “an honorable man. The others have not always been

so." Bill is somewhat taken aback to hear that there have been others, but ends up saying that he does not judge her: "Your choices are your own, as are mine. I wish to continue on my way home. You have my gratitude for your hospitality. I will not soon forget it." At this point, the woman shows her fangs and attacks him. A noticeably paler Bill wakes up surrounded by desiccated corpses; those are the others, who, she explains, did not deserve better, since they turned out to be "savages" and not "gentlemen." Bill asks her if he is dead. "Oh, yes. But I'm not keen to let you go quite so easily." She straddles him, and continues, "I've waited a long time for a man such as you." She makes a cut on her throat and urges him to drink her blood if he wants to live: "Do you wish to see your family again? Your wife, your children? You must drink from me. Take me into you. Feel me in you. We are together, William, forever. You ... are mine." In the last sequence of the flashback, he walks up towards his house and sees his wife and children on the porch, while the vampire woman explains to him that he cannot go back to his family. The event presented in Bill's flashback is a clear example of "[t]raditional vampiric reproduction [that] occurs at the cost of individual life and the dissolution of the victim's family," which Brinks and Talley mention as a contrast to vampiric reproduction in *The Gilda Stories* (163). In his 1988 article on vampirism as homosexuality and homosexuality as vampirism, Richard Dyer points out that "[m]arriage contains female sexuality—hence the horror of the female vampire ...," and it "restricts sexuality to heterosexuality ..." (64). He observes, "We have images of sexually/vampirically active women, ... but the point-of-view is nearly always a man's. ... So although we have images of an active female sexuality, this is more often seen in terms of its threat/treat for the man" (Dyer 63). These conventions are at work in *True Blood*: Bill is the victim of a female vampire rapist, whose sexuality is part and parcel of her monstrosity. Moreover, it is precisely because Bill is a gentleman and a good husband and father that she claims him and turns him into a vampire instead of just feeding on him and killing him. In other words, what we have here is the good heterosexual patriarch as the victim of rapacious female sexuality.⁷ As this

7 Unlike many "polymorphously" sexual vampires in recent and not so recent vampire narratives (Gelder 70, 109), and unlike Harris's Bill Compton in *Dead until Dark*, *True Blood*'s central vampire character is depicted as unambiguously heterosexual. This inflexible (majority) sexual orientation in a vampire can be compared to Gilda's lesbianism, which does not prevent her from having sex with Julius, an African American man, before bringing him into her vampire family by turning him into a vampire. In his article

event is presented from Bill's perspective right after his talk in the church, it seems clear that the viewer is supposed to take his side—representing traditional patriarchal heterosexuality—against the sexualized female monster.

Both before and after they become vampires, family is important to both Bill and Gilda; and family in these two vampire narratives is intimately related to memory as well as race, gender, and sexuality. In *The Gilda Stories*, the Girl runs away from the plantation and slavery when her mother dies, but she remembers her mother, her sisters, and her mother's stories of the Middle Passage and Africa throughout her long life. These memories assert the subjectivity, agency, and family bonds of African American slaves and, thus, serve as a contemporary commentary on allegations that these were lacking under slavery.⁸ This commentary is a kind of literary counter-memory according to George Lipsitz's definition of the term: "Counter-memory is a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal. ... [It] looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives ... [and] forces revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past" (Lipsitz 213). For the Girl, becoming a vampire and assuming the name Gilda is also an initiation into another kind of family, a queer vampire family, which to begin with includes Bird and the gay white vampire couple she first meets in San Francisco in the 1890s.

In *True Blood*, Bill Compton is running towards his family when the war is finally over; he has tried to take a shortcut home, but has lost his way, which is why he ends up in the vampiric war widow's house. Interestingly in this context, the nineteenth-century photo of him, his wife, and two children is the only representation of a nuclear family in a TV series that is filled with broken and dysfunctional families: Sookie and Jason's parents died in an accident when they were children, Sam's adoptive parents aban-

on *True Blood* and *Let the Right One In*, J. M. Tyree admits that "*True Blood's* tones often clash, using the vocabulary of gay rights to serve a central heterosexual love affair ..." (34). Moreover, it is striking that in the first season of a TV series filled with graphic sex scenes, Bill and (the grateful) Sookie only have sex in the missionary position, which is not the case in Harris's novel where, among other things, Sookie experiments with being on top.

