Parallel Narratives in the Marginalization of the Other

Tia Sherèe Gaynor
Marist College

ABSTRACT

This article uses content and discourse analysis to identify parallel narratives in the HBO series True Blood and American society, then applies Young’s politics of difference to identify counternarratives suggesting that knowledge, culture, and customs are not universal. The three primary characteristics of the politics of difference—democratic cultural pluralism, equality, and postmodernism—provide a lens to explore the identified narratives. It is argued that American discourse, like True Blood, is embedded with strategies of Othering that shape policy design and implementation in such a way as to benefit those deemed advantaged.

Illustrations of the supernatural in American popular culture often fall within two categories. Some, like fairies and Glinda the Good Witch in Victor Fleming’s Wizard of Oz (LeRoy & Fleming, 1939), are considered pure and angelic. Others, like Glinda’s archnemesis, The Wicked Witch of the West, are evil heathens who create havoc. However, as Maguire (2007) shows us, Elphaba Thropp is, more than anything, misunderstood rather than wicked and evil.

Like dialogue in popular culture, narratives in American society shape ideologies. More often than not, discourse places those who are not included in the dominant social group in an outsider category, treating them as Others. Through cultural imperialism—“the universalization of a dominant group’s experience and culture, and its establishment of the norm” (Young, 1990, p. 59)—dominant narratives are customary and universal. Therefore, cultural imperialists use power and capital to strategically conceptualize images that are rarely representative of social groups but are effective in shaping images that are far too often undesirable (Schneider & Ingram, 1997; Young, 1990). In popular culture, this is evident in discussions of supernaturals—vampires are soulless blood-suckers; werewolves lack self-control and reason; witches are...
bitter and vengeful. American narratives parallel this discourse, suggesting that blacks are lazy and shiftless, gays are immoral and promiscuous, Latinos are all undocumented immigrants, and women are overly emotional and lack the competitive edge to lead. These kinds of narratives influence policy development and implementation (Farmbry, 2009; Schneider & Ingram, 1997). The implications of an Othering discourse reveal how disadvantage is embedded within existing public institutions, systems, and policies that marginalize segments of society. The term “dominant narratives” refers to the prevalent narratives within a society. Its plural form implies that there is not one dominant narrative, but a set of pervasive narratives—both in True Blood, the HBO television series discussed in this article, and in American society at large.

HBO’s True Blood series chronicles the life and times of the vampire and human residents of the imaginary town of Bon Temps, Louisiana, and the struggles the town faces with the integration of vampires into society. Like those deemed Other in real-life America, the vampires in Bon Temps are forced to deal with marginalization and oppression, which in the case of their species is termed naturalism, a term obviously evoking the parallel term racism. The dialogue surrounding the presence and integration of vampires in True Blood closely mirrors the dialogue that surrounds discussions of traditionally disenfranchised and oppressed social groups in the United States.

In the discussion that follows, Young’s politics of difference is used to parallel the Othering narratives in True Blood with American discourse. Through content and discourse analysis, the primary characteristics of difference—democratic cultural pluralism, postmodernism, and equality—are used to challenge normative social constructions that continue to perpetuate the use of narratives that recognize and promote difference. The discussion explores how dominant narratives are used to categorize the Other and how negative social constructions influence policy design and implementation. It then links True Blood discourse with counternarratives to explore the role of policy and public administration in eradicating Othering processes.

As this article focuses on Othering narratives in True Blood and American discourse, readers may find some or all of the narratives discussed offensive, upsetting, and perhaps uncomfortable. The narratives related to American discourse, however, are not fictional.

**PROCESSES OF OTHERING**

As Foucault explains,

discourse is really only an activity, of writing in the first case, of reading in the second and exchange in the third. This exchange, this writing, this reading never involves anything but signs. Discourse thus nullifies itself, in reality, in placing itself at the disposal of a signifier. (1971, p. 21)
He further suggests that discourse can ostracize, segregate, and “function as a system of exclusion” (p. 12). Foucault provides no clarification on exactly who or what the *signifier* is, but Farmbry (2009) clarifies that traditionally two sets of individuals play significant roles in shaping foundational knowledge—“the expert and the intellectual” (p. 5). In the fields of public administration and policy, administrators and officials are often considered technical experts who design policy and policy issues (King, Feltey, & Susel, 1998; Schneider & Ingram, 1997). The experts who construct and bring meaning to American discourse are typically individuals who possess the political power to construct and manipulate narratives (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Fundamentally, this is problematic, as experiences, concepts, ideologies, and images unrelated to power are largely excluded from the discourse.

Potter argues:

> Language reflects how things are in its descriptions, representations and accounts. And as these are circulated in the world of human affairs they may be treated as accounts which are reliable, factual or literal, or, alternatively, the mirror may blur or distort in the case of confusions or lies. (1996, p. 97)

In this respect, the concepts and groupings developed by the powerful often serve as the dominant narratives that shape normative understandings of the social world. Said’s (1979) Orientalism, for example, underscores the juxtaposition of power and social construction by exploring conceptions of truth regarding the *Orient*. Said posits that the construction of *Orient* and *Orientals* by Western experts is a “regular constellation of ideas” whereby Europeans and Americans constructed ideas that served as a “system of knowledge about the *Orient*” (p. 133). The “truth” of *Orient* and *Orientals*, as presented by these experts, was unchallenged and pervasive, so much so that it filtered into the Western consciousness and served as the framework in which interactions and perceptions of the East were grounded. Said perceived that these conceptions were “based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged” (p. 9). What enabled the social construction of the Orient and the persistence of the affiliated ideals was the “relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (p. 133). Said’s point, however, aims not solely at social construction, but, more importantly, at the “close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions” (p. 133) within which Orientalism operates.

