

Exotic Otherlands, Headquarters of Death:¹ Sub-tropical Land- and Cityscapes in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*

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New Orleans was a real center for them [vampires].
...if you threw a rock on a street corner you'd hit one.
Though you better not.
(Harris 2009a, p. 1)

Abstract

The landscapes and cityscapes of the sub-tropical Southern United States, with their opulent nature, exuberant cities, boisterous cultural diversity and troubled history of conflict and violence have long offered an alluring locale for Gothic narratives. This article explores the ways in which *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (2001–2013) – the best-selling literary series by Charlaine Harris and the basis for the HBO TV series *True Blood* – construct the Gothicised imageries of the American South as the terrain of confusing ambivalences; of glamour and exoticism, death and the uncanny. Informed by the discourses of tropicality, Tropical and Urban Gothic and exotic tourism – and the ways they interweave with the concept of Otherness – the paper seeks to illuminate the process of interrelating and consequently exoticising the figure of the Other and Southern sub-tropical land- and cityscapes. It also examines the tropes of urban inter-species relations articulated in the series as a metaphor for the Southern racial/ethnic heritage with its anxieties of miscegenation, transgression and “excessive” heterogeneity. A particular emphasis is placed on the accounts of New Orleans as the liminal space of cultural blending and touristic exploration of the figure of the Other.

Keywords: *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, sub-tropical Gothic, New Orleans, exotic tourism, sub-tropical nature, miscegenation.

¹ New Orleans was described as “the head-quarters of death” by the traveler Henry Tudor in 1831 (Kelman, 2006, p. 91). I owe this information to Owen Robinson (2016) who also uses Tudor’s expression in the title of his text.

Southern strangeness: Introduction

Many scholars emphasise the significance of setting within the Gothic story, placing the uniqueness of Gothicised spaces and places in the spotlight of the genre (e.g. Edwards, 2016, p. 13; Edwards & Vasconcelos, 2016, p. 2; Overstreet, 2006, p. 2). The landscapes and cityscapes of the sub-tropical Southern United States, with their opulent nature, boisterous cultural diversity and troubled history of conflict and violence have now long offered an alluring locale for the narratives of the supernatural and the uncanny (see Bernardi, 2016, pp. 122-123). Ominous and beautiful, exuberant cities of the South, eerie bayous, overgrown forests and isolated plantation houses abounding in seclusion and mystery, have taken over the role of dilapidated European castles and shadowy dungeons in creating the Gothic atmosphere of Southern literary fiction (e.g. Amador, 2013; Graulund, 2016). Following the lead of Patricia Treble (2008), Victoria Amador maintains that Louisiana particularly, with its “effects of a climate so different to that of northern Europe, the multinational ambiance of both population and architecture...and the general atmosphere of violence” linked to the dark history of slavery, constitutes a suitable milieu for the American Gothic (2013, pp. 163-164). In her essay on the literary constructions of Gothic Louisiana in the works of Charlaine Harris and Anne Rice, Amador further speaks about “the region’s natural, social, metaphorical and archetypal strangeness” and the authors’ participation in “the tradition of Gothicizing the southern states” (2013, p. 165).

The Gothic story of the best-selling literary series, *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (2001–2013), by Charlaine Harris, is, indeed, inseparably linked to Louisiana landscapes and cityscapes, and draws generously on the region’s history of turbulent racial relations and multiculturalism. The state itself is narrated as being populated with both human and a wide variety of supernatural creatures, particularly vampires who revealed their existence to the wider public and organized a civil rights movement for the undead “citizens.” In Harris’s literary world, Louisiana, as a state that is “notably friendly to the Cold Ones,” becomes an important admission point of vampire immigrants and refugees entering the United States (Harris, 2009c, p. 41). Although most of the novels in the series are set in Bon Temps—a fictional rural town in the Northern part of the region—the Southern vampires are typically presented as (seemingly) humanised, sophisticated and affluent urban dwellers. Vampire facilities—like hotels, clubs, or bars—are predominantly located in urban centres, particularly New Orleans which is metaphorically called a “Disneyland for vamps” (Harris 2008a, Loc 186²). “A nexus in the wider American Tropics” (Robinson, 2016, p. 46), in Harris’s novels the famous city further becomes a nexus for vampirical politics, cultural life and tourism.

