

## ABSTRACT

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has long been hailed as a feminist show for its reworking of horror's final girl trope. Instead of being either feminine and a victim or masculine and a hero, the show combines femininity *with* heroism through the central figure of Buffy. But is the mere representation of female heroism enough to warrant feminist praise? Feminist and poststructuralist theorists have long argued that "woman" is a multivocal category and challenged the framework of representation for its assumption of a universal "woman," or "girl" subject. Yet *Buffy* centers around one blonde, white, middle-class girl and her struggles to be a normal girl, creating a gendered ideal of normalcy. A close reading of two other Slayer characters reveals that Buffy's normalcy is upheld over the experiences of girls of color and working-class girls. I argue that this exclusion is no accident but by design; the show's choice to represent girlhood through Buffy effectively universalizes Buffy's experience of girlhood. This universalization shows how appeals to "girl" as a stable category will always end up reifying hegemonic notions of girlhood, pointing us towards the pitfalls and limitations of representation as a feminist political tactic.

GOOD GIRLS, “BAD GIRLS,” AND “DIRTY GIRLS”: THE STAKES FOR  
MARGINALIZED GIRLS IN *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER*

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## INTRODUCTION: “WHAT YOU ARE, WHAT’S TO COME”

For years, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was considered an unabashedly feminist show that redefined network television’s approach to women and girls. Then, at the height of the #MeToo era in 2017, came an open letter from showrunner Joss Whedon’s ex-wife, Kai Cole, alleging that, beginning with his time on the *Buffy* set, Whedon had had numerous affairs with actresses, coworkers, fans, and friends (Cole). Cole wrote that while Whedon admitted the affairs to her, he “never conceded the hypocrisy of being out in the world preaching feminist ideals” (Cole). Then in 2021, Charisma Carpenter, who played Cordelia on *Buffy* and *Angel*, wrote on Twitter (now X) that Whedon “abused his power on numerous occasions” and “created hostile and toxic work environments,” including calling her fat and firing her when she became pregnant (Carpenter). Sarah Michelle Gellar, who played Buffy, posted on Instagram in support of Carpenter, on which fellow Buffy star Michelle Trachtenberg commented that she was “brave enough now as a 35 year old woman...To repost this. Because. This must. Be known. As a teenager. With his not appropriate behavior...Very. Not. Appropriate. So now. People know what Joss. Did. The last. Comment I will make on this. Was. There was a rule. Saying he’s not allowed in a room alone with Michelle again” (Stevenson). Cue headlines like “Joss Whedon was Hailed as a Feminist. Then Came the Allegations about his Behavior.” *Buffy* fans, Whedon acolytes, and pop culture lovers all struggled to reconcile Whedon’s actions with his outspoken feminism. How could someone who had written such a feminist show fail to implement feminist ideals in their own life? Could there really be such a drastic distinction between a person’s politics and their behavior? Or perhaps *Buffy* was never that radical to begin with.

Regardless of the end result, Whedon conceptualized *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a feminist take on the horror genre. Carol J. Clover has observed that teenage characters who have

sex are always killed in slasher movies, and that “even in films in which males and females are killed in roughly even numbers, the lingering images are of the latter” (35). Clover has also coined the term “final girl” to refer to the popular trope of female characters who do not die but manage to survive and save the day. The final girl, according to Clover, is “boyish, in a word. Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine—not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends. Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls” (40). The final girl’s lack of femininity and use of phallic objects to attack the killer cause Clover to argue that the final girl does not signify femaleness but instead acts as a surrogate for the male viewer to whom slasher movies are most often marketed. Therefore, Clover writes, “To applaud the Final Girl as a feminist development, as some reviews of *Aliens* have done with Ripley, is, in light of her figurative meaning, a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking. She is simply an agreed-upon fiction and the male viewer’s use of her as a vehicle for his own sadomasochistic fantasies an act of perhaps timeless dishonesty” (53). Clearly, the genre is in need of a feminist update.

While *Buffy* had many writers, I began with Joss Whedon because he conceptualized and executive produced the show, and was heavily involved with the writing and directing processes. Whedon created *Buffy* seeking to change the way women were represented in horror. Identifying the trope of “the blond girl in the alley in the horror movie who keeps getting killed,” he “felt bad for her, but she was always more interesting to me than the other girls. She was fun, she had sex, she was vivacious. But then she would get punished for it. Literally, I just had that image, that scene, in my mind, like the trailer for a movie—what if the girl goes into the dark alley. And

the monster follows her. And she destroys him” (Udovitch). And so, the quick-witted, blonde-haired, vampire-staking Buffy Summers was born.

If the final girl lacks femininity, Buffy more than makes up for it. A Los Angeles valley girl, Buffy has just moved with her mother to Sunnydale, a suburb she complains is “two hours on the freeway from Neiman Marcus” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” 18:03). Upon meeting Buffy, Sunnydale High it-girl Cordelia Chase tells her that she “would kill to live in L.A.—that close to that many shoes!” before having to test her “coolness factor” in order to let her into her clique (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” 9:34). Buffy is told she can “skip the written” because she’s from L.A. but still has to answer her thoughts on Vamp nail polish (“over”), James Spader (“he *needs* to call me”), Frappuccinos (“trendy, but tasty!”), and John Tesh (“the devil”). She passes with flying colors, successfully proving her status to both Cordelia and the audience as not only a normal teenage girl but *the* archetypal 90s teenage girl through her knowledge of what’s trendy. If the continual references to brands and consumer trends feels repetitive, let it be known that all of these lines occur less than halfway through the first episode. Buffy’s girl identity is bound up with 1990s consumer culture, causing problems when she would much rather go to the mall than train for Slaying. Through the comparison to Cordelia, Buffy is shown to be a “normal”—read: stylish and social—girl before she is the Slayer.

It goes without saying that Whedon’s model of what a girl is is extremely limited. *Buffy* reworks a recognizable stereotype, but not one that is relatable to most girls. Blonde, thin, white, conventionally attractive, boy-crazy, and shopping-obsessed, she displays traditional femininity to the extreme. While Buffy goes out every night and Slays vampires, we never see her break a sweat, and her super strength does not visibly manifest in muscles, as the vampire Angel notes in

the first episode. Her feminine appearance remains perfectly partitioned off from her Slayerhood, the latter never troubling the former. Rachel Fudge writes that

Buffy could be the poster girl for an entire decade of girl-oriented mass media/culture. For better and most certainly for worse, she's Sassy incarnate, an angsty alternatteen with a penchant for Delia\*s-style slip dresses. She's feisty and moody and won't let anyone push her around. Her ever-present tank tops showcase her rack quite efficiently. She has a passion for justice and goodness—even when it means killing her boyfriend, Buffy performs with martyrlike grace. Her makeup is impeccable, her eyebrows well-groomed. She's a girl's girl, fiercely loyal to her best girlfriend. She may have returned from a night of heavy slaying, but her frosted hair is still in its pigtails, her sparkly makeup intact. (2)

Buffy's hyperfemininity appears natural, as we never see her having to put much effort into her appearance besides occasionally brushing her hair. Aside from Hollywood beauty standards, there is a tactical reason why Buffy looks the way she does: "If I can make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who takes charge of a situation without their knowing that's what's happening," says Whedon, "it's better than sitting down and selling them on feminism" (qtd. in Fudge 4). Ascribing an explicitly political message to his show, Whedon is concerned not only with the recuperation of female characters in horror, but also with producing a feminism that is marketable, specifically to teenage boys. Even for Whedon himself, Buffy's body is part of the appeal: "I definitely think a woman kicking ass is extraordinarily sexy, always...If I wasn't compelled on a very base level by that archetype I wouldn't have created that character. I mean, yes, I have a feminist agenda, but it's not like I made a chart" (Udovitch). Buffy's character is, much like the final girl, from the beginning sutured to male audience enjoyment and the display of conventional, normative femininity.

Judith Butler begins their seminal 1990 work *Gender Trouble* by questioning the efficacy of representation as a feminist political strategy. Representation, for Butler, is "the normative function of a language which is said to either reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women" (2). This formulation can be extended to the category of girl; to

represent girls is to prescribe and circumscribe a certain idea of what girls are. Following Foucault's findings that "juridical systems of power *produce* the subjects they subsequently come to represent" (2), Butler argues that there is no subject, and therefore no "woman" or "girl" outside of systems of power. And because gender "is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities," Butler writes that it is "impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (4-5). Not only is gender inseparable from the systems of power that produce it as a coherent category, but what constitutes that category differs across culture and history. Any attempt to represent "woman" or "girl," then, can only be representing one or another discursive fiction produced by power.

While Butler is concerned with political representation here, cultural representation is another important part of the conversation. Cultural studies holds that culture is part of what Marx called the superstructure of society that rests atop its material economic base. Televisual culture must therefore be understood as a reflection of material productive processes. Stuart Hall writes that "The 'object' of [televisual] production practices and structures is the production of a message: that is, a sign-vehicle, or rather sign-vehicles of a specific kind, organized, like any other form of communication or language, through the operation of codes, within the syntagmatic chains of a discourse" (258). Messages are translated into the language of televisual codes to be interpreted by the audience. But to read the message of a text is not so simple as determining what the producers intended. Producers of a television show or film may have a particular message they intend to transmit, but

the production process is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, technical skills, professional ideologies,

institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about audience, etc. frame the passage of the program through this production structure. However, though the production structures of television originate the television message, they do not constitute a closed system. They draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, “definitions of the situation” from the wider sociocultural political system of which they are only a differentiated part. (259)

Because televisual texts are produced by individuals, and individuals’ ideas are shaped by the wider society, cultural studies treats televisual texts not only as the product of individual authors but the wider culture itself. The production and consumption of televisual texts is a circuit. Frameworks of knowledge, structures of production, and technical infrastructure all go into producing the message of a text. This includes the intended message of the producers as well as everything that influences them. Audiences then re-translate the signs and codes of a text themselves to receive a message that may or may not be the same as that which was encoded into the text to produce new frameworks of knowledge, structures of production, and technical infrastructures that then influence the production process anew. Cultural production is thus a discourse between producers and consumers that elicits a wide variety of messages. These messages may belong to the dominant cultural order, or, in some cases, they may conflict with the hegemonic viewpoint. But for the most part, as Marx wrote, “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (*The German Ideology*). The study of popular culture is therefore important not for any one message in particular but to understand the circulation of ruling ideas.

*Buffy* is an interesting case because its producers intended to produce a message against the grain of most representations of girls in horror at the time. Yet in representing a new kind of girl, the show is putting forward its own idea of what a girl is, an idea that is limited by both producers’ imagination and Hollywood conventions. If the masculinized final girl implies that girls must adopt masculine characteristics to be taken seriously, Whedon responded by taking

femininity seriously, centering a conventionally feminine protagonist. In addition to visually conveying picture-perfect femininity, Buffy is also driven by her emotions, contrary to the traditional hero. I find this approach problematic because it replicates the patriarchal idea that emotions are women's sphere while men are more rational. We see this dichotomy in the frequent clashes between Buffy and her Watcher, Giles, who wants Buffy to be more disciplined while Buffy wants to spend time with her friends or go to the mall. Though the show takes seriously Buffy's struggles to balance Slaying with a "normal life," it also betrays a limited and stereotypical view of the activities girls partake in. While some might read Buffy's struggle to balance Slaying with a normal life as showing her femininity to be a performance that requires effort, or even an example of "feminist camp" (Pender 14), I find these arguments unconvincing as Buffy's femininity is not merely a superficial trait but goes right to her very core. The show takes great pains to show Buffy and other female characters' feminine types of knowledge, such as when Buffy identifies a vampire based on his outdated clothing, or when she proclaims that "my emotions give me power" ("What's My Line, Part Two" 28:07). While, to be sure, femininity is devalued in the eyes of society, this is the case only because women and girls themselves are devalued, and women and girls must be feminine. Let us not forget that women and girls who do not correctly perform femininity or are deemed not to are devalued all the same, perhaps even more so. Yet the show revolves around Buffy and Buffy alone, showing only one model of what it means to be a girl. While an argument could be made for Willow, Buffy's best friend, being an alternative model of girlhood, she is shown from the very first episode to fail at performing femininity when it is joked that she is dressed by her mother. Throughout the show, when other girls are introduced, they are always shown to be subordinate to Buffy in some way, establishing Buffy and her iteration of girlhood as the ideal girl.

...