8 *The Gilda Stories* could thus be said to belong to an intellectual and literary tradition that Ann duCille calls the "resistance school" as opposed to the "ruination school": those belonging to the "ruination school" "maintain that American slavery undermined and effectively destroyed not only the institutions of marriage and family but the morale and mores of bondsmen and women; and those [belonging to the 'resistance school'] ... insist that slaves found creative ways to be together, love each other, and forge enduring marital unions and family networks, despite the cruelties of the system that held them captive" (606).

doned him when they discovered that he is a shapeshifter, Sookie's grand-uncle molests her when she is a child, and Tara has a troubled relationship to her alcoholic, single mother. In addition to Bill's eagerness to return to his family, there are many indications in this episode of him as a loving husband and father in his pre-vampiric life. He is very moved when the mayor gives him the photo after his talk in the church and actually cries blood. When he returns to his house after the talk, he sees his wife and children on the porch for a moment. In the later flashback, he rejects the war widow's sexual advances and tells her: "I'm sorry. I apologize if I misled you, but I have a wife and two small children waiting for me. And if Bon Temps is as close as you say it is, then I'll see them soon, and I do not wish to sully our reunion." His being turned into a vampire is relentlessly pictured as a tragic loss of family, and it is a family we recognize as the fulfillment of the twentieth-century American ideal: the "traditional" white nuclear family with clearly defined gender roles for the husband and the wife. Historically, this family form was only dominant in the US in the 1950s and -60s (Coontz), a fact that should not detract attention from the prevalence of this ideal and the nostalgic lamentations of its demise in political, social, and cultural contexts in the past forty years, which is exemplified in *True Blood*.

As indicated above, in *The Gilda Stories* nineteenth-century family bonds before the protagonist becomes a vampire are complicated by slavery. The exploration of the horror of American slavery in the mid-nineteenth century begins on the first pages of Gomez's novel, long before the runaway slave girl is turned into a vampire. After having traveled through the Mississippi and Louisiana woods for fifteen hours without stopping, the Girl sleeps restlessly in an abandoned farmhouse, dreaming about her mother, remembering their life together on the plantation and the stories her mother told her about the Middle Passage and "the Fulani past — a natural rhythm of life without bondage" (Gomez 10). The Girl's sleep is "hemmed by fear," and the danger materializes in the form of "[a] white man wearing the clothes of an overseer" (Gomez 9). Still half-dreaming as the bounty hunter drags her out of the hay, "she was not ready to give in to those whom her mother had sworn were not fully human" (Gomez 10). So, when "the beast from this other land" tries to rape the Girl, she uses a stolen knife to "enter" him, thus reversing the rape and the seeming powerlessness of her situation (Gomez 11; Patterson). His warm blood washing over her as he dies is compared to the first bath her mother had been able to give her, which is a deeply sensual memory. With their mixture of dream, memories,

and violent physical events, these first few pages are by far the most evocative in the novel in terms of style and structure.

These pages also do a great deal of work in terms of “haunt[ing] back”—to use Goddu’s phrase for African American writers’ “reworking [of] the gothic’s conventions to intervene in discourses that would demonize them” (“Vampire” 138)⁹—in asserting the subjectivity, agency, and family bonds of African American slaves. As the bounty hunter attempts to rape her, the Girl remembers her mother’s comment on white people’s inability to tell fat from butter on a warm biscuit: “They just barely human. Maybe not even. They suck up the world, don’t taste it” (Gomez 11), which is an aposite way of describing exploitation in a vampire novel. In the opening of Gomez’s novel, then, it is white people, especially white men, who are demonized; or as Patterson puts it, from the Girl’s perspective they are “cast in terms of the vampire mold so familiar from novels by Stoker and other white men.”

Memories of slavery recur throughout *The Gilda Stories*, whereas the issue of slavery is explicitly brought up in *True Blood* only briefly. In the TV series, the discussion about slavery occurs in the second episode and is played out in a way that trivializes the question of whether Bill owned slaves and the person who asks it. It is African American Tara who asks Bill, “Did you own slaves?” This question comes after Sookie’s grandmother has told off Jason, due to his aggressive behavior towards Bill in a discussion about civil rights for vampires. Jason’s comments are obviously prejudiced as well as confrontational, and he is told not to be rude to his grandmother’s guest in her house. Sookie also takes Tara’s question to be rude, but Bill just smiles a rather self-indulgent smile and explains that he did not own slaves, but his father did. He remembers a “house slave, a middle-aged woman, whose name I cannot recall, and a yard slave, a young strong man called Minas.” Sookie’s grandmother is delighted and exclaims that “this is what my club will be so excited to hear about.” With a disbelieving look on her face, Tara asks, “About slaves?” The response is: “Well, about anything that has to do with that time,” at which point Bill says that he looks forward to speaking to Mrs. Stackhouse’s club, which closes the conversation. Slaves are reduced here to details of historical local color. In the next episode, Tara mentions to her and Sookie’s employer that Bill owned slaves and that she

9 Drawing on Goddu’s “Vampire Gothic,” Kathy Davis Patterson accurately observes that Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* is an “intriguing attempt” at haunting back.

thinks that he should at least apologize. Since the viewer has been informed that it was not Bill but his father who owned slaves, Tara's comment, like Jason's prejudiced aggression in the previous episode, appears unreasonable, as the whole question of whether descendants of historical oppressors should apologize to those whose ancestors were oppressed has been transposed to a purely personal level.

