

Bloody Economics: *The Sookie Stackhouse Novels* and the Cost of Being ‘Out of the Coffin’

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Vampires are consumers. They (normally) consume human blood for sustenance. Yet, they are also consumed. On the one hand, popular culture has a ravenous appetite for vampires; Susan Peppers-Bates and Joshua Rust explain this attraction to vampires as not only an attraction to the taboo, but also as a ‘romantic longing’ to return to life filled with the mysterious and supernatural (2010: 187). On the other hand, consumption of the vampire is innate to the vampire’s very existence. After all, how does one end up with a new vampire? Charlaine Harris’s *The Sookie Stackhouse Novels* explore this tension between the vampire as consumer and consumed with an economic twist on the role of blood. The creation of bottled blood, LifeFlow in *Living Dead in Dallas* (Harris 2002: 26) or True Blood¹ in later books such as *Dead and Gone* (Harris 2009: 269), allows Harris’s vampires to come ‘out of the coffin’ (Harris 2001: 1) and exist openly in human society by paying for a manufactured substitute of what they used to take for free. The very act that frees them to make their existence known to mankind also binds them to the humans’ capitalist economy. Harris’s vampires are primarily consumers in the way they participate in the American economy, yet they concurrently remain deeply entrenched in a much older, feudal social system through their continued adherence to the vampire hierarchy. This system is based on blood as well, but in a very different way.

This article seeks to establish Harris’s slowly unfolding depiction of the economics of blood across the book series as a whole before addressing the implications of these systems on

the relationships central to the main plotlines. Since readers learn of vampire society along with Sookie Stackhouse, who narrates the novels, pertinent details regarding vampires' interaction with the humans' capitalist economy and details of the vampires' hierarchy are presented as needed for various subplots throughout the series. Ultimately, it is the tensions between the vampire as consumer and consumed, between economic capitalism and a feudalistic hierarchy, and the differing economics of blood that disallow Harris's vampires to form lasting relationships with humans in the overarching plot of the series. Harris's novels reveal that cultural concerns regarding the economics of blood are a greater barrier to vampires truly participating in human society than the scientific need for a blood substitute.

The most common reference to *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* or *The Sookie Stackhouse Novels* (both titles by which the novel series is known) is, in fact, a section on the first page of the first novel. Harris sets her heroine, Sookie, as consciously aware that her reality follows the legacy of Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire*. This section is referenced in Laura Wright's 'Vegan Vampires', for example, as she begins her discussion of HBO's *True Blood* with the way that Harris fits her novels into the legacy of vampire fiction (2015: 57). Wright's discussion of vegan vampires is limited to the television show, evident in her lack of discussion of Bubba, a key vampire from the books. Melissa de Zwart's 'Anyone For a Vampwich?' likewise begins with Sookie's observation that vampires in Louisiana must be more interested in living in New Orleans due to Anne Rice's novels before discussing the complexities of copyright between the books, television show, and fan fiction. Intentionally or not, Harris gave critics the perfect 'in' to her novels on page one with Sookie's declaration of this novel's connection to popular culture.² Yet this invitation to see the novels as building on a rich legacy of vampire fiction is generally used only as an introduction to *True Blood*, instead of the thirteen books

which follow that page. Harris's books develop overt themes such as vampire culture, as well as more nuanced concerns with consumerism, equality and various social concerns gradually throughout the full series.³

The vampire as a parasite, feeding off of society, is well-worn territory. Karl Marx's use of the term 'vampire' in *Capital* (1867) is expounded on by Mark Neocleous, who argues that Marx was not 'suggesting that the vampire really exists, he uses it as a metaphor to capture something very real indeed, namely a particular relation between human beings'; the authorities *are* vampires (2003: 676). Franco Moretti's concerns regarding capital in *Dracula* (1897), the stockpiling of money which comes back to life to be dusted off and used to take over the world (1982: 74), builds upon Marx's ideas of capitalism and connects them to fear. These readings of vampires as taking and soaking up the capital in society do not, however, account for the vampire who is free to exist in human society. What of the person down the block who happens to be a vampire? Critical ideas of vampires and the economy are evolving for the vampires who make friends with humans, provide them with jobs, and invest in the same stock market they do — for vampires who are represented as more human individuals than symbolic.

