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"Blood Petroleum": *True Blood*, the BP Oil Spill, and Fictions of Energy/Culture

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The third season of the HBO series *True Blood*, set in fictional Bon Temps, Louisiana, aired in a mediascape shaped by coverage of the BP oil spill that wreaked economic and ecological havoc on the US Gulf South during the summer of 2010. A retrospective examination of the series in this context, and against the grain of critical consensus labeling it mere escapism, demonstrates that taking *True Blood* seriously can yield compelling insights into the US Gulf South as a site in which convergences of the global and the local, of reality and representation, and of energy and cultural production result in the formation of a hybrid: energy/culture. Analysis of the storyline featuring the Vampire King of Mississippi shows how *True Blood* extends the long-standing cultural practice of making vampires screens for projecting collective desires and anxieties. Through a "camp aesthetic" that weaves into the Vampire King's maniacal pursuit of blood in various forms dire warnings about excessive consumption and environmental apocalypse, *True Blood* offers fictional ways to make meaning of the actual conditions and consequences of energy production and consumption brought to the surface with great urgency by the BP oil spill.

The third season of HBO's hit series *True Blood* aired during the summer of 2010 in a mediascape highly attuned to the US Gulf South as a consequence of the BP oil spill.[1] Arjun Appadurai defines the "mediascape" as one of five distinct yet interrelated "cultural global flows" generating repositories of images and narratives in which news, politics, and commodities mix, thus blurring lines between fact and fiction for viewers inhabiting "imagined worlds." Out of "image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality," viewers can extract settings, plots, and characters to mold "imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places."[2] The mediascape

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[1] Naming the spill is a process fraught with complexity and political controversy. I use "BP oil spill" because it was the most commonly used name during the crisis and remains so as of now. Alternatives such as "Deepwater Horizon oil spill" and "Gulf oil spill" have emerged over time. Also worth noting is that subcontractors on the Deepwater Horizon project, Halliburton and Transocean, have been implicated in media coverage, government reports, and legal proceedings, indicating that BP is not solely culpable.

[2] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 35.

shaped by coverage of the BP oil spill was a case in point, serving up to viewers worldwide a virtual gumbo of media content focussed on the US Gulf South in general and Louisiana in particular. This mixture included footage from the so-called "spill cam," which streamed the gushing oil in real time, in addition to an ever-proliferating flow of information from news, government, and corporate sources and from a blogosphere teeming with pseudo-scientific hypotheses and conspiracy theories. Thanks to HBO, cable subscribers and tech-savvy media poachers could watch not only *True Blood* but other Gulf South-centric programming as well: multiple rebroadcasts of Spike Lee's critically acclaimed Katrina documentary, *When the Levees Broke*, and the newly released sequel, *If God Is Willin' and Da Creek Don't Rise*, or the debut season of the series *Treme*, an Altmanesque rendering of life in post-Katrina New Orleans from David Simon, creator of *The Wire*.

Surveying this mediascape, it would seem that *True Blood* fits most comfortably in the category of pure escapism – a site of repose geographically situated inland from the Gulf and thus somewhat removed from the bleak ramifications of the oil spill. Unlike its HBO counterparts, *True Blood* self-consciously eschews strict realism via a camp aesthetic that further embellishes an already embellished imagined Louisiana with an extensive cultural history. True to form, Bon Temps, Louisiana, the principal setting of the series, is an exotic locale where people's inhibitions invariably dissipate in the humid climate to release libidinous flows. *True Blood* ups the ante by adding to the cast of colorful human characters a bevy of supernatural creatures, including vampires, werewolves, shape-shifters, fairies, and the occasional visitor from classical mythology. On the whole, critical reception of *True Blood* has labeled it a guilty pleasure, citing the outlandish storylines and stylized characters, human and otherwise, as evidence that the show does not take itself too seriously, nor should viewers.[3] And yet *True Blood* tries to have it both ways, spiking its escapism with doses of reality that provoke thought about how the fantastical setting of the series resonates with the actual places inhabited by viewers. For example, a motif in the series thus far is exploration of impediments to achieving the pluralistic ideal expressed in the motto emblazoned on the United States seal: *E pluribus unum*. Toward this end, vampires struggle individually and collectively to reconcile the influence of heritage with the desire for mainstream assimilation. After the invention of Tru Blood, a synthetic substitute for the "real thing" developed in Japan

[3] See Robert Bianco, "Wild 'True Blood' Packs Full-Throated Fun," *USA Today*, 11 June 2010, 9D; Jaime J. Weinman, "Fangs Down, the Trashiest Show on TV," *Maclean's*, 28 June 2010, 56.

and marketed globally, vampires have the option to forgo feeding on humans. Thus many of the undead have "come out" and joined the American Vampire League (AVL) to promote equality using a strategy that gives new meaning to the philosophy of nonviolent activism.