Farmbry’s (2009) frameworks of knowledge conceptualization suggest that the archaeology, positionality, and sociology of knowledge shape discourse and its associated exclusions. The archaeology of knowledge explores the foundation and evolution of cognition. Access and ability to garner power enable one to obtain a position wherein one is able to direct discourse as
well as to “define and limit the scope of definitions within that discourse” (p. 2). A person who is positioned within power can “shape perspectives of Truth within a society” (p. 5) and create concepts of individuals and groups. The intersection of these frameworks is “a beginning point for exploring conceptualization of Others, and how policy development in relation to them has evolved” (p. 12).

Complementary to Orientalism, Farmbry’s framework describes social group formation. Social groups are constructed based on ethnic, locale, age, race, sex, occupation, lingual, and other attributes. They attempt to identify collective persons who are differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, history, or way of life (Young, 1990). Group membership partly constitutes people’s identities in terms of cultural norms, social situations, and history. These groupings allow members to share experiences and practices. Farmbry posits that

our group identities . . . have intertwined their roles and a collective unconscious to a degree that affects various processes, such as the collectives or groups to which we belong and how our realities are shaped. Our group membership and group identity frame the realities of which we are a part and to which we subscribe. (2009, p. 7)

The presence of social groups is not innately problematic. However, social groupings are used to determine which populations are targeted as advantaged or disadvantaged. In his discussion of in-groups and reference groups, Allport argues:

To a considerable degree all minority groups suffer from the same state of marginality, with its haunting consequences of insecurity, conflict, and irritation. Every minority group finds itself in a larger society where many customs, many values, many practices are prescribed. The minority group member is thus to some degree forced to make the dominant majority his [sic] reference group in respect to language, manners, morals, and law. He may be entirely loyal to his minority in-group, but he is at the same time always under the necessity of relating himself to the standards and expectations of the majority. The situation is particularly clear in the case of the Negro [sic]. Negro culture is almost entirely the same as white American culture. The Negro must relate himself to it. Yet whenever he tries to achieve relatedness he is likely to suffer rebuff. Hence there is in his case an almost inevitable conflict between his biologically defined in-group and his culturally defined reference group. If we follow this line of thinking we see why all minority groups, to some degree occupy a marginal position in society with its unhappy consequences of apprehension and resentment. (1979, p. 38)
Although race is no longer deemed to be biological (Harris-Perry, 2011; Lopez, 1994), Allport’s argument speaks directly to the intragroup dynamics associated with the impact of the power differentials, marginalization, and negative construction of social group members. Self-identification with social group membership intersects with the identity imposed upon each group, forcing members to be seen and judged according to their assigned identity or in-group membership, rather than the identity they have selected for themselves. The negative social construction of social groups corresponds to the establishment of Others, as groups only exist in relation to one another. Therefore, when the process of social grouping is combined with harmful imagery, it serves as a foundational element for Othering.

These negative conceptions have been and continue to be vital for sustaining social and political power structures. For instance, “the development and institutionalization of a system of slavery signified one of the key transitions to a state of Otherness within American society, one that changed a group of people to a codified status as property” (Farmbry, 2009, p. 25). The Othering of Africans in seventeenth-century America was vital to the expansion of the institution of slavery. According to Delgado and Stefancic, “conquered nations generally demonize their subjects to feel better about exploiting them” (2001, p. 17). The dehumanizing narratives associated with enslavement made it possible for captors to create a society that embraced the abuses and horrors associated with American chattel slavery.

Distinguishing social groups (e.g., black, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer [LGBTQ], Latino, immigrant, woman, white, wealthy, poor) as advantaged or disadvantaged, promotes an us-vs.-them mentality, presenting the notion that some are in and Others are out. Membership in a dominant, powerful social group affords privileges and opportunities, whereas membership in a targeted group affords hardship, struggle, and marginalization. In policy design, Others thus translate as targeted populations, and the discourse and imagery related to these groups are maneuvered in deceptive ways resulting in political benefits and gains. Schneider and Ingram argue that degenerative forms of politics intentionally and strategically separate target populations into “deserving” and “undeserving” groups, thereby legitimating the conferral of beneficial subsidies or regulations for the former and neglect or punishment for the latter. The divisive, value-laden social construction of target populations interacts with the power the targets have over the future careers of political leaders. Such interactions produce distinctive patterns (and flaws) in policy designs that are detrimental to democracy. The characterizations of the target populations become embedded in the design itself and send messages to people about whether their interests are legitimate and how much (or little) they are valued by society. (1997, p. 6)

VAMPIRES SUCK
Othering narratives are found in both society and policy, and are often at the heart of policy development and implementation. Political leaders use their positions and political “power to make policy decisions and therefore decide issues directly” (Schneider & Ingram, 1997, p. 75). This strategy serves three primary purposes. First, the political leader is able to convey the benefits of degenerative policies to a select constituent group. Second, the transmission of benefits places the leader in a favorable light (i.e., makes the leader look politically successful) to those who do (and do not) benefit from the leader’s policies. Third, adopting policies that benefit the “deserving” concomitantly leads to opportunities to implement policies that punish the “undeserving” or “deviant” (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Consequently, policies have inequality engrained within them, creating an avenue for structural injustice in the American political system (Behrens, Uggen, & Manza, 2003). The persistence of these policies is facilitated by normative conceptions of life and ways of knowing. As Stivers contends,

> The way we frame a theoretical conversation not only makes a certain kind of coherence possible but, if it becomes pervasive enough, establishes an orthodoxy that literally keeps us from being able to hear certain voices that have been defined as not parties to the dialogue because they raise issues that do not fit or belong. (2002, p. 11)

