

Gothic Vancouver: *Blood Ties* and Vampire Television

Alison Peirse University of Northumbria

Vancouver is not necessarily the first topic that springs to mind when discussing vampire television.¹ In an attempt to remedy this, the vampire television series *Blood Ties* (2007) is considered here in relation to its Canadian production context. Written from the perspective of a British academic viewing the programme on a UK channel, I explore the series' political economy within an international framework (its production and distribution in Canada and its scheduling/exhibition and reception in the UK), suggesting that the Canadian qualities of the series are often willfully ignored in distribution and reception in order to locate the series in a disparaging relationship to existing vampire television such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *Angel* (1999–2004). It is argued that this tension is also explicit within the text itself as *Blood Ties* negotiates a precarious balance between its specifically Canadian identity and its concurrent attempt to locate itself within a broader international cult television canon. The ultimate failure of the series (running for only one season) is then located in relationship to the recent explosion of vampire fiction on domestic screens, where the limited budget and Canadian context of *Blood Ties* inspires a form of Gothic television distinct from the American vampire series *True Blood* (2008–).

Telefantasy and Vancouver

In the past two decades, the province of British Columbia (and in particular, Vancouver and its surrounding environs) has increasingly been turned to as an alternative shooting location for American film and television production. The attractiveness of Canada's west coast is due to, among other things, the weakening Canadian dollar in the 1990s, lower basic costs, production subsidies, the diversity of locations available, Vancouver's proximity to Los Angeles (a two and a half hour flight), and the implementation of various domestic tax credits.² What makes Vancouver interesting for a study of vampire television though is that many productions filmed in the area are telefantasy: indeed Serra Tinic notes that

throughout the 1990s nine of America's top ten 'supernatural' series were filmed in the region.³ More recently, the pilot episode of *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–) was filmed in Vancouver, while in late 2011, *Fringe* (2008–) and *Supernatural* (2005–) remained permanent fixtures in the area. The cinematic vampire also lurks on the west coast, the *Twilight* production team turning to British Columbia to film parts one and two of *Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn* (2011/2012).

Vancouver's dispensation towards telefantasy has not gone unnoticed in the local press, and in October 2007 the *Vancouver Sun* published an article entitled 'They Came from BC' examining the importance of telefantasy (discussed in this instance predominantly as fantasy, horror and science fiction) for the local film and television industry. It suggested that decades of filming programmes such as *The X-Files* (1993–2002) in Vancouver's 'Hollywood North' had created a range of highly skilled labourers, including a number of skilled carpenters. This expert workforce is considered particularly attractive for producers of telefantasy, as the carpenters 'can construct the huge sets used for science fiction and fantasy films. Series will re-use sets, and movie sequels returning to the city where the original was shot can also use them again, provided there is storage available'.⁴

However, many telefantasies filmed in Vancouver, such as *Supernatural*, are US products developed and financed in the Los Angeles area with a specifically American flavour; Canada is simply a convenient and cost-efficient location and production centre.⁵ Yet *Blood Ties* is somewhat anomalous, possessing as it does an entirely Canadian pedigree. The series began life as the Toronto-based 'Victoria Nelson' novels by Canadian fantasy author Tanya Huff. The six-volume series (1991–2006) is set in Toronto and follows Vicki Nelson, a sufferer of *retinis pigmentosa* who quits the police force and takes up work as a private investigator. Her crime-solving partner is 450-year-old vampire Henry Fitzroy, the bastard son of King Henry VIII. The television series visualises Toronto as a gloomy postmodern space, capable of sheltering and sustaining vampires and other supernatural creatures, an urban environment ruptured by the constant movement between natural and paranormal where animistic beliefs rub shoulders with clues generated through the practicalities of cutting-edge forensic science. The books were developed for television by Peter Mohan, produced by Toronto's Kaleidoscope Entertainment and Vancouver's Insight Film Studios in association with Canada's CHUM Television and filmed primarily at Insight Studios' sound stage in Maple Ridge, British Columbia. The cast and crew also have Canadian lineage, with the two directors James Head and Allan Kroecker raised in Red Deer, Alberta and Winnipeg, Manitoba respectively, and Ontario-born actors playing the three lead characters: Vicki by Toronto actress Christina Cox; Henry by Kyle Schmid, a native of Mississauga, and Mike Celluci (Vicki's former lover and police partner) by Oakville actor Dylan Neal.

Blood Ties is not the first television series to explore the hybrid world of vampirism and detection – for that we can also look to the American series *Moonlight* (2007–2008) and not least *Angel* where the vampire himself is a private investigator. *Blood Ties* is not even the first television series with a vampire-detective

pairing to be set on the mean streets of Toronto. *Forever Knight* was set and filmed in Toronto and ran for three seasons (1992–1996), yet, like the other programmes mentioned was funded by an American network, created by primarily American writers and aimed at American syndication. What makes *Blood Ties* distinctive then is its entirely Canadian ‘circuit of communication’, interpreted here in terms of textual specificities, production, distribution, scheduling and reception.⁶ Its uniqueness raises the following questions: what impact does the show’s Canadian funding have on its aesthetic form, and how did this (if at all) contribute to its Gothic sensibility? How was *Blood Ties* received internationally? While it is distinctive as a Canadian vampire series, how can we understand its uniqueness in relation to other contemporary vampire television programmes such as *True Blood*?

