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Making the “Monstrous” Visible? Reading “Difference” in Contemporary Fan- tastic Film and Television

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Following the trend of the humanized monster in the contemporary fantasy genre, the three *X-Men* films and the *True Blood* television series question the visual representation of the monster and the way the figure has been used to stigmatize the racial and/or sexual other. These narratives use the somatic metaphor of “passing” to highlight the ways in which identity categories are defined through visible “difference,” thereby suggesting that race and sexuality are performative rather than essentialized. Yet while these stories seem to discourage stigmatizing readings of “monstrosity,” or racial and/or sexual otherness, and encourage the spectator to see and interpret “difference” in new ways, the filmic discourse sometimes represents the humanized monster as complicit with white heteronormativity. In this essay, I argue that the discourse of the *X-Men* films positions the spectator in such a way as to visually identify the passing monster and ultimately reinforces the binary between the racial and/or sexual other and white heteronormativity. The discourse of *True Blood*, however, plays with spectators’ visual expectations and often positions them on the same level as characters, thus destabilizing the distinction between the monster and the human.

Tod Browning’s film *Dracula*, based on the novel of the same name, appeared in 1931, two years after Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* and three years before John M. Stahl’s film, *Imitation of Life*. The latter both portray black characters passing as white, who are ultimately exposed and “pun-

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ished" in a similar way as Dracula.¹ Evidently, the concept of passing and the fear that it engendered were prevalent during the modernist period, and more specifically around the 1930s. Undoubtedly, this preoccupation was due to the growing social and legal importance of the One Drop Rule and the need to define as threatening, or even "monstrous," those who attempted to cross the color line.² Whether through novels and films of the fantasy or realism genres, the portrayal of passing and the transgression of racial and/or sexual boundaries in the modernist period have left a legacy for contemporary literature and film. In this essay, I consider the role of passing characters and the reading of difference in the *X-Men* film series and the HBO television series *True Blood* to explore the positioning of the spectator in relation to racial and sexual transgression. These two contemporary fantasy narratives consciously use the figure of the monster to allegorize race and non-normative sexuality, offering to their spectators alternate ways of reading and defining difference – ways that appear not only to counter the manner in which the monster was traditionally represented and subsequently interpreted, but also that might influence the manner in which the spectator then reads racial and sexual "difference." With its threatening monstrous creatures, the fantasy genre has often been a space in which anxieties regarding the racial and/or sexual other could be explored. From the depiction of the alien in early science fiction narratives to the vampire of gothic novels and horror films, the figure of the monster has been used to stigmatize the other by incorporating scientific discourses that have surrounded the construction of race and non-normative sexuality. Recently, however, as part of the post-human trend that originated partly in science fiction, the figure of the monster has been humanized. What was once the covert "coding" of the monster as the racial and sexual other in earlier fantasy narratives has now become manifest. Contemporary fantasy narratives follow the African-American civil rights and gay

¹ All three narratives end in a death which restores the hegemonic order of the racial binary (and in the case of *Dracula* the non-normative sexuality versus heterosexual binary). Clare (in *Passing*) and Dracula, both passing characters, are each "punished" with their own deaths. Peola (in *Imitation of Life*) is "punished" for passing through the death of her mother which causes Peola to regret her actions and to rejoin the black community. While one could argue that Dracula is killed for reasons other than merely for passing, his seemingly transgressive practice carries other connotations that are used to characterize both Dracula and Clare, such as provocative or "perverse" sexual desire and racial mixing. (For an analysis of the character of Clare in relation to homosexual desire and miscegenation, see Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter*.)

² Throughout the early 1900s, Southern states began adopting the One Drop Rule along with the Jim Crow laws. While the American census maintained the mixed-race categories of "mulatto" and "quadroon" through the turn of the century, by 1930 these terms disappeared from the census forms, forcing people to identify with only one race.

liberation movements, not only questioning the scientific discourses that have long been used to characterize the “monstrous” other, but also incorporating past and present debates regarding the categorization and social positioning of the racial and/or sexual other. As such, the monster is sometimes positioned as the “disenfranchised” fighting for equal rights. Such texts then appear as a vindication for the rights of those who are different from the white heterosexual norm.

