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Chapter 4 ► Revolting Queers: The Southern Gothic in Queer Horror Film and Television

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A revolution of southern queers recruits
kindred spirits to subvert gender, create
intersections, celebrate assorted sexual
identities, insist on all kinds of diversity, and
critique the violence of poverty and injustice.

—PIPPA HOLLOWAY

Pippa Holloway's "Manifesto for a Queer South Politics" encourages southern queers to rise up, or to revolt, in celebration of their difference. She continues that it is via this embrace of queer sexual miscellany, alongside longstanding cultural associations of deviance, abnormality, and subversion, that queer subjects from the South can highlight the inequality, prejudice, and violent acts meted out to generations of queer individuals throughout U.S. history. These anxieties and celebrations are often metaphorically played out in the form of southern gothic texts in literature, theater, film, and television. Here the metaphorical values of the gothic horror offer a symbolic space both for queers who revolt and for *revolting* queers. By queering the traditionally conservative formula of certain horror film subgenres (here slasher horror and survival/backwoods rural horror), and in rendering explicit the queerness already inherent in the figures of the vampire and the zombie, queer creators and audiences can engage in a process of telling familiar stories anew from a contemporary perspective that allows for a critique of the past and a projection of current anxieties felt by LGBTQ+ communities in the twenty-first century. More specifically, some of the most potent critical voices can arguably be found in queer-authored depictions of sexual Otherness in recent southern gothic-inspired queer horror film and television.

Southern gothic traditions often depict a contemporary world that is constituted and textured by the past and yet is also agitated by present turmoil. There is a sense that the southern gothic is frenetically layered with ghosts and past cultural traumas that have never truly been laid to rest. Christopher Lloyd paints the contemporary South as a world where “cultural memories . . . are . . . engaged within gothic form and transformed in the process; dark traumas from the region’s past are lodged in and substantiate culture.”¹ Eric Savoy posits that “the gothic registers a trauma in the strategies of representation as it brings forward a traumatic history toward which it gestures but can never finally refer.”² The South can be considered an “oppositional” space, one that is often thought to be out of time, disjointed against the rest of the United States. This notion of the haunting of the present by the past rings true in many queer horror texts that represent, as David Punter and Glen-nis Byron put it, a “gothicized version of the American South” with a notable portrayal of “madness, decay, and despair, and the continuing pressures of the past on the present, particularly with respect to the lost ideals of a dispossessed southern aristocracy and to the continuance of racial hostilities.”³ Teresa Goddu argues that the region “has often been depicted in gothic terms” because it is a “benighted landscape, heavy with history and haunted by the ghosts of slavery.”⁴

In relation to the queer potential present in the southern gothic, Lloyd further suggests that “the South has long been depicted as the nation’s other, an aberrant space within America’s borders.”⁵ In depicting Othered spaces, moving-image representations of the South in horror clearly connect with Robin Wood’s concept of the Other in his seminal article “Introduction to the American Horror Film,” in which he offers a reading of the monstrous metaphors that represent cultural fears and anxieties, many of which center on differences of gender, class, race, and sexuality.⁶ The Other serves not only to symbolize that which either the individual or the dominant culture designates as different, but it also represents “that which is repressed (but never destroyed) in the self” and is then “projected outwards in order to be hated or destroyed.”⁷ Wood’s figure of the queer monstrous Other here can also, by extension, be seen to represent the queer spaces and individuals of the South. Goddu’s consideration of the South as an oppositional, ghettoized space therefore offers it as a means through which the “normative United States” can cleanse itself of any abject relations: “The South’s gothic excesses and social transgressions [have] served as the nation’s safety valve: as the repository for everything the nation is not, the South purges contrary impulses.”⁸

Horror scholars such as Robin Wood, Harry Benshoff, Ellis Hanson, and Jack Halberstam have written extensively on depictions of the symbolic Other in the horror genre as representative of sexual difference (typically, homosexuality or bisexuality).⁹ What is perhaps most notable about their considerations of the queer Other in the horror genre is that both the monster and the homosexual are permanent residents of shadowy spaces. To elucidate, these “closeted” queer horror films’ treatment of the sexual Other often results in representations of queerness that remain metaphorical. Conversely, in my recent work I provide further insight into contemporary queer horror film and television texts in which the monstrous metaphor of queerness is rendered explicit by queer-identified directors and producers and by narratives and characters that are “out” in their presentation of sexual difference.¹⁰ I wish to continue along such a line of analysis in this chapter’s consideration of southern-oriented queer horror by stating that when monstrousness as a metaphor for the threat that homosexuality poses to heteronormativity ceases to be coded and instead becomes open, it then operates to turn the focus of fear upon itself, its own communities and subcultures. It projects contemporary anxieties *within* queer subcultures.

Michael Bibler writes that for scholars working in Southern Studies, the possibilities of operating via a queer methodology are often overwhelming. Taking a queer approach allows for an understanding of “the complex deployments of gender, desire, and eroticism both prior to the invention of homosexuality as a category and in relation to the region’s culturally diverse topographies, where the labels ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ may seem foreign or anachronistic, including rural and Appalachian spaces as well as Southern African American, ethnic, Native, and poor white communities.”¹¹ Bibler also warns against an idealistic, umbrella-style categorization whereby differences within queer communities can be “drained” and “anything Gothic can be interpreted as Queer,” as would any analysis of southern regionalism that suggests it “as an aberration of, or deviation from, national normativity.” Instead Bibler recommends that any attempt to “queer the region” should take into consideration “historical differences” and should appreciate the ways that “non-normative expressions of gender and desire” are negotiated with “concepts of nation and . . . race and class.” Bibler’s point that is perhaps most relevant for this chapter’s analysis of southern-oriented queer horror is that “queering the region is more a matter of taking a particular methodological approach to Southern literature and culture than of building . . . a ready archive of texts.”¹² To that end, as I have argued in my previous work, the central concern of

queer horror film and television is a focus on supposed aberrations of eroticism, sexuality, and gender. These in turn work to expose and highlight the hypocrisies and inconsistencies within seemingly normative power structures, and draw attention to the failure to maintain imaginary boundaries and borders that demarcate “normalcy” from “deviancy.” southern queer horror therefore also reveals certain cultural shifts and certain queer subjectivities that will not fit comfortably into what Bibler calls “narratives of region.”