It is customary, when analyzing *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s feminism, to begin with some historical context. I will do so here, but rather than beginning with the immediate 1990s context, let us go back to the mid-1800s to define what I mean by femininity. The prevailing image of femininity over the last two centuries has its roots in the nineteenth century American ideology known as the cult of True Womanhood, or more specifically the cult of domesticity. As the latter title suggests, True Womanhood is directly linked to the development of the home as women's sphere of influence, in contrast to the public sphere which was considered to be men's domain. Historian Nancy Cott attributes these spheres to the rapid expansion of capitalism in the first few decades of the nineteenth century; whereas prior modes of production had been largely located within the home and centered around personal consumption, the specialization of economic function and rise of the manufacturing industry drew men away from the home (23). As a result of this shift, women's domestic labor took on a new importance as it was implicated not only in the success of the individual man but the reproduction of the workforce as a whole. The ideology of True Womanhood emerges in this context to naturalize women's domestic labor.

This ideology took shape through a "discourse of domesticity" found in writing produced both by and for women at this time (Cott xxv). Barbara Welter, who coined the phrase "cult of True Womanhood," identifies in this literature the characteristic virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity that make up the idea of the True Woman. Women were considered to have a "peculiar sensibility" to religion that would have a redemptive effect on the world of men, according to *The Young Ladies' Class Book* (qtd. in Welter 152). Similarly, women were seen as less "sensual" and more able to control their sexual desires than men, and were therefore expected to remain chaste in the face of seemingly inevitable assaults on their

virtue (155). Women's successes in turning down men's advances were seen as a sign of their power and moral superiority to men, while women who succumbed to romance were often said to go mad, drawing a connection between sexual purity and intellect (156). If the first two virtues appear to place an unequal amount of labor (emotional or physical) on women, the latter two do so explicitly. Men's assumed intellectual superiority made them the designated providers for their families, so it was seen as the natural order of things that women would submit to them. As moral beings, women had only their love to offer men in return, and were expected to maintain "a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind" to keep their husbands happy (*The Young Ladies' Book*, 1830, qtd. in Welter 159). The virtue of domesticity also stems from this emphasis on taking care of men, specifically in response to their growing absence from the home. Women's literature praised domestic tasks such as child-rearing and nursing, associating them with other prized feminine qualities such as purity and morality so as to encourage the proliferation of the domestic sphere. *The Young Ladies' Class Book* referred to the domestic sphere as "the great guardian of society against the excesses of human passions," casting the external world as one of great temptation, in contrast to and threatening the aforementioned virtue of purity (qtd. in Welter 162). All four of the virtues of True Womanhood cohere to ensure women as a viable source of labor-power.

The distinction between the public and private spheres obscures the ways in which the relegation of women to the domestic sphere was a product of capitalist development. Cott writes:

Women's sphere was 'separate' not only because it was at home but also because it seemed to elude rationalization and the cash nexus, and to integrate labor with life. The home and occupations in it represented an alternative to the emerging pace and division of labor. Symbol and remnant of preindustrial work, perhaps the home commanded men's deepest loyalties, but these were loyalties that conflicted with 'modern' forms of employment. To be idealized, yet rejected by men—the object of yearning, and yet of scorn—was the fate of the home-as-workplace. Women's work (indeed women's very

character, viewed as essentially conditioned by the home) shared in that simultaneous glorification and devaluation (62)

While women performed all of the labor necessary to allow their husbands to go to work each day, this was not abstract labor that can be converted to exchange-value and sold to an employer and thus was unrecognizable as labor according to the logics of capital. Thus, when men retired to the home at the end of each workday, they were retreating from the pressures of the modernizing world, such as the implementation of time-discipline and occupational ambition (59). In addition to being pious, pure, submissive, and domestic, women were seen as separate from the rational, masculinist world, driven more by emotion than intelligence. The anachronistic appearance of domestic life within industrial capitalism more broadly drove a wedge between the two spheres, leading to the ambivalence of male workers that Cott notes. Yet at the same time women were distinctly aware of the importance of their roles, not only as wives but also as mothers. Similarly to the notion that women were inherently moral beings who could better the men in their lives, ladies' magazines wrote of women's patriotic duty to bring their influence to bear "upon the right side for the country's weal," showing a national investment in women's reproductive labor (Elizabeth Wetherell, 1851, qtd. in Welter 172). Interestingly, the author of this quote writes in the longer essay that child-rearing was for women a much better contribution to American society than voting, as the latter would cause "a vast increase of confusion and expense without in the smallest degree affecting the result," betraying a paternalistic view of women's intellectual inferiority (Wetherell, qtd. in Welter 172). The juxtaposition of these ideas shows how the home and broader society were inextricably linked, and yet despite the necessity of their labor, women were still denied participation in public life. The valorization of women as emotional, nurturing creatures was merely a pretext to ensure their labor in the domestic sphere.

Of course, there have always been women present in the public sphere—just not those women to whom “womanhood” or “femininity” have typically been applied. Angela Davis’ study of enslaved women in *Women, Race, and Class* reveals that, when it came to labor, there was no difference between enslaved men and women, but women were additionally subject to sexual abuse. Black women were also exploited for their reproductive capabilities, but in distinctly more dehumanizing ways than their white counterparts: “in the eyes of the slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force. They were ‘breeders’—animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers” (Davis 10). The cultural valuation of women’s role as mothers did not extend to those mothers who were not seen as women, or even human. But life in the slave quarters tells a more egalitarian story. While “‘Woman’ became synonymous in the prevailing propaganda with ‘mother’ and ‘housewife,’ and both ‘mother’ and ‘housewife’ bore the fatal mark of inferiority,” Davis finds that “among Black female slaves, this vocabulary was nowhere to be found. The economic arrangements of slavery contradicted the hierarchical sexual roles incorporated in the new ideology. Male-female relations within the slave community could not, therefore, conform to the dominant ideological pattern” (13). Often (misogynoiristically) seen as a sign of Black women’s unfair dominance over men, enslaved men and women took solace in the labor of the home and shared the housework and other reproductive duties. And just as men participated equally in this labor, women participated equally in rebelling against slavery. “If Black women bore the terrible burden of equality in oppression, if they enjoyed equality with their men in their domestic environment,” Davis writes, “then they also asserted their equality aggressively in challenging the inhuman institution of slavery. They resisted the sexual assaults of white men, defended their

families and participated in work stoppages and revolts” (16). Across the Black Atlantic, Black women fought on two fronts: race and gender. Yet despite this resistance, Black women were often barred from mainstream feminist movements, and representations of women who challenge systems of oppression predominantly feature white women.

Given the ideal that was the True Woman, it is understandable that the first two waves of feminism prioritized bringing women out of the home and into the workforce as a core goal. But these movements were often dominated by white, middle-class women, and as a result neglected those women for whom labor was not a choice. Likewise, mainstream feminist movements have failed to address issues of race and class. Black feminists like the Combahee River Collective have long made the connection between capitalism and patriarchy apparent, yet mainstream feminism has yet to make socialism a part of its demands. Instead, in the popular consciousness, feminism has become synonymous with women’s representation in positions of power and, by the 1990s, meaningless platitudes that “girls can do anything!” sold back to girls on T-shirts. This neoliberalism-inflected popular “feminism” conflates feminism’s success with the experiences of a small minority of privileged women who achieve success in various institutions. Women’s liberation comes to be synonymous with women’s incorporation into the ruling class, as though the capitalist logic that the success of the few equals the success of the many were at all true. Angela McRobbie has used the term “female individualism” to refer to the idea of women’s achievement as “based on the invitation to young women by various governments that they might now consider themselves free to compete in education and in work as privileged subjects of the new meritocracy” (258).

It is in this post-feminist context that *Buffy* comes about. According to McRobbie, post-feminism is “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be

undermined...postfeminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force” (255). We can see post-feminist rhetoric, for example, in Sarah Michelle Gellar saying that feminism “makes you think of women that don’t shave their legs” (qtd. in Levine 171). Such rhetoric reduces second wave feminism’s insistence that women should not have to alter their bodies to fit beauty standards to a prohibition against the ostensibly feminine act of shaving one’s legs, a reduction made possible by the idea that women no longer *need* feminism to secure their freedom.

Post-feminist popular culture, McRobbie observes, shows the modern, educated working woman to have new concerns separate from those that feminism highlighted, such as anxieties about success and the fear of delaying marriage for too long. According to Bonnie J. Dow in *Prime-Time Feminism*, the 1980s saw a decline in portrayals of the single-career woman and a return to the nuclear family with more narratives about women balancing career and family, effectively still aligning women with the home. *Buffy* falls into these post-feminist patterns with Buffy’s concerns about being seen as a normal, feminine teenage girl even as she is the Slayer. I see the focus on Buffy’s efforts to maintain a normal, or domestic, life in the face of her “career” as the Slayer as drawing from the tradition of True Womanhood, with the show still enforcing a divide between Buffy’s femininity and the more masculine world of Slaying.

...

In their insightful article on the limits of *Buffy*’s feminism, Renee St. Louis and Miriam Riggs write that far too much *Buffy* criticism falls into what television critic Charlotte Brundson refers to as the “ur-feminist article,” where it takes

a television programme or film that has a central female character—or characters—and which is usually addressed to a feminine audience, and explores it within the vocabulary

and concerns of feminism. The structure of the article usually involves setting up what is proposed as an obvious feminist reading of the text in which the text—and the heroine—fail the test. Then what the author does is to mobilize her own engagement with the text, her own liking for the treatment of the dreams and dilemmas of the heroine, to interrogate the harsh dismissal of this popular text on feminist ground, and to reveal the complex and contradictory ways in which the text—and the heroine—negotiate the perilous path of living as a woman in a patriarchal world. The text is redeemed, and precisely the features that made it fail the feminist test render it more resonant, interesting and sympathetic for women now. (qtd. in St Louis and Riggs 2)

*Buffy* may appear on the surface to be unfeminist based on its protagonist's adherence to conventional femininity, but often texts will dismiss these concerns in order to *reread* Buffy as empowering for one or another reason. St. Louis and Riggs find that often these readings “seem rooted more in a desire to find points of identification and redemption within the text than a concerted effort to read the text within its presentational and cultural contexts. Even the most responsible and widely cited critics tend to allow the text to stand without significant intervention into its more problematic moments and portrayals” (3). For example, Elana Levine raises the argument that Buffy's feminine style could be deemed problematic, but, citing the riot grrrl movement's mixing of feminine and masculine styles, argues that Buffy's “girlie” style opts for a similar visual contradiction with her more masculine role as the Slayer (Levine 178). I do not find this argument convincing because while Buffy's fighting may disrupt ideas of what a girl's body can do, Buffy's visual presence still adheres to conventions of beauty that are steeped in white supremacy and heterosexism. The show further emphasizes Buffy's femininity by highlighting her emotions, intervening into a centuries-long discourse that associates men with rationality and women with emotion not by challenging it but by merely reasserting the importance of correct, feminine emotion. Elyce Rae Helford writes that “There is no danger of emotional excessiveness from Buffy, unless it is to portray normative (hetero)romantic anguish or to demonstrate the ‘normal’ tendency to err in judgment from time to time as a teen. As far as

anger is concerned, Buffy feels it, but her manner of display is almost always redirection, primarily in the form of sarcasm or biting humor” (23). Helford goes on to argue that Buffy’s sarcasm and humor trivialize girls’ anger both because they reduce her rage to mere quips and because girls in the real world are unable to make the same quips threatening violence that Buffy usually does. Buffy is first and foremost caring and compassionate; always wanting to do the right thing, she may be sassy but she is never truly angry enough to be unfeminine. I am therefore unconvinced that Buffy’s femininity reflects a feminist position. On the contrary, I see her as fulfilling standards of what it means to be a girl or woman that have existed for centuries, standards that are inherently tied to whiteness and the bourgeoisie. Inspired by Black feminism’s attention to the intersections of identity, I argue here that race, class, and gender in *Buffy* are co-constitutive. Buffy is not only a girl, but a very conspicuously white middle-class girl against whom all marginalized characters are judged.

Several *Buffy* critics have written about race in the show. Kent Ono, for example, has written probably the most oft-cited criticism of the show’s racism, and critiqued the way popular readings of the show’s feminism often assume its “girl” audience to be automatically white. He argues that “The dual role of each of the major characters creates an ambivalent fantasy subject position in which the character both feels marginalized and yet occupies a position to which others feel marginal. Together, Buffy and her friends occupy a slew of thoroughly marginalized characters very often coded as biologically *and existentially* different” (170). Buffy and her friends occupy the margins of Sunnydale High’s social scene, nowhere near the popularity of characters like Cordelia, but they (Buffy in particular) still hold power over more marginalized groups such as the vampires and demons who are deemed killable by the logic of the show. While there are few characters of color on the show, Ono argues that “the marginalization of

vampires on the show takes the place of racial marginalization in the world outside the show. For instance, when a character becomes demonized for the first time, his or her eyes often are ‘blackened’” (172). Furthermore, he points out how “vampires lurk in the underworld, live in darkness, and wait to attack and suck the life blood out of an unsuspecting ‘human.’ The metaphor relies on a fear of contamination, invasion, being overpowered, and assault. As characters ‘descend’ into evil, something about them becomes darker, usually their clothes” (173).