This study explores some of the ways in which *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* construct and convey the Gothicised imageries of the United States sub-tropical region and its dwellers. Informed by the discourses of tropicity, Tropical and Urban Gothic and exotic tourism—and the ways they interweave with the concept of Otherness—it seeks to illuminate the process of

² Some books in Kindle edition lack traditional pagination. In the absence of page numbers, the most efficient way to locate a quotation is through Loc, that is “Location.”

interrelating and consequently exoticising the figure of the Other and Southern sub-tropical land- and cityscapes. It also examines the tropes of urban inter-species relations articulated in the series as a metaphor for Southern racial and ethnic heritage with its recurrently expressed anxieties of miscegenation, transgressing of social boundaries and “excessive” heterogeneity.³ A particular emphasis is placed on the accounts of New Orleans as the liminal space of cultural blending and touristic exploration of the figure of the Other. Through these analyses this paper seeks to uncover the ways in which *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* contribute to the cultural tradition of symbolically constructing the sub-tropical American South as a Gothicised terrain of confusing ambivalences – those of glamour and exoticism, death and the uncanny.

A city of the night: New Orleans and its vampires

The city of New Orleans has long been marked by the “mythology of death,” culturally fashioned as the habitat of voodoo practitioners, witchcraft and both deadly and undead supernatural creatures (Robinson 2016, 40; see also Bernardi, 2016, pp. 122-123; Harris, 2006, p. 161, 164). The accounts of New Orleans as “the head-quarters of death” – frightening, mysterious and filled with beautiful mirages – were already widespread in the narratives of the early nineteenth-century European and American explorers (Robinson, 2016). The city’s “unwholesome” sub-tropical environment and striking epidemics earned it a name of a “wet graveyard” and “the necropolis of the South” (Kelman, 2006, Ch. 3). These stories, as Owen Robinson (2016) observes, became the foundation for the Southern Gothic fiction of the future as they pictured New Orleans as “a strange, unknowable place that presents strange, unknowable dangers to the outsider” (p. 51) and is characterised by an uncanny “otherworldliness” (p. 47).

This particular imagery rendered New Orleans a perfect urban milieu for the literary and cinematic vampire. Many famed bloodsuckers have been living, or passing through, the (in)famous city, contributing to the cultural discourse of New Orleans as the terrain of the Gothic and supernatural, and becoming a powerful voice in its narrative construction (Bernardi, 2016).⁴ In the world of *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, where the undead have come out of the coffin to eagerly colonise the urban spaces of business, politics and entertainment, the vampires’ fascination with New Orleans is credited directly to “the whole Anne Rice thing” (Harris, 2009a, p. 1) in an explicit homage to the author who “had been proven right about their existence” (Harris, 2008a, Loc 187).

³ “Excessive” heterogeneity has been identified by Luck (2014) as one of the focal themes of American urban gothic literary tradition.

⁴ Bernardi specifies the examples of Louis and Lestat (*Interview with a Vampire*), Bill and Eric (*True Blood*), Stefan and Damon (*Vampire Diaries*) (2016, p. 123). Further examples can include *Son of Dracula* (dir. Robert Siodmak, 1943, Universal Pictures), the CW TV series *The Originals* (2013–) or the novel *Lost Souls* by Poppy Z. Brite (1992). See also The New Orleans Vampire Association website: <http://www.neworleansvampireassociation.org/> and Browning (2015) on the phenomenon of self-identifying “real” vampires’ communities in New Orleans.

As a site of dangerous pleasures, glamour, violence, death and deceit, in Harris's novels New Orleans (along with several other sub-tropical Southern cities) becomes imagined as an uncanny, yet alluring, Gothicised Otherland. The city's extravagant nightlife is dominated by vampires who, unlike the protagonists of Rice's novels (e.g. Rice 1976/2014, p. 40), refuse to see New Orleans as "a great place to blend in or hide in plain sight" (Bernardi, 2016, p. 123; see e.g. Harris, 2006, p. 203). Instead, they are its rulers and most prominent citizens. As the narrating heroine Sookie Stackhouse reveals:

New Orleans was a city of the night now. It had always been a place with a brawling and brazen nightlife, but now it was such a center for the undead that its entire character had changed.... New Orleans is like no other place in America... (Harris, 2006, p. 169)

Except for "[t]he undead jazz clubs, featuring musicians no one had seen playing in public in decades," the New Orleans of Harris's novels accommodates vampire hotels, bars, "[v]amp strip clubs, vamp psychics, vamp sex acts; [and] secret and not-so-secret places where you could get bitten and have an orgasm on the spot" (Harris, 2008b, Loc 55). It is in New Orleans that the vampiric queen of Louisiana, Sophie-Anne Leclercq, establishes her royal headquarters, soon becoming inextricably linked to her chosen city. As the latter is pronounced "a mecca" for the undead (Harris, 2009a, p. 191) the queen's special status depends on her location; thus, not unpredictably, she loses much of her influence after hurricane Katrina – the ruin of the city being the first step to her own downfall (Harris, 2008a, Ch. 1; 2009c, p. 84). However, while the royal vampress is narrated as indissolubly connected to the urban space she inhabits, New Orleans is just as dependant on its vampiric monarch; their fates intertwining and ever-reliant. The figure of a dazzling, lethal monster-queen becomes a personification of the city itself with all its exoticism and dangerous beauty. Sophie-Anne's wealth, chic and immaculate grooming (Harris, 2006, p. 208), her colourful entourage and extravagant parties reflect the very glamour, excess and festive air of the city. With her French heritage and aristocratic ways, the queen further epitomises New Orleans's multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, along with its "insistence on 'European identity'" (Robinson, 2016, p. 45). More importantly, her extravagance and celebrity status boost vampire tourism, reported to be an essential source of the city's income, and as a result the vampress occupies a privileged position, with both supernaturals and humans complying with her "wants and wishes" (Harris, 2009c, p. 84; see also 2006, p. 198). Sophie-Anne's deluxe mansion – decorated in a carnival style with an unsettling riot of colours and festive themed ornaments that give it an air of "a macabre Disneyland" (Harris, 2006, pp. 198-199, 203) – is advertised as "Vampire Headquarters" on every must-see travel list and is constantly besieged by tourists, guides and souvenir sellers (Harris, 2006, pp. 198-199). The queen generously contributes to community life, and when she leaves New Orleans after hurricane Katrina, human leaders formally request her return – her presence seen as a remedy to the decline in the city's holiday industry (Harris, 2008a, Loc 179).

Bring some black to a vampire bar: *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* and exotic tourism

Drawing on the work of Anna Hartnell, Radhiah Chowdhury (2010) points to the narrative establishment of New Orleans as “a paradise of specifically ethnic Otherness...where ‘visitors have for decades been invited to immerse themselves in the supposedly “exotic” space of ethnic tourism’ (Hartnell, 2009, p. 723) ...a place to safely experience the Otherness of Louisiana’s Creole cultural melting pot” (Chowdhury 2010, pp. 28-29). In *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* this imagery is extended onto a number of other sub-tropical Southern cities, and the Otherness signified by ethnic/racial background is translated into the Otherness of species. The figure of the Other – the vampire – is offered for tourist exploration and purchase in urban Gothicised venues, mostly vampire bars and hotels. The most famous of the latter (and reportedly, the first one in the world created exclusively for vampires), the “Blood in the Quarter,” is, not surprisingly, placed in New Orleans’s most touristy district, the French Quarter (Harris, 2009a, pp. 267-268). It is, however, the vampire bars, which since the Great Revelation of the vampires’ existence “had become the hottest form of nightlife a city could boast” (Harris, 2009b, p. 86), that are narrated as a primary site of the consumption of the Other – a terrain of thrill and adventure where Otherness is presumably tamed and safely regulated. In Harris’s universe, these places of exotic night entertainment, with their suggestive names, “Fangtasia,” “Bat’s Wing” or “Vampire’s Kiss” (Harris, 2009b, p. 86; 2011b, p. 67), are fast being established throughout American sub-tropical urban centres, the narrating heroine Sookie specifically mentioning (or frequenting) the ones in New Orleans, Shreveport (Louisiana), and Dallas (Texas).