### A POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

#### Overview

Young’s (1990) *Justice and the Politics of Difference* critiques the conception of distributive justice and challenges theorists like Rawls (1971), Ackerman (1980), and Galston (1980) who define justice solely in terms of the equitable distribution of resources and social goods. Rawls’s (1971) distributive justice takes an individualistic approach that “obeys the context of class inequality” (Young, 1990, p. 20). Structural phenomena cannot be evaluated through individual behavior and action. Therefore, Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* ignores the presence of injustice within systems and institutions. Young argues that the focus on the redistribution of wealth, income, and status (i.e., justice as individualism)

ignores and tends to obscure the institutional context within which those distributions take place, and which is often at least partly the cause of patterns of distribution of jobs or wealth. Institutional context should be understood in a broader sense than “mode of production.” It includes any structures or practices, the rules and norms that guide them, and the language and symbols that mediate social interactions.
within them, in institutions of state, family, and civil society, as well as the workplace. (p. 22)

The focus on the individual in distributive conceptions of justice thwarts an understanding of the institutional systems that allow injustices to occur and is, therefore, unable to evaluate differences in class inequality, social structures, capitalist institutions, and class relations (Young, 1990).

Assertions about (in)justice should extend beyond access to material goods and resources to include shared decision-making power, just compensation for labor, and shaping positive cultural images and symbols. Young states that “decisionmaking issues include not only questions of who by virtue of their positions have the effective freedom or authority to make what sorts of decisions, but also the rules and procedures according to which decisions are made” (1990, p. 22). For instance, when considering economic distribution in America, one must consider existing structures that give access to power and decision-making to some but deem Others unworthy of such engagement. Therefore, democratic decision-making does not represent an issue of distribution, but a component of social justice.

Distributive theorists view power as a dispensable good, a tangible item that can be allocated and reordered (Galston, 1980; Miller, 1976; Rawls, 1971). This line of thinking ignores two key factors. First, power is relational and not tangible. Power exists only when individuals, or groups, possess it and others acquiesce to it. This relationship is necessary if power structures are to be sustained. Therefore, advantaged social groups maintain power at the expense of those they have marginalized (Schneider & Ingram, 1997; Young, 1990). Second, power does not solely exist within a dyadic arrangement. In addition to a model that engages the powerful and the powerless, there is also a third agent—the structure—that allows, supports, and creates this power dynamic (Young, 1990). For example, race in the United States evolved from a social construction of imagery and narrative into the embedment of these images in legislation that determined citizenship and human and civil rights (Alexander & Stivers, 2010). The distributive understanding of power ignores these structures, focusing only on resource inequality.

Negative conceptions of certain cultures, power imbalances, and unequal access to decision-making all function as oppressors in American society. Oppression, resulting from everyday practices and systemic constraints, is found in the creation of the Other via cultural imperialism, marginalization, powerlessness, and exploitation. American capitalism creates exploitative structures that transfer the products of labor from the worker to the owner, concentrating wealth and power among private interests. For example, people of color, women, and the poor disproportionately hold unskilled “menial” positions where their work is exploited for the benefit of a few powerholders (Young, 1990). Women in heterosexual relationships may fall victim to exploitation, as the labor and nurturing they provide within the home is provided

VAMPIRES SUCK
to men and children, and they receive little emotional care or satisfaction in return (Ferguson, 1984).

Those who are marginalized are held to be useless, “people the system of labor cannot or will not use. . . . there is a growing underclass of people permanently confined to the lives of social marginality, most of whom are racially marked” (Young, 1990, p. 53). The traditional public administration approach excludes and marginalizes, particularly as it clings to a single, dominant hegemony (Farmer, 1999). The impact of such oppression on those considered marginal—people of color, the elderly, the unemployed, single mothers, the differently abled, the homeless, and nonheterosexuals, among others—is often cyclical, as it forces members of these social groups to interact with social service organizations. Young (1990) argues that because of their marginal status, individuals are often deprived of material goods and forced to depend upon resources provided by redistributive social policies. Dependency leaves recipients vulnerable to agency requirements, arbitrary rules, and power over the conditions of their lives, thus ultimately excluding recipients from equal citizenship rights. According to Brodkin and Majmundar,

organizational practices (formally prescribed and informally created) may have distributive effects, skewing access to benefits in ways not consistent with formal, categorical considerations. If, as argued, there are organizationally imposed costs to claiming, it is not necessarily the case that they are uniformly applied or that claimants are equally able to bear them, regardless of their interest or willingness to do so. (2010, p. 839)

Consequently, the shiftless, drug-abusing “welfare queen” narrative is reinforced and upheld by the existence of structures and policies that create an environment for this cycle to persist (Gilliam, 1999; Hays, 2004).

As discussed, the ideals, narratives, and images affixed to social and cultural groups shape how members of these groups are treated, determine their social standing, and designate their access to opportunities and resources, including health care, quality education, safe neighborhoods, and decision-making authority (Sampson, 1993). Injustice often occurs when these cultural images and symbols reinforce stereotypes and substantiate prejudice (Harris-Perry, 2011). For instance, the images of black women on twenty-first-century American television (e.g., Basketball Wives, The Real Housewives of Atlanta, Love & Hip Hop, The Bad Girls Club, The Game) reinforce discourse that they are neck-twisting, finger-pointing, aggressive, overly sexual beings. The images of Arabs/Muslims seen in shows like Homeland and 24 depict them not as Americans but as bomb-detoning terrorists. Lesbians portrayed on television conform stereotypically to Eurocentric standards of beauty, appealing to the desires of the heterosexual male (The L-Word, The Real L-Word, Grey’s
Anatomy, Orange Is the New Black, Glee). These images shape society’s connotation and are detrimental to group members. Using the example of black women in America, Harris-Perry (2011) discusses the impact of derogatory assumptions and discourses on social groups. At the crux of her argument is the notion that black women’s experience in America is political because of their negative social construction. These misrecognitions “are skewed by stereotypes that deny their humanity and distort them into ugly caricatures of their true selves” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 183). The devised constructions created by experts and the politically powerful determine the meaning, images, and symbols of what is normal, making those who do not conform Other.