Jessica Hautsch has gone even further to say that “the Buffyverse’s entire creation mythology is based on colonization” (3). Giles explains that “For untold eons, demons walked the earth, made it their home, their, uh, their hell. But in time they lost their purchase on this reality, and the way was made for mortal animals, for man. All that remains of the old ones are vestiges, certain magics, certain creatures” (“The Harvest” 2:22). Much like the founding myth of the Americas, this creation myth hinges on the idea of heathens who did not deserve access to their land and needed to be exterminated for the land to be used by proper humans. The demons we see in the show are thus remnants of the multitudinous colonized subjects wiped out for the greater good. Of course, the genocide of demons is permitted because they are categorically evil. Yet on numerous occasions the show marks the difference between demons who deserve to die and demons who can be allowed to live. Buffy urges Faith to leave a demon alive because “I don’t think he falls into the ‘deadly threat to humanity’ category” (“Enemies” 4:49). She fights with her army boyfriend Riley over the theorem “demons bad, people good,” telling him that it is “different with different demons. There are creatures—vampires, for example—that aren’t evil at all,” referring of course to her boyfriend Angel, but also implicitly to the chipped Spike, who has not yet received his soul but has by this point joined the Scooby Gang (“New Moon Rising”

14:47). Buffy does not fully subscribe to Giles' colonialist logic, but neither does she reject it outright. The Scooby Gang has the power to restore a vampire's soul, making a vampire "not evil at all," yet they use it only on Angel. For all other vampires (besides Spike), Buffy is content to stake them and move on. She acts as judge, jury, and executioner of all those who appear to be a threat to Sunnydale society.

There has also been some insightful critique of the few characters of color we do see on *Buffy*. Ono offers close readings of Kendra, a second Vampire Slayer called after Buffy briefly dies in the first season finale, and Ampata, a South American exchange student who turns out to be a mummy. Ono notices a pattern in that, first, Buffy is jealous of the two characters, which "necessarily creates an alignment to and an empathy for her position," and second, that their physical differences are accompanied by moral differences that justify "their elimination from the show and the repositioning of Buffy, whose angst has been made more complex and clear and whose moral superiority has been renewed, at the center of the show" (177). For instance, Ampata is willing to take human life to prolong her own, resulting in Buffy having to Slay her. The centering of Buffy's feelings results in the routine denial of identification with characters of color. Ono goes as far as to answer the question "Toward whom is girl power directed?" with "Predominantly, people of color" (179). Lynne Edwards has analyzed the four Black Slayers we see in the show, arguing that they each occupy a particular racist trope of Black women. In "The Caucasian Persuasion of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," Ewan Kirkland writes that "In foregrounding its progressive gender politics, other identity formations, namely race and class, have been compromised" (15). While much of Kirkland's analysis is laudable, he makes the fatal mistake of separating race and class from the show's ostensibly "progressive gender politics." How progressive can a show for girls be when the only girls it allows to exist are middle-class

conventionally attractive white girls? Rather than separating out the show's treatment of race and class from its treatment of gender, I hope to analyze the three together.

My first chapter offers a deeper dive into the character of Kendra. Departing from Ono, I do not ask why there are so few characters of color on the show, but rather what it is about the show that does not allow for characters of color. The only way to answer this question is to examine the role that characters of color play when they do appear. I argue that Kendra serves as a contrast to Buffy, in order to uplift Buffy's individuality and white femininity. Kendra's episodes coincide with Sunnydale High's career week, where Buffy is told that she can go on to anything, exemplifying the female individualist narrative Angela McRobbie identifies. In contrast, Kendra's Jamaican background is constructed as backward and oppressive, her experience far from that of the normal girl that Buffy represents. Yet the show neglects to make visible this power differential between the two, instead naturalizing Kendra's subservience as simply part of her character. I see Kendra as an example of what Toni Morrison calls the "Africanist character" of early American literature, a bound and suppressed Black figure against which early American writers crystallized their own national identity. While this identity was predominantly gendered male, *Buffy* updates this tradition, using a Black female character to limn out the identity of the white female character. In contrast to Kendra, Buffy appears autonomous, as well as more human and emotional, emphasizing her femininity as well. I show how Buffy is defined early on in opposition to Blackness, defining girlhood as always-already white.

My second chapter looks at the class and sexual dynamics of *Buffy*, focusing on Faith, the Slayer called after Kendra's unceremonious death in her third episode. Faith is from the beginning shown to be excessively sexual, in opposition to Buffy's more controlled, acceptable

sexuality. Faith is also, in what little information we are given about her backstory, shown to be working-class, and I argue that the audience is expected to fill in the gaps in this backstory with stereotypes of the working class as irresponsible and overindulgent. Faith eventually turns evil, which I argue the show positions as the logical next step for certain types of working class, sexual subjects. To my knowledge, there has not been any published writing on class specifically in *Buffy*. Kirkland notes how, like Willow's Jewishness, Xander's working-class background is erased. There are no mentions of after school jobs or money issues, and while Buffy is from a single-parent household, the two are never shown to struggle, designating them as thoroughly middle-class. At the beginning of season three, Buffy leaves Sunnydale (though where she got the bus money is never explained) and gets a job in Los Angeles as a waitress, for the first time having to work to earn money. The episode follows Buffy as she discovers the city's homeless residents are being taken to hell and made to work for all eternity, prompting Buffy to lead a workers' uprising that emphasizes Buffy's status as a heroic individual and therefore places her hierarchically above the workers whom she is trying to liberate. Later on in the season, Cordelia is seen having to work in a dress store to buy her prom dress because her father "made a tiny mistake on his taxes," but this arc is cut short as somehow Xander is able to pay for her dress. In the later seasons, Xander forgoes a college education and works a number of odd jobs before becoming a construction worker, and while there are a few jokes made about his position he is largely respected. His experience differs greatly from Faith's, as I will show, and thus the show is unable to grant working-class women and girls the same empowerment and identification it grants to Buffy.

My third chapter focuses on the limits of the later seasons of *Buffy*. First of all, I extend St. Louis and Riggs' argument that the show does not grant emancipation to older women to

argue that as Buffy ages, she is pushed more into a maternal role. The show celebrates this maternal role, as if the gendered division of labor is not the problem but simply the lack of positive views of women's labor. I then turn to another poorly-constructed character of color, the First Slayer, whose story becomes more important as the show progresses. The First Slayer is another deployment of the Africanist character, constructed as both savage and silent. Her story reveals the Slayer power to be a product of the literal dehumanization of the female body. The First Slayer never gets to speak for herself, and Buffy effectively adopts her story as a feminist rallying cry, inscribing a particular 1990s narrative of women not letting men tell them what to do onto the First Slayer's historical experience. Lastly, I argue that the Potentials' storyline and expansion of Slayer power to all girls is an attempt at collectivism that ultimately falls short due to the show's repeated failure to grant subjectivity to girls of color and imagine girlhood beyond Buffy's white, middle-class experience.

“YOU SLAY, I’LL GO TO DISNEYLAND”: RACE, LABOR, AND IDENTITY IN

*BUFFY*

**Introduction**

A giant man in leather boots with a face covered in scars steps off of a bus. A door-to-door salesman gains entry to a house and screams erupt within seconds of the door closing. A young Black woman—the shooting script says “ethnic”—emerges from the shadowy cargo hold of a plane and attacks an airline worker unprovoked (Gordon and Noxon 23). First-time viewers would be forgiven for assuming that these are the three demon assassins Spike has sent after Buffy. But when the third stranger comes face-to-face with Buffy, it is as much her highly-disciplined fighting style as it is her proclamation that she is “Kendra, the Vampire Slayer” that reveals her true nature (“What’s My Line, Part One” 43:31).

As the prophetically-chosen successor to Buffy after her death at the end of the prior season, Kendra appears to pose a threat to the show’s very premise, that Buffy is *the* Vampire Slayer. Indeed, upon meeting Kendra, Xander remarks, “A Slayer, huh? I knew this ‘I’m the only one, I’m the only one’ thing was just an attention-getter” (“What’s My Line, Part Two” 21:50). But the show goes to great lengths to construct Kendra as fundamentally different from Buffy, not simply in race and culture (for Kendra, if her actress’ poorly-trained accent is to be believed, hails from Jamaica) but also in her approach to Slaying: while Buffy rarely listens to authority and relies on her heart to guide her, Kendra lives according to the Slayer handbook and her Watcher’s orders; while Buffy struggles to balance school, friends, family, romance, and shopping, Kendra does not partake in any of these things and is focused entirely on Slaying; and while Buffy constantly laments missing out on a normal life, Kendra does not seem to care. In other words, Kendra conspicuously lacks the characteristics that make Buffy recognizable as a

girl, and as an individual: her agency and self-possession, her complexity, and her emotions. But this conclusion only opens up further questions: what does it mean to be an individual, in the context of *Buffy*? Why is Buffy the only one who gets to be an individual? The answer, as I will show, is because she is white. Kendra's racial difference and her lack of social life are not two different aspects of her character, but instead cohere to show her difference from what the show defines as normal, i.e., white.

A number of scholars have written on race in *Buffy*. Nelly Strehlau has argued that *Buffy* associates the past with racialized populations and the present and future with its white protagonist, which we can see in the difference between Buffy and Kendra: "while Kendra is the Slayer called after Buffy's first death, and thus her successor, she can be seen as a return to the kind of Slayer that existed before Buffy, and that Buffy has worked to modify and modernize: alienated from her family and friendless, dedicated solely to her calling, obedient, and dependent on her Watcher" (Iatropoulos and Woodall 99). Lynne Edwards has drawn attention to the show's "erasure of race" in its lack of main characters of color and read Kendra as an example of the "tragic mulatta" whose assimilation into white society ultimately leads to her death (Iatropoulos and Woodall 40). While I agree with Edwards' argument about Kendra's assimilation, I see Kendra not as an exception to *Buffy*'s lack of diversity but as a paradigmatic example of how race works in the show. Toni Morrison has developed a framework for reading Blackness in predominantly white narratives called the "Africanist character." The Africanist character appears in early American literature as a bound, suppressed Black figure in opposition to whom the new American white man could be constructed as a free, powerful individual. I use this framework to read Kendra not as tragic mulatta but as a closed figure of Blackness onto whom the tensions of Buffy's character can be displaced.

This chapter is also inspired by what Saidiya Hartman calls fungibility, which “makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master's body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion (21). According to Morrison, early American literature projected onto the Black body all of the fears and anxieties that resulted from American freedom and its predication on chattel slavery, creating a new body of literature drawing equally from gothic romance and Puritan sermons. Like its literary forebears, *Buffy* explores freedom through gothic and romantic tropes, and also foregrounds the formation of identity through its Bildungsroman structure. Kendra is a deployment of the Africanist character that is repeatedly invoked to naturalize and celebrate Buffy's white American femininity. Once Kendra, in the two-part episode in which she first appears, teaches Buffy the value of her own identity and individuality, she retreats far, far offscreen, only to return once more with some helpful information and be killed off. Kendra's death has little impact on the wider story and instead returns our attention to the show's white protagonist. Thus, *Buffy*'s abundant whiteness and racist treatment of its few characters of color is not merely symptomatic of racial exclusion in the United States; instead, the very mechanisms by which Buffy is created as the modern female subject are predicated on the unfreedom and invisibility of racialized “others” and thus always-already white.

### **Buffy, Slaying, and Labor**

The episodes' title is a reference to the long-running American game show *What's My Line?*, where contestants answered a series of questions posed by celebrity guests in order to ascertain their line of work; similarly, the episode begins with the Scooby Gang filling out a test

that will assign them to a career week seminar. Buffy, whose future is already decided for her, describes the exercise as “this whole week of *What's My Line?* only I don't get to play. Sometimes I just want...a normal life. Like I had before” (“What's My Line, Part One” 9:39). A constant refrain throughout the show, Buffy’s desire for a “normal life” is a desire to return to the innocence of her childhood, the pre-Slayer years when her biggest concerns were about what dress to wear to the school dance instead of the constant presence of evil. The addition of participating in Sunnydale High’s career week to this fantasy expands the definition of a normal life beyond high school to college and a career, though naturally as the Slayer Buffy’s future has been decided for her. The popularity of shows like *What's My Line?* and career questionnaires in American high schools reflects a belief in a direct linkage between labor and identity, that through enough questions you can determine not only who a person is but how they make a living. While Buffy’s usage of “play” and the nonsensical questionnaire itself may poke fun at this gamification of employment, the alignment of a career with one’s identity is the effect of an ideology that seeks to encourage individuals to identify themselves with the needs of capital. Buffy’s need to assert her identity is, in these episodes, explicitly aligned with participation in the free market.