The starting point for this essay is the visual metaphor of passing in the two contemporary fantasy narratives *X-Men* and *True Blood*. Passing is one social practice surrounding the categorization of race and non-normative sexuality that has often been implicit within early narratives of the horror and science fiction sub-genres. Part of what constitutes the threatening and the potentially subversive – part of what is inherent in “monstrosity” itself – is precisely the monster’s ability to escape visible definition as “monstrous” through passing. These narratives then often highlight the importance of visibility linked with the capacity to define and name what is monstrous and threatening, in order to assert power over the monstrous other and eventually to erase the menace. As previously mentioned, Bram Stoker’s novel, *Dracula*, provides one example of the transgressive passing monster that is ultimately “punished.” The same can be said of early horror films, such as Tod Browning’s 1931 *Dracula*. Yet, in the case of visual media, the spectator was traditionally given an advantage over the characters’ visual knowledge and identification of the monster through coding in the filmic discourse (such as dark lighting, extravagant costumes, make-up and sets, or even through the audible elements of threatening music and foreign accents). Contemporary fantasy narratives continue to draw on this manner of representing the “monstrous,” often with the intention of playing with these codes.

Indeed, passing is an example of a social practice that has been re-inscribed in contemporary fantasy texts in a manifest manner, in order to question the stigmatization of the racial and/or sexual other. *X-Men* and *True Blood* present groups or communities of monsters, or mutants and vampires, which have not only made themselves visible to humans, but also attempt to assert their own power through naming and defining themselves. Despite the fact that these mutants and vampires are now socially visible, the questions of how they should be visible and how their visibility should be read (both from within the group and from outside) remain in both these narratives, and are very much at the center of their use of racial and sexual discourses. Passing, or playing with what are considered to be visually-definable categories, is then at the center of these conflicts for control over intelligibility, as it seemingly works against the power to name and define those who are “different.”

Arguably, passing is transgressive as it questions the power of visibility to maintain identity categories and also suggests that these categories are performative rather than essentialized. Yet it is also simultaneously (even if unwittingly) complicit with white heteronormativity. Without the racial binary or the dividing color line between black and white, without the heterosexual / homosexual (or queer) binary, passing could not exist. Just as whiteness and heterosexuality depend on the blackness (or the non-whiteness) and the non-normative sexuality of the other to constitute themselves, white heteronormative hegemony relies on the occasional resistance of the other through a practice such as passing.³

In this essay, I will examine the ways in which each narrative invites the spectator to read “monstrosity” or “difference,” in relation to filmic discursive strategies that visually (and audibly) represent the figure of the monster. Ultimately, each narrative appears to suggest to the spectator a way in which difference should be read (or not), while the filmic discourse is sometimes at odds with this message. Like the two ways in which passing can be interpreted (as either complicit with white heteronormativity or transgressive) the filmic discourse will either position the spectator – in terms of the ability to identify the passer – as superior to the characters or on the same level. The former position gives the spectator the power to name and define the passer, suggesting that passing does not really work, that difference is essential; it is a position that ultimately works with the hegemonic order. The latter position allows the spectator “to be duped” by the passer and suggests the performative nature of identity categories. Indeed, while each story appears to use the figure of the monster to promote “difference,” to denigrate the stigmatization of the racial and sexual other, and thereby to question white heteronormative hegemony, the film’s discourse does not necessarily do the same. As such, I will ask of each text (and it is a question that should also be applied to other contemporary fantasy narratives): if the spectator is to read the non-human in relation to the human with regards to the racial and/or sexual other, does it follow that the humanized mon-

³ As Gayle Wald writes, “the color line has always required that subjects produce resistance in the context of the narratives that define them” (10). She also highlights that resistance to the category of race is necessarily constructed “out of the material of racial discourse itself” (10). I would add to Wald’s argument that the same comment can be made regarding the queer/heterosexual binary and the necessity of sexual discourse for producing resistance. Whether it be to have access to social spaces reserved for the white heterosexual (as is the case for Clare in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*) or to transgress the hegemonic order (like Dracula in Bram Stoker’s novel), the practice of passing and the “monster” who passes are ultimately part of the cultural construction of racial and sexual identity categories.

ster is simply another image of the human, one that is complicit with white heterosexuality?