In what follows, a retrospective examination of the BP oil spill mediascape proposes that favorably responding to calls to take *True Blood* more seriously can yield illuminating critical insights into fictions of actual energy production and consumption breached at points of contact between representation and reality by seepages of the Real. Influencing this process is a convergence of flows in the US Gulf South directing the movement of media, capital, labor, and technology and deriving impetus from the "global–local nexus" – a transnational engine of global capitalism that rivals the nation-state in terms of viability and influence.[4] Under these conditions, the camp aesthetic of *True Blood*, vividly on display in the third-season storyline featuring the Vampire King of Mississippi, a rapacious three-thousand-year-old vampire determined to rule the world by becoming the richest of the global super-rich, gives aesthetic expression to the multivalent and material lived experiences of "liquid modernity" exacerbated by the spill.[5] To be sure, the makers of *True Blood* could not have intended to address the environmental crisis directly. Rather, the simultaneity of events suggests a fateful synergy that in retrospect comes vividly into relief when examining the serious-minded aspirations of the series and what they reveal about the implications of the spill. Accordingly, the vampire king's constant pursuit of blood in various forms (human, vampire, synthetic, supernatural) and for myriad purposes (life, pleasure, profit, power) is a trope made more meaningful by the realities of producing and consuming capitalism's lifeblood – the liquid matter flowing continuously into the Gulf of Mexico in the context of the storyline's unfolding. This reading of blood and/as oil informs a broader interpretation of *True Blood*'s third season as in part a meditation on the local ecological and economic consequences of global fossil-fuel consumption and the resulting conundrum of imagining alternatives to oil capitalism.[6] This critical approach is responsive to the common charge that aesthetic analysis under the auspices of globalization theory distracts attention from materiality. It also answers recent calls for scholars to explore constitutive relations between energy production and

[4] Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, eds., *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 3.

[5] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2000).

[6] See Imre Szeman, "System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106, 4 (2007), 805–23, for a discussion of narrative trends in discourses on post-oil capitalism. Szeman observes, "Oil capital seems to represent a stage that neither capital nor its opponents can think beyond" (806–7).

cultural production in general and to address the cultural representation of oil in particular.[7]

BLOODSCAPES: CRUDE NARRATIVES AND FICTIONAL DESIRES

Of all the HBO fare available during the BP oil spill, Spike Lee's *If God Is Willin' and Da Creek Don't Rise* was the most explicit in addressing the potentially devastating effects on the already beleaguered economy and ecology of the region. Lee ambitiously attempts to document the disabling symptoms of Katrina-induced post-traumatic stress disorder, simultaneously making the case that the spill is the new Katrina. Though frenetic in narrative focus, *If God Is Willin'* does convey the anguish of residents caught up in the cycle of exploitation, environmental degradation, and economic (co)dependency extant since the Gulf South became, as it were, the only game in town for offshore drilling in the US. The documentary repeatedly points to the local consequences of global oil addiction – a material condition expressed through a figurative alchemy that mixes oil and blood. This trope spans the Age of Petroleum, as evinced by Upton Sinclair's muckraking novel *Oil!* (1927) and Paul Thomas Anderson's brilliant 2007 film adaptation, *There Will Be Blood*. Peter Hitchcock convincingly argues for reading these works as bookends of the American century that lay bare the functions of "oil logic," in part through visual and figurative representations of oil in relation to human bodily functions and fluids.[8] A signature passage from Sinclair's novel employs the blood–oil connection to highlight the material base of windfall profits for an enigmatic industrial tycoon. Regarding World War I, Sinclair writes that

> the nations of Europe had established for themselves two lines of death, extending all the way across the continent; and millions of men, as if under the spell of some monstrous enchantment, rushed to the lines to have their bodies blown to pieces and their life-blood poured out upon the ground. The newspapers told about battles that had lasted for months, and the price of petroleum products continued to pile up fortunes for J. Arnold Ross.[9]

[7] For discussion of the influences of energy resources on cultural production, see Patricia Yaeger, Laurie Shannon, Vin Nardizzi, Ken Hiltner, Saree Makdisi, Michael Ziser, and Imre Szeman, "Editor's Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources," *PMLA*, 126, 2 (2011), 305–26. See Amitav Ghosh, "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel," *New Republic*, 2 March 1992, 29–34, on the literary representation of oil. Ghosh discusses the curious dearth of American petrofiction in this seminal piece, sparking a lively critical debate still in progress. See Peter Hitchcock, "Oil in an American Imaginary," *New Form*, 69, 1 (2010), 81–97, for a compelling rejoinder to Ghosh.

[8] Hitchcock.

[9] Upton Sinclair, *Oil!* (New York: Penguin, 1954; first published 1927), 130.