Not all employment is created equal, however. While Buffy may be enticed by the prospect of a career, she rejects Slaying as a job:

If you don't like the way I'm doing my job, why don't you find somebody else? Oh right! There can only be one. Long as I'm alive, there isn't anyone else. Well, there you go! I don't have to be the Slayer, I could be dead!...Wouldn't be much of a change, anyway. Either way I'm bored, constricted, I never get to shop, and my hair and fingernails still continue to grow, so really, what's the diff? (“What's My Line, Part 1” 14:18)

If we choose to go along with the Slaying-as-job metaphor, Buffy’s complaints are largely related to the conditions of her labor; effectively the only member of the workforce, Buffy bears the full

brunt of the grueling conditions and long hours. Buffy sees these conditions as preventing her from living a normal life, which is here signaled as “get[ting] to shop,” aligning her identity with the gendered feminine activity of going to the mall. Clothing is a constitutive element of Buffy’s identity, at times literally shown to “speak” who she is, and the mall is often figured as the site of ever-delayed fulfillment of her wish to be a normal girl. Labor therefore plays a substantial role in Buffy’s identity, just not her own labor. Buffy’s likening of her life as the Slayer to death is thus not simply because she works in poor conditions but because it provides her little opportunity to assert control over her identity. Alienated labor is, for Buffy, comparable to death.

Later on in the episode, Buffy again invokes the employment metaphor in referring to Slaying as a “gig,” which Giles reframes as “more than a ‘gig.’ It’s a sacred duty—which shouldn’t prevent you from eventually procuring some more gainful form of employment,” causing Buffy to reply, “Uh, Giles, it’s one thing to be a Watcher and a librarian...no one blinks an eye if you want to spend all your days with books. What am I supposed to do? Carve stakes for a nursery?” (“What’s My Line, Part One” 19:19). Recognizing that the “sacred duty” justification for Slaying has long since fallen on deaf ears, Giles for the first time imagines a future in which Buffy could Slay *and* individuate herself via a career. Giles adapts his traditional Watcher script within a neoliberal discourse of “gainful employment.” In doing so, he also replicates Buffy’s devaluation of Slaying as unattractive, alienated labor better suited to “someone else.”

### **Toni Morrison’s “Africanist Character”**

Buffy’s primary conflict throughout the show is not with any of her demonic foes, but with Slaying’s infringement on her freedom to define her identity and future. In these episodes

specifically, having a career is positioned as the ideal avenue for self-making. We must be skeptical of any attempt to frame participation in the free market as the impetus for any kind of freedom, and the particular subject to whom this freedom is granted. Historically, of course, this subject has been a white man, but by the 1990s in the United States most upper-middle class white women also have the option to “make something of themselves” beyond their traditional maternal role. How does *Buffy*, in its intervention into cinematic representations of girls' power, mobilize earlier American myths of self-making to construct a new neoliberal girl subject?

Toni Morrison, in “Romancing the Shadow,” argues that early American literature contributed to the construction of the American self as a new, free white man through the strategic use of bound and suppressed Black figures. The New World was figured as a place of unlimited freedom and potential for European settlers fleeing “constraint and limitation,” or, in other cases, “a society perceived to be unacceptably permissive, ungodly, and undisciplined” (34). Yet American freedom not only arose in opposition to Old World values, but also atop the exploitation of Black bodies. As a result, Morrison finds nineteenth-century American literature rife with fear, at once “gothic,” “romantic,” “sermonic,” and “Puritan,” a generic hybrid reflecting the developing American consciousness as it navigated the contradictions and complications of its freedom (36). “What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation,” Morrison writes, “was an American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American...the image of reined-in, bound, suppressed, and repressed darkness [that] became objectified in American literature as an Africanist persona” (38). The visibility of Black bodies comes to signify both unfreedom and otherness, in opposition to which whiteness acquires meaning of its own; racial difference “provided a huge payout of sign, symbol, and agency in the process of organizing,

separating, and consolidating identity along culturally valuable lines of interest” (39). Whiteness becomes synonymous with Americanness itself.

Morrison finds a canonical tale of becoming American in Bernard Bailyn’s 1986 reading of the letters of William Dunbar, a Scottish scientist who in the 1770s “appeared suddenly in the Mississippi wilderness to stake out a claim to a large parcel of land, then disappeared to the Caribbean, to return leading a battalion of ‘wild’ slaves with whose labor alone he built an estate where before there had been nothing but trees and uncultivated soil” (qtd. in Morrison 40). With the simple word “alone,” Bailyn conveniently elides Dunbar’s obvious plunder of raw materials and labor power and rewrites the narrative to one of individual empowerment. By emphasizing the transformation from “nothing but trees and uncultivated soil” to Dunbar’s estate, Bailyn ascribes to Dunbar an almost godlike power over the land. Bailyn describes a parallel transformation in Dunbar himself: “Endlessly enterprising and resourceful, his finer sensibilities dulled by the abrasions of frontier life, and feeling within him a sense of authority and autonomy he had not known before, a force that flowed from his absolute control over the lives of others, he emerged a distinctive new man, a borderland gentleman, a man of property in a raw, half-savage world” (42). While, as Morrison points out, what Dunbar had known before was a life of European theological and scientific education, no amount of intellectual exploration can compare to the “authority and autonomy” derived from his newfound power over Black bodies. Furthermore, tapping into this power—the “force that flowed,” or what Morrison refers to as a “natural resource”—not only allows Dunbar a sense of power over others, but also to remake himself. Dunbar is quite literally a “man of property” in the sense that the ability to own property (land and people) granted by his whiteness is the necessary condition for his new self.

Autonomy, authority, newness and difference, and absolute power come to dominate

American literature. Morrison argues that

each one is made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism. It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity. Autonomy is freedom and translates into the much championed and revered 'individualism'; newness translates into 'innocence'; distinctiveness becomes difference and the erection of strategies for maintaining it; authority and absolute power become a romantic, conquering 'heroism,' virility, and the problematics of wielding absolute power over the lives of others. All the rest are made possible by this last[.] (44)

In the literature of a nation built on the ideal of freedom and the reality of chattel slavery, the American (male) self is figured through individualism, innocence, difference, and heroism. We see American individualism beginning to take shape through Dunbar's repudiation of European "finer sensibilities" for the "abrasions of frontier life" and again in the narrative of his single-handed transformation of his estate. Morrison says that Bailyn describes early America as a "raw, half-savage world" because "there is ready to hand a bound and unfree, rebellious but serviceable, black population against which Dunbar and all white men are enabled to measure these privileging and privileged differences," enabling the new white man to "now persuade himself that savagery is 'out there'" (45). Difference is then employed to separate the "in here" from the "out there," in the process actively constructing both of these spaces. The absolute power of the white American "us," or perhaps the solitary "I," that runs beneath the surface of American society finally comes to be justified through the figure of the romantic hero.

If the American self is predicated on a constructed Africanism, what exactly constitutes this Africanism? Morrison puts forward a number of aspects of Africanism that deserve further attention. First, there is the use of the Africanist character as "surrogate and enabler" (51). The construction of racial difference makes possible the Africanist character as a means of

comparison and self-reflection for white readers. Thus, by looking at specific uses of the Africanist character, we are able to understand how writers actively participated in constructing white American identity: “Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny” (52). The Black body is a fungible body, able to be molded into whatever suits the needs of white people. Second, Morrison calls for investigation into the construction of this difference via language:

how the dialogue of black characters is construed as an alien, estranging dialect made deliberately unintelligible by spellings contrived to disfavor it; how Africanist language practices are employed to evoke the tension between speech and speechlessness; how it is used to establish a cognitive world split between speech and text, to reinforce class distinctions and otherness as well as to assert privilege and power. (52)

Given that silence and an assumed “savagery” are primary aspects of the Africanist character, both what they say and how they say it are key to that character’s construction. Third, Morrison draws our attention to the usage of the Africanist character to “limn out and enforce the invention and implications of whiteness” (52). If the Africanist character is the “out there” to the American man’s “in here,” what qualities do writers ascribe to Africanism to maintain this separation? How are Africanist characters used to “define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters” (52-53)? One final place Morrison identifies for further analysis is the way narratives of Black unfreedom are “a means of meditation—both safe and risky—on one’s own humanity” (53). Returning to the influence of romance on early American literature, how do writers make use of these narratives to grapple with the tensions and fears of American freedom? Morrison writes that “Such analyses will reveal how the representation and appropriation of that narrative provides opportunities to contemplate limitation, suffering, rebellion, and to speculate on fate

and destiny. They will analyze how that narrative is used for discourse on ethics, social and universal codes of behavior, and assertions about and definitions of civilization and reason” (53). These four dimensions of Africanism Morrison invokes here—surrogate and enabler, language as a means of portraying difference, the enhancement of whiteness, and meditation on humanity—provide an entry point to engaging with otherwise silent and suppressed Black figures in American literature.

American individualism, Morrison ultimately shows us, cannot be understood separately from its dialectical opposite, the fabricated image of Blackness in American literature and culture. Why return to early American literature in a chapter on a television show from the 1990s? First of all, Morrison was writing about American individualism in the 1990s, a few decades into the era of neoliberalism, an ideology that, according to David Harvey, “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). This suturing of individual freedoms to market freedoms “seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market,” so that freedom can only be achieved through participation in the market economy (3). Freedom thus becomes reconfigured as the freedom to choose—what career to have, where to shop, what to buy. Neoliberalism also coincides with the second wave of feminism, which succeeded in expanding women’s involvement in a number of fields. As a result of these histories, girls like Buffy are now invited to “make something of themselves” via participation in the free market, in much the same way the early American man was seen to be self-made; that is to say, the exploitation of others provides the condition for white freedom. For though slavery in the United States has long been formally abolished, it lives on in the nation’s economy, politics, culture, and even the Thirteenth

Amendment itself, thanks to that loophole, “except as a punishment for crime.” In the neoliberal era, the majority of labor continues to be performed by a racialized underclass, but it becomes increasingly outsourced to various countries and “zones” outside the continental United States with fewer labor protections. It makes sense, then, that Buffy’s desire for “someone else” to take on her alienated labor in order to individuate herself through a career is answered by the arrival of a Black woman from the Global South. While Kendra’s arrival in Sunnydale is made possible by commercial air travel and globalization, ultimately she functions as an extension of the Africanist character who makes possible Buffy’s position as the free American woman of the late-nineties.

### **Kendra as Africanist Character**

Kendra is constructed as naturally suited to the demeaning labor of Slaying because she is Jamaican. Kendra points out to Buffy that “Your life is very different than mine,” to which Buffy responds, “You mean the part where I occasionally have one? Yeah, I guess it is,” her definition of a “normal life” that she rarely gets to experience coming to stand in for life itself and thus implying that Kendra does not have a life. Kendra continues,

The things you do and have, I was taught, distract from my calling. Friends, school, even family...My parents, they sent me to my Watcher when I was very young...I don't remember them, actually. I've seen pictures. But, that's how seriously the calling is taken by my people. My mother and father gave me to my Watcher because they believed that they were doing the right thing for me, and for the world. (“What's My Line, Part Two” 27:14)

Kendra links her dedication to Slaying to her culture, establishing a proximity between Jamaica and the forces of darkness that we do not see in Sunnydale, whose normalcy relies on the abjection of said forces. This proximity therefore establishes Jamaica as more connected to the savage world of vampires and demons. While Buffy longs to return to a childhood innocent of

the knowledge of these evils, Kendra has no childhood or innocence to return to, having trained to be the Slayer from such a young age. Though Kendra fights evil, she is not wholly separate from it, made visually apparent in her first scene when she is indistinguishable from the demon assassins hunting Buffy and attacks an innocent human, “her feline, feral eyes getting used to the sudden light. She's a predator, a hunter” (Gordon and Noxon 23). Though later seasons of the show explore an underlying connection between Slaying and a darker, more primal force, Buffy is never characterized so far apart from humanity as Kendra is in her first appearance. That Kendra’s connection to savagery is employed for the sake of “the world” brings her perhaps one step above savagery itself, to the image of the “noble savage,” “happy slave,” or what filmmaker Spike Lee has called the “Magical Negro” to refer to Black characters who possess supernatural powers that they use for the benefit of white characters (Gonzalez). That Kendra became the Slayer when Buffy died and arrived in Sunnydale not long after means that “the world” is really just the imperial core, symbolized by the American suburb. Kendra’s Slayer skills and cultural propensity for fighting evil are a resource that can be exported to the United States, simulating colonial plunder of the Global South. Yet to account for the relations of production that structure the lives of the two Slayers would mean admitting that Buffy’s “normal life” is not only not universal but dependent on colonial domination. So instead, the show portrays Jamaica as not only primitive but oppressive, and specifically misogynistic. Kendra has no agency of her own and is instead passed between the patriarchal institution of the family and a representative of the all-male Watchers’ Council. It is unclear if Kendra is, like Buffy, subject to the British Watchers’ Council—which in Season Three is explicitly aligned with an Old World patriarchal order—or if Jamaica is under some other jurisdiction, so there is little insight into the racial dynamics between Kendra and her Watcher, but the element of patriarchal control is there on the surface.