The *X-Men* films are part of the recent Hollywood trend of comic book superhero films.⁴ Undeniably, the first motivation behind the production of these films was to profit from this trend as well as leverage the already enormous success of the comic book series. With the comic books' status as “the biggest-selling comic of all time” (Sabin 159), the filmmakers hoped to attract and to please comic book fans as well as viewers who were not familiar with the series.⁵ An effort was evidently made to reproduce the comic book themes of social and political marginalization in the films' plotlines and mutant characterization. Roger Sabin writes of the comic series:

The X-Men were complete personalities whose mutancy could be viewed as a metaphor for adolescence, race or sexuality. The fact that they fell in love, fell out, got married, gave birth, died and, above all, experienced discrimination from prejudiced humans only added to their appeal. (159)

This wide-ranging and appealing metaphor of difference was picked up in the marketing campaign of the second film with the movie poster slogan, “The time has come for those who are different to stand united.” Aside from referring to the film's story in which all mutants cease fighting amongst each other in order to defend themselves against threatening humans, the slogan might also speak to civil rights activists. As Deborah Madsen notes, the slogan “is resonant of the climate of civil rights struggle which coincided with the first appearance of the Marvel comics” (92). The films thus appear to position themselves in relation to the disenfranchised in the same way that the comic book series has in the past.

In addition, the films follow the comic books' use of focalization primarily through mutant characters which evidently contributes to the spectators' ability to position the other as subject and to potentially identify with them. Emphasis is thus placed on the suffering that mutants experience due to human prejudices; and these prejudices are clearly aligned with those experienced by the racial and/or sexual other.

⁴ The list includes earlier films such as *Superman* (1978) and *Batman* (1989), as well as *Spawn* (1997), *Blade* (1998), *Spiderman* (2002), *Daredevil* (2003), *Hulk* (2003), *Fantastic Four* (2005), and *Iron Man* (2008), and these films' sequels. The three *X-Men* films were released in 2000, 2003, and 2006; and one might add to this list the prequel about the character of Wolverine, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, released in 2009.

⁵ Bryan Singer, the director of the first two films, comments in his DVD commentary of the first film that the film was written in such a way as to introduce the different mutant characters and their powers to an audience that might not be familiar with them.

One such example occurs in a heart-wrenching scene which is also the very first scene of the first film. The young Magneto (the future leader of the violent, revolutionary-type mutants, the enemies of the X-Men) is forcefully separated from his parents by Nazis in a World War II concentration camp. Very little color is used in the scene except for the yellow stars that Magneto, his parents, and the other Jewish-identified characters wear, as if to emphasize the labeling (or perhaps even the dividing color line) that the Nazi soldiers used to define and control those believed to be different. In the three films, Magneto then reads the human desire to name and define mutants, to segregate, and even to “cure” them, in the light of his experience as a Jew, recalling the Nazi practice of labeling, segregating, enslaving, experimenting on, and exterminating the Jewish other.⁶ As such, the scene evidently asks its spectators to read mutantism as a parallel to the racial/ethnic other; and as the films’ initial scene, it introduces this as a manner of reading for the spectator to follow.

The second film contains a scene in which the mutant boy Bobby, previously passing as human to his family, comes out to them as a mutant. As the scene is staged as a homosexual coming out, mutantism is here meant to be read as a parallel to non-normative sexuality. His parents’ reaction reflects the stigmatization from which homosexuals or queers suffer. Bobby’s mother says, “This is all my fault” (54:30), as if Bobby’s mutantism were the result of a poor up-bringing in which he did not learn how to be fully human or heterosexual, as if mutantism or non-normative sexuality were immature or degenerative. She also asks, “Have you ever tried not being a mutant?” (57:15) The word “gay” could easily be substituted for “mutant” and the question itself recalls psychological and medical experiments which attempted to “cure” homosexuals. Similarly, as previously suggested, a “cure” is produced by humans in the third film, which positions mutantism as a disease, reminiscent of the stigmatization of African-Americans through the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment or the AIDS scare in relation to homosexuals. In scenes such as these, through mutant confrontations with humans, the films suggest the ways in which difference should not be read and “dealt with.” In the same way that the “cure” offered by humans would

⁶ The scene might approach what Adam Lowenstein terms “the allegorical moment” in modern horror film, “a shocking collision of film, spectator, and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted, and intertwined” (2). Lowenstein’s term reflects how the spectator might be shocked at the use of such a historically sensitive event in the context of a comic book superhero film, while at the same time recognizing the “appropriateness” of the use of superhuman powers (which Magneto exhibits in trying to prevent the separation from his parents) as a metaphor for the extreme emotion and trauma of such an experience.

erase difference, the human strategy in the first two films reflects a desire to erase mutant presence in society. Indeed, the films present very few positive examples of humans and their reading of mutants. As spectators, we are encouraged to follow the X-Men from their point of view of mutant difference; and it is a difference that should not be advocated and displayed with pride, but should rather be hidden through passing.