In "Oil and Blood" (1933), W. B. Yeats conjures visual and olfactory images of the eponymous substances mixing in dead and undead bodies, implicitly casting the Age of Petroleum as merely the latest episode in a long history of producing and consuming oil with deadly consequences:

> In tombs of gold and lapus lazuli
> Bodies of holy men and women exude
> Miraculous oil, odour of violet.
> But under heavy loads of trampled clay
> Lie bodies of vampires full of blood;
> Their shrouds are bloody and their lips are wet.[10]

Subjects of Lee's documentary extend this figurative stirring of lifebloods, fashioning images of human blood and crude oil to issue scathing indictments of valuing corporate profits over worker safety and environmental stewardship. Thomas Eckerman, a self-styled "New Orleans thespian by way of Iowa," demonstrates how he redefines "BP" as an acronym for "Blood Petroleum" in a performance-art piece. Phyllis Montana LeBlanc, whose spirited commentary on cosmic and bureaucratic absurdity in *When the Levees Broke* landed her a role in *Treme*, exclaims with righteous indignation, "We all know there's blood in that BP oil!" LeBlanc's charge is a palpable reminder that eleven workers lost their lives in the explosion that crippled the Deepwater Horizon rig and caused the rupture in the Macondo well. Now the converse of LeBlanc's indictment has proven to be the case as well: tests have detected traces of oil and the dispersant Corexit in the blood of Gulf residents, scuba divers registering the highest concentration levels.[11] The commingling of blood and oil signals the contamination of "pure" humanity, functioning as rhetorical ballast in debates about the economic and ecological implications of the spill and expressing longing for materiality in a mediascape in which popular narratives exhibit the sheen of superficiality and the visible traces of fictional desires. Such narrative desires and features demonstrate the potential efficacy of forging the fictional *True Blood* as a critical lens through which to examine implications of the all-too-real BP oil spill.

The desire to fictionalize elements of the spill is on display in various forms. A pointed example is the transformation of the Macondo well from a site of energy production into one of cultural production by virtue of the spill cam. Taking this notion to its illogical extreme, David Kronke wrote a satirically glowing review of the media spectacle for the *Huffington Post*, calling it an

[10] W. B. Yeats, "Oil and Blood," in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, Volume I, *The Poems*, 2nd edn, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), 243.

[11] Bill Barrow, "BP Oil Spill's Health Effects Will Be Felt for Generations, Scientist Warns," *Nola.com*, 5 Feb. 2011, www.nola.com/news/gulf-oil-spill/index.ssf/2011/02/bp_oil_spills_health_effects_w.html.

avant-garde exercise in *cinéma vérité*, "a $200-billion experimental art film" called *BP's Oil Spill Live Feed*. Defying conventions of the Hollywood blockbuster, except for the staggering price tag and "straightforward plot," the film is a stunning achievement in "counterprogramming." Kronke describes the production as much more ambitious than James Cameron's *Avatar* and bold in its repurposing of the silent-film genre. "It's decidedly not for all audiences," Kronke concludes with ominous deadpan, "but its historical impact on cinema (and life in general) may prove to be much greater."[12]

If *BP's Oil Spill Live Feed* is an avant-garde subversion of the Hollywood summer blockbuster, as Kronke lampoons, then the document issued by the commission appointed by US President Barack Obama to investigate the spill reads at times as a standard blockbuster novelization. The narrative section of *Deep Water: The Gulf Oil Disaster and the Future of Offshore Drilling* is replete with conventions of Hollywood disaster fare: loud explosions, dazzling technological marvels and malfunctions, and, as erstwhile BP CEO Tony Hayward might say with his knack for unintended meaning, bloody casualties. The report conveys images of bodies, human and animal, drenched in blood, oil, and "mud" (industry lingo for a mixture of organic and synthetic substances). In one passage, an oil-drenched egret – surely BP's Coleridgian albatross – falls to the deck of the burning Deepwater Horizon rig.[13] Purple prose and clumsy dramatic flair shape the narrative account of the explosion and its aftermath. The report lauds the bravery, vocational skills, and hierarchical camaraderie of rig workers at the same time as it points to hubris expressed through presumed technological mastery in asserting human dominion over nature. Key passages read as pale imitations of epic seafaring narratives from the *Odyssey* to *Moby-Dick* to James Cameron's *Titanic*. The narrative section of *Deep Water* concludes with a vivid expression of its fictional desires, noting that the Macondo well was named for the town in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The report cites a passage from the novel to suggest that the fate of the fictional Macondo applies not only to that of its fateful namesake but more broadly to the oil and gas industry as it "plumbed the depths of the Gulf":

> It was as if God had decided to put to the test every capacity for surprise and was keeping the inhabitants of Macondo in permanent alternation between excitement and disappointment, doubt and revelation, to such an extreme that no one knew for certain where the limits of reality lay.[14]

[12] David Kronke, "Film Review: *BP's Oil Spill Live Feed*," *Huffington Post*, 2 June 2010, www.huffingtonpost.com/david-kronke/film-review-bps-oil-spill_b_594311.html.

[13] National Commission on the BP Deep Water Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling, Report to the President, *Deep Water: The Gulf Oil Disaster and the Future of Offshore Drilling* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2011), 12.

[14] Ibid., 53.