In Harris's novels, vampires all over the world have come out of the coffin. As the novels only feature a relatively small group of vampires, most of whom are based in northern Louisiana, the American economy is most pertinent to this discussion. In his chapter 'What is Capitalism?', Jürgen Kocka summarizes three main philosophers' definitions of capitalism. Kocka argues that Karl Marx's most central claim regarding capitalism is that 'the *market*, which is presumed a division of labor and money economy, [is] a central component of capitalism' (2016: 7). Max Weber, however, focuses on capitalism as an 'economic action [. . .] characterized by competition and exchange, orientation to market prices, the deployment of capital, and the search

for profit' (Kocka 2016: 11). The last of Kocka's classic theorists of capitalism is Joseph A. Schumpeter, whose own definition of capitalism requires a focus on credit. Here, it is his interest in innovation as the cause of 'waves of economic expansion' that can best relate to the vampire's entrance into the humans' economy (Kocka 2016: 15). Kocka himself suggests that a definition of capitalism 'emphasizes decentralization, commodification, and accumulation as basic characteristics' (2016: 21). While the specifics of American capitalism can clearly be argued and refined, it *is* fair to describe the humans' economy in the United States as capitalist as represented in the *Sookie Stackhouse Novels*. The economy of the novels has a competitive market in which labor is exchanged for money. The vampires' entry into this economy is due to innovation. Each of the main definitions of capitalism referenced by Kocka are applicable.

The purchase of blood in the novels is, itself, at odds with Marx's take on vampires and the economy. Firstly, the vampires are not the authorities here.⁴ Secondly, there is no overt hoarding of capital now that vampires exist openly in society. Money is meant to be used by Harris's vampires. Beyond the obvious benefits of not having to hunt in the secret of the night, being welcomed into the humans' capitalist economy allows vampires a certain amount of renewed acceptance as *people*. They can now go to the store and exchange cash (or credit) for products for dietary consumption. Interestingly, readers rarely see vampires actually buying blood. Bill lives on bottled blood, presumably from a 24-hour store. All of the central vampires (Eric, Bill, and Pam) get the occasional drink out at Fangtasia or Merlotte's. Otherwise, Sookie does most of the purchasing throughout the series. She keeps her house stocked with a list of ingredients needed for casseroles, coffee and a supply of blood for her guests. She is determined to be a good hostess to any guest. Coffee? Tea? B positive? In the way she acclimates to entertaining vampires, Sookie models the potential for individuals to be welcoming to the undead

despite the slowness of society to accept minority groups.⁵ This desire to be hospitable makes Sookie one of those driving demand for bottled blood through her consistent purchase of it. Still, the vampires are active members of the economy. They are both making money *and* spending it in establishments either owned by humans or that employ at least some humans.

Nevertheless, the vampires make the most of humans consuming their culture, or rather their perceived culture. As Frank Grady notes, ‘the relentless march of commodification’ has not spared the vampire (1996: 225-226). While Grady’s examples include Count Chocula and *Sesame Street*’s Count von Count, Harris’s vampires rely on the intentionally Gothic commodification of vampires, such as found in movies. Eric’s bar, Fangtasia, is decorated with movie vampire images and entertains a steady clientele of what Sookie defines as ‘vampire groupies and tourists’, clothed in various movie-related costumes or the stereotypically dark clothing of the Goth subculture (Harris 2001: 101). Fangtasia represents Eric’s ability to monetize his condition. He can keep a steady income by playing into the stereotypes that people assume represent the vampires’ lives and desires. Yet it is still a performance of what humans expect of vampires based on *Dracula* and Rice’s vampires, for instance. Grady explains that Rice’s Lestat claims to reveal vampire secrets in *The Vampire Lestat* to a human audience that is unmoved by his revelations (1996: 233). Eric’s bar is Harris’s answer to this: he performs the lie since humans prefer their fiction over the truth. This façade represents a disconnect between humans’ assumption of what vampires are and want, and vampires’ real desires.