It is through the rejection of passing as other than a transgressive practice that Magneto and his clan attempt to impose their own reading of themselves. A scene in the third film highlights this issue of imposed versus self-imposed identity. A large mutant gathering brings Magneto into contact with possible recruits, all of whom have the same identifying tattoo. For these mutants, the mutant tattoo enables a recuperation and valorization of the human’s negative interpretation of the term “mutant,” in a similar manner that the term “queer” was appropriated and re-signified by queer activists. In addition, the self-imposed “brand” represents a desire to claim ownership over one’s own body, in opposition to the notion of slavery, as well as to be constantly “out” as a mutant. In labeling and “outing” themselves, the tattooed mutants then create their group, their subject position, asking to be read in a certain way and reading other mutants accordingly.

However, the spectator is not encouraged to sympathize with this mutant pride as the latter group is villainized. Indeed, those who choose to publicly “out” themselves as mutants (or monsters) are also those who demonstrate the need for humans to classify them as mutant (or monstrous) and thus as dangerous. Their use of passing in order to penetrate human political and military spheres, to threaten human boundaries, adds to their depiction as villains. The character of Mystique is the prime example here, as she is able to morph into any appearance. While she may advocate the importance of NOT passing as a vindication of her right of freedom, the moment when Mystique chooses to reveal her “natural” appearance is rather with the intention of instilling fear in her human adversaries.⁷ In addition, the films’ discourse contributes to the danger that transgressively passing mutants represent while also positioning the spectator as able to identify these mutants as threats. Aside from the spectator’s ability to identify Mystique through either the knowledge of her intentions or a brief glimpse of her yellow cat-like eyes when passing, one scene positions Nightcrawler (who is otherwise a “good” mutant – one of the X-Men in the comic book series) as dangerous. The second film opens with a group touring the White House.

⁷ In the second film, Nightcrawler asks Mystique why she does not use her powers to appear (or pass) permanently as a human, to which she replies: “Because we shouldn’t have to” (1:11:28).

The camera slowly pans across the tour group and stops with an over-the-shoulder shot of a character in a trench coat, sunglasses, and hat, observing the crowd. While the spectator might not initially recognize the character as Nightcrawler, his position as separate from the group, and as more powerful – watching rather than being watched – signals to the spectator that he is a passing mutant. Menacing music adds to his characterization as threatening. In other words, the scene uses traditional horror film coding, allowing the spectator to identify the dangerous monster before the human characters do, and so ultimately contributes to the former's position as “all-knowing” and superior to “duped” characters, as well as to the “monstrously-identifiable” mutants. In the end then, the *X-Men* films present two forms of the monster, the more traditional figure through the portrayal of Magneto and his clan, and the more contemporary figure of the humanized monster through the X-Men. As metaphors for the racial and/or sexual other, this depiction is indeed problematic as it suggests that those who exhibit pride in their otherness and attempt to reverse the power structure of white heteronormative hegemony are dangerous, while those who choose to hide their difference, to pass as human (or white heterosexual) and ultimately to integrate into the dominant order are the heroes.

Evidently, the distinction is not quite so clear-cut as this – the X-Men do display their powers when necessary to defend themselves or humans who are in danger. Yet, undeniably, the X-Men's manner of passing is complicit with the hegemonic order and coincides with the way in which they are depicted in the films' discourse. Indeed, the X-Men present a rather normalized view of the other, one that is visibly more human than monstrous, and one that is largely white, middle-class, and heterosexual. First, the mutants that appear in Professor X's school (which is also a safe house for young mutants and the X-Men) are all in human form in opposition to the more animalistic characteristics of the mutants in Magneto's clan. With only one non-white character in the X-Men (Storm, played by Halle Berry), it is again Magneto's clan that represents racial difference for the spectator. The latter two elements “whiten” the X-Men in their move from the comic books to the films. While Storm might remain the only non-white X-Men character in the comic series, the frequent presence of the Beast and Nightcrawler (who only appear in one movie each and never seem to fully integrate into the group), two mutants with blue skin and animal-like characteristics, as well as Wolverine's and Cyclops' primary appearance in colorful costumes and masks, contribute to the X-Men's portrayal in the comics as

diverse.⁸ The films further homogenize the otherwise heterogeneous appearance of the comic book characters through the use of costuming: all X-Men wear the same black leather suit. Second, the rather affluent atmosphere of the school is sharply contrasted with the world of Magneto's recruits who appear to be part of an underground subculture. The third film's mutant gathering takes place in an abandoned and dilapidated church; the mutants present are clothed and coiffed in such a way as to suggest poverty and homelessness. That Magneto finds new allies in such an environment coincides with the long-standing link between inner-city poverty and crime.