In the parlance of media narratives that promote solidarity in the face of epic catastrophes, we are *all* Macondoans, insofar as this sentiment applies to inhabiting both material landscapes and imagined worlds shaped by the vagaries of global capitalism and the chronic anxieties of fossil-fuel dependence. It should come as no surprise, then, that the Macondo well rupture and the impending consequences for the ecology and economy of the US Gulf South, not to mention the power of the US nation-state, produced desire for the ordering assurances of narrative evident in the strained literary flair of *Deep Water*. Such fictional desires form in part as buffers to the crude material reality projected in the *mise en scène* of the spill cam footage: that the ocean is now a "techno-organic realm," as Patricia Yaeger writes in articulating her vision of "ecocriticism$." For Yaeger, the dollar sign functions as a "prosthetic" that foregrounds material concerns as a deterrent to the tendency in ecocriticism to romanticize nature through ethereal invocations of the sublime that can, as in the concept of the infinitely abundant ocean, unwittingly enable reckless practices. Yaeger attaches the dollar sign as a reminder that "the ocean as *oikos* or home rolls under, beneath, and inside the edicts of state and free market capitalism."[15] Along these lines, the spill cam aesthetic animates fictional desires and melds elements of the visual and the material into a spectacle of techno-imagism. It confronts viewers with raw footage of gushing oil as a tragically sublime expression of what Zygmut Bauman calls "negative globalization," a force that "specializes in breaking those boundaries too weak to withstand the pressure, and in drilling numerous huge and unplugable [*sic*] holes through those boundaries that successfully resist the forces bent on dismantling them."[16]

A crucial point is that the boundaries destabilized by the ruptured Macondo well delineate both material and representational fields. Slavoj Žižek's application of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in the service of a rehabilitated mode of Marxist ideological critique provides illustrative terms. Žižek makes the case for adhering to the thesis that truth is structured as a fiction, citing Lacan's stipulation that "truth is condemned to remain a fiction precisely in so far as the *innomable* Real eludes its grasp."[17] Accordingly, the simultaneous flow of material crude and visual footage constitutes and represents the intrusion of an elusive Real difficult to contain with mechanical devices deployed to the ocean floor or through representational schemes constructed in the symbolic order. With considerable force, it undermines the integrity of

[15] Patricia Yaeger, "Editor's Column: Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons," *PMLA*, 125, 3 (2010), 529.
[16] Zygmut Bauman, *Liquid Fear* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2006), 96.
[17] Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 167, original emphasis.

symbolic fictions that constitute the everyday realities of global energy production and consumption (government oversight, corporate responsibility, etc.) and ideological fantasies ("beyond petroleum," "clean energy," etc.) that form in response to the inconvenient truth of steadily increasing fossil-fuel consumption and carbon emissions as peak oil looms on the horizon. The consequent revelations about the structure and flows of global capitalism in the wake of the spill call to mind Žižek's gothic economic theory. He contends that the "true horror" is not the "particular content hidden beneath the universality of global Capital" but the reality that "Capital is effectively an anonymous global machine blindly running its course," not operated by "a particular Secret Agent."[18] Rather than celebrate "the new freedoms and responsibilities brought about by the 'second modernity,'" Žižek asserts, "it is much more crucial to focus on what *remains the same* in this global fluidity: the inexorable logic of Capital." As a stealth force, the "spectral presence of Capital" drives global consumption and structures consumer desires, meaning that "today's subject is perhaps more than ever caught in an inexorable compulsion that effectively runs his life."[19] The raw footage projected by the spill cam confronted viewers with this compulsion in the context of oil production and consumption, eliciting a perverted scopophilia marked by fear and fascination in response to the seemingly unstoppable flow of crude. As *True Blood*'s Eric Northman, the jaded vampire sheriff of Louisiana Area Five and proprietor of the bar Fangtasia, might say, there is something about the lure of a "live feed" that forces a confrontation with the material conditions of necessity, excess, and lack. As it happens, in the BP oil spill mediascape, the fictional *True Blood* serves as a surprisingly effective instrument for examining how the spectral presence and consuming force of global capital possesses (in every sense of the word) national, local, and individual consumer identities with destabilizing symbolic and material effects. Moreover, this critical perspective subjects the ideological elements of energy production and consumption to the force that complacent consumers, unscrupulous corporate executives, and the vampires populating Bon Temps find most destabilizing: the light of day.

"DEADLY SERIOUS": ECO-CAMPING IN *TRUE BLOOD*

The third season of *True Blood* showcases a blatant scene-stealer in the form of guest star Denis O'Hare portraying Russell Edgington, the Vampire King of Mississippi, a gay vampire ensconced with his lover, Talbot, in the "big house" on a sprawling Mississippi plantation guarded by werewolf "overseers."

[18] Ibid., 218. [19] Ibid., 354, original emphasis.