Politics of Difference as a Counternarrative

The politics of difference serves as a counternarrative to Othering and oppressive structures and institutions (hooks, 1990; Young, 1990). This theory, a critique of the “ideal” forms of justice, suggests that society should transcend difference, provide equal treatment, and foster assimilation. At the core of this philosophy is an affirmation of difference and a reconceptualization of equality. The ideal of celebrated difference stems from such social movements of the twentieth century as the black liberation effort. As Young noted, many members of these movements held “that a positive self-definition of group differences is in fact more liberatory” (1990, p. 157).

A politics of difference values “difference and Otherness,” and understands the legitimacy it brings to policy creation and academic discussion (hooks, 1990). The primary tenet is that a politics of difference incorporates and deems valuable the voices and experiences of the “displaced, marginalized, exploited” (hooks, 1990, para. 5). Achieving this level of equality, particularly for those traditionally disadvantaged and oppressed, requires differences in treatment. Young (1990) proposes that in order to achieve social justice, social policy and its associated narratives should sometimes offer special treatment to certain groups. She uses “pregnancy and birth rights for workers, bilingual-bicultural rights, and American Indian rights” (p. 158) as examples for special treatment.

A politics of difference is represented by three primary characteristics that recognize difference—democratic cultural pluralism, postmodernism, and equality. All of these are central to ensuring a “positive sense of group difference” (Young, 1990, p. 167).

Democratic Cultural Pluralism

Democratic cultural pluralism serves as a counternarrative to cultural imperialism. In this sense, cultural imperialism refers not to the colonizer’s imposition of culture and habits on the colonized (Tomlinson, 1991), but to the perpetuation of a normative perspective “by allowing norms expressing
the point of view and experience of privileged groups to appear neutral and universal” (Young, 1990, p. 165). According to Young, democratic cultural pluralism is both liberating and empowering. She writes,

Implicit in emancipatory movements asserting a positive sense of group difference is a different ideal of liberation, which might be called democratic cultural pluralism. In this vision the good society does not eliminate or transcend group difference. Rather, there is equality among socially and culturally differentiated groups, who mutually respect one another and affirm one another in their differences. (p. 163)

Young illustrates that all social groups “have distinct cultures, experiences and perspectives on social life with humanly positive meaning, some of which may even be superior to the culture and perspective of mainstream society” (p. 166). Democratic cultural pluralism does not seek to eliminate or transcend group differences. It maintains that there is equality among socially and culturally differentiated groups that mutually respect one another and affirm one another in their differences.

Contemporary social movements see democratic cultural pluralism as an avenue away from the doctrine of representation and toward the principle of belonging. Within this context, social groups have direct influence over political issues, rather than indirect access to representatives (Melucci & Avritzer, 2000). In this sense, difference and the voices of the traditionally disadvantaged are inserted into the political system. Ultimately, democratic cultural pluralism calls for “new channels for directly presenting moral forms of life which are not in the majority and yet demand acknowledgement” (Melucci & Avritzer, 2000, p. 509).

**Postmodernism**

The twentieth-century academic paradigm of postmodernism encourages us to conduct a radical reevaluation of modern assumptions about culture, identity, history, or language. Postmodernists challenge “modern priorities, tolerance, humanism, egalitarianism, detached experiment, evaluative criteria, neutral procedures, impersonal rules, and rationality” (Rosenau, 1992, p. 5) in order to provide alternative narratives and meanings. At its core,

postmodern social scientists support a re-focusing on what has been taken for granted, what has been neglected, regions of resistance, the forgotten, the irrational, the insignificant, the repressed, the borderline, the classical, the sacred, the traditional, the eccentric, the sublimated, the subjugated, the rejected, the nonessential, the marginal, the peripheral, the excluded, the tenuous, the silenced, the accidental, the dispersed, the disqualified, the deferred, the disjointed. (Rosenau, 1992, p. 8)
In other words, postmodernists examine the phenomenon of Otherness. They look for the unique and diverse rather than unity and sameness. The postmodern perspective provides the counternarrative for assimilation, highlighting difference and questioning traditional ways of knowing. Foucault (1976, 1980) argues that knowledge is linked to the varying discourses and narratives that shape the knowledge that is formed within them. The narratives that are dominant in our lives largely construct what we know and how we understand what we know. However, for postmodernists, normative means of knowing, defining, and understanding are of no interest. “A postmodern social theory would examine the world from the multiple perspectives of class, race, gender, and other identifying group affiliations” (Agger, 1991, p. 116). The experienced realities of Others are highlighted; little attention is given to “grand narratives,” and “totalizing tendencies” are rejected (p. 116). Embedded within the postmodern lens is a critique of assimilation and the universalization of experiences, knowledge, and standards. Overall, postmodernism argues against assimilation in order to achieve equality.

**Equality**

Central to an understanding of a politics of difference is comfort with the notion that equality does not eliminate social difference. Transcending group difference to provide equal treatment is, through a politics of difference, more indicative of assimilation than of equality (Young, 1990). At times, providing unequal treatment and offering different opportunities may be needed in order to address historical inequities. A politics of difference redefines equality and shifts conceptions away from “treating everyone according to the same principles, rules, and standards” (Young, 1990, p. 158) toward a new direction where equality signifies the engagement and inclusion of all groups, sometimes requiring “different treatment for oppressed or disadvantaged groups” (p. 158).

The recognition and acceptance of difference is evident in Littleton’s *equality as acceptance* theory. In evaluating gender differences, Littleton (1987), argues that policies should not recognize socially and culturally based gender differences but work to guarantee that these differences do not result in disadvantage; therefore, revaluing “femininely coded activity and behavior as the equal of masculine-coded activity” (Young, 1990, p. 177). Liberation and equality are achieved when difference is acknowledged, accepted, and valued as equally as homogeneity.