The recent edited collection *Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond in Southern Literature and Culture* similarly seeks, as its central project, to “resist and dismantle inherited master narratives about the region,” looking instead to “pose in good postmodern fashion, the possibility of multiple micro-narratives splintering off from the region’s boundary-bound master narrative of loss, death, and mourning [by] venturing into the Caribbean, Native American Studies, critical race theory, and redefinitions of horror, haunting, and affect in the aftermath of trauma.”¹³ Christopher Lloyd’s latest study of the U.S. South in literature and culture extends this project via a consideration of the ways in which the histories of racial violence are manifest in representations of the body, arguing that “again and again, southern culture returns to the body; it is obsessed with corporeality’s vicissitudes.”¹⁴ Jay Watson also notes that cultural representations of the South “are abundantly peopled with remarkable bodies: physically excessive, or deficient bodies; sexually contradictory bodies; moving, morphing, volatile bodies; diseased, disabled or disfigured bodies; disappeared or spectral bodies; commodified bodies; bodies out of place; disciplined and punished bodies; labouring bodies; aestheticized, ethereal or otherwise exemplary bodies.”¹⁵

This chapter’s analysis of southern queer horror also seeks to demonstrate the ways in which the southern queer body is displayed as transgressive, borderless, disorganizing, de-territorializing, and shown to embrace a fluid state of “becoming.” It will do so firstly by analysing blurred sexual and gendered identities and bodies/subjectivities that are not fixed in space or time in Lucio Fulci’s surreal Louisiana-set zombie horror *The Beyond* (1981), in the spectral southern hospitality of the cannibal townsfolk of Pleasant Valley in Tim Sullivan’s “gaysploitation” horror sequel *2001 Maniacs* (2005), and in Alan Ball’s nostalgic-queer vampires in the (HBO series *True Blood* 2008–14). Secondly, I will turn my attention to the importance of fluidly performative subjectivities (gendered, racial, and sexual) as seen in the postmodern parody present in new queer horror film and television that deconstructs “post-southern” identities. This postmodern play is where Bibler suggests that “writers play

with claims of truth and authenticity by self-reflexively referencing the images, tropes, signs and symbols of southern culture from earlier works.”¹⁶ This can be seen most clearly in the textual reflexivity that exists in the simultaneous gender and genre play in Ball’s *True Blood* and more recently in Alan Rowe Kelly’s *A Far Cry from Home* (2013), a backwoods horror pastiche that queers the subgenre to posit a critique of oppressive right-wing Christian homophobia. The chapter will conclude by considering the literalization of the fluid queer body using Patricia MacCormack’s concept of the “squishy” body, Halberstam’s notion of queer “bodies that splatter,” or, in more Deleuzian terms, the “body without organs.” This is represented in the dilapidating, decomposing, rotten, and melting bodies of the zombies and victims from *The Beyond*; in the soft, splattering, pliant, and queered flesh of Sullivan’s *Maniacs* sequels; and in the liquefying, gloopy corpses of *True Blood*’s vampires and vampire queers.

Pleasant Valley Revisited: Queer Maniacs and the Return of the Queer Repressed

Lucio Fulci’s cult supernatural zombie film *The Beyond* is perhaps an unlikely choice to pave the way for a consideration of southern-gothic-inspired queer horror narratives. While not explicitly queer in its treatment of sexual identities, *The Beyond*’s queer potency lies in its collapse of temporal and spatial boundaries, in its opening representation of a historical lynch mob, and in its depictions of the messily corporeal zombie body as queer. Fulci’s film opens in Louisiana, 1927, in a sepia-tinted sequence. We are introduced to a torch-bearing posse rowing a makeshift raft laden with rifles and shackles across a lake toward a careworn hotel isolated in a shroud of mist. One of the hotel’s residents, the artist Schweik (Antoine Saint-John), is putting the final touches on a painting of an unclear, otherworldly landscape strewn with gray blobs that at a glance appear as corpses. Bursting in on Schweik, who is clearly depicted as a nonnormative, marginalized, queer figure persecuted for his deviancy in practicing the “dark arts,” the mob accuses him of witchcraft. Without hesitation, they beat and chain Schweik and take him to the hotel’s cellar, where they crucify him, pour acid over his head, and watch him in the throes of agony as his face dissolves. This opening sequence reveals that, as is written in the Book of Eibon (a fictional book of the occult that contains ancient prophecies), the hotel is one of the seven sacred gateways to hell. Upon this revelation, Schweik is walled up alive in the cellar by the baying crowd. The

importance of this sequence of mob rule does not lie simply in the beating and torture of Schweik, which is arguably evocative of a queer-phobic fear of the Other, but in the film's return to Schweik's painting in its final moments. Fulci's two protagonists, Liza (Catriona MacColl) and Dr. John McCabe (David Warbeck), having endured and escaped a dreamlike, dizzying spatial journey via portals leading to various parts of Louisiana, from soft-focus, clammy swamplands to booze-infused depictions of French Colonial-style quarters, all the while being pursued by shambling zombies, finally find themselves back at the hotel, trapped in a hell-like landscape that bears an uncanny resemblance to Schweik's painting. Soon it is clear to the spectator that the painting does not depict hell—it *is* hell.