***Blood Ties* and Toronto**

Will Brooker has explored Vancouver as a home for cult television, arguing that while Vancouver may be valued by film and television producers ‘as a generic, anonymous, “flat” fictional environment, to fan pilgrims who bring their own imaginary maps (based on the fictional geographies of *Smallville*, *The X-Files* and *Battlestar Galactica*), the city is a rich intersection of possible worlds’.⁷ Brooker’s argument pivots on the perceived anonymity of Vancouver and its surrounding areas, for the city is ‘considered generic and unrecognizable to a US audience; it can be everywhere – Boston, Sioux City, Washington DC, Metropolis – because, to non-Vancouverites, it looks like nowhere in particular’.⁸ Brooker’s reading of Vancouver as a ever-ready body double for anywhere in (and beyond this) world is helpful for thinking through the conflicted representation of Canadian space and place in *Blood Ties*. Discussing Huff’s novels, Mohan comments ‘I remember the thrill of finding them in Book City and thinking what a wonderful series I could get out of them. For once, Toronto would be Toronto – that’s what I liked best about the idea’.⁹ However, due to complex economics of co-funding, the series was produced in Vancouver, as Mohan reveals, ‘it’s simply too costly for a show like ours to be based in Toronto. Too many permits and hassling and studio space is costly’.¹⁰ The creative team chose not to change the setting of the series to Vancouver, as novelist (and writer of ‘Stone Cold’, 1.9), Huff points out the books took place in Toronto and ‘Mohan always intended to stay very close to the feeling if not the content of the books. More than just the geography, the culture of the west coast is different enough it would have necessitated a major rewrite of too many core elements’.¹¹ Yet this does raise problems, for national and regional identities sit rather uncomfortably together: the landscape and city spaces of Toronto and Vancouver are markedly different, and I now want to turn to how attempts to ‘mark’ Toronto are manifested within the text.

The weather becomes a prominent player in location shooting, with heavy rain (‘Stone Cold’, ‘Norman’, 1.12; ‘We’ll Meet Again’, 1.21) or snow (‘Necrodome’, 1.10) prominent in many sequences, and freezing temperatures indicated by

the actors' fogged breath in a number of episodes, including 'D.O.A.' (1.13). A montage of city scenes that appear three or four times per episode, depicting Toronto's taxis, sidewalks and landmarks including the CN Tower, Lake Ontario and street signs such as the junction for Nassau Street and Augusta Avenue. In 'Heart of Fire' (1.8) Vicki and Mike consult a map of Toronto when brainstorming where Mendoza may have taken Henry, and in '5.55' (1.14) Vicki reads the *Toronto Sun*. Canadian dollars are exchanged as the unit of currency in 'Heart of Ice' (1.7), and in 'Necrodome', Henry and Vicki consult the timetable for Union Station, Toronto's central hub for inner-city transit. In 'Gifted' (1.4), Vicki goes to Beguiling, a comic book store on 60 Bloor Street West to read the graphic novels that Henry produces. The store signage is an attempt to cement the set in a Toronto location: 60 Bloor Street West is a real street in Toronto, and the Bloor Comic Book Centre in fact exists at 703 Bloor Street West, Toronto. The scene is also a reference to the programme's origins, as Huff was working at the biggest comic book store in Toronto when she started writing her vampire novels. Filming actually took place though at Elfsar Comics and Toys, 1007 Hamilton Street in the Yaletown district of Vancouver.¹²

However, for a UK viewer unfamiliar with the specific locales of Toronto or Vancouver, there is little sense of the programme's 'Canadianness'; the textual markers are subtle, and it isn't until the end of the season when Henry plans to relocate to Vancouver ('We'll Meet Again') that location is explicitly addressed. Many of the montage images used to reinforce the East Coast location – neon lights at night, blurred sidewalks, skyscrapers, and cars – could be any major city, returning to Brooker's adage that Vancouver as a filming location becomes 'everywhere and nowhere'. Notably, the majority of scenes are shot at Insight Studios on pre-constituted sets. These are usually either dimly lit, liminal locations such as alleyways, clubs, sewers, car parks, warehouses and basements, or the recurring interior spaces: Henry and Vicki's apartments, the interior of the police station, the coroner's laboratory, and Vicki's office. *Blood Ties* only occasionally turns to location shooting, which (rather than utilizing the local mountains and forests as *Battlestar Galactica* does), often takes place in generic cityscapes or suburbia. One particularly large house in Maple Ridge is used repeatedly for external and internal location shooting, doubling as a golf club ('Love Hurts', 1.6), and the homes of a judge ('Deadly Departed', 1.5), a nightclub hostess who is revealed to be Medusa ('Stone Cold') and a lycanthrope hunter ('Wild Blood', 1.14) among others. Undoubtedly this relates to the production budget, reported to be C\$1.14 million per episode and described by Mohan as 'very ... miniscule' but the effect is an uncanny form of repetition compulsion as the same spaces (with a prominent staircase in the centre of the room) reoccur as sights/sites of dread and imminent death.¹³

Henry usually feeds in his luxurious flat, occasionally at a club and almost never outside. The only exterior landscape in which this occurs is 'Blood Price, Part 2' (1.2) when a weakened Henry is forced to feed on Vicki; rather incongruously on a basketball court. Vampirism is twinned within studio locations, locating blood-

sucking within the private (or at the most, semi-public) realm. This is demonstrated in 'Gifted' when a scene begins with a close up of two girls in a club. Their trembling lips almost touch as they lean towards each other through a mesh fence while throbbing house music blares in the background. They hold hands, linking their fingers through the mesh, and then Henry is shown to their left, feeding on a willing female victim. Framed in intimate close up, his facial features are almost completely hidden as he nestles in the sensuous curve of her white neck, accentuated by a strong key light. Her head tilts back and she gasps in glorious agony. His phone rings, and as he pulls away from the woman a set of small puncture marks are shown on her throat, marked by a tiny sliver of blood across each hole. As he responds to the caller he absentmindedly touches his mouth, wiping a single strand of blood from his face.¹⁴

This short reading is symptomatic of *Blood Ties*, where vampirism is suggested in a generic, non-specific urban environment. Blood does not spurt (or even trickle from the wounds), fangs remain hidden and the detachment from the throat is clinical and quick. Henry's face is hidden and covers the wound, and the actual act takes place in the viewer's mind. Despite this, there is an awareness of the need to equate vampirism with sexuality, and accordingly Henry's victim is presented in orgasmic throes, his virile sensuality is paralleled with the stereotyped tableaux of lesbian desire that takes place at his side. Notably, Henry does not suck and the girls do not kiss; a self-enforced policing of desire takes place within the scene, restricting sexuality to connotation. A similar example of vampire sexuality and subtlety can be found in 'Heart of Fire'. In a flashback to 1742, Henry has been captured and held in a dungeon by immortal Spanish inquisitor Xavier Mendoza. Henry convinces the pious inquisition assistant Maria to free him from his cell, he then bites Maria's neck and opens his wrist, yet this all takes place in the shadows of the dungeon without a drop of blood displayed. Insinuation replaces bloodletting; Henry's suitably low-budget vampirism is manifested in his black contact lenses and his ability to run *really* fast.