The vampire bars are described as being patronised by three categories of customers: the undead, their human aficionados (derisively labelled “fangbangers”), and tourists who come to explore and revel in both the vampires’ and “fangbangers” exoticism (e.g. Harris, 2009b, p. 86). The bars coin catchy slogans (“You’ve reached Fangtasia, where the undead live again every night”), offer their services as party-planners, and, most of all, provide humans with the possibility of encountering “authentic” vampires (Harris, 2009b, p. 241). Sookie suspects that a visit to a vampire venue could even be included in a tour package: “Bring some black for your exciting visit to a real vampire bar! Follow the rules, and you’ll be fine, catching a glimpse of this exotic underworld” (Harris, 2009a, p. 115). As Rune Graulund (2016) notices, the tropical space within the Western world is typically perceived as an exoticised pause from daily living, with exotic pleasures to be bought and relished in before returning home (p. 34). Thus, tropical tourism becomes inextricably linked with the practices of colonial consumption (Höglund, 2016). In Harris’s bars it is the figure of the vampire that is both fashioned and fashions itself as a consumable Other – a commodity to be explored, acquired and enjoyed by the exotic-thirsting visitors, much in tune with Robinson’s commentary on the “supernatural” and the “deadly” being commercialised and translated into profit for New Orleans tourist ghost-chasers and cemetery tours (Robinson, 2016, p. 40).

This seemingly uncomplicated consumption of the “authentic” Other is, however, a fantasy deliberately and skilfully constructed by the Other themselves. Tourists who pay to see the

vampires in their “natural” milieu are unaware of the existence of real (that is exclusively vampirical) establishments closed to the human public. Neither do they know about special contracts that bind the bloodsucking “patrons” to making regular appearances in the venues to maintain the inflow of visitors (Harris, 2009b, p. 241; 2008a, Loc 290, 295), with many vampires only reluctantly accepting their duty of “sitting around being mysterious and vampiric” in order to “enthral the [human] vermin” (Harris, 2009b, p. 241). The walls of “Fangtasia’s” interior are decorated with photos of famous cinematic bloodsucking characters, enhancing the fantasy, but also communicating the falseness of the vampire bar experience (Harris, 2009a, p. 115). Not unlike the “pathetic...fangbangers” who, with their false fangs, capes and painted drops of blood, are nothing more than a cheap imitation of their supernatural idols (Harris, 2009b, p. 86; 2009a, p. 115), some vampires in the “fake” vampire venues are required to wear vampirical costumes – that is, attire attributed to their species by popular culture. This, however, is only a commercial deception, a fancy dress, as in their every-night existence their sartorial choices often appear to be quite conventional. Sookie’s undead friend Pam, for instance, dresses in lightly coloured twinsets, jumpsuits and penny loafers (Harris, 2008a, Loc 92, 1041), choosing blue bands for her hair and dresses with white-trimmed collars for special occasions (Harris, 2008b, Loc 1711). However, while on “bar duty,” Pam calculatingly Gothicises her otherwise conservative image and acquires an “overdone ‘vampire’ look” (Harris, 2009a, p. 114) by dressing in a long “filmy trailing black gown” expected by tourists (Harris, 2008a, Loc 87, 92). The vampires “masquerading” as vampires (or more precisely, as the vampirical figures ingrained in popular culture) and subjecting themselves to the deliberate process of othering, point to the flexibility and performativity of the identity of the Other; thus complicating the notion of “the authentic.” The tourists fail to experience “real” Otherness – nor are they truly interested in doing so; just as the vampires are not inclined to provide actual knowledge of vampirism. What they do provide, instead, is a product that fulfils tourists’ expectations and confirms their pre-conceived ideas about the visited minority. This process of (self-)othering, while working towards strengthening the sense of difference and further isolation of the vampire minority, can also be read as empowering the Other – as the vampires consciously promote and sell their difference/exoticism, and thus capitalise on their Otherness.