Finally, while Bobby's “coming out” scene uses a narrative that is proper to non-heterosexual identities, the spectator is assured of his heterosexuality from the previous scene in which he shares an intimate moment with his girlfriend. The second film thereby suggests that homosexuality is acceptable as a metaphor, but not as a visual or literal depiction. In his analysis of the film *Addams Family Values*, Harry Ben-shoff writes:

In a case such as this, keeping homosexuality within the closet of connotation continues to marginalize and minoritize, even as it allows for other more general notions of queerness to be warmly received by mainstream audiences. (268-269)

In other words, while the film argues that prejudice against homosexual individuals is wrong, it also suggests that homosexuality hardly exists, representing the “minoritizing” view that Eve Sedgwick outlines in her work, *Epistemology of the Closet*.⁹ In a sense then, passing in *X-Men* is similar to early passing narratives – the desire to be read as human is synonymous with the desire to be read as white and/or heterosexual. The spectator is thus asked to read difference positively as long as it coincides with, rather than confronts, white heteronormative hegemony.

Like the *X-Men* films, the television series *True Blood* follows a trend, that of the continually growing popularity of the figure of the vampire, in both literature and media. The first season aired at the end of 2008, shortly before the release of the first *Twilight* film, perhaps profiting

⁸ See for example pages 2-3 in the episode entitled “The Fate of the Phoenix”, reprinted in Roger Sabin's *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* (159). Of the eight X-Men on the two page spread, only two characters, Professor X and Jean Grey, appear as white humans. Deborah Madsen also points out that the character Bobby in the film (known as Iceman in the comic books) is rarely called by his mutant name and never appears in the ice man-shaped form that the comic books depict (93).

⁹ See pages 1 and 83-86 where Sedgwick discusses the double bind between the “minoritizing” and the “universalizing” views of homosexuality.

from the wave of interest in vampires that the *Twilight* novels and the marketing campaign for the first film created. Indeed, the HBO series does present some similarities to the *Twilight* films: both narratives center on the “forbidden” love between a male vampire and a human female, both appear to portray “good” vampires versus “bad” vampires, and both are based on a series of novels. Yet while *Twilight* normalizes the vampire (positioning Edward Cullen as a white heterosexual vampire with family values, who refuses to feed off humans), *True Blood* does not and seems rather to present a counter-discourse to this newly-popularized figure of the vampire. Although the *True Blood* series’ plot-line remains fairly faithful to the novels on which they are based (Charlaine Harris’ Sookie Stackhouse novels), the series’ creator, Alan Ball, emphasizes the position of the vampire as disenfranchised and features characters that highlight racial and sexual tensions, while at the same time problematizing the supposed humanization of the vampire.

Like the first scene of the *X-Men* films, the very first scene of the *True Blood* series indicates how the spectator might read (or not) the vampire other. In part, it demonstrates that the vampire struggle for equal rights involves a fight to dispel stereotypes, the *aprioris* that human characters and spectators have alike. The scene takes place in a mini-mart where there are initially two characters, the store clerk and a customer, one of whom we learn at the end of the scene is a vampire. It opens with a shot of a television screen – the store clerk is watching a vampire activist arguing in favor of vampire rights. As we listen to the activist stating the reasons why vampires deserve the same rights as humans, the camera briefly acknowledges the customer – a paunchy Southern hillbilly who appears to be buying beer – and then spends much more time on the store clerk with a slow pan from his feet to his head, showing his dark clothing, heavy boots, and long black hair, with quick close-ups on his skull rings and talisman-like necklace. A young college-age couple enters the mini-mart after having seen a sign outside the store advertising the sale of Tru Blood, a synthetic blood drink for vampires. The store clerk begins speaking about vampires as if he were one of them, using a thick foreign accent. In this manner, the store clerk tells the young couple what a vampire is through both his speech and his performance, all the while playing with stereotypes. The camera, with its focus on the store-clerk’s teeth, and the soundtrack’s scary music, assist him in this performance. Eventually, he reveals that he was merely playing a joke on the customers. While the young couple begins to relax and laugh with the store clerk, the hillbilly customer appears insulted and asks the young couple to leave. After the college boy makes it clear that the hillbilly has no right to tell him what to do, the hillbilly reveals his fangs, scares the young couple into leaving, and then pro-

ceeds to threaten the frightened clerk. As the vampire purchases his pack of Tru Blood, he tells the clerk: “You ever pretend to be one of us again, and I’ll kill ya” (Ep. 1 3:45).