The film's disruption of temporal order is of interest to this chapter's consideration of the southern gothic aesthetics of queer horror. The film's original Italian title is *E tu vivrai nel terrore—L'aldilà*, which translates as "And you shall live in terror—The beyond" and, as Michael Grant suggests, refers to "the notion of a future that is conditional on the past—a terror beyond, beyond the grave, beyond the end and before the beginning, in which you shall live."¹⁷ Patricia MacCormack also draws attention to *The Beyond's* final statement inscribed on the screen in intertitles—"and you will face the sea of darkness, and all therein that may be explored"—positing that "Baroque waves in a sea replace finite territories of organised, signified corporeal social space and chronological causal time."¹⁸ *The Beyond's* queering of temporality and spatiality allows for the tortured, queer-coded Schweik to enact his revenge from "beyond" death and across time. The walling-up of Schweik can be read as an obviously queer signifier of the enforced closeting of the queer marginality that he represents, which refuses to be imprisoned or silenced and thus haunts the present in the form of the film's numerous decaying, reanimated corpses and its intangible supernatural forces. Schweik's queer-coded revenge operates as a "return of the repressed" and is projected into the present as a monstrous persecution of the heteronormative couple Liza and John.

The southern gothic trope in which revenants from the South's troubled past haunt the present returns as the central concept of "Godfather of Gore" Herschell Gordon Lewis's *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (1964). Lewis's film is perhaps the most infamous B-movie horror film to articulate certain clichés and stereotypes of the Deep South. Partly inspired by the Broadway musical *Brigadoon*, Lewis utilizes the same "return of the repressed" motif, shifting its fantastical Highlands setting to the South and replacing the genre conventions of the musical with those of the slasher subgenre. *Two Thousand Maniacs!* cen-

ters on a group of young Yankees traveling through the rural South who find themselves stranded in a backwoods part of Georgia called Pleasant Valley while on the way to Atlanta. They are welcomed by the townsfolk with true southern hospitality—and invited by the town's leader, Mayor Buckman (Jeffrey Allen), to take part in the upcoming centennial festivities. Slightly wary of the townsfolk's Confederate flag-waving enthusiasm, the group is charmed by the mayor's cordiality and agrees to stay. Soon it becomes clear to the spectator, and to some of the guests, that the quaint southern town of Pleasant Valley is not quite all it seems. One by one the guests are lured away to various events in the town's fair to be murdered in increasingly elaborate ways, from dismemberment to drawing-and-quartering to being rolled down a hill in a spiked barrel.

The story surrounding the town is eventually revealed. Toward the end of the Civil War, Pleasant Valley was destroyed by Union forces (ironically, only an "army" of six Yankees) and the ghost of the town has reappeared on the hundred-year anniversary of the atrocity. Its townsfolk are bent on avenging the massacre by ritually murdering six lost Yankee travelers with northern license plates who follow a detour sign to the town. Lewis's comedy-horror *Deep South* clichés include southern lotharios, "white trash" hicks, and a banjo-playing bluegrass troupe called the Pleasant Valley Boys, whose recurring tune "The South's Gonna Rise Again" feeds into the concept of unburied trauma resurfacing in spectral form. William Matthew McCarter considers the regional Othering in Lewis's film as perhaps unrepresentative of racial unrest in the region from the past and indeed from the time in American history in which the film was made. He notes, "Although the film was released in the midst of America's Civil Rights movement, there is no mention of race relations in the South or of the segregated South. . . . By focusing on the 'centennial celebration' of Pleasant Valley and the destruction by Union troops, Lewis is able to make implicit claims about the South. . . . The redneck ghosts of the Confederacy's ritualistic acts of revenge represent the South's obstinate refusal to desegregate the South during the Civil Rights movement."¹⁹ Anthony Szczesiul suggests that Lewis's film exaggerates its clichéd southern character types to comment ironically on already-present stereotyped views of southern hospitality: "The film's ironic parody of Southern hospitality highlights the performative nature of the discourse. Here the possibility of Southern hospitality is transformed into a cruel joke: the visitor becomes victim."²⁰ Indeed, part of the enjoyment for queer spectators in their engagement with Lewis's film arises in what Harry Benshoff states is the "immense plea-

sure . . . available in offering a queer reading of seemingly 'normative' horror texts,"²¹ whereby the queer spectator rereads the text's intricacies via an already present historical conflation of monstrosity with homosexuality, and the part that the film's excessively performative enactment plays is key in this formulation.

Indeed, the cult appeal of *Two Thousand Maniacs!* for queer audiences is evidenced in "out" gay director Tim Sullivan's sequels *2001 Maniacs* (2005) and *2001 Maniacs: Field of Screams* (2010), both of which take Lewis's original plot and cast of characters and update them, intensifying the original's presentation of camp textuality and performativity. Sullivan utilizes the concept of ghostly reincarnations to develop more explicitly queer characters made possible by these films' productions in a more permissive postmillennial period. Both sequels follow Lewis's original twist of the long-gone town and its inhabitants supernaturally reappearing to avenge their deaths by picking off groups of young Yankee travelers on their way to Spring Break in Florida. In Sullivan's films, the Yankee group contains one closeted gay male character, biker Ricky (Brian Gross) in *2001 Maniacs* and Falcon (Trevor Wright) in *Field of Screams*.

Sullivan's sequels also feature a recurring queer-oriented antagonist as a somewhat sympathetic Other among the Pleasant Valley townsfolk. Mayor Buckman (played by Robert England and Bill Moseley respectively) has a son, Rufus (Brendan McCarthy and Christopher McDaniel), portrayed as a closeted hillbilly who, in several scenes, is encouraged to indulge his repressed desires by the aforementioned gay male characters Ricky and Falcon, only to succumb to overwhelming guilt and shame, which brings about the outrageous deaths of the seducing males. Rufus's attempts to indulge his homosexual desires with both Ricky and Falcon are discouraged by his homophobic father, and instead such erotic desires are comically projected into sex/death murder sequences. For example, as part of the town's festivities, the now outed queer character Ricky is captured by Rufus and tied to a log-cutting bench where he is comically and fatally sodomized with a large spike by two beautiful young women—incestuous "kissing cousins" who themselves represent the town's perverse sexuality—while Rufus looks on. The slapstick impaling of Ricky (which Mayor Buckman laughingly exclaims is "Ricky on a Sticky") ends with the spike emerging out of his gaping mouth (see figure 4.1).