The reek of the gothic and the fear of miscegenation

The imagery of a sub-tropical city as a place of pleasure, excitement and a seemingly safe, colonial consumption of the Other is further problematised through exposing the dark and fear-inducing aspects of Southern urban spaces. In tune with New Orleans’s “mythology of death,” the narratives of death multiply, intertwine and superimpose on one another – the story of Sookie’s cousin Hadley being a striking example. Hadley, herself one of the undead, is slayed by another vampire at one of New Orleans’s famous cemeteries “reeking of Gothic atmosphere” called Cities of the Dead (Harris, 2009c, p. 85). Unsuspecting a deathly trap, and in the hope that “the dead can raise the dead,” she arrives at the cemetery to evoke the spirit of Marie Laveau, a voodoo

sorceress, to ask her about the future of a vampire she created by killing a dying werewolf (Harris, 2006, pp. 164, 230).

The vibrant, cosmopolitan city reveals itself as a Gothic terrain of violence and destruction with highly tense social relations where elegant parties turn into bloodbaths and upscale apartments hide bodies and gore. The safety of encountering the Other is deceptive, and the encounter itself carries the undertones of grave danger. For instance, the first joint entertainment of the queen of Louisiana and her newly wed husband begins as a luxurious social gathering in the queen's "party-barn." A renovated monastery, the venue is plain and unornamented, sanitised of any Gothic trappings. The murals on the walls are described by the narrating heroine as "a statement in public relations"; they depict vampires performing human jobs and fully assimilated into the society of the living. The image is washed clean of any signs of monstrosity; yet Sookie refuses to accept this visual message of sameness and brings difference to the fore: "All you had to do was sit down at a supper table with vampires, and you'd be reminded how different they were, all right" (Harris, 2006, pp. 300-301). The heroine's apprehension is soon proven justified, first when she spots a line of human blood donors awaiting vampires to feed on them, then when the refined social gathering is interrupted by a bloody head flying through the waltzing couples on the dancefloor (Harris, 2006, Ch. 22).

As Chad Luck emphasises, one of the fundamental terrors of the Urban Gothic is *spatial proximity* – "a fear of overwhelming diversity in close confines" (2014, pp. 132-133). "The crowded, disorienting, heterogeneous fabric of urban experience" (p. 134) becomes a source of anxiety and tensions among different groups inhabiting its space and produces fear of boundary transgression and miscegenation (p. 133) – the latter thinly veiled in the novels as a fear of the intermixing of species. Reflecting the intricacies of the Southern ethnic and racial fabric, the New Orleans of Harris's series is populated with vampires, werewolves and other shapeshifters, witches, fairies and humans. This *spatial proximity*, as Luck observes, does not facilitate inter-cultural dialogue; but rather, turbulence and conflict. Humans conspire against vampires, the undead and werewolves despise each other and are internally divided into hostile fractions. There are many who think that the city "was better when everyone here was breathing" (Harris, 2006, p. 179) and the queen's estates are constantly having to be safeguarded against the Fellowship of the Sun – a group of fanatics who fuel hatred against vampires (Harris, 2006, p. 199), their actions strongly resembling the history of lynchings with vampires being abducted and condemned to be burnt at the stake together with their human companions (Harris, 2009b).

The intermixing of races/species is narrated as undesired and instigating trouble. For example, Sookie's cousin Hadley's belief that she might be related to Marie Laveau becomes the first step in her violent murder by the vampire Waldo. Sookie, however, immediately recognises Waldo as a liar and firmly declares her family "white," hence "impossible" to be related to a "non-white" person. She also speaks of the humiliation that Hadley's father would suffer if his "Creole bloodline had been enriched by a little African-American DNA somewhere back in the day" (Harris, 2009c, pp. 88-89). This fear of miscegenation is most distinct in the story of Jake Purifoy, a werewolf who