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Russell's plantation-based enterprise, complete with images and plot devices that evoke slavery, calls to mind Paul Gilroy's elaboration on Hegel in making the case that the plantation economy was in many ways a foundation for global capitalism.[20] Taking the idea of the southern planter as parvenu capitalist rather than country squire to its logical extreme, *True Blood* casts Russell as aspiring to dominate the markets of transnational capitalism. Russell's ambitious path begins in Louisiana and involves controlling the flow of liquid capital in various forms – from the ample natural gas reserves about which he rhapsodizes early in the season to the various forms of blood (human, vampire, and fairy) that he produces, consumes, pursues, and fetishizes. Simultaneously, the vampire king issues dire warnings about environmental destruction, delivering jeremiads that indict humans for reckless self- and planetary destruction. In his performance, O'Hare engages in what can be called "eco-camping" – not the form of green outdoor recreation that has become fashionable these days or the kind of "eco-Camp" that denotes cultural recycling, but a use of camp in the service of ecocriticism and ecocriticism$, for that matter.[21]

Viewing camp as an instrument of critique in *True Blood* is a critical move that intervenes in the long-standing debate about the efficacy of camp as an agent of political activism. Initiating this debate, Susan Sontag, in her influential essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" relies on binary opposition between aesthetics and materialism for her definition. Sontag asserts that "Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical," resulting in part from paradoxical relations between production and reception: "Camp is art that proposes itself seriously but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is 'too much.'"[22] In "Uses of Camp," Andrew Ross posits an alternative definition, identifying a pivotal moment for camp in the early 1960s when it transformed into a "cultural economy" that "challenged, and, in some cases, helped to overturn legitimate definitions of taste and sexuality." Rather than preserve binary opposition between aesthetic and materialist modes of analysis, Ross advocates integration, arguing that "we must also remember to what

[20] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 54–55.

[21] Moe Meyer, ed., *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (New York: Routledge, 1994). In the Introduction to this volume, Meyer briefly summarizes Chuck Kleinhans's essay "Taking Out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Parody," casting Kleinhans's thesis as "eco-Camp" because it argues that the alternative to consumer culture posed by the queer functions "as a vast representational recycling program" (20). My use of "eco-camping" is not confined to the representational field; rather it suggests that camp offers a means of bridging the gap between aesthetics and materiality – in this case, between cultural production and energy production.

[22] Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *idem, Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 275–93, 277, 284.

extent this cultural economy was tied to the capitalist logic of development that governed mass culture industries."[23] Ross's definition makes camp relevant to Tara McPherson's trenchant analysis of *True Blood* in the context of uneven development shaped by global capitalism. Though sympathetic to "production studies" founded on socioeconomic analysis, McPherson stresses the importance of tending to matters of representation in texts that serve as "documents of labor, of struggle, and of our own complex relations to capital." McPherson proposes a hybrid critical approach not unlike Ross's, bringing together economic and aesthetic analysis of cultural production to examine "the modes by which complex economic and organizational structures are made meaningful at the level of lived experience or of narrative."[24] O'Hare's eco-camping as the vampire king provides the basis for extending the scope to encompass energy production as well. After all, the practices that McPherson identifies in her analysis of *True Blood* in the context of "Louisiana's bid to become Hollywood South"[25] – not least the state's use of tax incentives and right-to-work laws to lure business – had long trial runs in the state's transformation into "America's energy corridor." Vampire camp is in many respects an ideal medium for contemplating the surplus of horrors arising from this "successful" investment and for thinking about how the lines between energy production and cultural production give way in the formation of a hybrid: energy/culture.

When questioned about the camp factor in *True Blood*, O'Hare takes issue with the critical consensus. In an interview, he remarks, "People keep saying, oh, *True Blood*, it's so campy. Not from the inside. Nobody I know on that set is playing at anything. They're going full force." O'Hare cites the "ridiculous" situations in the series as responsible for the charge, insisting that it does not stem from "the actors winking at the audience." O'Hare reinforces his claim by stating that "the house style on *True Blood* is not campy. The house style is deadly serious."[26] As an actor, O'Hare is clearly resistant to the camp label, likely because it implies a diminishment of craft in the individual performances and compromised integrity in the series as a whole. The defense relies on the earnestness of the actors and on the same binary logic that Sontag purports: if the show takes itself seriously, then it cannot be camp. And yet O'Hare's performance suggests otherwise, for it bears all the familiar

[23] Andrew Ross, "Uses of Camp," in David Bergman, ed., *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 54–77, 74.

[24] Tara McPherson, "Revamping the South: Thoughts on Labor, Relationality, and Southern Representation," in Kathryn McKee and Deborah E. Barker, eds., *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 336–52, 346.

[25] Ibid., 344.

[26] "Drink the Glass of Water – Denis O'Hare," www.imaginefashion.com/ladies-gentleman/drink-the-glass-of-water-denis-ohare.

hallmarks: flamboyant dialogue, costumes, and gestures; sustained irony; and a celebration of queerness.[27]