Such queer southern gothic narratives operate as a means for the traumatic past to inhabit the present and for seemingly distant cultural anxieties to remain firmly lodged in the subconscious of the contemporary South



FIGURE 4.1. "Ricky on a Sticky" from *2001 Maniacs* (2005).

presented on screen. Certain apprehensions remain obvious and carry across with ease from the stereotypical performativity of Lewis's film, including racial tensions around slavery and rather base depictions of abject, backward white trash. While Lewis's film does not confront alternative sexual orientations and queerness explicitly, Sullivan's films clearly do. In their inclusion of gay male characters as both monsters and victims, *2001 Maniacs* and its sequel offer a critique of outdated traditional views of homosexuality belonging to old-fashioned and uncivilized folk from the South and comically point toward the dangerous repercussions that occur in the repression of alternative sexual orientations.

**Southern Queer Vampires: "We are nothing like you. . . .
We are . . . immortal. Why would we seek equal rights?"**

Alan Ball's *True Blood* is perhaps the most literal of the queer horror texts discussed in this chapter to utilize the southern gothic trope of the past haunting the present. In *True Blood* there is a blurring of temporality whereby multiple undead voices, subjectivities, and anxieties from the past continue to speak to the present day. The show's central monster—the immortal vampire—allows for the transcendence of temporal limitations. Queer vampires from various points in American, and indeed global, history remain "un-living" in the present, interacting with characters from the contemporary South. These include Eric (Alexander Skarsgård), a centuries-old bisexual Viking, his bisexual progeny Pamela De Beaufort (Kristin Bauer van Straten), and Eric's bisexual vam-

pire maker the ancient Godric (Allan Hyde), who is more than two thousand years old. Older still, the vampire king of Mississippi and would-be queer terrorist Russell Edgington (played by “out” gay actor Denis O’Hare) was “made” in the Carpathian Mountains more than three thousand years ago, in a time before the coming of Christ. The existence of queer vampires thus extends across lengthy timelines, yet the symbolic haunting of the southern past into the present is not limited to queer “return of the repressed” *metaphors*; rather, the show’s explicit depiction of vampires as queer monsters is more complex than operating merely as a cipher for a wealth of sexual difference.

In “God Hates Fangs: *True Blood*, Black Queer Agency, and Appropriations of the History of Racial and Sexual Violence in the Deep South,” Joanna Davis-McElligatt criticizes as “too simplistic” creator Alan Ball’s robust dismissal of the vampire as a queer metaphor. Ball accuses interpretations of “vampires-as-queer, or vampire-as-black” of being instances of “weak historical interpretation.” Instead, Davis-McElligatt inquires into Ball’s “misapprehension” of both historical and contemporary twentieth- and twenty-first-century black and queer cultural politics to focus mainly on the black genderqueer figure of Lafayette. She concludes that as a result of the show’s “appropriation of narratives of resistance by the oppressed,”²² radically queer characters like Lafayette fail to be recognized or represented in the show as a fitting experience of the struggles “faced by black queer southern men outside the world of the television show.” She suggests instead that the show is indicative of a “new postracial, colorblind, and posthomophobic temporal landscape where subjects of derision, scorn, and oppression are not now, and in the future will not be, black and queer.”²³

While I agree that, for the most part, the portrayal of Lafayette is somewhat assimilated into the narrative as a character whose struggles become less about his gendered, class, or racial status and more driven by plot complexity, I suggest that this is perhaps due to the show’s appropriation of the (queer) uncanny, returning the initially radical, edgy figure of Lafayette as a familiar-unfamiliar subject. Indeed, where Davis-McElligatt concludes, “In the context of the show, vampires are structured as incomplete metaphors or representations of black and queer people, but the present of Lafayette ultimately hinders the success of those metaphors,”²⁴ this is precisely *because* the typical tropes of the gothic uncanny are “queered.” If the show stands to represent a critique of anything, it comes from its reflection of the white, cisgender, queer male at the top of a hierarchy of queerness, in its presentation of middle/upper-class white male vampires. This is something that Davis-McElligatt

concur with in her interpretation that “vampires are routinely coded as the most dangerous magical creatures in the universe, not only because of their extraordinary power, but because of their desire to upset the social order of the South by living openly as vampires.”²⁵ What occurs instead, consciously or not—as Ball seems to indicate that the only possible interpretation of a monstrous symbol is one that is consciously encoded—is a complex portrayal of the various queer subcultures in the real world that exist in disharmony.

True Blood’s metaphorical placing of the vampire as a figure of Otherness bears a double effect. The show’s representation of the vampire as a metaphor for Othered minorities (ethnic, gendered, class-based, and sexual) is clear, yet their wish to “come out” and live openly alongside humans also questions what happens to the vampire-as-metaphor (for homosexuality) in a text in which homosexuality, and indeed queerness, is rendered so explicit.²⁶ In an essay I have written on this subject, I conclude that, in the case of *True Blood*, the figure of the vampire critiques queer subcultures by highlighting the dead “homo-ness” of a (non)conformist gay culture in an age of assimilation.²⁷ *True Blood*’s approach to queerness is largely celebratory, excessive, and outrageously multiple in its depiction of faeries, maenads, witches, werewolves, were-panthers, and vampires as subcultures of difference. In *True Blood*, abject Otherness is both assimilated and reveled in. Chief among its Others, the vampire not only stands as a metaphor for homosexuality but is also literalized in the plethora of outed and closeted gay vampire, witch, faerie, shape-shifter, and human characters. In representing an assimilative homonormativity, the show ceases to offer the same essentialist threat to heteronormativity that the metaphorical vampire-as-homosexual might once have done. Moreover, in its ever-increasing continuum of Othered subjectivities, the show offers up a varied selection of queer “becomings.”