becomes a vampire. The transformation happens without Jake's consent and much to the dismay of New Orleans's supernatural community. As the undead and werewolves have long considered themselves natural enemies, Jake becomes stuck in a "noman's-land" ostracised by both groups (Harris, 2008a, Loc 153, 158, 3161, 3167, 3650, 3654). Werewolves and vampires alike are repulsed by his mixed-species status; the undead mockingly call him "the Formerly Furred" (Harris, 2008a, Loc 2179), and the weres sever both personal and professional ties with him. A once happy and popular man is turned into a sad and lonely figure who inspires "a terrible blend of pity and fear" in the narrating heroine Sookie (Harris, 2008a, Loc 153): "Jake was the kid who'd come to school wearing the wrong clothes.... Being a combo vamp-were [a mixture of two apparently contradictory identities] had ruined his chances with either crowd" (Harris, 2008a, Loc 2180). This sense of a destabilised self resonates with Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection. Here, the abject resides in "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite," no longer able to rely on clear differentiation (1982, p. 4). In the end, unable to accept his mixed-species status, Jake becomes involved in a conspiracy against vampires and helps orchestrate a bomb attack on a vampire hotel, dying in the process. Jake's story can be interpreted as illuminating the racism and inequality of social relations of the American South; a critique of inter-racial hostility and a cautionary tale against its consequences. However, since Jake ultimately becomes a terrorist – his actions fiercely condemned by the narrating heroine and his abject body destroyed in the explosion – this critique is to some extent silenced, the message becoming ambiguous as an expression of social anxieties related to difference and the crossing of interracial boundaries.

The living fabric of New Orleans is further complicated by its location at the waterfront and a resultant multitude of "sailors and other travellers from many countries passing through the city in a partying mood" (Harris, 2009a, p. 77). As Sookie relates in *Dead until Dark*, the newcomers have become the source of a sexually-transmitted disease, Sino-AIDS, that can debilitate a vampire's strength (Harris, 2009a, p. 77), echoing the association between tropicality and dangerous maladies that has long been present within Western narratives of the tropics (Kelman, 2006, Ch. 3). The sub-tropical urban milieu of New Orleans is narrated not only as a place of temporariness and a domain of those in transit to other "real-life" places, but also as a space of exotic, yet dark, entertainment, where the air of festivity is contaminated by demoralisation and disease. The image of the city is further Gothicised by the surrounding inhospitable swamps and unpredictable sub-tropical weather that lurk behind the sophisticated urban civilisation; disruptive forces stealing into the cityscape which may, at any moment, become savaged and devoured by barbaric nature.

Romantic and savage: *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* and sub-tropical nature

In multiple narratives, the multi-layered concept of "tropics" is typically entrenched in nature (Huat, 2008, p. 2) with its lavish vegetation, warmth, humidity, torrential rains and exotic animals.

Tropical nature has long been represented in terms of two extremes: as “an earthly paradise” (Arnold, 2000, p. 7); or a treacherous reservoir of danger and disease, “swampy, snaky [and] roiling with deadly, engulfing agency” (Smith, 2003, p. 117; see also Edwards & Vasconcelos, 2016, p. 2). Most of all, however, as David Arnold points out, the nature of the tropics has been construed as powerful and untamed, its “rule...absolute,” juxtaposed against the notion of “civilisation” (2000, pp. 6-7, 11).

The first of these representations recurrently denotes tropical nature as a site of romance and erotic desire (Huat, 2008, p. 4). This trope resonates in both Harris’s novels and the *True Blood* series⁵, with Sookie and Bill setting off on their first romantic promenade to the sounds of the “rural opera” of the sub-tropical night (Harris, 2009a, p. 54), or with Sookie and Eric enjoying a passionate sexual encounter in the middle of the Louisiana woods (Tucker & Podeswa, 2011). In the latter scene, the audience is treated to visually rich scenery with the camera unhurriedly gliding over the dark waters towards the two lovers in an erotic embrace, their figures moonlit against the shadowy background of luxuriant vegetation. The scene ends with Sookie and Eric filmed from above; as the camera moves further away, their naked bodies are shown on a soft bed of moss framed with lush greenery – a luminous dreamscape where the lovers are sheltered from the outer world by the overgrown and wild-looking flora of the sub-tropical forest. In another love scene – present only in the novels – the erotic encounter between the main heroine Sookie and her boyfriend Quinn plays out against the backdrop of a tropical thunderstorm (Harris, 2006, Ch. 19). The storm unfolds in tune with the development of the passage, highlighting and accentuating its pivotal moments. The sky is darkening and the first rolls of thunder are heard in the distance along with the rising sexual tension between the characters. The scene is brought to a climax when “[a] clap of thunder sounded outside as I parted my knees to let him get as close to me as he could” (Harris, 2006, p. 255). Having reached erotic fulfilment, the happy lovers embrace and listen sleepily to the pouring rain and the sounds of the thunderstorm receding in harmony with the gradually calming atmosphere of their rendezvous (Harris, 2006, p. 256).