Night location shooting is significantly more expensive than daytime, and as the vampire can only emerge outside after dusk Henry's materiality precludes him from appearing in many of the location sequences. This leaves the vampire to lurk in the private and often domestic realm, he can rarely be seen in any discernible Canadian city space (whether that is the Toronto setting or the Vancouver filming location), and he does little to imbue the programme with a sense of Canadianness. This purpose of this argument isn't to revert to essentialism, to suggest that an inherent Canadian identity is easily identified in any aspect of popular culture (and indeed, such a project is well beyond the remit of this article). The concept of what constitutes a specifically 'Canadian' national identity and/or sensibility and its manifestation in popular culture remains deeply contestable, as Adam Lowenstein comments in his study of Canadian horror film, 'in Canada, the utopian promise of an abstracted, indivisible national body resists being imagined in its comforting wholeness; instead, the national body is imagined as fragmented, fragile and even colonised'.¹⁵ Similarly, in her study of the *Ginger Snaps* films, a

trilogy of Canadian female werewolf films, Sunnie Rothenburger draws on Linda Hutcheon's work to suggest that 'Canadian culture often takes an ironic stance to national metanarratives, due to Canada's lack of power in world politics, its colonial history, and its uncertainty in relation to its identity'.¹⁶

My analysis has revealed that a concerted effort was made by the production staff to incorporate Canadian elements, even ones at odds with each other, with shooting in Vancouver and images of Toronto regularly inserted into the text. However, the Toronto cityscapes are often indistinguishable from other major cities, and primarily function as ellipses to mark a change of location, the passing of time, and the exteriors of buildings. In addition, the potential articulation of a national identity is somewhat elided, by keeping the vampire imprisoned on set and eschewing filming in the stunning landscapes for which British Columbia is known.

'How neck-gnawingly predictable': the UK scheduling and reception of *Blood Ties*

Blood Ties premiered in March 2007 in America on Lifetime, and in August 2007 on Space and City TV in Canada, and in the UK on digital channel Living.¹⁷ Amy Barham, Head of Acquisitions for Living (renamed Sky Living in 2011), reveals that the channel was keen to acquire *Blood Ties* and was forced to bid against other channels for it. Barham was particularly keen to obtain *Blood Ties* as it fitted well with the channel's remit for screening supernatural and paranormal dramas such as *Charmed* (1998–2006) and *Ghost Whisperer* (2005–2010). The supernatural content of the programme was in fact crucial, as she was looking for a 'dark and sexy programme to bring in the 16–34 year old viewers'.¹⁸ Barham explains that Northern European television channels have a propensity for buying and screening Gothic programmes, particularly those that relate to magic and the supernatural. For these markets, there is a sense that that vampires (and related beings) play an important part of popular culture, yet in Southern Europe audiences are far more interested in stories of saints and religion. As such, for Barham, *Blood Ties* 'works well in our territory'.¹⁹ She also interpreted Lifetime's commitment to screen the series in the US as very positive as she considers Lifetime to have a number of parallels with Living, most obviously in programming for and about young women. Barham dismisses the Canadian context as 'not a consideration', pointing out that many US programmes are filmed in Canada 'on the quiet' and that *Blood Ties* was marketed instead to its viewers as 'here's a kick-ass sexy, dark drama for you'.²⁰

As Living owned the UK rights to the programme it was repeated in 2008 on Freeview sister channel Virgin 1 (launched October 2007, rebranded as Channel One in September 2010, closed February 2011), offering the opportunity to introduce *Blood Ties* to a new audience while not incurring further acquisition costs. Paul Rixon explains that American programmes are often bought by British broadcasters for financial reasons: American programmes recover their

very high production costs in the American market, and can then sell to British broadcasters at low rates. This is a particularly attractive package to British broadcasters, for 'they can often attract a fair sized audience while costing far less than commissioning domestic productions. This has been particularly important for channel start-ups, when audiences still have to be won over, production facilities built, advertisers wooed and revenue streams developed'.²¹ Living and Virgin 1's choice of purchasing and scheduling the (albeit Canadian) programme accords with Rixon's scheduling model for smaller channels with less financial muscle than BBC and ITV, where they depend 'for all or part of their schedule on buying American programmes not only to fill up some of the off-peak periods, but also to play in or near primetime...[creating] major anchor points in the evening'.²² Barham's interview and Rixon's reading of the international circulation of North American television then point to *Blood Ties*' national context as not the natural selling point for the programme; that its appeal lay in the anticipated interest by a young female market already watching similar supernatural programmes on Living TV.

Similarities can be drawn between these findings and the series' UK press reception. Over a period of eleven months, beginning with *Blood Ties*' first run on Living, the series was discussed in the UK national press at least nineteen times. What is most apparent in the reviews – ranging across the magazines *Radio Times*, *Heat*, *Sci Fi Now* and newspapers *Daily Mail*, *Guardian*, *Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Sun* and *The Scotsman* – was the keenness of the writers to relate the programme to the already established telefantasy canon commanded by *Buffy* and its ilk. There are four *Buffy* references, one for *Charmed*, one for *Angel*, one for the *Moonlight*, as well as allusions to (at the time) forthcoming *True Blood* and ITV's *Van Helsing* (renamed *Demons* upon release in 2009).²³