What vampires actually seem to want or value is complicated, but most evident in the women central to the vampire plotlines: Sookie and Pam (Eric’s vampire child). These women are difficult to classify as archetypal female Gothic characters given that their preferred appearances reveal the complexities of their natures. Sookie is a human woman, though a

telepath due to some fairy blood in her lineage. When Sookie and Bill first go to Fangtasia together, Sookie describes her white dress with flowers as something you wear ‘if you wanted the personal interest of whoever was your escort’, and her shoes as ‘red high-heeled screw-me shoes’ (Harris 2001: 97). Everyone notices her, and all of the vampires seem to desire her both for her fairy blood and performed sexuality. She is neither innocent victim, given her self-conscious sexuality, nor is she portrayed as a monster.⁶ In contrast, Pam is technically a monster and prefers a more modest appearance. Sookie later uses Pam’s attire to determine what the night holds for her friend. Pam wears the stereotypical ‘trailing black gown’ to work (Harris 2003: 283). Her everyday clothing, however, is better suited for a suburban soccer mom than a fierce vampire. As Sookie explains on one occasion, ‘Pam was dressed, as always, in sort of middle-class anonymous clothing [. . .] She looked like Alice in Wonderland with fangs’ (Harris 2003: 38). Pam’s work clothes are a costume. She dresses the part of the movie vampire at Fangtasia because it is what the patrons assume vampire culture *should* be. As Andrew Smith states, ‘the Gothic often trades in tabooed representations of desire’ (2013: 199). Sookie and Pam invert what we expect of them. Despite her dress at the bar that night, Sookie has sought a platonic male escort to ensure her physical safety. Pam, as the tabooed object of male desire, is a dream that would slip away if the same men saw her in her everyday clothes with her girlfriend. In this juxtaposition, then, readers see that the ‘vampire culture’ which most people experience, and which the vampires themselves peddle, is a show put on to be consumed by the public.

Intentionally choosing to perform an expected Goth culture allows the vampires to accumulate wealth, solving the problem of surviving in the human world indefinitely when the public is watching. Eric’s bar relies on humans’ desire for a *vampire* bar, rather than just a night out. In this way, Fangtasia embodies the paradox that Smith identifies in Goth subculture, which

‘appears to be both “middle class” in composition and “anti-middle class” in attitude’ (A. Smith 2013: 202). On her first visit to Fangtasia, Sookie notes that, amongst the aforementioned fang-bangers and tourists there are also vampires mixed into the crowd, ‘like real jewels in a bin of rhinestones’ (Harris 2001: 102). Later, she and readers learn that the vampires in Eric’s area all take their turns spending nights at the bar so that there are always enough vampires around to keep the humans entertained. From the costumed female vampire serving as the bouncer, who makes Sookie question if vampires prefer such attire or intentionally don it in order to fit the stereotype (Harris 2001: 100-101), to the four women who approach Bill and offer to let him bite them (104-105) and to Eric and Pam’s rebuffs of humans (106), the bar acts as a place for interactions that humans might not have anywhere else, a place to attempt overt advances that would otherwise be taboo. Most of the people in the bar are normal, down to their desire to walk on the wild side for an evening. This space, separate from normal Shreveport mores, opens people to new experiences and, at the same time, provides Eric with a healthy income and thus makes him a stakeholder in the capitalist economy.

Blood, as a consumer good, also opens the door to the possibility of vampires’ victimization by human consumers in a way that would not have been possible when the former originally preyed upon humans from the shadows. On the one hand, Eric’s careful performance of Goth culture at the bar is a choice for economic gain. On the other hand, the introduction of vampires into the humans’ capitalist economy also results in their blood becoming a marketable item. Aspasia Stephanou situates *Dead Until Dark* in the context of American blood shortages and fears of infection via blood borne diseases, events which sparked actual scientific interests in creating artificial blood for human use (2014: 125). When vampires are integrated into Harris’s society as consumers, they are also consumed; their blood is a powerful recreational drug. In this

way, what makes them stand out the most, the need for human blood, is ‘controlled and tamed’ in two ways: they are forced to become economic consumers and, simultaneously, they are reduced to objects of human exploitation (Stephanou 2014: 126-127). Vampires such as Eric are at the mercy of the capitalist economy in multiple ways.