As Wendy Gan emphasises, tropical rain can become an ideal setting for romance. “The rain drives the lovers into the safety of indoor spaces, acting as a curtain drawn round them, enclosing them in a romantic world of their own” (2008, p. 12). Soon, however, the torrential rain that has facilitated the love scene between Sookie and Quinn becomes re-imagined in terms of menace and entrapment, as it serves as a cover for the stealthy approach of their enemies. The languid air of the scene is rapidly shattered when the lovers are forced to fight against a pack of vicious werewolves that invade their safe haven, and overpower them. The battered couple is loaded into a van under the downpour and abducted into the woods, enclosed by swamps, outside New Orleans. However, before reaching the end of the journey, Sookie and Quinn escape and seek refuge in the surrounding wilderness (Harris, 2006, Ch. 19 & 20).

⁵ *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* became the basis for the successful HBO TV series *True Blood* (2008–2014) produced by Allan Ball.

The mysterious bayous of southern Louisiana provide a chilling setting for the further development of the plot. With their murky waters, overgrown, tangled vegetation, dilapidating cabins and vapours of humidity and decay, they create a milieu satiated with the stifling atmosphere of sub-tropical Gothic. While Sookie appreciates the swamps as possibly “beautiful to look at and maybe tour in a canoe,” and as a (relatively) safe refuge from their assailants, her perception of the landscape is unmistakably that of an other(ed), uncanny terrain. This perspective is clearly tangible in her wariness of diseases and ominous beasts lurking in the muddy waters (Harris, 2006, p. 273) in which the series echoes, yet again, the popular discourses of tropics as a reservoir of maladies and monsters. Sookie experiences the atmosphere of the swamps as oppressive, the space in which an unnamed menace (“I heard something large slide into the water to our right” [Harris, 2006, pp. 271-272]) lies in wait for those who do not belong.

Unlike his (nearly) human girlfriend, Quinn, a weretiger – and thus himself a figure of the uncanny – appears to be at ease in the Southern wilderness. He laughs good-naturedly at Sookie’s anxiety and gracefully delves into deeper waters, smiling and without any obvious signs of discomfort. The man is not afraid of the bayous perils, and rightly so; when Sookie becomes frightened by a snake hanging over the water, he kills it effortlessly with his bare hands (Harris, 2006, p. 271). Although a tiger’s presence in Louisiana swamps is definitely unprecedented, the weretiger enters the area confidently and immediately establishes his position: “He gave a barking cough, and the swamp went silent. You wouldn’t think Louisiana wildlife would recognize the sound of a tiger, right? But it did, and it shut its mouth and hid” (Harris, 2006, p. 276). Quinn’s natural immersion in this Gothicised milieu, and his apparent sense of belonging, serve to accentuate his rough, physical masculinity, performed through his connection, and ultimately his command, over wild nature. The sub-tropical bayous provide a powerful backdrop for the man’s animalistic actions – tracking down his enemies with his excellent sense of smell and attacking them with his sharp teeth and claws (not to mention urinating in order to mark the territory as his own). Quinn’s transformation into a weretiger – “this fabulously beautiful and lethal beast” (Harris, 2006, p. 270) – further brings to the fore the “uncivilised” and the “barbaric” in both his own nature and the sub-tropical landscape, their exotic Otherness and the sense of uncanny highlighted, intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

The merging of tropical nature and the supernatural can further be traced in the figure of vampire Bill who, similarly to Quinn, comes to epitomise the feral of the sub-tropics. Rescuing his future girlfriend from a criminal couple, Bill murders the assailants and camouflages his deed through fabricating evidence for the “natural” cause of their demise. The couple is found crushed to death under an overturned trailer surrounded by uprooted trees and a devastated car (Harris, 2009a, pp. 41-47, 52). The vampire performing a violent tornado that leaves behind a disconcerting landscape of ruin and mutilated corpses points to the construction of sub-tropical nature as wild and overpowering. This imagery is brought to the fore when Harris incorporates the havoc of hurricane Katrina into her literary world. Both human and supernatural communities are hit hard: thousands are dead, missing or forced to flee (e.g. Harris, 2009c, pp. 109, 124, 130; 2011a, pp. 26, 60). The most powerful prove to be defenceless in the face of ferocious nature – even the

vampire queen of Louisiana suffers both the loss of her staff and the ruin of her estates (Harris, 2008a, Ch. 1). New Orleans, formerly an exuberant centre of the vampire minority and an ultimate destination for adventure-hungry tourists, is devastated (Harris, 2008a, Loc 186), its urban civilisation overcome yet again by savage and uncontrollable sub-tropical nature.