O'Hare's delivery of the vampire king's environmentally conscious monologues demonstrates the effectiveness of eco-camping in raising concerns relevant to cultural and energy production and consumption. There are several examples, but by far the most pronounced occurs in arguably the standout scene of the season: Russell's surprise "guest appearance" on a cable news network program in Episode 9. By the time Russell is ready for his close-up, he has seen his dream of world domination tragically altered due to the fatal staking of his lover, Talbot, by Eric Northman as an act of revenge for an atrocity that Russell committed centuries ago. Raging with grief and storming the studio, Russell tears into the body of a news anchor, extracting his spine to use as a prop while delivering a diatribe about, well, the spineless culture of excessive consumption. Mocking the American Vampire League's public-relations campaign for vampire equality, Russell claims that vampires and humans are alike only in terms of their narcissistic pursuit of individual profit and satisfaction. Russell berates the human viewing public, linking particular products to their material histories and to the destructive consequences of excessive consumption in aggregate: "Global warming, perpetual war, toxic waste, child labor, torture, genocide – that's a small price to pay for your SUVs and your flat screen TVs, your blood diamonds, your designer jeans, your absurd, garish McMansions!" Russell concludes his address to humans by elaborating on the theory of vampire supremacy that he has heretofore adumbrated: "We are nothing like you. We are immortal because we drink the true blood – blood that's living, organic, human." The vampire king is not eco-friendly; he is eco-fierce. In contrast to the "friendly faces" put on by the AVL in the superficial aesthetics of mass marketing, Russell counters with a graphic illustration of vampires' predatory nature: "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." Alternating between shots of characters viewing the live broadcast and shots simulating the live broadcast, the scene implicates viewers as consumers of the media spectacle. In the hands of such a deft performer, the overdetermined sequence registers as both wildly absurd and "deadly serious," as O'Hare might say – a use of camp to construct a simulated media spectacle

[27] My use of the term "queerness" requires clarification, especially when taking into account Russell Edgington's homosexuality and the contentious discussion of camp in the context of queer theory. I do not mean to refer to the vampire king's sexual orientation per se but to the ways in which his characterization destabilizes concepts and narratives that provide ideological reinforcement of the practices of free-market capitalism. While much could be said about the implications of the vampire king's sexual orientation, particularly with regard to vigorous debates about the nature and uses of camp, such concerns lie beyond the parameters of this essay.

more revealing about the material conditions and consequences of excessive consumption than the actual broadcasts of mainstream news organizations covering the disaster in the Gulf. As it happens, the vampire king's impromptu national address would have made an ideal voice-over had the "producers" of *BP's Live Oil Spill Feed* not opted for the mode of silent filmmaking.

Read in the context of the oil spill coverage, Russell Edgington's aggressive media strategy calls into question the authenticity of more "friendly faces" than those fronting the AVL's campaign for the Vampire Rights Amendment. The use of camp in staging the vampire king's brand of "environmentalism" mocks the ideological cynicism of "greenwashing," the now routine practice in marketing and public-relations campaigns of giving eco-friendly image makeovers to corporations with poor environmental track records. The "Beyond Petroleum" campaign mounted in 2000 by BP, then British Petroleum, is a case in point. The aim was to rebrand the company through bold feats of verbal and visual rhetoric. The freshly minted corporate logo, a green and yellow sunburst, was emblazoned on advertisements featuring slogans such as "It's time to go on a low-carbon diet" and "It's time to think outside the barrel." This campaign played out while the company greatly expanded oil and gas production, delving into ever deeper and more remote environs and all the while maintaining a lax regard for safety standards that resulted in two major accidents: an explosion at the company's Texas City, Texas refinery in 2005 that killed fifteen workers and a major spill from a badly corroded Alaska pipeline in 2006. Similarly, *Deep Water*'s findings show that the Deepwater Horizon explosion resulted from substandard work by BP and its subcontractors and from weak oversight by regulators from the US Minerals Management Service, an agency embroiled in scandals involving Dionysian exploits rivaling those orchestrated by the maenad Maryann that wreaked havoc on Bon Temps in the second season of *True Blood*. Such blatant greenwashing is a prime example of the cynical nature of ideology in a supposedly "post-ideological" milieu. As Žižek explains, this model stands in contrast to the one that defines ideology as false consciousness. Instead of assuming that people act in a fog of ignorance manufactured by external authority to preserve hegemonic control ("for they know not what they do," goes the famous caveat in describing mass behavior), the refashioned concept of ideology proposed by Žižek assumes that people *are* in the know but *act* as though they are not. Thus BP and other energy producers and we as energy consumers know to varying degrees that we are bound to petroleum rather than moving beyond it, but we behave (consume) as though we do not. Ideological fantasies of "clean energy" and "energy independence" enable this behavior, forming in response to material realities that Russell Edgington, brandishing the anchorman's bloody spine, describes in bracing fashion.