The series’s multiple, overlapping, and blurred sexual and monstrous/non-monstrous identities arguably distort any attempts at classification; furthermore, the show dismisses any attempts to categorize its queer Others as an absurdist pursuit. Nevertheless, the show’s explicitly queer creatures offer critiques of specific subcultural difference and confront queer experiences of pride, shame, and guilt around seemingly assimilated alternative sexualities. *True Blood*’s representation of the homonormative encodes subcultural tensions within gay (vampire) subcultures. It highlights the psychical traumas of “fitting in” to a subculture defined by materialism, promiscuity, gym body cultivation, youth obsession, and self-indulgence. For example, the withdrawn gay vampire Eddie Gauthier (Stephen Root) from season 1 is portrayed as a

closeted, couch-surfing creature who is reclusive not only because of his vampiric and/or homosexual impulses but because, being middle-aged and overweight, he does not fit into a world in which bodily perfection is revered. He then resorts to using escorts to feel loved.

This complex stratification of difference and fluid sexual Otherness is compounded by *True Blood's* southern locale, the central location of Bon Temps (meaning Good Times) in the swampy, often fecund bayous of Louisiana. The show's opening titles depict an American South that is part-steeped in the murky waters of rotting wetlands, with dense vines clouding the semi-submerged camera, with wildlife and vegetation shown in stop-motion decomposition as it is becoming mulch. Brigid Cherry and Caroline Ruddell offer a vibrant description of the various settings from *True Blood* as "anchored in the lush vegetation and humid wetlands of the Deep South. . . . In the humid, subtropical climate, the lush woodlands, swamplands and bayous clothe and conceal the contours of the land beneath. . . . It is in vegetation (not shadows) that monsters hide."²⁸ Cherry and Ruddell continue that "Bon Temps is an ideal location for barely concealed prejudices, buried secrets and damaged relationships."²⁹ Yet their work suggests that, while *True Blood* can clearly be placed as part of a southern gothic subgenre of texts, it is an ironic and self-reflexive portrayal that is more akin to a performative play with southern gothic textualities, aesthetics, themes, and characters: "The parodying of excess in *True Blood* is central to understanding its [queer] remediation of the Gothic. . . . the setting provides a particularly southern context where the Gothic is negotiated and remediated within a contemporary environment."³⁰ Returning to Lloyd's consideration of the South as America's "Othered space," when *True Blood's* depiction of southern spaces serves as a *home* to those Othered species, the supposed aberrant space and the radical potency that is implied becomes tamed, domesticated—by queering the *unheimlich*, it becomes *heimlich*. Both the vampire and the Othered space of the South become commodified by the outsider, assimilated into an industry of experience and commercialization. For example, the vampire bar Fangtasia, first seen in "Escape from the Dragon House" (season 1, episode 4), is visualized as a theme venue that attracts human customers wishing to experience the novel thrill of vampire culture. Here the presence of human tourists, "fangbangers" (those who participate in vampire sex without becoming vampires themselves), and "V-addicts" (those who seek a druglike high experienced by drinking vampire blood) foregrounds and celebrates the accessibility of the vampires' alternative sexual otherness and offers up "vampirism,"

and therefore queerness, as performative. In applying such an interpretation, I deliberately reference both the theatricality within Fangtasia and vampire tourism per se (that is, merchandising that extends to false vampire incisors marketed in actuality and in the fictional show) and Judith Butler's concept of gender "performativity" in relation to an excessively theatricalized sexual subjectivity. Butler argues that the supposed biology of binary gender is constructed via the repetition of acts and behaviors in which social performance creates gender, a performance that imitates culturally prescribed and impossible ideals.³¹

"Fluid" sexuality is represented in the show's use of orally sharing/drinking blood as a means of opening up bisexual and homoerotic relations for those seemingly essentialist heteronormative characters like Jason Stackhouse (Ryan Kwanten) and Sam Merlotte (Sam Trammell). The über-straight Jason, after having been healed by feeding from the vampire blood of both Eric Northman and the part-faerie-part-vampire Macklyn Warlow/Ben Flynn (Rob Kazinsky) (season 6, episode 4), proceeds to have erotic dreams in which his subconscious desires for both men are satirically depicted. In close-up, Jason is shown in a steamy mirror in his bathroom, his face partially lathered in shaving cream; the camera slowly tracks back to reveal another male's hand shaving him with a razor. The hand belongs to Ben/Warlow, who sensually offers to let Jason shave him in return. Jason complies, and the two shirtless men are seen in a two shot, surrounded by the suggestive steam of the bathroom. When Jason accidentally cuts his partner, he is erotically drawn to lick the trickling blood that oozes from the wound. The camera pulls in, capturing Jason's lustful urge, only to cut away to him sitting bolt upright in bed, having woken disturbed by the events of his erotic dream. The show plays with this "conversion" of its seemingly straight characters in several erotic dream sequences, including another of Jason's homoerotic nightmares, this time involving Eric (season 7, episode 2), and one involving the shape-shifter Sam's shower-set homoerotic desires for Bill Compton (Stephen Moyer) after having been healed by the ingestion of his blood (season 3, episode 1). *True Blood* suggests that the passing of blood can cause repressed queer desires to come to the fore, and this can be seen in examples such as the comical "turning" of staunch anti-vampire religious zealous Steve Newlin (Michael McMillian) into an "out" gay conservative American vampire who then declares his love for Jason Stackhouse, and in the case of Tara Thornton (Rutina Wesley) who, having been made a vampire by Pam, indulges in lesbian relations thenceforth.

The introduction of vampire king Russell Edgington and his long-term male partner Talbot (Theo Alexander) as the “civil-partnered” rulers of Mississippi reinforces a stereotypical portrayal of privileged homonormativity that arguably harks back to the capitalistic, landowning, consumerist vampire of the Old World. Edgington’s southern gothic antebellum mansion is steeped in references to an era of colonialism and the slave trade upon which his fortune rests. As an openly gay vampire couple, Talbot and Russell’s partnership resembles bourgeois monogamy, yet they remain promiscuous: Talbot seduces Eric after a disagreement with Russell, and Russell’s desire for power leads him to undertake a marriage of convenience with Sophie-Anne, the vampire queen of Louisiana, in order to resolve her debts and to expand his empire.