The vampire as a member of humans’ society, and economy, is what Sookie is willing to accept. She accepts the need to stock bottled blood in her pantry, and she willingly makes allowances for Eric’s obligations to the bar when they are a couple. In these interactions, Eric is a mix of consumer and consumed within the humans’ capitalist economy. Thus, Sookie is not concerned with Eric having only one status. She is not, for example, upset that he has to peddle the vampire stereotype for income. When Eric suggests that she could work for him at Fangtasia, Sookie responds:

“No, thank you.” I said it immediately. “I would hate to see the fangbangers come in night after night, always wanting what they shouldn’t have. It’s just sad and bad.”

[. . .]

“That’s how I make my money Sookie, on the perverse dreams and fantasies of humans. Most of those humans are tourists who visit Fangtasia once or twice then go back to Minden or Emerson and tell their neighbors about their walk on the wild side. Or they’re people from the Air Force base who like to show how tough they are by drinking at a vampire bar.”

“I understand that. And I know if fangbangers don’t come to Fangtasia, they’ll go somewhere else they can hang around with vampires”. (Harris 2011: 71-72)

The needs of capitalism make sense to her. Sookie knows what happens at the bar and she seems to think of it as she would any club scene, such as a strip club or a seedy bar with a drug dealer in the corner. For her side of this conversation, ‘vampire’ could easily be switched out for ‘sex worker’ or ‘ecstasy’. Exchanging these terms actually makes more sense given her reasoning that vampires are something the patrons should not have — and she is dating a vampire. Sookie only understands Eric and his business in terms of the human capitalist economy that she has always known, since she does not know the full extent of the vampires’ hierarchy and its feudal basis, nor of the role this hierarchy might play in the operations of Eric’s bar.

Like ‘capitalism’, the definition of ‘feudalism’ is openly debated by scholars, which, in this case, makes it a useful contextual term for the vampires’ hierarchy. In ‘The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe’, Elizabeth A. R. Brown discusses the concerns historians have with the term ‘feudalism’, including the vastly different usages and the oversimplification of very different social and political systems under a single umbrella term. The general concept of feudalism as dealing with courts, knights, and serfs, however, is found throughout (Brown 1974: 1067). Brown disputes the usefulness of this simplification of medieval society as useful for teaching, because though it may serve as a ‘familiar tag to which to attach consciously oversimplified generalizations’, the ideas must be unlearned later for students to exchange early concepts of feudalism with more nuanced historical understandings (1974: 1068). It is this very over-simplification and broadness that makes feudalism useful as an analogy for Harris’s vampire hierarchy.⁷ Most readers will have some (historically incorrect or not) concept of medieval feudalism as a pyramidal government in which the court sits at the top with the most power and the serfs toil at the bottom with the least power. Throughout the novels, we know who the kings and queens are. We could, however, debate whether Eric is a nobleman

or a knight and if Bill should count as a vassal or not. The nameless and/or undeveloped vampires who show up at the bar when required are clearly serfs. It is the reader's generalized awareness of feudalism that makes the vampires' hierarchy make sense, because it seems to fall into a system that readers think they understand.

It is vital to note that this blood-based economy is almost exclusively in the realm of vampires. Consider the difference in Sookie's familiarity with the vampire world before finding out any details of their kingdoms and fears of reverse colonization, which readers will recall as a prominent theme in earlier vampire works, like *Dracula*, or the territorial issues blamed on vampires in the human world, as discussed by Nick Groom in *The Vampire: A New History* (2018: 41-55). The vampires are not performing a part for humans and then living off of them parasitically, whilst divvying up their land behind their backs. Eric's capitalistic endeavors, discussed above, allow him his place in a vampire hierarchy that does not overtly touch the human world. Jennifer Culver asserts that 'mainstreaming' vampires such as Bill and, to some extent, Eric, are 'playing at being human' (2010: 20). Throughout the series, vampires fight for their rights and equality under human laws. Culver extends the metaphor of 'play' into the vampires' culture: '[s]afety lies in the hierarchy and courtesies of vampire culture, in playing the game' (2010: 22). While this seems to be the case early in the novel series, the later novels (published the same year and after Culver's essay) establish much more serious concerns within the vampires' hierarchy. William M. Curtis's essay, included in the same collection as Culver's, notes that not even Bill — whom he argues seems to be the most independent in his attempts to mainstream — seems to think that he can escape the vampires' hierarchy (2010: 71-72). Harris's novels create the vampires' culture and norms slowly, over the entire series. Looking back at the