In many respects, Russell Edgington's characterization is consistent with patterns of vampire mythology that Nina Auerbach traces in her provocative book *Our Vampires, Ourselves*. Focussed on two centuries of Anglo-American cultural history, Auerbach demonstrates how vampires emerge in various historical contexts as mythological manifestations of collective anxieties and desires. According to Auerbach, vampires of "the American century" have a tendency to "gravitate to leadership, aping the tyrants they parody."[28] By this standard, Russell Edgington reads as a twenty-first century variation on the American century's vampire. Such a turn is consistent with Michael Hardt and Antoni Negri's use of the vampire to describe the effects of late capitalism: "The vampire, its monstrous life, and its insatiable desire has become symptomatic not only of the dissolution of an old society but the formation of a new."[29] But Russell looks to the US antebellum period for inspiration, fashioning himself the plantation gentleman in keeping with evocations of the Old South rooted in lost-cause mythology. True to this mythic form, Russell cloaks his intense profit motive in the trappings of gentility, grandeur, and affected social graces. For this reason, in addition to others, the vampire king can be seen as both counterpart and foil to Tony Hayward, the CEO of BP whose hapless attempts to maintain a persona of graciousness, affability, and compassion against the backdrop of environmental catastrophe made for a kind of absurdist theater of gentlemanly deportment in the mediascape. The comparison gains strength from taking into account Karl Marx's often-cited use of vampirism as metaphor: "Capital is dead labour that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks."[30] Žižek's adaptation of Marx yields further understanding of how Hayward's media persona renders him every bit as undead as his imperial counterpart in *True Blood*. Žižek explains how the effort to transcend clichés permeating public discourse can yield an unintended outcome in subjectivity: "not a person capable of expressing themselves in a relaxed, unconstrained way, but an automated bundle of (new) clichés behind which we no longer sense the presence of a 'real person.'"[31] The figure that emerges is "a true monster, a kind of 'living dead'" embodied in the vampire. The vampire capitalist envisioned by Žižek finds almost perfect expression in the monstrous, undead gaffe that became Hayward's signature line: "I'd like my life back."

[28] Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 7.
[29] Michael Hardt and Antoni Negri, *Multitude* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 193.
[30] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Ernest Untermann (New York: Modern Library, 1906), 330.
[31] Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, ed. and trans. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (New York: Continuum, 2005), 157.

Russell Edgington's ruthless pursuit of wealth and power and cynical branding of his enterprise as "green" suggest that he is a mythic projection of anxieties about the adverse effects of laissez-faire capitalism. As such, the vampire king's queerly quasi-human form calls to mind the legal concept of the corporation as person – a genus of "monster" created by the US Supreme Court in *Dartmouth College* v. *Woodward* in 1819 and granted considerably more power in 1886 when the Court ruled in *Santa Clara Railroad* v. *Southern Pacific Railroad* that corporations were entitled to "equal protection" afforded to all "persons" under the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution. However, as Auerbach explains, it is difficult to assign definitive meanings to vampires because they thrive on ambiguity: "they can be everything we are, while at the same time, they are fearful reminders of the infinite things we are not."[32] For all the ties that symbolically bind the vampire king to producers in the global economy, there are those that link him to consumers as well. Consider, for example, how the camp aesthetic framing Russell's expansive emotional register in grieving the loss of Talbot resonates with the affective dimensions of consumption documented in studies that examine the relationship between fossil-fuel use and US consumers' emotions, feelings, and behavior.[33] After Eric Northman plunges a wooden stake into Talbot's back, Russell's beloved suffers what vampires in the series call the "true death," morphing from quasi-human, vampire form into a red, viscous, pulsing matter that Russell transfers to a crystal urn and then lovingly cradles during a spree of violence and mayhem. Talbot's bodily transformation puts him into the realm that Žižek describes as "the domain 'in between two deaths,' the symbolic and the real." Žižek explains that the "ultimate object of horror is the emergence of this 'life beyond death,'" which is defined in Lacanian terminology as "*lamella*, the undead-indestructible object, Life deprived of support in the symbolic order." Žižek adds that this "formless 'undead' substance of Life" is a pervasive trope in popular culture.[34] This substance signifies the "indivisible remainder" of the virtualized experience of reality – an ambiguous representation of what resists integration into the interface. In this regard, the fictional matter of Talbot in *True Blood* resonates with the material substance gushing from the Macondo well at the time of the season's airing – both assume an unruly form that resists definitive lexical value

[32] Auerbach, 6.

[33] See, for example, Carol Graham and Soumya Chattopadhyay, "(Un?)Happiness and Gasoline Prices in the United States," *Brookings.edu*, Sept. 2010, www.brookings.edu/~/media/Files/rc/reports/2010/09_gas_prices_happiness_graham/09_gas_prices_happiness_graham.pdf. Also see Daniel Ariely, "Using Guilt to Save Energy," *Big Think*, 24 Nov. 2009, http://bigthink.com/ideas/17461. Ariely's scholarship is associated with the burgeoning field of behavioral economics.

[34] Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, 155.

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in the symbolic order and thus yields urgent, deeply felt responses from those heavily invested in its containment.