True Blood’s knowing reflection of homo-conformism encompasses the inevitable failure of monogamy between the Edgingtons, leading to Talbot’s death. In an act of vengeance, the omnisexual Eric provides Talbot with the experience of “the true death”: first luring him with the promise of sexual penetration, he then impales him from behind with a wooden stake. Upon Talbot’s explosively fluid death, Russell suffers a mental breakdown and descends into a crazed and vengeful rampage. The trajectory of Russell Edgington from materialistic aesthete to crazed *homme fatal* perpetuates the cliché of a psychotic, murderous gay love. Despite his obvious white privilege, Edgington stands in opposition to the American Vampire League (AVL) and represents an antiassimilationist southern vampire/queer terrorist. During his reign of terror, Edgington bursts in on a live television news report on the AVL. Appearing suddenly behind the anchorman, he rips the spine from the fellow, pulling out a blood-clotted section as the newscaster slumps out of frame. Edgington takes his place and makes an impassioned, if campy, speech to the American public:

We are nothing like you. . . . we are . . . immortal [laughs] because we drink the true blood. Blood that is living, organic, and human. [He licks his hand, blood-slicked from the insides of the newscaster.] That is the truth the AVL wishes to conceal from you because, let’s face it, eating people is a tough sell these days—so they put on their friendly faces to pass their beloved VRA [Vampire Rights Amendment]. But make no mistake: mine is the true face of *vampires*. Why would we seek equal rights? You are not our equals. We will eat you, after we eat your children. Now time for the weather—Tiffany?

Edgington becomes the recurring antagonist of season 3 and season 5. As an enraged, politicized, queer vampire protestor, his outrageous attempts to

bring down the conformist ethos of the AVL are eventually thwarted by the more cultist Vampire Authority group. In the show, Edgington can arguably be seen as a hysterically camp protest against the acceptance and normalization of the vampire race, but extratextually the argument clearly resounds in the contemporary United States in which queer *difference* runs the risk of being lost in the attempt to strive both for acceptance and for equal rights, which ultimately requires some assimilation into prevailing cultural norms. In essence, *True Blood* is a problematic queer text, in the sense that its various representations of queerness exist to trouble or upset efforts to conclude anything about the show's sexual-political standpoints, suggesting instead that queer subjectivity is anything but fixed, essentialist, and *true*. Instead, the series possesses a polymorphously perverse pride in the presentation of its multiple, often incompatible, queer identities.

Queering the Backwoods Horror

Alan Rowe Kelly's *A Far Cry from Home*, a short section from the 2012 anthology horror film *Gallery of Fear*, directed by Kelly and Anthony G. Sumner, taps into contemporary cultural unease surrounding the recent acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights into the U.S. mainstream. The film features a queer couple who, in true survival horror tradition, unwittingly stumble into the world of religious and Republican fanaticism in the backwoods South and find themselves tortured and slaughtered by stereotypical rednecks. Setting its story in the southern Appalachians, the film offers a queer twist on the backwoods horror subgenre. *A Far Cry from Home* inverts traditional survival horror's dynamic of heteronormativity (as represented in the heterosexual couple and/or the nuclear family) threatened by marginalized, transgressive, and often symbolically queer Others. Instead, religiously conservative, oppressive, and southern-coded heteronormativity is turned monstrous and threatens a queer-oriented couple at the center of its narrative. The backwoods horror has long configured its monsters as veiled queer antagonists. In John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972), physically grotesque, sodomizing, inbred families threaten an adventuring troupe of masculine outdoors enthusiasts from the city. Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) depicts the post-Industrial Age, cannibalizing Sawyer family, who threaten to consume the next generation of white privilege, along with the complexly gendered character Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen), who is seen wearing the faces

of women and men. Kelly's film develops the well-trodden tropes of the conservative horror film narrative, positing the religious right and moral conservatism as the monstrous Other and depicting queerness as the normativity placed under threat.

A Far Cry from Home centers on Lane, a typically *Final Girl*-style protagonist with a gender-neutral name, a forty-something androgynous queer figure with long, feminine hair and subtle traces of drag makeup (played by director/actor Alan Rowe Kelly, known for undertaking female roles), and Lane's twenty-something lover Kayle (Don Money), who appears more typically masculine. The couple decide to escape for a weekend's antiquing to share some quality time. Stopping off at a dilapidated junk store in the Appalachian Mountains called Hung by a Thread, they encounter a family of southern Christian rednecks led by a clichéd Christian preacher who claims that they are "God's warriors put on this pitiful planet to rid it of all its abominations." While not an outright parody, the film utilizes pastiche in that it clearly alludes to southern-set backwoods survival horror, such as the porcine references in sodomy-obsessed *Deliverance* and the grotesquely mutated, literally nuclear family of *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977).³² It also pays visual homage to both *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre's* and *The Skeleton Key's* mise-en-scène in the junk shop's animal skins, rickety furniture, dried bone ornaments, toy skeletons, grotesque Mardi Gras masks, and pickled vegetables and human organs in jars, and parallels such primal collectables with Christian objets d'art, including crucifixes and figurines of the Virgin Mary.

A Far Cry from Home also mirrors Tobe Hooper's film's narrative trajectory in that, while Lane smokes a joint outside the shop, Kayle disappears, leaving the feminine-masculine central character to endure extended torture at the hands of the monstrous family, *Final Girl*-style. The family, consisting of Aunt Idella (Katherine O'Sullivan) and her grown nephews Otis (Benzy) and Buster (Jerry Murdock, who is introduced squealing offscreen as a Leatherface-like brute), receive dubious religious guidance from the equally monstrous Preacher (Terry West), who legitimizes their crusade against "certain debased, debauched humanity," declaring that "sodomites will be sent straight to hell!" The Preacher encourages the slaughter of homosexuals, particularly effeminate gay men, who he claims "fuel the fires of Satan!" before further quoting from I Corinthians 6.9–10: "Be not deceived, neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind . . . shall inherit the kingdom of God." In one scene Lane's lim-

inal, fluid, feminine masculinity is shown as the main target of hatred for the family, and is, arguably, a source of anxiety for both homosexual and heterosexual characters. Lane asks to use the store's telephone and is quickly cornered by the threatening but intrigued Otis and Buster. The grotesquely simplistic duo become confused as to Lane's gender. Both Otis and Buster exclaim: "Do you smell pussy? I smell pussy"; "Well, I smell cock!" before concluding "You look like a girl!" Director and actor Alan Rowe Kelly comments on his decision to keep Lane's gender fluid: "I kept Lane sexually ambiguous. Viewers needed to look at Lane the same way as the rest of the characters in the film look at him/her—with confusion, curiosity, and apprehension."³³