book series as a whole, readers see that vampires are not unwilling but actually unable to break from the hierarchy, even when they most want to.

Blood is the basis of the vampires' hierarchy and their economy in a very personal way. Unlike the metaphors used by economists such as Marx or the political and/or medical interests expressed by Groom,⁸ actual blood is integral in the intensely personal interactions of Harris's vampires. Sookie learns of the vampires' shadow system of government early in the novels. She knows there is a Queen of Louisiana and a King of Mississippi; she knows that Eric is the Sheriff of Area Five and that Bill becomes the Investigator specifically to protect her. It is not until she and Eric are married by vampire rite and share a 'blood bond' that any of the intricacies of the vampire government are explained to her. In *Dead in the Family*, Eric explains to Sookie the way the vampires divided up the country and named the sections after various mythical figures (Harris 2010: 160-166). This is not, however, merely an introduction to how the country was split between warring vampires. What Eric explains to Sookie also outlines how vampires take over weakened kingdoms, who gets notified of battle plans, and the importance of spying on each other. This discussion is the most direct address of the hierarchal system that the vampires employ. In and of itself, this discussion reveals the general layout of the kingdoms and not much more. Yet this information contextualizes various details throughout the series. The vampires' economy is based on blood exchange, whether the taking of blood through violence or the making of vampires, rather than purchase of it — and only revealed to those with specific ties.

The power of take-overs is the most direct parallel to feudalism because readers see the hierarchy in action. The terminology is even right; there are kings and queens, as well as subjects doing their bidding and fighting their battles. The weight of loss of undead 'life' is heavy, yet it is taken for granted as something that can and does happen. Victor delights in telling Eric that the

queen and all of the other sheriffs are dead when Louisiana is taken over. Further, he has all of Eric's 'people' trapped at Fangtasia and is ready to kill them if they do not, at Eric's order, agree to become subjects of the new ruler (Harris 2008: 174-175). When Eric asks why he is the only sheriff to survive this long, Victor readily replies, '[b]ecause you're the most efficient, the most productive, and the most practical [. . .] And you have one of the biggest moneymakers living in your area and working for you. [. . .] Our king would like to leave you in position, if you will swear loyalty to him' (175). Here, it is Eric and Bill's acclimation to the American economy (via Fangtasia and Bill's vampire directory computer program) that secures their possibility of survival in a land grab scenario worthy of a medieval romance. Eric and Bill agree, in a surprising moment of diplomacy for vampires, and Louisiana and Arkansas become subject to Victor's ruler, the King of Nevada (179). Sookie and others present are spared bloodshed because of the economic value (in the humans' economy) that these two vampires add to a vampire kingdom. As Grady notes, earlier vampires, like those described by Stoker and Rice, have had to have a certain preoccupation with wealth, accumulating and legitimizing it (1996: 227). Eric and his vampires need to survive under the new ruler who values their economic abilities to generate already legitimate wealth. Harris's vampires reveal that even open business in the human world does not answer all of the concerns regarding vampires' wealth because of the hierarchy.

The gift of blood from a vampire to a human makes the latter susceptible to the vampires' hierarchy. When Bill and Sookie first meet and she saves him, he offers her the vials of blood the Rattrays had already taken from him (Harris 2001: 13). This offer is capitalist in nature, as he suggests that she could sell it. Later, Bill feeds Sookie on two occasions: first, to save her life following an attack (31) and, second, to increase her abilities before a meeting with Eric (195).