Kendra also has no last name, which Buffy takes to mean Kendra's culture is backwards and causes her to snidely remark, "can you say 'stuck in the '80s?'" ("What's My Line, Part Two" 3:56). This comment, like many other insults Buffy hurls at Kendra throughout the episode, goes unchallenged by Kendra or other characters and therefore so does the image of Kendra as victim of her primitive country's oppression. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly to Buffy, Kendra is forbidden from talking to boys, portraying Jamaica as regressive with respect to sexual politics as well. This construction of Jamaica as primitive as well as regressive makes the alienated labor of Slaying, so constricting to Buffy, a form of freedom for Kendra and thus positions her as the natural "someone else" to take up the calling.

Kendra herself is characterized as naturally obedient, a reflection of her cultural tie to Slaying. Once Giles confirms Kendra's identity with her Watcher, the two men decide the Slayers should work together to defeat Spike and his assassins. This prompts a spirited discussion between Kendra and Giles, leaving Buffy out:

KENDRA: The assassins? I read of them in the writings of Dramius.

GILES: Oh really, which volume?

KENDRA: I believe it was six, sir.

BUFFY: Um, how do you know all this?

KENDRA: From my studies.

BUFFY: So, obviously you have a lot of free time.

KENDRA: I study because it is required. The Slayer handbook insists on it.

BUFFY: Wait. Handbook? What handbook? How come I don't have a handbook?

GILES: After meeting you, Buffy, I realized that, uh, the handbook would be of no use in your case. ("What's My Line, Part Two" 14:00)

Studying has never been Buffy's strong suit; her Slaying duties always come before homework, and whenever a new vampire or demon pops up in Sunnydale, Buffy usually volunteers to investigate around town while the rest of the group researches in the library. So when Kendra demonstrates her superior intellect, Buffy automatically assumes Kendra must have more free time than her, only to learn that Kendra simply follows the rules. Buffy's rejection of studying is

partially a rejection of the idea that life can be lived according to specific rules or memorized facts, so Kendra's contentedness with this approach shows that, though she has been training to be the Slayer much longer than Buffy, she has not questioned the rules, implying a lack of interiority. This clash over studying is also emblematic of the show's opposition of Giles' masculine rationalism (the way Slaying is supposed to be) to Buffy's more emotional approach, aligning Kendra with hegemonic masculinity over Buffy's feminine individuality. Giles' neglecting to give Buffy the Slayer handbook is a recognition of this individuality, even among Slayers. It is worth noting here that the three Slayers we see in the show (i.e. not counting comics, novels, or any other media that expands the *Buffyverse*) prior to Buffy are all racialized individuals, and thus Buffy's unique "case" and exemption from the rules of Slaying can be read as confirming her uniqueness. Kendra, by contrast, calls Giles "sir"—a far cry from Buffy and her friends' frequent jokes at his expense—and offers the Slayer handbook as the obvious explanation behind her actions, as if she has not considered doing anything for any other reason. Kendra is therefore positioned as the natural Slayer, in comparison to Buffy.

Kendra's characterization as passive and lacking interiority causes Buffy to seriously consider letting Kendra take over so that she can live a normal life, literally showing how this normal life is predicated on the labor and bondage of the Black subject. Buffy tells Willow, "maybe after this thing with Spike and the assassins is over, I could say, 'Kendra, you slay, I'm going to Disneyland'...Disneyland would get boring after a few months. But I could do other stuff. Career day stuff. Maybe I could even have a normal life" ("What's My Line, Part Two" 15:53). Due to Kendra's characterization as passive and obedient, Buffy sees her as a natural Slayer—or slave—who could potentially take over and allow her to have a "normal life," i.e. a Disneyland vacation (in the short term) or a career. That Disneyland is the site of this fantasy is

significant for a number of reasons. A multibillion dollar tourist attraction built around the intellectual property of a mass media conglomerate, Disneyland is a shrine to American capitalism. Subdivided into various locations including “Main Street, USA” and “Frontierland,” Disneyland relies on and locates visitors within a fabricated, romanticized version of American history. Unlike the “reality” of Sunnydale, where white suburbia is shown to be perpetually under threat from the various forces of darkness that lurk in its shadows, Disneyland is a site of pure fantasy; the only scares are to be found on roller coasters and in haunted houses, available to those daredevils who want the sensation of fear in a perfectly controlled environment. This is Buffy’s greatest fantasy, that “someone else” can finally take over so she can retreat back into blissful ignorance of all the world’s evils. Yet even Buffy realizes that she cannot live in the realm of fantasy forever; eventually she’ll need to come back to the real world and start a career—the “more gainful” employment Giles prophesied earlier. There is no question as to whether Kendra might want something more from her life, as she was raised to only ever be the Slayer. Buffy, she and Giles seem to agree, is the type of person who deserves more—defying authority, making her own rules. Here she also displays the necessary ambition and competitiveness that is rewarded in the free market. Buffy is the embodiment of the American individual, in a petite blonde package.

Obviously, as the titular heroine, Buffy does not go off to Disneyland. Through Kendra, she realizes the full extent of her unique approach to Slaying. If before Kendra was suggested to be unemotional, her response to Buffy’s suggestion that being taken from her parents sounds lonely confirms this:

KENDRA: Emotions are weakness, Buffy. You shouldn’t entertain them.

BUFFY: Kendra, my emotions give me power. They’re total assets!

KENDRA: Maybe for you. But I prefer to keep an even mind.

BUFFY: I guess that explains it.

KENDRA: Explains what?

BUFFY: Oh, well, when we were fighting. You're amazing, your technique, it's flawless, better than mine.

KENDRA: I know.

Buffy: Still, I would have kicked your butt in the end. And you know why? No imagination.

KENDRA: Really? You think so?

BUFFY: Oh, I know so. You're good, but power alone isn't enough. A good fighter needs to know how to improvise, to go with the flow. Seriously, don't get me wrong, you really do have potential.

KENDRA: Potential? I could wipe the floor with you right now!

BUFFY: That would be anger you're feeling.

KENDRA: What?

BUFFY: You feel it, right? How the anger gives you fire? A Slayer needs that. ("What's My Line, Part Two" 28:07)

The "flawless technique" that comes out of Kendra's disciplined training is subordinated to Buffy's characteristic ability to think on her feet using whatever objects are available to dole out violence and puns. Indeed, mastery of the English language itself is indicative of Buffy's individuality despite the fact that Kendra, too, is from an English-speaking country. By recognizing the power of her emotions that she brings to Slaying, Buffy is able to finally embrace Slaying as an aspect of her identity. She then adopts a sort of white woman's burden in teaching Kendra the value of her emotions, as if everyone should be more like Buffy. After all, if Kendra had been more like Buffy, perhaps she would not have nearly caused Angel to burn alive (a much more gruesome death than Buffy offers to any vampire, let alone her boyfriend) earlier on in the episode. Buffy's emotionality, in contrast to Kendra's seemingly-natural stoicism, ultimately constructs her as the ideal power-wielding subject because she is able to improvise, imagine, and tap into her emotions to make the right decision.

Buffy's constructed superiority to Kendra is made clear in the final scene between the two, when the battle is won and the two have a friendly goodbye. Having ripped what is apparently her only shirt in the fight, Kendra thanks Buffy for her generosity in lending her a

shirt before affirming that, yes, this time she will sit in a seat and not the cargo hold. Buffy then thanks Kendra for her help in saving Angel, to which Kendra says, “I am not telling my Watcher about that. It is too strange that a Slayer loves a vampire...Still, he is pretty cute” (“What's My Line, Part 2” 42:02). The callback to the manner of Kendra’s arrival highlights her shift from an initially aggressive and potentially evil character to a girl who wears fashionable clothes, giggles about boys, and even withholds information from male authority figures. Secure in the knowledge that she is the better Slayer, Buffy can now accept Kendra as a friend and in Kendra’s visual and behavioral changes we see the conclusion of Buffy imparting her Slayer wisdom to Kendra. But it is perhaps Buffy who walks away with the greater lesson; when she tells Kendra, “maybe they won’t fire me for dating him,” Kendra offers up some wisdom:

KENDRA: You always do that.

BUFFY: Do what?

KENDRA: You talk about Slaying like it’s a job. It’s not. It’s who you are.

BUFFY: You get that from the Handbook?

KENDRA: From you. (“What's My Line, Part Two” 42:16)

Kendra’s opposition of Slaying as a job to Slaying as “who you are” parallels the distinction made in these episodes between a job (boring, constricting) and a career (gainful, a means of individuating oneself, the metric for success). Buffy regards Slaying as a job because it does not allow her to live out the normal life she imagines for herself, but Kendra’s very existence shows that it could be worse; her description of Slaying as “who you are” effectively redefines Slaying to a career. Buffy’s unique approach to Slaying lies not only in her attempts to maintain a normal life outside of Slaying, to which Kendra’s external and internal transformations in this scene stand as a testament, but also the *way* she Slays, powered by emotion rather than merely following a handbook. This is why Buffy cannot simply allow Kendra to take over while she takes a vacation or starts a career, why the show is called *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: because even

though she would prefer not to be the Slayer, only she possesses the drive to always do what is right. Kendra ultimately returns to whence she came because Buffy no longer needs her as a reminder of her own freedom and individuality.

### **Conclusion**

The expanding of Buffy's normal life to include the self-making potential of a career is ultimately concluded by the reframing of Slaying as a career, without challenging the distinction made between alienated and unalienated labor or the underlying racial dynamics. Kendra is the show's first named Black character, but her appearance does nothing to augment the show's blindingly white scope of suburban southern California. Instead, in her few appearances, she serves to represent Blackness as unfeminine and inherently more suited to subjugation, foreclosing the possibility that the show could offer Black girls the same types of freedom and power it does white girls. Engaging meaningfully with Blackness rather than reducing it to what Toni Morrison identifies as Africanism would expose the limits of the neoliberal framework that posits freedom and power to be achievable through individualism and the extension of representation to women. Ultimately, *Buffy* merely sutures white femininity to American individualism while leaving the white supremacist logics undergirding the two untouched.

“SHE’S LIKE THIS CLEAVAGE-Y SLUT BOMB”: CLASS AND DESIRE IN *BUFFY*

**Introduction**

It is Cordelia’s call to “check out slut-o-rama” that first brings our attention to Faith, a brunette roughly Buffy’s age dressed in tight red pants and a black crop top with a chest cutout dancing very closely with a boy at the Bronze (“Faith, Hope, and Trick” 13:41). In a callback to the show’s very first episode, Buffy realizes Faith’s dance partner is a vampire based on his outdated clothing, causing her to follow the two as they exit the club. Faith, evidently aware of this fact, is already fighting the vampire outside, pausing briefly between attacks to introduce herself. After tussling with him for some time she runs up to Buffy, asks “can I borrow this?” and without waiting for a response grabs Buffy’s stake and reduces the vampire to ash (“Faith, Hope, and Trick” 15:17). She returns the stake to a speechless Buffy, whose bewilderment reflects Faith’s unabashed flaunting of the code Buffy follows as a Slayer: always be prepared, never put yourself in harm’s way, and remain focused on neutralizing the threat.