In *The Gilda Stories*, it is Gilda's mother who is the house slave. Although Gilda is, as indicated, generically called the Girl until she is turned into a vampire, names play an important part in her memories of her sisters on the plantation (Gomez 39). She even knows her father's name and that he was good with horses, although she never met him, since he was sold before she was born (Gomez 179). Again, a contemporary revision or re-imagining of the importance of African American familial connections under slavery is repeatedly emphasized. However, these vital connections are always juxtaposed with the pain inflicted by slavery. For instance, after Gilda has become a vampire, blood slowly trickling from an incision on a sleeping woman's neck "reminded her of the wounds she and her sisters suffered on their tiny hands as they'd wrenched the cotton from its stiff branches. Lines of blood covered them until the flesh was hardened by experience" (Gomez 123). The vampires in Gomez's novel also carry the soil of their birthplace with them wherever they go, which like the scars on her fingers lends a material dimension to Gilda's memories: "Although she had not been back to Mississippi since the day she'd made her escape from the plantation, she carried the soil with her, and its scent made it real to her still" (Gomez 130). It is important to Gilda to remember "her master's lash as well as her mother's face, legends of the Middle Passage, lynchings she had not been able to prevent, images of black women bent over scouring brushes," as it fuels "her ambition," and in the 1980s — when Gomez actually wrote most of what became *The Gilda Stories* — "[t]he inattention of her contemporaries to some mortal questions, like race, didn't suit her. She didn't believe a past could, or should, be so easily discarded" (Gomez 180). These statements from the novel can be taken as metafictional, as Gilda's and her author's projects appear to be very similar, especially when Gilda begins writing historical novels: "the stories of their history, cloaking it in adventure and mysticism ..." (Gomez 220). Similarly, in writing *The Gilda Stories*, Gomez writes and re-envision the history of slave families, black women, lesbians, and feminists, among others, cloaking it as a vampire novel with the powerful, but ethically responsible African American vampire Gilda as its hero.

Hence, both Gilda and Bill transmit their versions of nineteenth-century events in a present that roughly coincides with the time outside the narratives when *The Gilda Stories* and the first season of *True Blood* were produced: Gilda as a historical novelist and Bill as the provider of oral history at the church meeting. As readers and viewers of the two narratives, we also have access to these vampires' personal memories of the past. Indeed, Gilda and Bill exemplify how recent permutations of the sympathetic vampire can serve as figures between memory and history: as remembering subjects as well as embodiments and transmitters of the past.¹⁰

The Gilda Stories and *True Blood* also "remember" through their use of genre conventions; and the adherence to and the modifications or alterations of vampire conventions are important in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the two narratives. Like Dracula, Gilda carries the soil of her birthplace wherever she goes. However, carrying soil from the plantation from which she has escaped as a slave means something very different from Dracula's attachment to the soil of his and his aristocratic ancestors' estate in Transylvania. Furthermore, Gilda's fangless, nurturing conversion into a vampire in a multiracial, lesbian environment that provides the basis for building a queer family constellation challenges the genre conventions that are used when Bill is turned into a vampire. In his case—which is pictured as a heterosexual rape with a white woman as the rapist—penetration, fangs, and monstrous female sexuality play a major and traditional part. Unlike Gilda and many other vampires in the last century and a half, in the first season of *True Blood* Bill Compton can hardly be said to break or problematize any sexual taboos outside some Bon Temps citizens' prejudices against any kind of vampire-human intercourse; he is truly "mainstream" and far from the queer or "polymorphously" sexual vampire. Nevertheless, an unusual feature in terms of vampire conventions that the two narratives share is that both Gilda and Bill are reflected in mirrors.

As emphasized by the fact that they are vampires with mirror reflections, to a significant extent Bill and Gilda are defined as what they were before they became vampires: a white man and a black woman in a society marked by, or haunted by, racism and sexism. Through its main vampire character *The Gilda Stories* seriously deals with the impact of the past on the present and the construction of groups of people as "other," gothic themes

10 The emergence of the sympathetic vampire's perspective actually coincides with the increasing interest in memory studies—the "memory boom"—in the last thirty years or so.

that have not lost their importance today. In the figure of Bill Compton, *True Blood* also approaches those themes. However, while the images and memories of the nineteenth century serve as a progressive if complicated counter-memory or re-vision of the past in Gomez's novel, which among other things gives marginalized groups such as lesbians and slave families a viable history, nineteenth-century images and memories work to much more conservative effects in the first season of Ball's TV series. They nostalgically invoke the "traditional" nuclear family ideal, diminish the impact of slavery, and resurrect the undead white Southern gentleman as an all-American figure for the present.

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