**TRUE BLOOD: A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

*True Blood* first aired on HBO in September 2008 and chronicles the lives of the residents, both supernatural and human, of the fictional town of Bon...
Temps, Louisiana. The fantasy horror series is based on *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, a series of connected novels by Charlaine Harris, and presents a world in which humans and vampires attempt to live alongside one another in a small country town. Thanks to the creation of a synthetic blood product, Tru Blood, formerly coffined vampires are able to come out, integrate with humans, and “proclaim their existence and work to become equal in the eyes of the law and society” (Boyer, 2011, p. 22).

The show is centered on a fairy telepath named Sookie Stackhouse and her vampire lover Bill Compton. The racism (that is to say, naturalism), prejudice, segregation, violence, and intolerance so boldly presented in *True Blood* are highlighted by the narratives against integration. The discourse is eerily similar, seemingly purposely on the creator’s part, to historic and contemporary narratives in American society.

*True Blood* presents vampires as Others who represent ideals contrary to normative standards. In the terms of the show, the integration of vampires and humans has taken place throughout the world, but it is not until two years after this that the residents of Bon Temps are exposed to their first vampire. The show chronicles the evolution of a new Bon Temps, one that has both human and nonhuman residents.

*True Blood*’s political commentary provides an ideal canvas on which to draw parallels between Other narratives in the show and in contemporary American society. Boyer argues that “the world of *True Blood* and its vampiric representations . . . have significant implications for our belief systems . . . implications for how we come to understand both historical notions of difference and otherness surrounding race, sexuality, and gender” (2011, p. 23). For this reason, the narratives within the show are likened to the dominant narratives of the American Other.

**STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

To effectively identify parallel narratives, two primary analytic techniques were employed. First, content analysis was used to identify narratives within *True Blood*. Content analysis is “any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages” (Holsti, 1968, p. 608). A key component to analyzing data in this manner is the text in which they are presented. Researchers should engage in data interpretations in order to develop “ideas about the information found in the various categories, patterns that are emerging, and meanings that seem to be conveyed” (Berg, 2007, p. 308).

Content analysis is not limited to an examination of written documents or transcriptions of recorded audio communication. Aubrey (2004) conducted a content analysis of teen programming to examine the depiction of sexual consequences in television shows. Bretl and Cantor (1988) studied the portray-

All six seasons of *True Blood*, comprising a total of 70 episodes, were viewed to identify Othering narratives embedded within the show. Dialogue that was pervasive and recurring was defined as a dominant narrative. The dominant narratives of each episode were defined as Othering if they marginalized or oppressed vampires, perpetuated ideals of assimilation, fostered cultural imperialism, and encouraged inequality.

Second, critical discourse analysis was employed to evaluate the implications of these narratives. Gee argues that critical approaches to discourse analysis do not simply evaluate discourse in terms of social relationships; “they also treat social practices in terms of their implications for things like status, solidarity, distribution of social goods, and power” (2004, p. 33). In this context, critical discourse analysis was used to understand the implications of the dominant narratives and explore the social and political context in which they are entrenched.

The dominant narratives found within *True Blood* were categorized based on their association with at least one of the three characteristics of the politics of difference counternarrative—democratic cultural pluralism, postmodernism, and equality. Culturally imperialistic discourse was associated with its counternarrative of democratic cultural pluralism. Narratives discussing assimilation were coupled with postmodernism, and discourse descriptive of inequality was aligned with the counternarrative of equality. The narratives identified in *True Blood* were then compared to the dominant narratives prevalent in American society.

To facilitate the reader’s comprehension, the discussion of parallel narratives is organized by discourse type: religious/faith-based (narratives of faith and religion), family-based (narratives discussing the impact on family or related to familial relationships and structures, including marriage, dating, and sexual relationships), political (explicitly or implicitly related to civil rights and equality), and societal (narratives that relate to societal images).

There are two key limitations to this study. First, since only one television show was analyzed, the parallel narratives identified may not be representative of the narratives presented in other television shows or other media. The marginalization of Others may occur on nonsubscription television shows, movies, social media, and other media, but none of these are included in the investigation. Second, as HBO is a subscription channel, its viewership is limited to those who purchase access to its content, and thus its reach is limited to a specific narrow audience. Despite these limitations, evaluating and paralleling the show’s narratives highlight such discourse and demonstrate the incorporation of narratives in popular culture.

**VAMPIRES SUCK**
PARALLEL NARRATIVES:
NATURALISM IN TRUE BLOOD; OTHERISM IN AMERICA

Religious/Faith-Based Discourse

As with many of American society’s historical and contemporary narratives, religious beliefs shape the dominant narratives of True Blood. The show’s opening credits presents the image of a lit sign that reads God Hates Fangs. The tenet God Hates Fags, posted by the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, directly parallels this narrative. The phrase serves as the Web address for the church, which states that it “is a profound theological statement, which the world needs to hear more than it needs oxygen, water and bread” (Westboro, 2013). Although Westboro’s perspective is extreme, the narrative it promotes is analogous to that promoted by the sign in True Blood. Season 6 of True Blood focuses on Governor Truman Burrell’s desire to eliminate all the vampires in Louisiana.

Throughout the season, Governor Burrell’s personal feelings toward vampires impede his ability to make judgments based on what is best for the residents of his state, a theme that is sometimes present in American politics. For example, in 2012 the Virginia State Senate proposed a bill that would require a transvaginal ultrasound for women wishing to terminate a pregnancy. This bill, if enacted into law, could have affected 50.9% of the state’s population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The state senators who drafted the bill were more concerned with personal ideology than with the negative impact on residents.