Cut to inside the Bronze, where Faith gleefully recounts a story—to Xander’s delight—about fighting vampires naked, before proclaiming “God, I could eat a horse. Isn’t it crazy how Slaying just always makes you hungry and horny?” earning Buffy a curious look from her friends and causing her to reply “sometimes I crave a non-fat yogurt afterwards” (“Faith, Hope, and Trick” 16:08). This moment serves to illustrate the difference between the two characters: Faith openly announces both her hunger and her sexual desire, whereas Buffy shyly admits to enjoying a healthy snack. The use of hunger bears the marks of 1990s diet culture, which exerted pressure on many young girls and women to be thin at the expense of food. While Buffy has a supernaturally fit body and is shown not to need to train to maintain her physique, this line tells us that she still prioritizes what is healthy over what she enjoys. Buffy has not

always been this way, as in a flashback to before she became the Slayer she is seen with a pink lollipop in her mouth; instead, it is Slaying that has caused her to cultivate this self-denial, as it makes her better able to fulfill her responsibilities as the Slayer. As she has embraced Slaying, she has had to learn to suppress her own desires, to the point that the only thing she can really say that she craves is a nonfat yogurt. Buffy's self-denial immediately differentiates her from Faith.

Through Faith's explicit invocation of sex, hunger here signifies desire more broadly. In a previous episode, Buffy hesitates to have sex with Angel not because he is two hundred years older than her or because there could be negative consequences, but simply because "to act on want can be wrong," as if the problem is with sexual desire itself ("Surprise" 7:14). Angel's turning evil as a result of their sexual encounter seems to confirm that desire is the problem, and future episodes will show that even when sex does not unleash a world-ending evil Buffy is supposed to fight, it still stops her from fulfilling her Slayer duties. In Buffy's experience, sex is irresponsible and antithetical to the Slayer's duties, another object of desire she denies herself. Faith, on the other hand, is a Slayer who does not deny herself pleasure, and thus poses a problem for the show that can only be solved by her eventual turn to evil.

I am not interested in discussing Faith's morality or the precise moment in her descent into evil at which she reaches the point of no return. What I am interested in is how Faith is set up to turn evil given her construction as indulgent, irresponsible, and promiscuous. Faith's arc was designed to show "the darker side" of Slaying, or what happens when one gives into the seduction of absolute power (Marti Noxon qtd. in Tjardes 70); this seduction is foreshadowed in the above scene when Faith is shown to indulge in whatever she desires. Faith's purpose in the show is similar to Kendra's, i.e., to limn out the boundaries of what it means to be the Slayer. If,

through Kendra, we learned that Buffy is an individual who uses her emotions to fulfill her responsibility to the world, through Faith we learn that there is such a thing as being too much of an individual. Where Kendra was desexualized, Faith is excessively sexual. Where Kendra was passive, Faith is highly autonomous. Where Kendra was defined by her duty, Faith shirks it. Only Buffy occupies the unmarked position between the two girls, clearly delineating the acceptable mode of female empowerment. In my last chapter, I argued that Buffy's difference from Kendra was really based on racialized emotion and an inability to grant interiority—and therefore subjectivity—to women of color, and Black women specifically. While Faith is white, she is coded as working-class and therefore still marginal to normative Sunnydale society. Faith's indulgent behavior and excessive sexuality are rooted in the historical construction of the lower classes as lazy and sexually immoral, and audiences are left to fill in the gaps in her character with these stereotypes. Defined entirely by her function as Buffy's "shadow self" (Noxon qtd. in Tjardes 70), Faith does not stand on her own as a character; her backstory serves only to highlight her class difference from Buffy, she is characterized primarily by her promiscuity in comparison to Buffy's modesty, and she conspicuously lacks Buffy's affective embrace of her Slayer duty. Her class, sexuality, and lack of emotion are all associated with her eventual turn to evil, upholding Buffy's middle-class white girlhood as the ideal subject position.

### **The Construction of Faith**

Faith, like most side characters on the show, is not as fleshed-out as Buffy is. What little information we do get about her backstory tells us that she is working-class: she is a high school dropout with a neglectful alcoholic mother currently living in a motel in "the poor side of town," far from where the rest of the show takes place ("Faith, Hope, and Trick" 33:58). With only these

vague notions of her class background, the viewer is left to fill in the rest of her backstory. Her first scenes on the show establish her as pleasure-seeking and overtly sexual, traits that mark her as different not only from Buffy but from middle-class Sunnydale society itself. With the knowledge of Faith's class position, these traits make sense within a larger narrative of the working class as lazy and overindulgent. Faith's flaunting of Sunnydale sexual mores becomes a more insidious sign of her inability to control herself and live within her own means. One particular scene that aids in this construction is when she flirts with the motel manager in order to get out of paying \$18 for the night, showing her promiscuity to be a direct result of her economic position. We are left to ponder, is this the first time Faith has used her wanton sexuality to avoid paying for something? Faith falls easily into stereotypes of working-class people as criminals, people whose poverty is the result of laziness and not earning their money the "right way."

This is a stereotype of which the show is well aware. The vampire Spike, for instance, is known for his cockney accent and black leather coat, both of which associate him with London's working-class punk subculture. However, the episode "Fool for Love" shows him to have been a 19th-century poetry-writing aristocrat prior to his siring. It is only after he becomes a vampire that he adopts the accent we know, the change highlighted by the mocking of fellow vampire gang member Angelus. Similarly, the same episode shows his black coat to be stolen from Nikki Wood, a Black Slayer that Spike killed in a graffiti-laden New York subway car in the 1970s. The coat is imbued with a sense of old New York grime as well as an association with the city's Black residents, showing Spike's villain aura to derive from working-class and Black aesthetics. The revelation that Spike's style is merely a superficial working-class affect not only betrays the show's use of working-class aesthetics to create enjoyable villains, but an awareness of its doing

so. The show relies on audiences to also make the connection between working-class style and a certain type of character that revels in their own villainy. It does this with Faith, too, conveying her difference through her dark hair and makeup, revealing clothing, and a tribal tattoo. Her physical presence highlights her “dark” sexuality, contrasting with suburban Sunnydale’s more conservative notions of femininity exemplified by the tattooless, blonde Buffy. Visually and on the level of character, Faith embodies stereotypes of working-class depravity.

Faith’s character arc is similarly lacking in depth, as though Faith were destined to turn evil based on her class position. She lacks consistency, in some episodes materializing for a moment to remind us that she is still there while other episodes omit her completely. A mere one episode after accidentally killing a man and fighting with Buffy over it, Faith nonchalantly walks into the library to judge the Slayers’ new Watcher, Wesley, as though she is still a member of the group. In the same episode, she chokes Xander and rejects the Scooby Gang altogether to take the Mayor’s “job opening,” a phrase positioning her as individualistic and prioritizing financial gain despite the fact that she does not seem to be paid for her work. An episode passes in which Faith does not appear at all, but in the next episode she tells Buffy that something about being evil “just feels right” and launches into the most detailed exploration of her backstory yet: “I just wanted, you know, something to love. A dog’s all I wanted. Well, that and toys. But mom was so busy. Enjoying the drinking and passing out parts of life that I never really got what I wanted. Until now” (“Enemies” 35:56). In the span of one episode, Faith has become a full-fledged villain. Delivering a monologue typical of the role, she attributes her murderous ways to childhood lack, specifically of love and material objects. That one of the only times Faith speaks about her childhood is to trace the trajectory from then to now confirms the connection between her immorality and class background. Her narrative purpose as the “dark Slayer” transcends all

other aspects of her character and her working-class background serves only as explanation for why she turns “dark.”

Attempts to humanize Faith only reify the classism inherent in her construction. Buffy expresses some sympathy for her, saying, “I know Faith's not gonna be on the cover of *Sanity Fair*, but...she had it rough. Different circumstances, that could be me,” but Willow says “No way. Some people just don't have that in them” (“Doppelgängerland” 2:54). Buffy prefaces her sympathy by deeming Faith to be not sane, a judgment that holds upper-class modes of affect and self-expression to be the height of sanity. In her mention of Faith’s circumstances, Buffy explicitly makes the connection between Faith’s criminality and her class status. We should feel bad for Faith, we are told, because “she had it rough” and did not have access to the same privileges that Buffy did. Buffy’s extension of sympathy comes from her superior position, and because she assumes the inverse—that in different circumstances, Faith could be like Buffy. If Faith had come from a more privileged background, we are to believe, things would have turned out differently. If she had a mother who loved her and drove her to school every day, a Watcher doubling as a father figure who helped with her Slaying and studying for the SATs, friends who stuck by her no matter what, she would be a different person. In other words, if she had had access to such markers of class as a stable family and a good education, she would be the right kind of person, the right kind of Slayer. Faith’s acceptance would therefore require her to turn her back on where she came from, to reject her working-class background and assimilate into bourgeois society, becoming “sane.”

Willow, however, rejects any fluidity in Faith’s character, instead attributing her behavior to something “in” her. This explanation seems to move away from class as a motivating factor for Faith’s behavior, but as I have shown, Faith cannot be thought of outside of her class status.

Willow later expands on her position, telling Faith, “I know you had a tough life. I know that some people think you had a lot of bad breaks. Well, boo hoo! Poor you. You know, you had a lot more in your life than some people. I mean, you had friends in your life like Buffy. Now you have no one. You were a Slayer and now you're nothing. You're just a big selfish, worthless waste” (“Choices” 38:39). Taking a rare stand, Willow does not deny that Faith has had some “bad breaks,” but unlike Buffy minimizes both their impact and their role in her downfall. In saying that Faith “had a lot more” than “some people,” Willow accuses Faith of being ungrateful while implying that her value comes from what she possesses. Yet the only possession of Faith’s that Willow can name is Buffy’s friendship, to which she ascribes a redemptive power. Alone, and without the influence of Buffy, Faith is “nothing,” possessing no value of her own. Willow blames Faith for her own alienation from society, describing her as “worthless” and a “waste” and drawing from imagery of the working-class as a drain on society, leeching off of the upper classes. Even though Willow places Faith’s behavior in terms of her individual actions, she utilizes classist tropes of working-class ingratitude and wastefulness to argue that Faith is irredeemable.

Willow’s words echo the myth of what Marx refers to as economic original sin:

Long, long ago there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent and above all frugal élite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living...Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort finally had nothing to sell except their own skins. And from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority who, despite all their labour, have up to now nothing to sell but themselves, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly, although they have long ceased to work. (873)

This is the myth that sustains capitalism. Offering up a historical and ontological distinction between the upper and lower classes, it naturalizes the widespread inequality required for the production of value while masking the immense violence of primitive accumulation. It is easier

to believe that some people are just fundamentally lazy than to comprehend the historical and continual violence that undergirds our economic system. Likewise, it is easier to believe that we can control our circumstances by being diligent, intelligent, and frugal than that our fate ultimately lies in the hands of the capitalists. As long as these traits are upheld as necessary for success, the working classes will always be held to that standard and blamed for a perceived inability to achieve it. While Buffy and her friends fall into the “élite,” Faith is a perfect example of the “lazy rascals” engaged in “riotous living”; she lives in the moment, prioritizing her own desires and temporary pleasures rather than more permanent fulfillment. She does things because they are fun to her, never stopping to think about the long-term. According to the logic of capital, she is poor *because* of the way she lives, rather than the reverse, that she has developed these ways of living because stability has never been a guarantee. When Willow notes a fundamental difference between Buffy and Faith, that Faith has something that Buffy does not that causes her to kill without remorse, she is borrowing from the capitalist myth of the working-class as ontologically immoral.

Faith not only embodies the stereotype of working-class depravity in general, but an age- and gender- specific stereotype of working-class depravity. According to Anita Harris, the early 1990s saw greater interest in the lives of young girls “as new kinds of workers, consumers, and citizens” (15). In her book *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*, Harris observes the creation at this time of two very different kinds of narratives surrounding adolescent girls: the ideal worker “can-do” girl and the troubled “at-risk” girl. While the “can-do” girls are “optimistic, self-inventing, and success-oriented,” those identified as “at-risk” are “seen to be rendered vulnerable by their circumstances—living in poverty, in unstable homes, in communities known for violence, drugs, and crime, and so on” (24). Buffy embodies the trope of

the “can-do” girl: imagined to have a future in college and beyond, Buffy is dedicated to her Slaying duties while also managing her appearance, social life, and academics with a smile. Faith, on the other hand, does not possess Buffy’s focus and is imagined to be Buffy’s replacement once she leaves for college. Faith’s class and education status prohibit her from having the same upward mobility as Buffy, and thus she is reduced to being a source of labor Buffy can call upon, similarly to Kendra. In contrast to the successful can-do girl, the at-risk girl is seen as always-already a failure. Describing the process by which “[s]tructural disadvantage is recast as poor personal choices, laziness, and incompetent family practices,” Harris writes that

The problems of the at-risk are often seen as endemic to the communities they come from, and individual families and cultural groupings are held to blame for the lack of success of their youth. Incompetent parenting is often erroneously associated with unsafe neighborhoods, which are in turn linked to crime, poverty, and an ethnic demographic...At-risk and risk-taking youth are then frequently seen as inheriting bad attitudes, which trickle down through their communities. (25)

Harris notes here how analyses that take into account class stratification still tend to ultimately blame individuals for systemic issues. This is a tale as old as time, stemming directly from the myth of economic original sin. The problem is identified not with the structural disadvantage Harris names, but with specific behaviors that are seen as setting “at-risk” youth up for failure. Interventions, such as the troubled teen industry, then take place only at the individual level, focusing on disciplining teens and cultivating correct behaviors. Young women in particular who are designated as at-risk “are imagined as both the passive victims of circumstances beyond their control, and also as willful risk takers who use girlpower to their own (self-) destructive ends” (25).