In particular, the press honed in on *Blood Ties*' clear attempt to carve out its own niche in the canon of cult telefantasy.²⁴ The programme is based on a series of bestselling fantasy novels and, like *The X-Files* and *Angel*, is generically hybrid in its amalgamation of horror and detection.²⁵ It works through key tropes of the supernatural and folklore on an episodic and serialised basis, is replete with meta- and inter-textual referents constructed through narrative formations (including 'monster of the week' episodes that reference canonical horror films such as *The Omen* (1976), *The Shining* (1980) and *American Werewolf in London* (1981)), explicit references to vampire cultures ('Norman' begins with Henry and Vicki watching *Nosferatu* (1922)) and dialogic inference (regular throwaway quips from Vicki and supporting characters refer to popular culture figurations and other vampire programmes). In '5.55' (1.14), *Blood Ties* utilises the infamous 'time loop' narrative device, the 'groundhog day' when the character is forced to live the same day over and over again, uncannily repeating episodes already seen in 'Life Serial' (6.5) in *Buffy*, 'Déjà vu All Over Again' (1.22) in *Charmed*, 'Mystery Spot' (3.11) in *Supernatural* and 'Monday' (6.15) in *The X-Files*. Resonating with the female lead characters in *Charmed*, *Medium* (2005–2011) and *Ghost Whisperer* (to name but a few), Vicki is also a feisty postfeminist heroine supported by her

sidekick, the beautiful and charismatic vampire Henry, whose presence explicitly encourages a follow-on fandom from viewers of *Buffy* and *Angel* who search for a new Spike. Coreen, Vicki's receptionist is even the archetypal geeky assistant – an occult expert and computer whizz, able to instantly generate endless material on bedevilment with a single tap on the keyboard, taking her place in line next to *Buffy's* Willow and *Supernatural's* Dean.

The attempt to create a cult programme is an understandable move on the part of the producers as such texts attract loyal audiences, something that has been noted by Mark Jancovich and James Lyons, who write 'not only could fans generate a loyal audience base that might help a show avoid cancellation in its vulnerable early days, but they could also act as a source of additional revenue through merchandising'.²⁶ But by emulating models of narration and characterisation designed to encourage cult fandom, *Blood Ties* lays itself open to accusations of unoriginality, something the British press was quick to pounce upon. John Dugdale writes in the *Sunday Times* 'the recent proliferation of female-led supernatural dramas may lead viewers to suspect that TV honchos have been entering into shadowy pacts with peculiar men at crossroads', and that *Blood Ties* 'is unlikely to alter the belief that the sooner the genre is sealed within a lead-lined coffin, the better'.²⁷ Similarly, Martin Skegg highlighted it in the *Guardian Guide* 'Pick of the Day' ostensibly to poke fun at it: 'it's a little like *Buffy* for grown-ups, but without the wit, panache or charm. The supernatural facets are well worn ... the script clunky and much of the acting would embarrass eighth-graders. It's either first episode syndrome, or on its own highway to hell'.²⁸ The following week in the same paper, Kate Abbott confirmed Skegg's projected narrative, arguing:

It wasn't that the first episode was finding its feet; *Blood Ties* is barely palatable pap, and looks set to stay that way. The phrases 'dreadful as sin' and 'demonic rituals' are not often lumped together, but in this case they simply must be. Vicky, our borderline blind detective heroine, needs to enlist vamp of the hour Henry (son of Henry VIII – yes, really) to quash the towns' underworld intruder. Meanwhile, the two are steadily falling in love – how neck-gnawingly predictable. She even lets him suck her blood. Things can only go downhill, surely?²⁹

The UK press repeatedly lambasts *Blood Ties* for its cult affectations, derides its derivative nature, makes jokes about the limited special effects and mocks its attempt to gain entrance to the already amply stuffed vampire television canon. During its first run on Living it was often prominently featured in broadsheet television sections in order for the paper's critics to destroy it with as much wit, panache, and vampire-themed humour as they can muster (revealing that they can muster a lot at an easy target).³⁰

Blood Ties' Canadian identity (whether national, or regional) is generally overlooked, and when it is mentioned it is in a decidedly negative way. Of the nineteen write-ups, only two (both in *The Times*) allude broadly to national specificity. Angus Batey lists the action as taking place on the 'streets of Toronto' while Ed

Potton states that a vampire is stalking ‘Toronto’s citizens’.³¹ However, on the one occasion that the Canadian context was discussed in depth it created an international furor. *Guardian* critic Gareth McLean printed a vitriolic assassination of the show, based not simply on genre but national identity:

Though, on account of the comparative cheapness to film there, it doubles for America in many dramas, Canada is not known for its TV exports. There was *Degrassi Junior High* and that little-known *ENG* (Electronic News Gathering), a soapy drama set behind-the-scenes at a news channel. But that, I think, is it. To those, we can now add this daft series centered on a detective who specialises in crimes with a supernatural slant, and the vampire she teams up with to do so. Wonder no more why Canada isn’t known for its television exports.³²

The scathing article caught the attention of Canadian television critics, prompting this response by Kevin Baker, the TV critic for the Canadian *National Post*, eight days later:

A British TV-reviewer, the other day in the *Guardian*, considered a show called *Blood Ties*, ‘a daft series centered on a detective who specializes in crimes with a supernatural slant, and the vampire she teams up with to do so’ ... ‘wonder no more’ the critic concluded ‘why Canada isn’t known for its television exports’. (Wondered, I never. Canada’s biggest mistake was not chucking the monarchy when we got our own anthem, flag or prime minister, whichever came first. It’s why, on a global scale, we remain relatively crap at most things. You don’t wow the world with your culture, industry, diplomacy, philanthropy, f***ing or derring-do while a foreign head glooms out from your money. You don’t. You never will. Even if you wish you could, you can’t seriously believe you might. Yes, ‘she’s also the Queen of Canada’. We all know she’s not really).³³