After being tortured, Lane escapes the family and, fleeing into the woods nearby, discovers in a clearing a collection of tents, each of which contains the rotting corpses of previously murdered gay couples. Lane finds Kayle strung up and barely alive, tied between two trees and posed crucifixion-style, complete with a crown of thorns and nails driven into his wrists. Lane stumbles into a trap, falling onto spikes driven into the ground and piercing both hands. The trap then literally rips Kayle in two and, kneeling beneath his body, Lane is orgasmically sprayed with arterial blood and innards. Kayle's flesh here eases apart rather than being riven with force, further evidencing the fluid pliability of queer flesh.

Tracked down, Lane is captured and forced to repent. The Preacher and the two brothers prepare to kill Lane, who reveals the palm wounds, which the fanatically religious pursuers interpret as (queered) stigmata (see figure 4.2). Tricking them further by appearing to speak in tongues, Lane dispatches Buster with his own axe before being shot and killed with a crossbow by the Preacher. Lane's dead body is dragged into the tent circle. In the film's final shots, a mixed-race straight couple arrive at the junk shop, much to the bigoted annoyance of Aunt Idella, with the film hinting that the narrative repeats itself.

A Far Cry from Home is one among many pointing toward a trend in recent queer horror film and television texts that focus on one of the primal fears of LGBTQ+ identified subjects: someone wanting to kill them precisely *because* they are queer.³⁴ *A Far Cry from Home* manifests a very real, violently homophobic reaction encouraged by religious fundamentalism and right-wing family values, seen localized in the rural regions of the more "traditional" South, that is exacerbated by the increasing assimilation of homosexuality into the mainstream. Gaysploitation horrors such as Kelly's are significant in that they



FIGURE 4.2. Lane (Rowe Kelly) and his "queer stigmata."

depict seemingly heteronormative America, here comically symbolized by the inbred southern family, as their monsters, and suggest that repressed homosexuality lies at the root of homophobia.

Splattering Southern Bodies and Swampy Queer Subjectivities

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that the queer bodies on display in southern gothic queer horror film and television can be said to represent a breaking down, a deconstruction and reconstruction, of enforced essentialist structures that would seek to fix sexuality in place through conformity to a set of norms. The texts analyzed in this chapter all show interesting configurations of perversions and queerness that renegotiate the way queer bodies and pleasures become disorganized and challenge traditional corporeal and sexual paradigms. They do this with their appropriation of gothic traditions, including the collapse of temporal and spatial borders in their spectral storytelling; their portrayal of a multiplicity of excessive, self-reflexive, queer identities; and their depiction of a literalizing of the fluid subjectivities seen in the physical breakdown of queer corporeality.

There are clear parallels between the queer fluidity in southern gothic horror and Deleuze and Guattari's "body without organs," which they describe as "permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by mad or transitory particles."³⁵ This fluid substratum is what Deleuze calls the "body without organs." In a general sense, this can be seen in the abject, dilapidating zombie bodies in Fulci's *The Beyond*; in the pliantly soft flesh of the victims of violent acts that see bodies burned, broken apart, and melted in gaysploitation horror; in the bloody, orgasmic pools that the vampire body is "reduced" to in *True Blood*; and in the fluid performativity of genre styles, gender traits, and queer identities found in queer horror film and television texts.

Returning full-circle to *The Beyond*, Patricia MacCormack considers the queer potential of Fulci's zombie films. She applies the concept of "the body without organs" to Fulci's recurring zombie figure, and writing specifically about *The Beyond*, she argues that the representation of corporeal violence does not serve to destroy identities, but instead suggests that such "acts of violence are acts of corporeal experimentation, not destruction."³⁶ The swampy environs of Fulci's films exist not only as spaces that conceal rotting, decaying bodies but also as places of rebirth and re-creation with a focus on queer libidinal energies. MacCormack concludes by listing *The Beyond*'s inventive scenes of bodies in torment: "crucifixion, melting by acid, a face is eaten by spiders, another wrenched off, a throat torn out and handyman Arthur . . . has his eyes squelched out and kills his wife in an equally gruesome way in a marital parody, showing interest in corporeal reconfiguration (the body, literally "beyond"). . . . Death creates self through larval flesh. Zombies desire bodies without organs and as their libidinal acts are ones of infection rather than copulation they create other bodies without organs, open up and fold back."³⁷ The queer bodies depicted in southern-set queer horror can be understood as reorganizing bodies that are perpetually shifting in state. This is especially relevant of the death/rebirth seen in the orgasmically explosive "deaths" of *True Blood*. The show's iconically gloopy death scenes depict the vampires' bodies liquefying into a comically visceral mess upon receiving the "true death" by stake. It is in this sense that the notion of fluid sexual Otherness and queer subjectivities are rendered literal in the orgasmic symbolism of the vampire's melting body. However, in the episode "Save Yourself" (season 5, episode 12), there is an interesting extension of *True Blood*'s lore of vampire death. Having grown tired of living the apologetic life of an assimilationist vampire, Bill drinks the blood of Lilith (the progenitor of the vampire

race) to assume her godlike powers. He begins to bleed out from various orifices—eyes, ears, nose, mouth—and eventually he bursts apart in a postcoital explosion, liquefying into a pool of blood. The spectating Sookie and Eric look to leave, only to see the naked, reborn Bill rise and re-coagulate from the pool of vampire viscera as an all-powerful phallic god. Bill's white cisgender male displacement of Lilith as vampire god further cements my earlier point about *True Blood's* critique of queer culture's own hierarchical problematic.