This discourse is played out within the show itself. Buffy blames Faith’s circumstances, i.e. her poverty, while Willow blames Faith’s personal choices. When Willow says that Faith “had” friends like Buffy who give her value, she shows a belief that Buffy can bring Faith into

the fold of acceptable society. Faith's rejection of Buffy is therefore, in Willow's eyes, a conscious choice not to adopt the "can-do" girl behaviors that Buffy embodies. Faith's lack of desire to change solidifies her as the dangerous "at-risk" girl. Faith is demonized for opting out of a system that requires her to prove herself by showing her capacity for success.

### **Faith and Desire**

Faith is also demonized for her embrace of her own desires. We see this just before she cements her outsider status by killing a man, when she and Buffy rob a sporting goods store to supply themselves with weapons. Buffy quips, "think they're insured?" which Faith says is "strangely, not my priority. When are you gonna get this, B? Life for a Slayer is very simple. Want, take, have," shoving stolen goods down the front of her pants ("Bad Girls" 24:46). With "Want, take, have," Faith puts her life's philosophy in terms of desire. It is a philosophy that easily lends itself to illegal activity, which Faith does not care about, naturalizing the relationship between the working class and crime. Faith's turn to crime represents the belief that the working classes are poor because they are lazy and leech off of others. Buffy briefly tries out Faith's method, stealing a knife of her own and looking satisfied with herself, but drops it and obeys the police when they show up. Faith makes wise cracks while allowing herself to be arrested, before convincing Buffy to escape since "we can't save the world from jail" ("Bad Girls" 26:46). Though she believes herself to be above the law, Faith is only able to appeal to Buffy through the language of duty, rather than of desire. As they flee, only Buffy hesitates to make sure the officers are okay, showing that her sense of duty and justice takes precedence over the desire for freedom. Buffy's care-oriented approach to Slaying is contrasted with Faith's "want, take, have" approach, showing Buffy to be the better Slayer. The brief arrest serves to remind Buffy that she

cannot simply have whatever she wants, and she seems shocked back to normal. The next night, when the murder occurs, Buffy can be seen with her usual stake, while Faith brandishes a stolen crossbow, not having learned her lesson. The primary difference between Faith and Buffy is that Buffy has learned to control her desires, while Faith acts on them all.

When it comes to sexual desire, Buffy and Faith could not be more different. Buffy is not wholly without sexual desire, but hers is always packaged in the form of passive crushes; in true feminine form, she privately observes the boys she is interested in but is careful not to make the first move. Faith, on the other hand, goes out and takes what she wants. Her unbridled sexuality combined with her Slayer power makes her dangerous in a way Buffy is not. Buffy's relationship with Angel is generally one of equal power and equal emotional involvement. When Faith has sex with Xander, she holds power over him not only because she is physically stronger but also because she is more sexually experienced and therefore does not have an emotional stake in the situation. This power is shown by Faith being physically on top of Xander, and afterward leaving him naked and vulnerable on her doorstep without looking back. The second time the two have sex is after Faith has killed for the first time and Xander goes to talk to her, believing that because they had sex they shared a connection. The scene emphasizes the power differential between them when Faith says "Like you could make something happen if I didn't want it to?" drawing our attention to the subversion of traditional male/female sexual dynamics ("Consequences" 26:55). Uninterested in talk, Faith pushes Xander onto the bed, saying, "you want to feel a connection? It's just skin. I see. I want. I take. I forget," as he insists their first time was more than that ("Consequences" 29:06). Faith's emotional detachment from sex becomes explicit here, showing her to be guided purely by her own sexual desire. The substitution of "I forget" for "I have" in Faith's philosophy further portrays her as cold and unfeeling for denying

sex and virginity the heightened status they are granted in mainstream society. Continuing to hold Xander down, Faith tells him, “I could do anything to you right now and you want me to. I could make you scream. I could make you die,” before beginning to choke him (“Consequences” 29:22). Faith employs the language of the rapist, reveling in her power over Xander and using his own desire for her as justification for his violation. The subversion of sexual dynamics finds its logical end in the female rapist. Rape is here severed from the structural forces that sanction and encourage it, instead locating it in physical dominance and sexual desire. The close-up on Xander saying “no, wait, it was more than that,” just before being choked emphasizes the emotional impact of realizing Faith does not care about him beyond sex just as much as the physical attack on him. Sexual violence and Faith’s lack of intimacy are linked here and taken equally seriously. This equal treatment is especially damning given that up until now a core feature of Xander’s character has been his desire for sex, directed primarily at Buffy but also at the majority of the women he comes into contact with. Xander’s desire for sex is naturalized by the fact that he is a teenage boy (“I’m seventeen. Looking at linoleum makes me want to have sex,” he says in “Innocence”), but Faith’s desire for sex has from the beginning been suspect. That Xander did not explicitly consent to Faith during either of the times the two have sex is less important to the show than the fact that he wanted her and she only “used” him. It is thus her desire for sex unconnected to romance, and by extension her unfeminine sexuality, that is villainized here.

Normative monogamous relationships are again upheld as the correct form of sexuality in season four when Buffy and Faith switch bodies, as Faith learns the value of romance. One of the first things Faith does in Buffy’s body is have sex with Buffy’s boyfriend, Riley. She is immediately different from Buffy when she has sex, leaving the door open and asking, “How do

you want me?” but Riley does not notice (“Who Are You?” 26:23). Her immediate jump to fantasies and roleplay is reminiscent of her second encounter with Xander, where she also asks a variety of questions such as “lights on or off, kinks or vanilla?” (“Consequences” 28:46). Both of these instances show Faith’s sexuality to be lacking in seriousness. When Riley is not receptive, Faith tells him, “well if you don’t want to play—” and he interrupts, “Right. I don’t wanna play,” casting normative, monogamous sex as more “real” and correct than other expressions of sexuality (“Who Are You?” 26:52). When Riley tells Faith-as-Buffy that he loves her, Faith is disturbed, asking in a quiet voice, “what do you want from her?” (“Who Are You?” 29:22). This scene lets us know that Faith has never had a loving relationship, offering that up as an explanation for why she only values pleasure. Though Faith was previously portrayed as inherently gravitating to her pleasure, this episode introduces the idea that there is a reason for Faith’s abnormal sexuality, implying that she has only been told she is loved by men who wanted something from her. Now that we understand Faith’s separation of sex and romance to be the result of her bad experiences with men, she appears more sympathetic and similar to Buffy; not an evil villain, but simply a girl victimized by men. Also while in Buffy’s body, Faith saves a girl from a vampire and stares at her strangely as she thanks her, as though it has never occurred to her that she can be accepted for doing her job to protect people. This moment and the realization that there are honest men out there serve to teach Faith the benefits of being like Buffy, and when we next see her she is on the *Angel* spinoff series turning herself in to the police. Once Faith’s prioritization of sex over romance is revealed to be the result of negative experiences with men, she is able to overcome these negative experiences and redeem herself, denaturalizing non-normative sexuality.

Faith's redemption occurs concurrently with a monogamous relationship. In season seven, she returns to *Buffy* and begins dating Principal Wood, whom Lorna Jowett in *Sex and the Slayer* regards as a "domesticator" of Faith:

His relationship with Faith begins as a sexual one, and he matches her in boasting of sexual prowess, but he has more to offer. That he survives to "surprise" Faith with the realisation that some men are "pretty decent guys" is a clear indication that Faith's redemption is complete—she wins the reward of romance ("Chosen"). Implicitly this also includes "proper" gendering through heterosexual romance...rather than simply allowing her to exercise her sexual and physical power, [the relationship] encourages Faith to articulate emotion (in "Touched" she tells Wood that the Mayor was "like a dad" to her). (89)

Apparently rehabilitated after serving time in jail, Faith is no longer driven by desire. Following up on the implication that Faith is hostile to the men she meets because she has had bad experiences with men in the past, she learns through her relationship with Wood that a loving relationship is possible for her. As Jowett notes, the relationship brings Faith in closer proximity to normative expressions of gender, such as being emotional. The "reward of romance" is granted to Faith as she is brought in from beyond the limits of acceptable gender and sexuality.

### **Faith and Emotion**

Faith's inability to articulate emotion is, in a sense, her true crime. We have already seen this in the conflation of sexual violence with her emotional detachment from sex. If one does not visibly display their emotions, it seems, they cannot be trusted to wield power. Just after the accidental murder, Buffy confronts Faith in her motel room, saying that "you can shut off all the emotions that you want. But eventually, they're gonna find a body," but when Faith explains that she has already taken care of the body, Buffy changes her tune: "Getting rid of the evidence doesn't make the problem go away," suggesting that Faith's shutting off her emotions *is* actually the problem ("Bad Girls" 43:05). One might argue that Faith's reaction is the more level-headed

one, taking care of the evidence so that the Slayers do not have to deal with a criminal investigation on top of fighting demons, but the show does not see it that way. Angel's character establishes that having a soul means feeling remorse for one's misdeeds, allowing him to be redeemed despite the great evils he has committed. Guilt is therefore a humanizing, redeeming emotion, and one that Faith does not seem to possess, rendering her less human than the ensouled vampire. Of course, Faith may very well feel remorse, given a scene of her returning to the body to stare at (and possibly hide) the evidence of her crime, but we otherwise lack any information as to how Faith processes this traumatic experience. But, as Sue Tjardes remarks, the "previously on Buffy" sequence's continual repetition of Faith's assertion that she does not care, alongside Giles' assertion that "she's unstable," emphasizes Faith's apathy over her humanity (71). Faith's downfall begins in full once she is shown to lack appropriate emotion.

It is a problem that Faith does not temper Slaying with emotion. When she apologizes for killing the man, she argues that in the grand scheme of things she has more than made up for it with the amount of people she has saved: "People need us to survive! In the balance, nobody's gonna cry over some random bystander who got caught in the crossfire," yet Buffy, already tearing up, replies, "I am" ("Consequences" 14:12). Buffy's tears model the appropriate reaction to the death of a single human, contrasting heavily with Faith's more rational approach. They remind us that Buffy's emotions give her power, propelling her to righteous action but also causing her to feel this loss so deeply. As we have already seen, Faith is driven by desire rather than emotion, and her invocation of Slayer duty here suggests that she believes she can do whatever she wants as long as she also helps others. Slaying is just a job for Faith, rather than a way of life as it is for Buffy. While both approaches generally have the same end result, Buffy's is upheld as morally superior while Faith appears individualistic and careless. Buffy is also an

individual, but she is willing to sacrifice herself for the greater good (as she does at the end of season five). Unlike Faith, Buffy has a sense of guilt that also helps regulate her Slaying. She has learned, after Angel, that her own desires are secondary to her job as the Slayer. She is thus the right kind of individual—singularly recognizable but not taking up too much space, her civic duty taking precedence over individual desire. Faith does not possess this sense of civic duty, disconnected as she is from the rest of Sunnydale society due to her class position. Her marginality excludes her from the moral code around which the rest of the show follows.

Faith's lack of emotions dehumanizes her to the extent that she is able to be killed. When Faith shoots Angel with a poison-tipped arrow, the cure for which is Slayer's blood, Buffy's qualms about killing humans are dashed when faced with the prospect of her boyfriend dying. While death is usually only reserved for vampires and demons due to their lack of soul, Faith is an exception for her inhuman behavior. Recalling that Buffy once told Kendra "You can attack me, you can send assassins after me, that's fine. But nobody messes with my boyfriend!" ("What's My Line, Part Two" 24:08), we know that attacking Angel is, in Buffy's eyes, unforgivable (nevermind that several of her friends have at one time or another wanted to do the same). Faith's killing is unacceptable because she does not care. Buffy's killing is sanctioned here because it is for love. Buffy's decision to kill Faith to save Angel represents the reassertion of proper heterosexual romance over Faith's improper separation of sex from emotion. Through Buffy's failure to capture Faith after stabbing her, the show conveniently avoids showing us our heroine sacrificing another human, even if it is somewhat justified. Instead, Buffy offers herself up to Angel and he feeds on her in an erotically-charged scene. Though the two are in the midst of a breakup after Angel realizes (albeit late) that the two cannot have a future together—i.e., meaning marriage and domestic bliss—the constraints on their love are, for the moment,

forgotten as the two embrace in a manner reminiscent of their sex scene the prior season. Despite the breakup, Buffy will be forever marked by Angel's bite, symbolizing their love's triumph over Faith's attack on it. Buffy, wearing a leather jacket and red leather pants, has been transformed by Faith into an almost-killer, but her love brings her back from the point of no return in a way that will be foreclosed to Faith until her romance with Principal Wood several years later.