The nationalistic, anti-monarchy rant penned by Baker suggests that somehow Canada and its television production industry is slighted in the disapproval of *Blood Ties*, which incidentally had a generally positive write-up in the Canadian press.³⁴ The exchange suggests that Canadian national identity continues to exist in a state of flux, marginalised by its past as an outpost of the Empire and subsumed by America, still at a cultural impasse in colonial time and space. Yet the debate about *Blood Ties* taking place across British and Canadian newspapers in fact reveals one of its greatest triumphs: the programme’s actual visibility. Michele Byers and Jennifer Vanderburgh have written at length about the lack of a dedicated archive for Canadian broadcast television, carefully attending to the implications that this has on its history and scholarship. For Byers and Vanderburgh, much of the history of Canadian television is the lost in the wilderness, bound up in complex licensing laws: shockingly, ‘of all dramatic series produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation before 1990, the CBC’s online store is, at the time of writing, selling only portions of three available on DVD’.³⁵ Indeed, somewhat ironically bearing in mind the newspaper reviews discussed above, they also provide a case study of *Degrassi*, explaining that because the production company

had the foresight to buy the contributor rights upfront, the series has remained in circulation ever since, in syndication, on VHS and DVD, and 'since the series is readily available, inexpensive and legal to screen in classrooms, *Degrassi* will be taught in schools, discussed and remembered as part of a specific cultural lexicon'.³⁶

I am not attempting to make a judgment value about the quality of *Blood Ties*, but am attempting to illuminate the tension between the programme's Canadian origins, its desire to engage with the telefantasy cult canon and the cultural blindness that emerges when the programme is sold internationally. While *Blood Ties* is denigrated in the British press for its cult affectations, it cannot be denied that the figure of the vampire (and its attendant generic tropes) is the primary reason that the Canadian programme has been screened internationally, been reviewed in the British national and regional press, and has received a widely-available DVD release. This is a reason to celebrate the series, and offers a single, small opportunity to ameliorate Byers and Vanderburgh's concern at the 'empty archive' of Canadian broadcast television and its ensuing lack of international engagement and sustained academic analysis.

The demise of Gothic television

Blood Ties' particular modus operandi is the Gothic; something (as I will come to argue) is increasingly unusual in contemporary television. According to Helen Wheatley, Gothic television is likely to feature one or more of the following: a mood of dread and/or terror evoking fear or disgust, stereotyped characters or plots often derived from Gothic literary fiction, representations of the supernatural (overt or implied), images of the uncanny, homes and families haunted, tortured and/or troubled, complex narratives organised around flashbacks, and/or memory montages, the utilisation of a gloomy *mise-en-scène* and regular subjective point of view mechanisms.³⁷ *Blood Ties* adheres to many of these categories in its supernatural imagery (which are often filmed with a diffused green lens), visually dark shooting style, propensity for foggy scenes that disguise the regularly-reused sets, subjective point of view shots to represent the monster (of the week's) perspective, and flashbacks that represent Henry's past life across centuries long-ago.

The majority of Vicki's commissions as a private investigator come from individuals who turn to her in despair as their loved ones act strangely, disappear or even die: a client's brother is hunted by zombies ('Bad JuJu', 1.3), a mother is savaged to death by a beast psychically created by her daughter ('Gifted', 1.4), a husband is worried his pregnant wife has been brainwashed by a fertility cult ('Post Partum', 1.11) while another believes his wife is cheating on him, only for Vicki to be drawn into a battle with an incubus in a Wisteria-Lane model of suburbia ('Love Hurts', 1.6). In *Blood Ties*, individual homes and families become the loci of horror; houses are haunted spaces that articulate loss and disappointment. Domestic spaces become dangerous, children are demonic and apparently inani-

mate objects entrap characters. Even the homeless are not safe, as a wendigo preys on the dispossessed in 'Heart of Ice' (1.7).

I'm not suggesting that *Blood Ties* is the first vampire television series to engage with the Gothic, but I am interested in how its Canadian production contexts create a different form of vampire television from its polar opposite, *True Blood*, adapted from Charlaine Harris' *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* novels (2001–2011) and produced by the American premium subscription channel HBO. A number of similarities do exist between the programmes: they are adapted from successful book series with established fanbases and while they focus on the vampire they also embrace a multitude of otherworldly beings, including shape-shifters, telepaths and demons. However, the divergent funding, production and distribution contexts of the two programmes have a profound impact on the representation of the television vampire, resulting in ultimately opposing televisual modes of uncanny Gothic and abject horror. *Blood Ties* corresponds to the former and *True Blood* to the latter; in essence *True Blood* is 'show' to *Blood Ties*' 'tell'.

The Canadian production context, multiple financiers and need for easy international syndication of *Blood Ties* trap horror in the (Gothic) shadows; blood runs only in the viewer's imagination, swearing takes its leave and sex is strictly out of shot, ensuring that the programme functions under the 'Least Objectionable Programming' characteristic of the American networks' 'TVII' model.³⁸ It has a financial imperative to appeal to as broad an audience as possible and so must be extremely careful about its depictions of sex and violence in case of offence, whereas *True Blood* is designed to appeal to a specific clientele who are not expected to balk at explicit representations. As Jane Feuer notes, although HBO 'has a very small audience of subscribers, much smaller than the equivalent audience for network quality drama, they happen to be the very upscale demographic willing to pay extra for more specialized and more highbrow fare'.³⁹ HBO is branded on 'appointment television' with an impressive resume of 'quality' television programmes including *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005) and *The Wire* (2002–2008). It is unregulated by the Federal Communications Commission and does not rely on advertising revenues to generate income and so does not incur the same ratings pressures as network television. This creates previously unparalleled freedom in the commission and creation of content – certainly censorship is no longer a burning issue. As Janet McCabe and Kim Akass point out, HBO's 'institutional power comes from asserting pleasure in scandalizing and flouting, from pushing the boundaries by broadcasting profanity, brutal violence and explicit scenes not seen (until recently) – elsewhere'.⁴⁰ *True Blood* aligns HBO's edgy yet quality strategy with Harris' sexually florid novels; the production team is able to creatively work through every possible conurbation of the abject in technicolour, lavishly-budgeted, sexually-orientated glory. As Melanie Waters has noted in her study of the entanglement of sexual excess and violence in the series, the first episode alone features 'graphic depictions of masturbation, cunnilingus, bondage, and other pornographic activities'.⁴¹