This first scene demonstrates the ways in which the show continues to upset and destabilize both vampire (and racial) stereotypes and coding. As Richard Dyer notes:

The role of stereotypes is to make visible the invisible, so that there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares; and to make fast, firm and separate what is in reality fluid and much closer to the norm than the dominant value system cares to admit. (16)

Evidently, it is due to vampire stereotypes and the store clerk’s “visibility” as gothic that the couple as well as the spectator are so easily “duped,” while the “invisible” “danger” is indeed “much closer to the norm” and thus able to “creep up on us unawares.” While in early vampire films, the spectator could recognize and identify the vampire more quickly than the human characters, *True Blood* positions the spectator’s (in)ability to correctly interpret the signs and coding of the vampire on the same level as human characters’. As such, the spectator’s habitually privileged position of knowing who is a vampire and/or who is passing – similar to what Samira Kawash calls “the (white) need to know” (127) – is compromised. Indeed, if the young couple and the viewer were immediately to assume that one of the characters in the mini-mart were a vampire, it would be the goth dressed store clerk, rather than the paunchy Southern hillbilly with a confederate flag on his baseball cap. It is then up to the “real” vampire to dispel the stereotypes of the vampire dressed in black, with a foreign accent that are reproduced by the store clerk. Arguably, the “real” vampire is not attempting to pass as human as the camera later shows us that he was holding a pack of Tru Blood in his hand rather than a pack of beer. Yet it is not until he displays his fangs and officially “outs” himself to the others that he is able to properly defend himself. In a sense then, he parallels the fight for civil rights that is portrayed on the television at the beginning of the scene; and he also works against it, as he threatens to kill the store clerk and thereby plays into the stereotype of the vampire as dangerous to humans. Furthermore, his image as a Southern racist hillbilly disrupts the notion of the vampire as the disenfranchised, as the one who suffers from discrimination, and demonstrates that the parallel between the racial other and the vampire other does not always work.

Similar to the *X-Men* films, *True Blood* portrays the humans’ manner of reading vampires as the racial and/or sexual other as problematic. Convinced that vampires are violent and dangerous, the Bon Temps

police attempt to exercise some form of control over vampires and their activities in order to protect humans and the human race (into which one can read the need to protect whiteness and heterosexuality). For instance, Fangtasia, a popular bar for vampires, fangbangers (or humans that are “vampire groupies”) and human tourists, is raided by the police. As an attempt to ensure that no vampire and human blood-drinking (or intercourse) is occurring, the raid can be read as a metaphor for pre-Stonewall raids on gay bars in which the police are positioned as protectors of heterosexuality, and here, of racial purity as well.

In addition, Vampire Bill and Sookie, the human heroine of the series, are later stopped in their car by a police officer. Suspecting that Bill might be a vampire, the police officer asks the couple if they have been at Fangtasia. When Sookie replies that they have not, the officer then asks permission to shine his flashlight on Sookie’s neck. Evidently, the officer suspects that Bill is passing for human, and believes that fang marks on Sookie’s neck would expose Bill’s “true nature.” Amy Robinson writes: “In hegemonic contexts, recognition typically serves as an accomplice to ontological truth-claims of identity in which claiming to *tell* who is or is not passing is inextricable from *knowing* the fixed contours of a prepassing identity” (122). The officer’s assumption that fang marks on Sookie’s neck would prove that Bill is a vampire demonstrates his presumption that a vampire in the company of a human would necessarily feed off the human; or in other words, that a vampire is animalistic and hypersexual and would be unable to control himself from the illegal activity of feeding from a human. The officer’s presumption of “*knowing*” what a vampire is also recalls the stigmatization of African-American men and their supposedly uncontrollable sexual desire for white women. As such, the officer positions himself as the controller of racial purity. His request to see Sookie’s neck is then not only to ensure that Bill is not passing, but also to ensure that the two are not engaging in inter-species (or interracial) sex. Knowing that there are no bite marks on Sookie’s neck, and that this does not mean the couple was not at Fangtasia, nor that Bill is not a vampire, the spectator may recognize that the officer’s attempt to define a vampire through visible markings is not only problematic, but also does not work.