Rather than representing the body's breakdown and messy visualization of the vampire's "true death," these explosively sticky, orgasmic moments from *True Blood* stand out as temporary, comic, gross-out depictions of Deleuzian queer "becomings" in which characters move from one status to another, one identity to another. This outlines the southern gothic's propensity to present a contemporary, nonessentialist, queer, fluid identity that is literally in flux, visualized in rotting and abject bodies and, more symbolically, in queer horror's multiplicity of shifting, inconsistent, continually changing, and performative subjectivities.

NOTES

The epigraph is from Pippa Holloway, "Manifesto for a Queer South Politics," *PMLA* 131.1 (2016): 182–86, at 186.

1. Christopher Lloyd, "Southern Gothic," *American Gothic Culture: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Joel Faflak and Jason Haslam (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 79–91, at 81.

2. Eric Savoy, "The Face of the Tenant: A Theory of the American Gothic," *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*, ed. Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), 3–19, at 11.

3. David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell 2004), 116–17.

4. Teresa A. Goddu, "The Ghost of Race: Edgar Allan Poe and the Southern Gothic," *Criticism and the Color Line: Desegregating American Literary Studies*, ed. Henry B. Wonham (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 230–50, at 230.

5. Lloyd, "Southern Gothic," 79.

6. In addition to the queer horror films set in the South discussed in this chapter, see, for instance, *Frogs* (1972), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Eaten Alive* (1977), *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (1995), and *The Skeleton Key* (2005).

7. Robin Wood, "Introduction to the American Horror Film," *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976–85), 2:195–220, at 198.

8. Teresa Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 76.
9. See, for instance, Wood, "Introduction to the American Horror Film"; Ellis Hanson, "Undead," *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (London: Routledge, 1991), 324–40; Jack [Judith] Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995); Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).
10. See my *Queer Horror Film and Television: Sexuality and Masculinity at the Margins* (London: Tauris, 2016).
11. Michael Bibler, "Queering the Region," *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the American South*, ed. Sharon Monteith (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 188–203, at 188.
12. Bibler, "Queering the Region," 188–89.
13. Susan Donaldson, "Making Darkness Visible," *Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond in Southern Literature and Culture*, ed. Eric Gary Anderson, Taylor Hagood, and Daniel Cross Turner (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 261–65, at 264.
14. Christopher Lloyd, *Corporeal Legacies in the US South: Memory and Embodiment in Contemporary Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 5.
15. Jay Watson, *Reading for the Body: The Recalcitrant Materiality of Southern Fiction, 1893–1985* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 9.
16. Bibler, "Queering the Region," 188.
17. Michael Grant, "The 'Real' and the Abominations of Hell: Carl-Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1931) and Lucio Fulci's *E tu vivrai nel terrore—L'aldilà* (*The Beyond*, 1981)," *Kinoeye* 3.2 (February 2003); Web.
18. Patricia MacCormack, *Cinesexuality* (London: Routledge, 2008), 112.
19. William Matthew McCarter, "Regional 'Othering' in Herschell Lewis's *Two Thousand Maniacs*," *Steel Toe Review* 10 August 2011; Web.
20. Anthony Szczesiul, "Re-mapping Southern Hospitality: Discourse, Ethics, and Politics," *European Journal of American Culture* 26.2 (2007): 127–41, at 132.
21. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 16.
22. Joanna Davis-McElligatt, "God Hates Fangs: *True Blood*, Black Queer Agency, and Appropriations of the History of Racial and Sexual Violence in the Deep South," *Small-Screen Souths: Region, Identity, and the Cultural Politics of Television*, ed. Lisa Hinrichsen, Gina Caison, and Stephanie Rountree (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 99–114, at 100.
23. Davis-McElligatt, "God Hates Fangs," 101–2.
24. Davis-McElligatt, "God Hates Fangs," 115.
25. Davis-McElligatt, "God Hates Fangs," 109.
26. The show builds on a cinematic and literary history of Southern queer vampires, most famously in Neil Jordan's 1994 film *Interview with the Vampire*, adapted from Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* series. Rice's novels and Jordan's screen adap-

tation, with its depiction of more explicitly queer vampirism, arguably paved the way for *True Blood*'s postmillennial presentation of a plurality of "out" queer vampires.

27. Darren Elliott-Smith, "The Homosexual Vampire as a Metaphor for . . . the Homosexual Vampire? *True Blood*, Homonormativity, and Assimilation," *True Blood: Investigating Vampires and the Southern Gothic*, ed. Brigid Cherry (London: Tauris, 2012), 139–58.

28. Brigid Cherry and Caroline Ruddell, "More Than Cold and Heartless: The Southern Gothic Milieu of *True Blood*," Cherry, *True Blood*, 39–58, at 42.

29. Cherry and Ruddell, "More Than Cold and Heartless," 42.

30. Cherry and Ruddell, "More Than Cold and Heartless," 53.

31. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). See a more detailed discussion of how integral Butler's work is to an informed understanding of queer horror texts in my *Queer Horror Film and Television: Sexuality and Masculinity at the Margins*.

32. It is interesting to note here that contemporary queer horror films clearly take ownership of the queer-phobic sodomy references that originate cinematically in Boorman's *Deliverance*, Sullivan's *Two Thousand Maniacs!* sequels, Ball's *True Blood*, and Rowe Kelly's *A Far Cry from Home* all feature scenes where the fear of sodomy is turned into a gross-out, often absurdist, comic element that arguably defuses homosexual panic.

33. Alan Rowe Kelly, quoted in Sean Abley, *Out in the Dark: Interviews with Gay Horror Filmmakers, Actors, and Authors* (Maple Shade, N.J.: Lethe Press, 2012), 230.

34. For example, see *Bite Marks*, dir. Mark Bessenger (2011); *The Gay Bed and Breakfast of Terror*, dir. Jaymes Thompson (2007); *Bloody Bloody Bible Camp*, dir. Vito Trabucco (2012).

35. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), 40.

36. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 111.

37. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 111.