The success of *True Blood* also has wider implications for vampire television, signaling the potential demise of Gothic television, for 'quality' American productions at the very least. Gary R. Edgerton, Robin Nelson and Akass and McCabe have all argued that the HBO model has had a profound influence on other cable channels, causing them to rethink their approaches to television drama.⁴² Subscription channels such as Showtime and FX, and network television stations such as Fox and CBS have increasingly turned to depicting the abject in their television dramas, even (or, as I have argued elsewhere in relation to *Nip/Tuck* (2003–2010), especially so) in those programmes that do not conform to the telefantasy canon.⁴³ Programmes such as *Fringe*, *Dexter* (2006–) and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000–) are predicated upon the bloody display of surgery, murder and corpses.⁴⁴ Characters are stabbed to death in intimate and gory close up, corpses are defiled in laboratories and vain women are cut into on surgical tables, creating a new of spectatorship predicated upon the 'show' of horrific bodies, and (to what Sue Tait has referred to in relation to *CSI* as) the 'necrophiliac gaze'.⁴⁵

The political economy of contemporary American television production has produced a new mode of television horror (understood here as the explicit depiction of the abject, previously only seen in 'adult' certified horror cinema), infiltrating everyday prime-time viewing. The insinuation and shadowy subtlety of the televisual Gothic, exemplified by *Blood Ties*' (necessary) restraint, is increasingly lost in a violent and sexually provocative chase for the next 'quality' programme. *Blood Ties* yearns for the pre-HBO world of *Buffy* and *Angel*; it is far removed from the more well-known representations of the vampire in contemporary popular culture, a dichotomy with *True Blood*'s horror-loving fang-bangers on one side and *The Vampire Diaries* and *Twilight* fans of small-town teen romance on the other. It is possible that *Blood Ties* will eventually be heralded as idiosyncratic for its Gothic sensibility, its shadowy subtlety an anomaly amongst programmes awash with a visceral sexuality or its uncanny inverse: voraciously championed abstinence.

A conclusion on Canadian vampires

Despite firmly cementing *Blood Ties* within a Toronto diegesis, and filming in Vancouver, the cultural elision of Canada is prominent in the international scheduling and reception of the series. Indeed, the Canadian content itself appears is almost entirely erased, a mere ghostly revenant occasionally materializing in dialogue and expository shots. This erasure is something that is contested by production staff and Huff herself: 'the thing is, because the show is set in Canada with no one around who isn't Canadian, there's no difference to emphasize because America has never come up'.⁴⁶ Similarly, when Canadian academic and expert on vampire television Stacey Abbott reflected upon her own experience of watching Vancouver-produced telefantasy, she talked about 'hidden Canadianness', where such shows are visibly Canadian *to* Canadians, but not so to others:

Everyone talks about Vancouver being used in American TV because it ... easily passes for other cities/places/planets. But it is often quite recognisable to people from Vancouver ... Also, casting often really emphasises the Canadianness to me ... Colonel Tigh in *Battlestar Galactica* is so Canadian, as are half the support cast of *Supernatural*. The show may quite convincingly pass off British Columbia as a wide range of places across the US, but they are always populated by Canadians. I am always struck when watching 'Bad Blood' [a vampire episode of] *The X-Files* that the coroner is played by Brett Butt, a popular comedian from Saskatchewan. He doesn't sound like he is from the Mid-West. All of this is to say that there is sense of Canadianness that comes across in these shows that is invisible to anyone outside of Canada.⁴⁷

The findings from this study suggest that the potential distinctiveness of Canadian television remains in flux. Telefantasy may be shot in Vancouver, but there is a constant negotiation and revalidation of regional, national and international identities dependent on divergent distribution and viewing contexts. The 'Gothic Vancouver' of this article is then revealed as somewhat of a faint, not only as Hollywood North drains the Canadian landscapes for American product, but as the quasi-domestic studio space beholden to the vampire serves to further erase *Blood Ties'* uniquely Canadian specificity for its international audience. As vampires continue to exert an ever-greater influence over popular culture, it is hoped that this article goes some way to encouraging readings of vampire television to take into account how the uncanny and the abject are often directly emanate from the material conditions of the programme's production. While it has been argued that (in terms of television at least) the vampire is an international figure, it seems that the methods of representing Vancouver's vampires may not be the same for those that lurk in Bon Temps.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Tanya Huff and Stan Beeler (University of Northern British Columbia) for granting permission to reproduce their *Blood Ties* interview and to Amy Barham at LivingTV for agreeing to be interviewed as part of my research. Various versions of this article have been presented at the University of Reading (June 2008) and the University of Hertfordshire (May 2010) and I would like to thank the audience for their comments. I would also like to thank the two anonymous *Gothic Studies* reviewers for their useful suggestions.

Notes

- 1 In the past two decades, vampires have become a fixture on television, and the majority of academic writing on this has focussed on *Buffy* and its spin-off, *Angel*. Most methodologies use close textual analysis to support representational readings around gender, sexuality, race, class etc, or as an opportunity to illuminate theoretical readings such as postmodernism. See Kent A. Ono, 'To Be a Vampire on *Buffy the*