Conclusions

In *Tropicalizing Gothic* Justin D. Edwards and Sandra G.T. Vasconcelos recognise that the tropical Americas are “as much what scientific exploration and knowledge have made them as a symbolic construction that allows for the appropriation of the Gothic” (2016, p. 2). They observe that the imagery of the tropical has long been shaped by ambiguities and ambivalences – permeated with “extravagance and excess...sensuality and exoticism, while it is simultaneously riddled with diseases and lurking dangers” (p. 4). With its sub-tropical American setting playing a focal role in creating the Gothic atmosphere of the story and immersed in the social, cultural and environmental specificity of the region, *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* contribute to that discourse, focusing its representations of sub-tropical spaces on images of abundance, alluring beauty and exoticism, but also those of decadence, danger and the uncanny. Above all, however – and much in tune with Felix Driver and Brenda S.A. Yeoh’s observation of “[t]he identification of the...tropics as altogether other” being a persistent feature of tropical symbolical construction (2000, p. 1) – Harris’s literary series presents the sub-tropical space of the American South as intimately linked to the figure of the Other, narrated as the source of both thrill and threat. The characters of *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* are deeply (sometimes inseparably) attached to the sub-tropical terrains they visit and/or occupy; they change and exoticise them with their presences, and are often, in return, transformed, appropriated, exoticised and consumed by them. Along with the stories of weretiger Quinn immersing in Louisiana’s bayous and Sophie-Anne epitomising the spirit of New Orleans, the story of Sookie’s cousin Hadley is the most captivating example. A popular cheerleader back in her home town, in the lush atmosphere of New Orleans Hadley becomes transformed into a creature of the uncanny – a vampire, a sire to a vampiricised werewolf and a “lesbian voodooienne” (Harris, 2009c, p. 89; 2006).

The multitude and heterogeneity of both supernatural and human beings inhabiting Southern cities result in the representation of cities as liminal spaces of complex and often discordant inter-species relations, and consequently, as sites of difference. This difference can be explored – if somewhat illusorily – through the carefully Gothicised and exoticised figure of the vampire which is constructed as a curiosity to be visited, enjoyed and gazed upon for the delight of tourists. In *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, however, the tourism of the exotic Other is ever-intertwining with the discourse of deception and “mythology of death.” The allure of the sub-tropics and their exoticised entertainment is narrated as inseparable from their deadliness, and the encounter with the Other often comes at a price. Reflecting the central tropes of the Urban Gothic (Luck, 2014), the descriptions of Southern cities are richly infused with Gothic undertones and engage with the

motifs of corruption, disease and hidden danger, creating what Chad Luck identifies as the “cartography of urban terror” (2014, p. 125). New Orleans, particularly, is presented as an uncanny composite of European sophistication and sub-tropical Gothicism where wild violence can be unleashed on unsuspecting guests at an elegant royal party, and where luxury apartments with French windows conceal bloody towels and undead corpses. This flamboyant city, surrounded by bayous and later devastated by hurricane Katrina, further becomes the locus of struggle between urban modernity and uncontained sub-tropical nature.

Reflecting the traditional constructions of both the Gothic and the (sub-)tropical as sites of contradictions, the land- and cityscapes of *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* are construed as liminal spaces between life and death; they operate both to facilitate supernatural romance and exotic excitement, and to provide the locale for bloody battles and corpses – infused as much with beauty and glamour as with monstrosity and the grotesque. The eerie atmosphere of both urban and natural places, the plethora of Gothic trappings and the sense of exoticism and ambivalence, become an essential tool in creating the Gothic world of the novels, further contributing to the imaginative Southern land- and cityscapes as the terrain of the uncanny and to the Gothicisation and exoticisation of the American sub-tropics.

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