In Season 2, The Fellowship of the Sun, Pastor Steve Newlin and his wife, Sarah, who lead a church based outside Dallas, Texas, preach a message of “coming from the darkness into the light.” They use the metaphor of light to reflect Godliness and the ability of humans to live during the daylight hours, as opposed to vampires’ inability to be in the sunlight. Pastor Newlin and Sarah Newlin are prominent voices in the anti-vampire movement and often appear on television news shows. The Newlins and their followers are known for their anti-vampire beliefs. They regularly conduct “Lock-Ins” designed to trap and kill vampires. The narratives advocated by Pastor and Sarah Newlin parallel some of the religious rhetoric targeted at the LGBTQ community in the real world. Bishop Eddie Long, for instance, who heads the Georgia-based New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, says that “homosexuality and lesbianism are spiritual abortions,” and that “God says you deserve death!” (as quoted in Robinson, 2010). Televangelist Reverend Jerry Falwell suggested that lesbians and gays—along with abortionists and feminists—were to blame for the September 2011 attacks, and in 1997 stated, “If we do not act now, homosexuals will ‘own’ America! If you and I do not speak up now, this homosexual steamroller will literally crush all decent men, women, and
children . . . and our nation will pay a terrible price!” (as quoted in Johnson and Eskridge, 2007, para. 10). The anti-gay attitudes of the religious right in the United States are mirrored in the anti-vampire narratives of The Fellowship of the Sun in True Blood.

The religious-based narratives of True Blood and the United States often make a connection between unnaturalness and procreation. Residents of Bon Temps reiterate the narrative that vampires are unnatural because they cannot produce new life, and in real life the LGBTQ community is also subjected to this discourse, which claims their orientation is unnatural and not God-given. Reverends Newlin and Falwell and Bishop Long use fear-mongering tactics to influence the behavior of their congregants and persuade them that vampires and the LGBTQ community are immoral.

Overall, the dominant narratives of the religious-based discourse described above epitomize cultural imperialism. In each of these cases the dominant narrative suggests that because Others do not live in accordance with a specific religious doctrine, they are deviants and unnatural. To effectively transcend the “God Hates . . .” discourse, democratic cultural pluralism challenges the dominant narrative in such a way that the Other is no longer seen as abnormal. Differences regarding religious beliefs and the role of God in one’s life are considered, and this sets the stage for meaningful opportunities of engagement and discussion. The counternarrative values difference, acknowledging that difference is not a weakness but a potent dynamic that fosters equality. The counternarratives embedded within True Blood have evolved over the course of the six seasons. Initially, these counternarratives were limited to small, scattered groups or to individuals, but as time (and seasons) progress, more strategic alliances have developed and, therefore, have made the counternarratives more prominent in the show. Similarly, in American society, the struggles of Others have gained more prominence as their alliances have expanded and become more powerful.

Family-Based Discourse

The narratives in True Blood that relate to family and relationships are suggestive of the narratives that were dominant during the civil rights era in America. Residents of Bon Temps regularly use the term “fang bangers” for those who enjoy sexual encounters with vampires. Interspecies dating and marriage are frowned upon in twenty-first-century Bon Temps, as were relationships and marriages between members of different ethnic groups in twentieth-century America. White men and women in America who had a black or African-American partner were considered “nigger lovers” and traitors to their race. The narratives of same-sex and interracial relationships in today’s American society also suggest that such relationships are aberrant. These paralleled narratives are evident on the show and in present-day
America (and in the recent past). In both environments, *True Blood* and the United States, these narratives suggest that the family and relationship structures of Others are abnormal and do not conform to dominant normative standards.

Dominant narratives of assimilation and cultural imperialism are present within these examples. The messages embedded in the narratives of *True Blood* and American society suggest that interspecies and interracial romantic and sexual relationships are not universally representative and trivialize the experiences of those within these relationships. They further suggest that these behaviors are not respectable, and that in order to achieve respectability one must assimilate into the dominant culture. The postmodern and democratic pluralism counternarratives argue for a mindset that incorporates various ways of knowing, refusing to accept the dominant culture’s definitions of a healthy relationship.

**Political Discourse**

Central to vampires coming out in the America of *True Blood* is the Vampire Rights Amendment (VRA), an amendment to the United States Constitution designed in the likeness of the civil rights acts to provide vampires with equality and justice. Proponents of the VRA believe that vampires were people, too. Spearheading the vampirian struggle is the American Vampire League (AVL), a civil rights organization presented in the likeness of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) or the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). The AVL engages in public affairs activities that promote vampire rights and a shift in the discourse around the presence and safety of vampires. The messages that stem from the AVL mirror those of civil rights organizations of the 1950s and today. These organizations proliferate narratives of equity, opportunity, and fairness. The opposition to the VRA and the AVL includes political and religious leaders as well as ordinary human residents. The discourse of the opposition stems largely from an ingrained fear that giving equal rights to vampires will lead to the “vampirization” of America. Similar discourse exists within the narratives of opponents to gay and interracial marriage and integration. These narratives advise that same-sex and interracial marriages will ruin traditional unions and the American family (Jackson, 2010; Santorum, 2003), just as those against racial integration argued that it would make equal what was inherently and biologically unequal.

Fear-mongering is a tool of persuasion used both in American society and *True Blood* to maintain dominant narratives and foster the marginalization of Others. Gun advocates, following domestic terrorist attacks (e.g., Navy Yard shooting in Washington, DC; Sandy Hook in Newtown, Connecticut), often dig their political heels in deeper when voicing their support for the right to...
bear arms. The National Rifle Association’s executive vice president, Wayne LaPierre, wrote in an editorial:

Hurricanes. Tornadoes. Riots. Terrorists. Gangs. Lone criminals. These are perils we are sure to face—not just maybe. It’s not paranoia to buy a gun. It’s survival. It’s responsible behavior, and it’s time we encourage law-abiding Americans to do just that. (quoted in Katchen, 2013)

LaPierre’s remarks are analogous to Governor Burrell’s warning about the danger posed by vampires in *True Blood.*

When humans, tax paying citizens, can no longer walk on their streets, at night, without fearing for their lives, then we have to take our streets back. . . . we are closing down all Vampire-run businesses. That is why I say to any of you who have the financial and legal means to do it, buy a gun, buy as many as you can, stock up on wooden bullets. This is still America. You have the right to defend yourselves and the people you love. (Ball, Harris, Tucker, & Moyer, 2013)

Governor Burrell’s remarks on American political freedoms and liberties represent the same intention as LaPierre’s. This rhetoric is designed to swell fear in residents while marginalizing and oppressing specific social groups.