- Vampire Slayer: Race and (“Other”) Socially Marginalizing Positions on Horror TV*, in Elyce Rae Helford, (ed), *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 163–86; Matthew Pateman, *The Aesthetics of Culture in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006) and Stacey Abbott, *Angel* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2009). Audience and reception studies have become increasingly popular, see Milly Williamson, *The Lure of the Vampire: Gender, Fiction and Fandom From Bram Stoker to Buffy* (London: Wallflower, 2005); Viv Burr, ‘Scholar/shippers and Spikeaholics: Academic and Fan Identities at the Slayage conference on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 8/3 (2005): 375–83, and Josh Stenger, ‘The Clothes Make the Fan: Fashion and Online Fandom when *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Goes to Ebay’, *Cinema Journal* 45/4 (2006), 26–44.
- 2 Neil M. Coe, ‘The View from Out West: Embeddedness, Inter-Personal Relations and the Development of an Indigenous Film Industry in Vancouver’, *Geoforum* 31 (2000): 391–407; Mike Gasher, *Hollywood North: The Feature Film Industry in British Columbia* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2002); Serra Tinic, ‘Global Vistas and Local Reflections: Negotiating Place and Identity in Vancouver Television’, *Television and New Media* 7/2 (2006): 155; Allen J. Scott, ‘The Other Hollywood: The Organisational and Geographic Bases of Television-Program Production’, *Media, Culture and Society* 26/2 (2004), 193.
 - 3 Catherine Johnson, *Telefantasy* (London: B.F.I., 2005); Tinic, ‘Global Vistas and Local Reflections’, 154–5.
 - 4 Marke Andrews, ‘They Came from B.C.’, *Vancouver Sun*, 13 October 2007, Business section, p. 1.
 - 5 Alison Peirse, ‘*Supernatural*’, in David Lavery, (ed.), *The Essential Cult TV Reader* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), pp. 260–7.
 - 6 Quote taken from Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson, ‘Introduction’, in Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson, (eds), *Cult Television* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. x.
 - 7 Will Brooker, ‘“Everywhere and Nowhere”: Vancouver, Fan Pilgrimage and the Urban Imaginary’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 10/4 (2007): 423.
 - 8 Brooker, ‘“Everywhere and Nowhere”’, 427.
 - 9 Quoted in Jim Bawden, ‘Taking a Bite Out of Crime: The Sleuthing Vampire Returns to the Small Screen, This Time Paired with an Ex-Cop in *Blood Ties*’, *Toronto Saturday Star*, 18–24 August 2007, p. 4.
 - 10 Bawden, ‘Taking a Bite Out of Crime’, p. 4.
 - 11 Stan Beeler, ‘Personal Interview with Tanya Huff’, 18 April 2007, p. 1.
 - 12 Elfsar, ‘*Blood Ties* Filming in Vancouver’, 18 September 2007, http://www.elfsar.com/Events/Blood_Ties_filming_in_Vancouver.htm [Accessed 22 June 2008].
 - 13 Figure cited in Malcolm Parry, ‘Insight Film’s President May Have Saved \$1 million in Equity Financing’, *Vancouver Sun*, 16 November 2006, Business Section, p. 3; Edward Gross, ‘*Blood Ties*: An Interview With Peter Mohan’, *Vampire Paradise*, 27 May 2007, http://www.vampireparadise.com/2007/05/blood_ties_an_i.html [Accessed 20 April 2010].
 - 14 In her recent discussion of ‘sparkly vampires’, Catherine Spooner posits that the turn of the century has witnessed a shift in the figure of the vampire. A distinction is made between two main types: the reluctant vampire (exemplified by Anne Rice’s *The Vampire Chronicles* series) and the assimilative vampire (most recently represented by

the Cullen family in *Twilight*). In response, Stacey Abbott has suggested that despite their differences, an aura of self-loathing surrounds both archetypes. Henry is different: he chose to become a vampire, makes a living creating graphic novels (in the television narrative) lives comfortably in the city and has no shortage of nubile young women who offer themselves as dinner. Henry is unusual in that he fails to adhere to Spooner's reluctant/assimilative distinction, nor Abbott's self-loathing figuration. Catherine Spooner, 'Gothic Charm School, or, How Vampires Learned to Sparkle', Plenary Address, *Open Graves, Open Minds: Vampires and the Undead in Modern Culture*, 16 April 2010, University of Hertfordshire; response from Stacey Abott in audience questions.

- 15 Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 149.
- 16 Sunnie Rothenburger, "'Welcome to Civilisation": Colonialism, the Gothic and Canada's Self-protective Irony in the *Ginger Snaps* Werewolf Trilogy', *Journal of Canadian Studies* 44/3 (2010), 97.
- 17 After initial sales to the UK and US, Fireworks International (an international television sales division of ContentFilm) sold *Blood Ties* to Spain, Germany, Italy, Latin America and Asia: 'NBC Universal has licensed the series for its Calle 13 pay channel for Spain, Andorra and Portugal, while Sony Pictures Television International has acquired it for its AXN channels in Italian-speaking Europe, Latin America and Israel. In Germany, Tele Munchen has taken the rights, while the News Corp-backed Star TV group has acquired the series for its Star World channels in Asia. In other Blood Ties global deals, Orion Cinema Network has the show in South Korea, SABC for South Africa and Euro TV for French-speaking Europe and French-speaking Africa'. Ed Waller, 'Fireworks Gives Blood', *C21 Media* 14 August 2007, <http://www.c21media.net/news/detail.asp?area=1&article> [Accessed 21 June 2008].
- 18 Alison Peirse, 'Personal Interview with Amy Barham, Head of Acquisitions at Living', 20 August 2008, p. 2
- 19 Peirse, 'Interview with Amy Barham', p.3. In January 2008, Living acquired the rights to the American vampire detective series *Moonlight*, at which point Barham stated 'Living has a real heritage in the supernatural and the recent excellent performances of *Ghost Whisperer* and *Blood Ties* demonstrate our viewer's commitment to this type of show'. Katherine Rushton, 'Living Swoops on Hit US Vampire Thriller', *Broadcast*, 23 January 2008, p. 1.
- 20 Peirse, 'Interview with Amy Barham', p. 3.
- 21 Paul Rixon, 'American Programmes on British Screens: A Revaluation', *Critical Studies in Television* 2.2 (2007), 98.
- 22 Rixon, 'American Programmes on British Screens', 105.
- 23 Leigh Holmwood, 'Now Gene Hunt Takes On Vampires', *Guardian Media*, 13 February 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/feb/13/television1?gusrc=rss&feed=media> [Accessed 20 June 2008].
- 24 Historically, cult television relates to the emergence of a specific kind of (predominantly American) programme in the 1990s such as *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991). With the increasing fragmentation of the television audience due to satellite television, home video recorders and the internet, the television industry began to make programmes designed to cater for a niche audience, rather than the broadest one possible. Programmes were then made economically viable through repeats, syndication, VHS/DVD releases and associated merchandising. As such, cult can be understood in terms