Bill's blood allows him to claim and protect Sookie. Although Bill does not explain to Sookie the bond she will have with him following the blood exchange, Sookie's later experiences with Eric provide context for Bill's actions. Eric spends the first couple of books trying to figure out how to get even a little of his blood into Sookie and finally does so by tricking her into 'saving' him in *Living Dead in Dallas* (Harris 2002: 214), long before they are dating. In this way, the vampires not only have some power over her, but she is not even aware of what that power is because the knowledge exchange is unbalanced.

This issue of unbalanced knowledge is mirrored in the novels' representation of the exchanges of blood. On the one hand, the major instances in which Sookie ingests vampire blood can be read as transfusions. Vampires have the upper hand in forcing Sookie to accept blood, as well as the resulting bonds, in dangerous situations. In *Club Dead*, Eric feeds Sookie to heal her of serious injury. She tells readers:

“I knew that the more of Eric's blood I had in me, the more he would know me. I knew that it would give him some kind of power over me. I knew that I would be stronger for a long time, and given how old Eric was, I would be very strong. [. . .] Eric was giving me a great gift”. (Harris 2003: 188-189)

Here, Sookie recognizes that she is involved in an exchange, even if she considers herself without a choice in the matter. She needs strength to survive and save Bill. On the other hand, blood is more than just blood. Aspasia Stephanou notes that historically blood was considered ‘a carrier of one's vitality and identity, blood also drew attention to the danger of changing one's sense of selfhood with the blood of another’ (2014: 30). Harris's representation of the blood bonds is similar to a nineteenth-century understanding of blood as being capable of changing a person. Here, Sookie is also aware that, to gain strength, she must give up part of herself to Eric.

Later, in *All Together Dead*, the Queen's henchman attempts to force Sookie into a bond that reads as an attempted rape. When Eric steps in and offers himself, this is an acceptable substitute to the henchman because Eric is pledged to the Queen. The result is close enough: Sookie will be bound to the Queen of Louisiana through a servant via the transitive property. Sookie knows that the bond with Eric is the better option. She knows him, knows that he values her and will not hurt her.⁹ Through this exchange, Sookie realizes what no one has told her: her blood exchanges with Bill and Eric have already bound her to them to small degrees, though they will lessen over time (Harris 2007: 177-178). As such, the health that both Bill and Eric restored to her was not without a cost. In Harris's novels, vampire blood is a form of currency when used this way. The human recipient obtains health and strength while the vampire donor secures a 'bond' with the human (at the expense of the latter's selfhood).¹⁰

The next strongest blood relationship is that of the maker/child, the most basic example of a blood relationship within the vampire world and the most complete release of the human self. If a blood bond can make the two parties feel what the other experiences, the maker can compel obedience through the giving of his/her blood to create a new vampire. Throughout the novels, this relationship is most clearly demonstrated in the connection between Eric and Pam. In the series, Pam is Eric's dutiful attendant. While Eric shies away from admitting that he loves Pam as his 'kid,' he admits that he is 'very fond' of her (Harris 2011: 194). As maker, Eric can order Pam to do anything he wants. Yet readers know that Eric is not so heartless as he would have others think. In this same conversation with Sookie where he professes fondness, he states that he would not order Pam to stay if she wants to leave after her girlfriend dies (194). Earlier, Eric and Pam are fighting in Sookie's kitchen when someone remarks to Sookie: '[y]ou know, he could order her to be still and she'd have to do it' (28). All of the times we see Pam try to rebel

against Eric's wishes are connected to a single issue: Pam is generally accepting of Eric's will and leadership, while Eric rules over Pam kindly. Thus, the burden of being fully subject to him is relatively light.