Governor Burrell institutes a statewide curfew for vampires and constructs a concentration camp where vampires are studied, undergo medical and psychiatric evaluations, and ultimately are killed. Burrell’s purpose in doing so is to better understand vampires’ powers so that he can construct weapons for use against them. Internment camps were set up to prevent espionage by Japanese Americans after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The U.S. government did not intend to study Japanese Americans, as Burrell’s did vampires, but they did attempt to weaken this social group through isolation, like the camps in *True Blood.*

Burrell’s desire to eliminate vampires from Louisiana mimics some of the discourse related to the Japanese internment. Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt stated, in his testimony to the House Naval Affairs Subcommittee to Investigate Congested Areas:

I don’t want any of them [persons of Japanese ancestry] here. They are a dangerous element. There is no way to determine their loyalty. . . . It makes no difference whether he [sic] is an American citizen, he is still a Japanese. American citizenship does not necessarily determine loyalty. . . . But we must worry about the Japanese all the time until he is wiped off the map. (1943, p. 739)

DeWitt’s comments are almost identical to what is said about vampires in Bon Temps, Louisiana. Fear of the unknown, the privilege associated with being a member of an advantaged social group, and the power to enforce this
fear is how, in these instances, dominant narratives shape political ideologies, influencing political activity and policy development.

Themes of inequality, cultural imperialism, and assimilation are found within the political discourse identified in *True Blood* and the American parallel narratives. In these instances, culturally imperialistic thinking suggests that people who do not conform to the dominant customs and ideals of citizenship will be ostracized and subjected to different political and social treatment. In making a decision whether to come out of the coffin (or, in the American narrative, come out of the closet), Others are forced to make a decision to either assimilate into the dominant culture or make their difference known, which may result in their being ostracized and exposed to violence. Postmodernism, equality, and democratic pluralism suggest that, ideally, one would never need to “come out,” as people should interact with one other as individuals, rather than based on their social group membership (even with the presence of social groups in society).

**Societal Discourse**

The normative standards set forth by dominant social groups determine how behaviors and ideologies are evaluated and which bar they are measured against. Vampires are measured against a human-centric standard whereby having the ability to walk during daylight hours, having a beating heart, and gaining sustenance from nonanimal food sources determines one’s normalness. Real-life Others—non-Christians, African Americans, Latinos, Asians, LGBTQ persons, the differently abled, women, and individuals of lower economic status, among others—are held to a Euro, male, hetero-normative standard according to which you are not normal if you are not white, Christian, male, and straight, yet you are still measured against those standards and are forced by play by the rules “they” create.

These standards become evident when one evaluates the narratives surrounding vampires and safety. The television series begins with an understanding that vampires and humans can coexist thanks to the availability of Tru Blood. This invention allows vampires to drink their preferred synthetic blood type without harming humans. Despite this advancement, vampires are still considered predators and humans their prey. Homophobic individuals engage in dialogue that presents LGBTQ men and women as predators, and straight men, women, and children as their prey. Historical narratives about gay men said that they were pedophiles and coercers (King, 2004). These narratives led to violent behaviors against the LGBTQ community, and, as evidenced in *True Blood*, they do so against vampires as well.

Season 5 depicts a hate group of anti-vampire activists led by the former sheriff of Bon Temps. The group, known as “The Obamas” because they wear Barack Obama masks when perpetrating their hate crimes, attempt to “purify”
the town by ridding it of vampires. Their attacks and violence emulate the behaviors of the Ku Klux Klan, the Aryan Nation, religious extremists, and gay and lesbian hate groups.

Dominant societal narratives make deviant that which is not understood. Postmodernism argues that Others should no longer be considered outsiders, challenging what is considered normal and no longer accepting the dominant culture as neutral and universal. The most recent season of *True Blood* (as of the writing of this article) concludes with the supporters of the vampiric struggle, both humans and vampires, collectively defeating the oppressive regime. Although not explicitly couched within postmodernism, the actions of the vampire supporters against the dominant culture may be seen as promoting narratives that are accepting and inclusive.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR A POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE**

Group differentiation, in and of itself, is not a negative concept. Injustice is introduced, however, when differences are aligned with negative formations of thought, where these conceptions influence public policy in such a way as to create Others. Degenerative politics, public policies that exploit and manipulate negative social constructs, symbols, or logic in policy design for political and economic capital (Ingram & Schneider, 2005), have become commonplace in American public policy and administration, as evidenced in housing policies (Sidney, 2005), social welfare legislation (Jurik & Cowgill, 2005), urban migration (Alkadry & Blessett, 2010), prisoner interrogation and abuse (Alkadry & Witt, 2009), and the overall administration and enforcement of laws (Alexander & Stivers, 2010). The highlighted discourses in *True Blood* and American society represent examples of dominant narratives symbolizing cultural imperialism, inequality, and assimilation. Although these narratives are intended to marginalize, the counternarrative—the politics of difference and its embodied characteristics of postmodernism, equality, and democratic pluralism—allows one to construct alternative responses that provide justice, power, and inclusion.