- of a mode of reception, as a business category for studios, and as a generic textual category (usually combining fantasy, horror and science-fiction). See Gwenllian Jones and Pearson, 'Introduction'.
- 25 Catherine Johnson, 'Quality/Cult Television: *The X-Files* and Television History', in Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon (eds) *The Contemporary Television Series* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 61.
 - 26 Mark Jancovich and James Lyons, 'Introduction', in Mark Jancovich and James Lyons (eds) *Quality Popular Television: Cult TV, the Industry and Fans* (London: B.F.I., 2003), p. 2.
 - 27 John Dugdale, 'Critics Choice', *Sunday Times: Culture* 6 April 2008, p. 80.
 - 28 Martin Skegg, 'Thursday 16 August Pick of the Day: *Blood Ties* 8pm Living', *Guardian Guide*, 11 August 2007, p. 89.
 - 29 Kate Abbott, 'Thursday 23 August Pick of the Day: *Blood Ties* 8pm Living', *Guardian: G2*, 18 August 2007, p. 89.
 - 30 Sadly, despite *Blood Ties*' valiant efforts to tap the cult canon, the series only survived for one season before being cast into the sunlight and left to crumble into Canadian dust. The reasons are partially economic. In June 2007, Bell GlobeMedia received approval to purchase CHUM and split it into two separate companies, selling off its CITY-TV stations. In May 2008, Lifetime confirmed that they would not pick up a second season of the show. This made financing very difficult as *Blood Ties* no longer had the backing of the original Canadian financier and broadcaster (who had provided the majority of the funding, and now did not exist), or the American distributor. The production company Kaleidoscope approached other channels and distributors to pick up the show, and an internet fan campaign was instigated but replacement funders failed to bite; Anon, 'Bell Globemedia Buys CHUM Ltd', *National Post* (Canada), 13 July 2006, <http://www.canada.com/nationalpost/news/story.html?id=72c62c18-f32c-44f7-9f83-78c6ee6ec590&k=11080> [Accessed 13 April 2010]; Canadian Communications Foundation, 'CHUM Ltd (1944 -2008)', *Radio/Television Station Group History*, no date, http://www.broadcasting-history.ca/index3.php?url=http%3A//www.broadcasting-history.ca/station_groups/Radio_Television_Station_Groups-CHUM_Limited.html [Accessed 13 April 2010].
 - 31 Angus Batey, 'Digital Choice', *The Times* 16 August 2007, p. 20; Ed Potton, 'Digital Choice', *The Times*, 11 April 2008, p. 20.
 - 32 Gareth McLean, 'Watch This', *Guardian: G2*, 11 April 2008, p. 30.
 - 33 Kevin Baker, 'When Grassroots Meets the Devil', *National Post: Weekend Post* 19 April 2008, p. 2.
 - 34 See Bill Harris, 'The Blue Blood Vampire', *Calgary Sun*, 20 August 2007, p. 39; Bawden, 'Taking a Bite out of Crime'; Bill Harris, 'Cox is the Vein Attraction', *Toronto Sun: Television*, 19 August 2007, p. 1; Vinay Menon, 'TV's *Blood Ties* Short on Brains But It's a Perfectly Adequate Addition to Television's Vampire Genre', *Toronto Star* 20 August 2007, p. 6.
 - 35 Michele Byers and Jennifer Vanderburgh, 'What Was Canada? Locating the Language of an Empty National Archive', *Critical Studies in Television* 5//2 (2010), 108.
 - 36 Byers and Vanderburgh, 'What Was Canada?', 108.
 - 37 Helen Wheatley, *Gothic Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 3.
 - 38 Robin Nelson, 'HBO Premium: Channelling Distinction Through TVIII', *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 5/1 (2007): 25-40.

- 39 Jane Feuer, 'HBO and the Concept of Quality TV', in Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, (eds), *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 147.
- 40 Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, 'Sex, Swearing and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO's Original Programming and Producing Quality TV', in Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, (eds), *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 66.
- 41 Melanie Waters, 'Fangbanging: Sexing the Vampire in Alan Ball's *True Blood*', in Beth Johnson, James Aston and Basil Gylmn (eds) *Television, Sex and Society: Analysing Contemporary Representations* (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 33.
- 42 Gary R. Edgerton, 'A Brief History of HBO', in Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (eds), *The Essential HBO Reader* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2008), p.11; Nelson, 'HBO Premium', 38–9; McCabe and Akass, 'Sex, Swearing and Respectability', p. 75.
- 43 Alison Peirse, 'Horrible Women: Abjection, Gender and Ageing in *Nip/Tuck*', in Roz Kaveney and Jennifer Stoy, (eds), *Nip/Tuck: Television That Gets Under Your Skin* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 66–86.
- 44 See Simon Brown and Stacey Abbott, 'The Art of Sp(l)atter: Body Horror in *Dexter*', in Douglas L. Howard, (ed), *Dexter: Investigating Cutting Edge Television* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), pp. 205–20; Elke Weissmann and Karen Boyle, 'Evidence of Things Unseen: The Pornographic Aesthetic and the Search for Truth in *C.S.I.*', in Michael Allen, (ed), *Reading C.S.I.: Crime TV Under the Microscope* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), pp. 90–102.
- 45 Sue Tait, 'Autoptic Vision and the Necrophilic Imaginary in *C.S.I.*', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9/1 (2006), 45–62.
- 46 Beeler, 'Huff Interview', p.1.
- 47 Alison Peirse, 'Personal Email From Stacey Abbott', 19 May 2010.

Address for correspondence:

Alison Peirse, Department of Arts, Squires 101g, University of Northumbria, Newcastle Upon Tyne NE1 8ST
Email: alison.peirse@northumbria.ac.uk

Copyright of Gothic Studies is the property of Manchester University Press 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.