Russell's visceral responses to Talbot-as-*lamella*, registering on a range from deep-seated codependency to loving devotion to vengeful rage to emotional displacement, are all the more uncanny and evocative when set against the emotionally charged and often contradictory reactions, particularly those of Gulf residents, to the spill cam footage of gushing oil, to images of oil slicks washing ashore in the Louisiana wetlands, and to the responses of BP executives and US government officials. Russell's focussed raging against the machine of human ecological destruction and excessive consumption stands in stark contrast to the bifurcated anger expressed by Gulf residents and politicians during the crisis. Reductive storylines in the mainstream media failed to delve into the complexities and contradictions fueling public outrage: anxieties about a US nation-state whose sovereignty and authority seemed undermined by BP and mixed emotions evident in the simultaneous condemnation of past and present oil-industry malfeasance and of the US government's temporary moratorium on offshore drilling. Instead, mainstream media narratives contrasted localized displays of outrage with the measured tones of Barack Obama as he struggled in vain to find a voice commensurate to the crisis. In some instances, Obama stood before cameras in virtual command performances to express indignation at BP, even after questioning the efficacy of anger as a response.[35] It became something of a mantra in media commentary to note the considerable "disconnect" between public outrage and presidential calm. Significantly, such commentaries failed to acknowledge an equally telling divide between the ubiquity of public "outrage" and the absence of individual and collective self-examination of consumption practices. Russell Edgington and his undead counterparts in *True Blood* can be understood as minding these gaps in the symbolic order of energy production and consumption ruptured by the forceful flow of the Real, taking into account the interpretation of the undead as metaphorical filler in the "intermediate space of the unrepresentable Thing."[36]

CONSUMING LOCALITY, PRODUCING ENERGY/CULTURE

As of this writing, BP is mounting an aggressive, multi-million-dollar advertising campaign to mark (make?) the first anniversary of an event

[35] See Devin Dwyer, "Obama Slams BP, Other Oil Companies for Spill Blame Game," *ABCNews.com*, 14 May 2010, http://abcnews.go.com/WN/president-obama-angry-frustrated-gulf-mexico-oil-spill/story?id=10646470; Ross Colvin, "Obama Says Anger Won't Solve BP Oil Spill," *Reuters*, 3 June 2010, http://in.reuters.com/article/2010/06/03/uk-oil-spill-obama-emotion-idINTRE65267V20100603.

[36] Žižek, *Interrogating the Real,* 157.

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vaguely referenced, if at all, in the steady flow of advertisements. In this case, it would seem that the BP oil spill is the disaster that dare not speak its name. The campaign theme is "Come Back," and it suggests that BP has borrowed a page from the post-Katrina recovery playbook: offer irresistible incentives to attract tourists in droves or, as the vampires of *True Blood* might view the strategy, to "glamour" them into paying a visit. This circular logic of recovery assumes that consumption is the cure-all for an economy and ecology debilitated by a disaster stemming from consumption. The advertisements feature "real stories" of Gulf residents – video testimonials from restaurant owners, shrimpers, and others – verifying that the Gulf is "back" and, in the process, crediting BP with making good on its promise to steer the recovery effort. (As it happens, countercampaigns under the auspices of Project Gulf Impact and "Realist News" have launched, featuring, among other materials, YouTube videos in which Gulf residents tell stories of illnesses and ecological damage sustained during and after the spill.[37]) Actually, the campaign extends a marketing and public-relations strategy that BP employed in the wake of gaffes by Hayward and other executives widely perceived as insensitive and condescending. The company implemented the audaciously named "Vessels of Opportunity" program, hiring local people in the fishing industry whose livelihoods were in jeopardy to help with cleanup and containment operations. In a series of commercials, BP employees hailing from the region touted local affiliation as an attribute of the company's global reach.

These attempts to remake BP in the image of locality are prime examples of the marketing strategy known as "glocalization" and demonstrate the ongoing production of energy/culture in the US Gulf South. Bauman, drawing on Richard Rorty, identifies the inherently fleeting nature of such initiatives: "Members of the global elite of super-rich may find themselves now and then *in* this or that place, but nowhere and at *no* time are they *of* that place – or any other place, to be sure."[38] In this regard, the undead once again answer the call for metaphorical filler, as their "supreme adaptability" in recasting immortal reach as local grasp for the purpose of exploiting resources is not unlike glocalization.[39] Nevertheless, as the vampires of *True Blood* know, the reach usually exceeds the grasp. As of this writing, season four is at the halfway mark, and the vampires of Bon Temps are struggling to make nice with their human neighbors as part of a broader strategy of outreach in the wake of the vampire king's nationally televised demonstration that humans are merely vampire prey. Thus selling good citizenship is the "new normal" in what the jaded head

[37] See "Real People from BP Gulf Oil Spill," *RealistNews.org*, 31 July 2011, www.realistnews.net/Thread-real-people-from-bp-gulf-oil-spill-stories-the-government-didn-t-want-you-to-see; "The Gulf Now – In Video," *Project Gulf Impact*, www.projectgulfimpact.org/.

[38] Bauman, *Liquid Fear*, 159.

[39] Auerbach, 8.

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of the AVL calls "a post-Russell Edgington world." In an AVL public-service announcement, Eric Northman uses boosterism to locate himself, proclaiming his status as "a taxpaying American and small-business owner in the great state of Louisiana." The proprietor of Fangtasia calls for a return to business as usual – for humans to "come back," in the parlance of BP's marketing campaign – by appealing to the ethos of consumption that cuts across the living/undead divide and unleashes desires whose flows may be virtually and actually impossible to contain.