There is, however, an example of the maker/child dynamic that demonstrates the possible extent of selfishness in such a relationship, where the cost of the maker's blood is very high. Contrasting Eric's relationship with his children (both Pam and Karin), Eric's maker, Appius Livius Ocella, is harsh and demanding with his children. One of the first, clear emotions that Sookie experiences through the blood bond with Eric following Ocella's arrival is fear. She states:

[a]s I felt his fear roll through me, I understood that Eric had to physically perform whatever Ocella ordered him to do. Before, that had been an abstract concept. Now I realized that if Ocella ordered Eric to kill me, Eric would be compelled to do it. (Harris 2010: 174-175)

Sookie has been only theoretically aware of a maker's power over another vampire because she has not seen such a negative reaction to a maker before. Additionally, this power over the vampire child does not seem to have a specific end point. Near the conclusion of this novel, *Dead in the Family*, both Eric's vampire brother and Ocella die the final death. Eric's speech reveals the love he has for his maker, despite any abuse:

"Ocella taught me everything about being a vampire", Eric said very quietly. "He taught me how to feed, how to hide, when it was safe to mingle with humans. He taught me how to make love with men, and later freed me to make love with women. He protected me and loved me. He caused me pain for decades. He gave me life. My maker is dead". (325)

For all readers know at this point, this is the end of Ocella. Harris has foreshadowed that his reach is farther though in his final words to Sookie: '[y]ou won't keep Eric, either' (322). It takes about two and a half books, but Ocella eventually wins. In a drawn-out subplot that weaves through those several hundred pages (and causes the Pam/Eric fights discussed above), readers learn that Ocella negotiated a marriage contract for Eric to a queen. Even though Ocella has flaked away in final death, Eric does not have the will to defy his maker's wishes — something Sookie cannot understand. This relationship between Ocella and Eric is wholly within the vampires' hierarchy of blood relationships and obedience.

Harris uses this total loss of selfhood by the vampire child to their maker in order to reveal the true cost of being out of the coffin. The consumption of the vampire child's will (so completely that Eric cannot rebel against an abusive, and finally dead, vampire sire) ultimately causes Sookie's expulsion from the vampire world. In *Deadlocked*, Eric and Sookie are engaged in a battle of wills: he thinks she should use her magic to save him from the marriage Ocella arranged, and she thinks he should love her enough to refuse to marry another. Despite all she has seen and experienced, Sookie cannot understand the ties that bind Eric to his maker. She is offended by Eric's proclamation that he should have turned her, against her will, as he did with Karin and Pam, and she is also upset by his plan to marry Freyda (a vampire queen) and keep seeing her behind his wife's back (Harris 2013: 116-118). Eric understands love within the context of the vampires' world. To him, love is a question of dedication, obedience, and forever. 'We need not have parted, ever again', he exclaims, as they argue about his intention to turn her (116). In either of Eric's options, he would have the best of everything. He could keep Ocella's contract *and* keep Sookie — forever. The closest Sookie comes to understanding Eric's dedication to Ocella is the daydream she has of being Pam and Karin's sister and fearing the

possibility of Eric ordering her to kill someone she knows (119). Recall Stephanou's argument that, in Harris's world, vampires 'are dangerous and need to be controlled and tamed, either by conforming to the consumerist ethos, or by being reduced to mere vessels of blood to be exploited by humans' (2014: 127). By the end of the series, the relationship between humans and vampires is more complex than this. It is the vampires who pull away from Bon Temps and Sookie because of the inner workings of *their* hierarchy. For Eric, being in human society let him fall in love with a woman he may have otherwise never met, and he must lose her in order to abide by the rules of the vampires' hierarchy.

The systems that pull the main characters in different directions result in a separation of the vampires and humans' worlds at the conclusion of Harris's novel series. Eric cannot free himself from the vampires' hierarchy; Sookie cannot understand those demands as a human. The tension builds over the course of the complete series, beginning with Bill intentionally meeting Sookie at his Queen's command. Bill and Sookie's relationship is troubled before it even begins. Conversely, Sookie and Eric grow together over time. Her realization that she loves Eric, even without the blood bond (in *Dead Reckoning*), could have been the basis for a solid relationship (Harris 2011: 189). The problem, however, is that she could not accept the blood bond which made her a part of his world. Eric's requirement that Sookie be left alone (in his wish list for marrying Freyda) removes her from the vampires' society. Bill will still be her neighbor; Karin will guard her; and Pam considers her a friend. These three will likely be the only vampires who interact with her. A shrewd businessman, Eric can easily act as a stakeholder in the humans' capitalist economy. Yet it is the vampires' hierarchy, and his inability to free himself from it, that lead to his obligations consuming his will for what he wants out of his 'life'. Ultimately, the price Eric pays for being out of the coffin is that he begins to feel, in a new way, the weight of

the vampires' hierarchy that he cannot escape. Harris suggests that the circulation of blood in the humans' capitalist world, with the simple buying and selling of blood, and in the vampires' hierarchy, with its spilling and sharing of blood, cannot necessarily be reconciled.