In opposition to the *X-Men* films, *True Blood* is primarily focalized through a human and might thereby suggest that vampires are objectified with regards to the spectator’s gaze. Indeed, the series’ focalization through Sookie in particular contributes to the idea of the spectator as “all-knowing.” Her telepathic ability to read human minds, which does not work on vampires, allows the spectator to identify a vampire through means that are not visible as soon as Sookie is in the company of one. Nonetheless, while Sookie can help the spectator to identify

vampires, she is often unable to “read” them. Positioned as the defender of vampires to the largely prejudiced human population of Bon Temps, she constantly finds herself confronted with violence, hypersexuality and/or “perverse” sexuality (or stereotypical vampire behavior) that even her love interest, Bill, occasionally demonstrates. In a sense then, the ability of Sookie to be occasionally “duped,” or horrified, by vampires, allows the spectator to be as well. At the same time, her telepathy places parallels between humans and vampires – showing that humans are sometimes guilty of the same things of which they accuse vampires – as does the series’ discourse. The opening credits are filmed from the vampire point of view and show that vampires have been witness to human sexual deviance, violence and the exertion of power over others, whether it be men over women or whites over blacks. In addition, the narrative of the first season illustrates that it is not necessarily vampires who “dupe” Sookie and the spectator, but rather a human. René, a supposed friend of Sookie, turns out to be a serial killer whose victims are women who have had sex with vampires. Passing, if not to demonstrate the performativity of human and vampire identity categories alike, is used as a tool for guarding racial purity.

Of course, *True Blood* can be accused of using discourses that surround the construction of the racial and/or sexual other problematically, in the same way as the *X-Men* films. J.M. Tyree comments, “*True Blood*’s tones often clash, using the vocabulary of gay rights to serve a central heterosexual love affair” (34). Yet while *X-Men* does not represent queer relationships, *True Blood* does, with both humans and vampires. One example of a queer character is the vampire Eddie whose only sexual relationship (with a human) demonstrates the way the series plays with the coding of vampirism: it is Eddie who stays at home and who decides whether or not to allow humans to enter his house. His partner, Lafayette, visits Eddie primarily to take his blood (vampire blood functions as a drug for humans), as do Sookie’s brother and his girlfriend who forcibly enter Eddie’s home and kidnap him. All three humans are positioned as vampires, while the “real” vampire becomes the human, a victim hunted for his blood. In the end, the series effectively destabilizes the binary between the human and the non-human as well as racial and sexual binaries. It does so by showing that vampires are both rightly and wrongly accused and by giving vampires the agency to play with these stereotypes. The unjust human stigmatization of vampires evidently serves to question prejudices against the racial and sexual other. Yet at the same time, it is the vampires’ non-normative practices that continue to destabilize the white, heteronormativity of human society.

As texts which consciously use discourses and social practices – such as passing – that have long surrounded the construction of racial and sexual categories, contemporary fantasy narratives appear to question the stigmatization of the racial and sexual other that earlier narratives propagated, while suggesting to the spectator an alternative way of reading the racial and/or sexual other. Yet this manner of reading is sometimes at odds with the way in which the filmic discourse visibly (as well as audibly) represents “monstrous” characters. Indeed, the visible representation of mutants in the *X-Men* films plays into binaries and reinforces white heteronormative hegemony. The danger with media narratives like the *X-Men* and *Twilight* films is that, rather than use the figure of the monster to question white heteronormativity, the monster becomes another image of normality, one in which difference (or otherness) cannot be visible if it is to be “acceptable.” For the inattentive spectator, they contribute to the “subtle” propagation of racial and sexual binary thinking.

True Blood, on the other hand, shows that reading the vampire is difficult, and – as the figure is a metaphor for the racial and/or sexual other – is sometimes problematic. In other words, *True Blood* does not attempt to provide any right or wrong way of reading the vampire or the human, but rather de-essentializes identities on both sides of the binary. Of course, *True Blood* also demonstrates the implacability of binaries. Yet rather than persisting in allowing white heteronormativity to define the other or the “monstrous,” its characters mutually define each other. In other words, it is not merely through humanizing the monster that the norm can be challenged, a “monsterizing” of the human must also be possible.

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