Postmodernism encourages critical evaluation and reevaluation of cultures, experiences, and assumptions and of traditional ways of knowing. Individuals who take this approach assess their ideologies and associated narratives in ways that foster depth, critique, and self-exploration. The postmodernist approaches public policy and administration with an understanding of the contextual variables that shape and influence perceptions of social group construction and openness to difference. In this sense, “the field of public administration [should] speak less in terms of top-down, instrumental mechanisms and efficiency protocols, and more in terms of mutuality” (Miller & Fox, 2007, p. 131). For example, rather than advocating for Louisiana residents to fight vampires with guns (which would prove useless unless they had silver bullets),
Governor Burrell could quell discord and work to establish interspecies organizations that identify local challenges related to human/vampire integration and develop solutions to address these challenges. Burrell’s rhetoric could exemplify a tone of inclusion (rather than separation) and advocate for greater understanding among all Louisiana residents. In America, rather than devising and implementing legislation that is determined to be neutral and ignores difference, public administration and policy would be better served if laws were group conscious. Group-conscious policies are aware of difference, do not assume normative standards, and therefore do not suggest assimilation. Policies that consider group difference may counterbalance marginalization and oppression, as they take notice of previous group subjugation.

Democratic cultural pluralism fosters mutual respect among social groups within their differences (not despite their differences). Cultural imperialism is characterized by viewing Others (whether vampires or marginalized Americans) as “less than,” deviant, or an aberrant subculture. Policies and procedures that are blind to group difference ignore historical and social context and tend to increase, rather than eradicate, disadvantage (Young, 1990). A polity “that asserts the positivity of group difference is liberating and empowering. In the act of reclaiming the identity the dominant culture has taught them to despise, and affirming it as an identity to celebrate, the oppressed remove double consciousness” (p. 166). Through democratic cultural pluralism, vampires are valued for their vampiric characteristics and historical knowledge of the world, and Others in America are valued for possessing varying perspectives and experiences that are associated with their social group membership. Public policy and administration, in this context, should incorporate varying perspectives and experiences into the decision-making process. Integrative approaches to public policy and administration may aid in revising current policies or shape future legislation to not embody Othering language or outcomes (Schneider & Ingram, 1997).

Public policy is designed to incorporate symbols and messages that demonstrate society’s values of citizenship, democracy, and justice. Only when the differences among social groups are negatively constructed and used for the benefit of those in power (and who shape discourse) is marginalization and oppression found. A politics of difference does not call for the transcendence of difference, but for the inclusion and fortifying of difference.

CONCLUSION

This investigation has identified parallel narratives in fictional Bon Temps and nonfictional America. It has discussed the importance of difference and its potential role in policy design and administration. Policy creation and its implementation, among the social, political, familial, and religious aspects of American life, shapes environments that benefit some at the expense of others.
Other narratives foster negative ideas about those with differences and shape approaches, thought processes, and institutional structures that oppress and marginalize. The counternarrative that the politics of difference presents, however, uses democratic cultural pluralism, equality, and postmodernism to challenge negative social constructions of targeted groups and revise policy design.

The parallel narratives presented throughout this article demonstrate how discourses are used to oppress and marginalize Others so as to maintain existing power relations. Foucault reflected that “for centuries, [discourse] sought to base itself in nature, in the plausible, upon sincerity and science—in short, upon true discourse” (1971, p. 11). Yet twenty-first-century discourse is not based upon “sincerity and science,” but is constructed to uphold existing power imbalances and oppressive structures designed to ensure that Others remain Othered (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). A politics that accepts difference is accompanied by empowerment and liberation (Young, 1990), ultimately creating equity and justice. “Democracy is messy, so are our lives; the danger is not in the plurality of dissonant voices, but in the temptation to tune them out” (Marrati, 2012, p. 994).

True Blood presents a fictional depiction of interspecies relationships between humans and vampires. These relationships mirror hierarchical structures in American society between dominant and disadvantaged groups. The ways that vampires are Othered in Bon Temps reflect existing disparities in American society. As a work of fiction, True Blood allows viewers to recognize inequality outside the scope of their real world. The show’s representation of vampires sheds light and awareness on the reality of the oppressed and the oppressor in a less threatening way than would direct confrontation of America’s dominant narratives. Storylines of vampire marginalization help viewers empathize with the position of Others in a way that may not be possible in real life. By holding a mirror to the face of American society, True Blood demonstrates how issues of injustice and marginalization manifest and persist. As discussed throughout this article, the discourse and narratives in True Blood closely parallel those in American society. Thus, viewers who see the injustice and oppression in Bon Temps, Louisiana, may be able to recognize the same in American society.

Twenty-first-century popular culture has made progress toward equality and justice in the normative sense. This is evidenced by television shows depicting gay and lesbian relationships (Scandal, Modern Family), people of color in leadership positions (Dexter, Fringe, 24), and powerful women (The Newsroom, Game of Thrones, Dora the Explorer). American society has also demonstrated progress toward normative justice (e.g., Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice as secretary of state, the appointment of Justices Sotomayor and Kagan, and the Supreme Court Defense of Marriage Act decision). These examples, on television and in real life, represent the exception, not the rule. The number of powerful female roles in Games of Thrones pales in compari-
son to the number of powerful men, just as the number of black secretaries of state (or presidential Cabinet members for that matter) pales in comparison to white appointees. Furthermore, these examples occur within the framework of cultural imperialism, where difference is ignored and the experiences of some are considered universal. Until ideologies inclusive of the politics of difference become pervasive in decision-making and policy development, there will still be significant progress to be made. It may be that shows like True Blood will help make that possible.

REFERENCES


VAMPIRES SUCK


**Tia Sherèe Gaynor** (tia.gaynor@marist.edu) is an assistant professor of public administration at Marist College. Her research explores the intersection of social justice, local government, and resident and citizen participation, focusing on avenues by which the distance between community residents and political issues can be decreased and ultimately eradicated.
Copyright of Administrative Theory & Praxis (M.E. Sharpe) is the property of M.E. Sharpe Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.