By revealing the impossibility of Eric and Sookie maintaining a lasting relationship, Harris's novels propose that being 'out of the coffin' does not actually free vampires to fully participate in human society. The major stumbling block of vampires' need to consume human blood for sustenance simply is not the only issue for human/vampire interaction. Bruce A. McClelland asserts that, for Harris's vampires, 'synthetic blood is a trap. It draws the vampire out of his place of opposition, shifting a natural need away from its original object and toward dependency on the illusory benefit of consumption-based communion with human beings' (2010: 87). While McClelland is most interested in the role of artificial blood in the television show, this issue of being trapped by consumerism in an attempt to commune with humans is fundamental to the novels' concerns with economics in general. Consumerism does not free the vampires from their feudal hierarchy, and so they remain trapped outside of human society. When Eric leaves Sookie, readers understand that (essentially) the experiment failed. The differences that keep vampire and human apart are not only issues of consumption, but also of cultural concerns that span the centuries of creating vampire culture, for which science and technology cannot develop a bottled cure.

Notes

¹ This book does include the 'e' in Trueblood in this instance.

² As Michelle Smith notes in 'The Postmodern Vampire', Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* is most concerned with the relationships between vampires (2013: 200), in part because they are still in hiding.

³ Dale Hudson's 'Of Course There Are Werewolves and Vampires' offers an extensive discussion of *True Blood*'s characters in connection with historical events from which the television series' creator Alan Ball was likely drawing as he depicts vampires as a new race of Americans fighting for equal rights. It is, however, important to note that this study is primarily of the television show. Many of Hudson's primary examples are only evident in the show, which intentionally draws political comparisons, emphasizing them in ways that are much more overt than in the books. Harris's vampires are also fighting for equal rights but, generally, in much more nuanced ways.

⁴ Vampires themselves are also a commodity. Vampire blood, V, is a black-market drug which is occasionally mentioned in the novels. On the first night they meet, Sookie rescues Bill from 'drainers' who intend to take his blood and sell it. She details the benefits of the drug to readers to explain the danger he is in (Harris 2001: 6). Later, in *Dead to the World*, Pam and Sookie estimate that, if drained, Eric's blood is probably worth somewhere around forty thousand dollars due to his age (Harris 2004: 180).

⁵ See Ken Gelder's 'Southern Vampires: Anne Rice, Charlaine Harris and *True Blood*' for a discussion of racial concerns in Southern vampire fiction.

⁶ It is also worth noting that, at this stage, she and Bill have not yet begun dating and she is a virgin. Her appearance blurs the reader's expectations that we can denote her place in a horror narrative from her clothing choices.

⁷ Indeed, critics such as William M. Curtis (2010) discuss feudalism in *True Blood* before Harris's books that make the connection clear were published.

⁸ See Groom's chapter 'Bleeding Gold', for example, for more on vampires as metaphor and in connection with illness (2018: 147-168).

⁹ Later, when Eric and Sookie are dating, and then married through a vampire rite, the bond takes the place of more traditional communication. They *know* each other's feelings before a conversation happens. It is in the context of not only a dating relationship but a blood bonded relationship that Eric shares with Sookie details of the vampire hierarchy. Blood bonded, they become subject to each other. They feel the other's feelings and are drawn to each other, sometimes despite their own wishes. Although this burden is lighter when they actually start dating, neither of them truly cares for it early on. In this relationship, they are closer than any other two people, and it is one which must straddle the human and vampire worlds.

¹⁰ Sookie is, however, in a better position than a normal human would be since vampires cannot glamor her due to her fairy heritage. This heritage is another reason why a bond with Eric is preferable: he will keep her secret.

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