### **Conclusion**

If Kendra could not be “the” Slayer because of her Blackness and lack of feminine individuality, Faith cannot be the Slayer because of her class status, improper sexuality, and lack of feminine emotions. Both of these characters serve to position Buffy as the correct kind of girl. In the very episode in which Faith first appears, Buffy tells her friends that she wants to “date, and shop, and hang out, and go to school, and save the world from unspeakable demons—you know, I want to do girly stuff” (“Faith, Hope, and Trick” 2:42). Although the third item in the list is a tongue-in-cheek remark highlighting how Buffy does not get to truly be “just a girl,” the joke actually serves to reinforce the idea that fighting demons is *not* girly. To be a girl is synonymous with Buffy's idea of a normal life, one centered around high school and friends. This is an idea of girlhood that assumes access to both education and ample leisure time, categorically excluding Faith as a high school dropout who has had to take survival into her own hands. In the season five finale, Buffy again associates girlhood with leisure when a shocked vampire points out that she is just a girl and she replies “that's what I keep saying” (“The Gift” 3:00). While the individualized nature of Slaying places a heavy burden on Buffy, here she argues for her exclusion from the labor expected of her on the basis of her girlhood. The show's continual references to girlhood as outside of labor betrays a view of girlhood based entirely on

middle-class white girls. Faith immediately diverges from this norm when she barter with her sexuality in order to live at the motel. Her class status and sexual desire cohere in this moment to bar her from hegemonic girlhood. Furthermore, Faith's sexuality and independence make her appear much older than Buffy despite the fact that they are roughly the same age. Faith's adultification grants her less sympathy than Buffy and places more blame on Faith for her bad decisions. Were she granted the privilege of being seen as a girl, her relationship with the Mayor might have instead been portrayed in a more predatory light, rather than simply the next step in her becoming a villain. Faith exposes the limits of Buffy's girl power technique, asking the question, can you use girl power if you are not, recognizably, a girl?

Faith is not allowed girlhood, but she does not sit comfortably in the category of woman, either. She is a far cry from the feminine ideal formed through the Cult of Domesticity, her class position again foreclosing her entry into normative gender. Lorna Jowett has argued in *Sex and the Slayer* that, relative to Buffy, Faith "adopts a much more 'masculine' independence, using sexual partners to satisfy her needs and then rejecting them and any emotional ties" (86). Despite the show's investment in girls' empowerment, it does not look favorably on Faith's sexual independence because it comes from typically masculine behavior. When Faith symbolically rapes Xander, she is not using girl power, but temporarily inhabiting the trope of the dominant male. If the final girl is a "male surrogate," as Carol Clover argues, and Buffy is the final girl finally "allowed" to be feminine, where does Faith fall? Is she a return to the male surrogate, lacking in feminine sentimentality and turning instead to masculinist modes of achieving power through violence? Yet Faith is not wholly masculine, either; she is sexualized as a woman. Her lascivious display of her own sexual desire puts her body on display for the viewer. We are made to believe that Faith is so sexually appealing that she not only ensnares Xander but even the

level-headed Giles with just a single moment of flirtation. Her control of her sexuality places her at the limits of appropriate behavior for women. If she is a woman at all, she is the wrong kind of woman, not the kind nice young girls grow into. Faith is a crisis of femininity, combining sexuality with power, and can only be contained by her casting as the villain or re-feminization through her redemption arc. Rather than advocating for women to be above men, which is what happens when Faith does take advantage of her power, the show redirects power through emotional regulation. In this way, it privileges the sphere of the feminine, while requiring its women to be recognizably feminine before they are rewarded with empowering relationships. Rather than subverting the trope of the final girl who renounces both sexuality and femininity, through Faith the show ties together femininity with normative sexuality and mandates both.

“WHAT ARE WE GONNA DO NOW?”: THE LIMITS OF *BUFFY*

**Introduction**

The longer *Buffy* goes on, the more it betrays the limits of its model of girls' empowerment. First of all, as some have pointed out, the show does not allow older women to participate in this empowerment, and as Buffy ages her options become more limited to a maternal role. After Buffy sacrifices herself for her sister at the end of season five, the show itself gets darker, a function of its switch to the UPN network that has been read as metaphorizing the problems of young adulthood as opposed to the earlier seasons' focus on high school. Depression, death, and poor sexual choices abound in the later seasons of *Buffy*, making the show feel drastically different than the campy, horror-comedy it began as. By the final season, the show has altogether abandoned the monster-of-the-week style plotlines, focusing instead on the final fight against The First Evil itself. This season is repetitive, with the Scooby Gang's research nights being replaced by endless debates over how to defeat "the thing that created evil" ("Bring on the Night" 15:33). With the arrival of new "Potential Slayers," the metaphor of Slayer as soldier becomes literalized as Buffy becomes drill sergeant of a new army, reaching the limit of her maternal role. Eventually, it becomes clear that Buffy does not have all the answers, and the show begins to problematize her role as leader, but this all comes too little too late. As Arwen Spicer has pointed out, it is ultimately Buffy's own plan to activate every girl as a potential Slayer—as well as use Spike for "cleanup"—that saves the day, undermining the metaphor of collective female empowerment. In this chapter, I will also examine the figure of the First Slayer, another deployment of the Africanist character that is used to emphasize Buffy's modern freedom. Lastly, I will analyze the expansion of the Slayer power to the Potential Slayers, a narrative that is still ultimately limited by the show's imagination of girlhood. Seven

seasons of *Buffy* have shown us that the chosen one narrative cannot be co-opted for feminist ends, because it will only ever result in the championing of individual privileged women and girls. The show's clumsy gesture at the democratization of power is unfortunately too little too late to undo its own individualist messaging.

### **The Limits of Womanhood**

While *Buffy* had an explicitly feminist goal, it fails to positively depict women beyond its youthful protagonist. In “‘And yet’: The Limits of *Buffy* Feminism,” Renee St. Louis and Miriam Riggs observe how the show does not grant emancipation to women older than Buffy. They argue that

for a show that claims to be pro-female, its portrayal of adults is quite gendered; the central characters are the young people and Giles—an exemplary patriarch—and a revolving cast of expendable women. The adult women have a far lesser chance of attaining and maintaining insider status, or of finding the ability to aid meaningfully in the fight against evil, which is the most important feminist activity of the show. The show's final empowering images suggest that past a certain age, feminism ceases to be an option and women must cede their fight to the next generation. (1)

The article offers a close reading of several of the adult women on the show, including Jenny Calendar, who provides an interesting counter to Giles but is ultimately reduced to a damsel in distress; Sheila Rosenberg, Willow's mother who is “simultaneously an ineffectual mother and a nitpicking academic” (6); Professor Walsh, another unsympathetic caricature of the female academic; Olivia, Giles' brief lover who does not even get a last name, is yet another disposable Black woman on the show, and whose “appearances on the show focus on sex, helplessness, silence, and childbearing” (7); and Joyce Summers, the well-meaning but ultimately clueless mother. Joyce's death prompts in Buffy an immediate recollection of her mother having dinner with Buffy and her friends. Rather than showing the integration of Joyce into the found family of

the Scooby Gang, a comment from Xander about vomiting up the food Joyce has prepared (recalling themes of consumption and excess) reveals Joyce to be in a position of subservience to the group. Only Giles moves to help Joyce clear the table, as the rest of the gang remain seated, engaged in their own conversations. The scene cuts to the present, with a dead Joyce lying on the sofa, as if to say, never again will Buffy be able to enjoy those easy moments with her friends, made possible by the service of her mother. St. Louis and Riggs see Joyce as “emblematic of the process by which adult women's contributions are minimized or overlooked as well as emblematic of how this process is linked to the idea of age and an aging body” (9). Following Whedon’s assertion that the episode’s theme is “the extreme physicality” of death, they point out the sound of Joyce’s ribs breaking as Buffy gives her CPR, the “gross and upsetting” thought that Joyce’s underwear might show, and each act beginning with Joyce’s body being processed, all of which draw a connection between the adult female body and death (Whedon qtd. in St. Louis and Riggs 9). They also argue that when Anya says, “There's just a body, and I don't understand why she just can't get back in it and not be dead anymore. It's stupid. It's mortal and it's stupid,” she refers not only to death but to Joyce’s body and by extension her own fears of aging (“The Body” 27:00). “Social irrelevance, aging, frailty,” St. Louis and Riggs write, “all of the negative aspects of adulthood are embodied in the mature woman” (10). Between Joyce and the other older female characters, there are no good options on the show for women as they age, suggesting that the show’s version of feminism is limited to young, attractive women. The older female characters in *Buffy* push the show’s feminism to its limits, suggesting that there is little for women to do besides die or be mothers.

The Slayer role is itself a kind of maternal role, having always been bound up with caregiving. It is a job that quite literally entails taking care of the entire world, blending the

public and private spheres into one domain for which Buffy is wholly responsible. Buffy is constantly having to put her own life and desires on hold in order to fulfill her duty. Early on, she learns that she is unable to have a normal relationship because she will always have to protect the boy she is seeing. In season one, Buffy accidentally brings a boy she has a date with to fight vampires, and rather than rejecting Buffy he finds the ordeal exhilarating and wants to do more dangerous things. It is up to Buffy to be the mature, responsible one and break things off in order to keep him safe. In her relationship with Angel, Buffy acts as a maternal figure, literally feeding him when she has to hide him in her room. Buffy serves as a nurturing, almost domesticating force for Riley as she teaches him how to listen to his emotions and forget his army training. And she quite literally domesticates Spike in that his love for her makes him try to be a better man; she is his reward for becoming more human, and she suffers for it. Being the Slayer has forced Buffy to grow up quickly, mirroring the way girls are socialized to be more mature than boys because of societal expectations that they will be mothers, perversely visualized in the way Buffy mothers the men she dates. Slaying is arguably reproductive labor, on multiple occasions ensuring that the entire world keeps turning. If *Buffy* fails to grant agency and relevance to older women, it also pushes girls to be more adult and take on impossible tasks, failing to move beyond the ideal of women and girls as maternal figures. The show simultaneously demands maturity and youth from girls.

Being the Slayer has prepared Buffy for season five when she takes on a more adult role as the eldest daughter when Dawn is introduced and Joyce falls sick. Buffy puts the good of her family before herself, dropping out of college to take care of her mother and sister. The show places much emphasis on Buffy's relationships, so much so that she is apparently the only Slayer to have relationships with others. Spike tells Buffy that "Every Slayer has a deathwish. The only

reason you've lasted as long as you have is you've got ties to the world: your mum, your brat kid sister, the Scoobies. They all tie you here but you're just putting off the inevitable" ("Fool for Love" 34:21). Buffy's relationships, we are told, give her life meaning. She has fought so hard to have a normal life outside of Slaying, and so much of her definition of a normal life revolves around relationships, whether that be friends and family or boyfriends. Buffy has only been able to balance her relationships with her life as a Slayer by combining the two, asking her friends for help with Slaying. This scene seems to be valorizing Buffy's relationships with her friends. However, Spike does not say that the Scoobies are assets but rather that they and Buffy's family tie her to the world. That they tie her does not necessarily mean an equal relationship, and could more accurately be said to mean that they tie her down. Perhaps Buffy does not have a deathwish because she knows she has so many people relying on her: her mother, her sister, her friends, they all count on her to be there. Buffy is not entitled to her own desire for relief, because she is responsible for so many people.

The value of the Slayer has always rested on what she does for others; Buffy's maternal role is no different. After Joyce's death, Buffy becomes Dawn's sole caregiver. Dawn is the key to an interdimensional portal given human form and sent to Buffy with the knowledge that she would protect her. Dawn is thus immaculately conceived, with Buffy becoming a mother not through sex but because she is shown to possess the innate drive to protect and take care of others. Buffy is therefore not just a mother but takes on a Madonna-like role. When told that Dawn is not her sister, Buffy replies, "No. She's not. She's me. The monks made her out of me. I hold her and I feel closer to her than—it's not just the memories" ("The Gift" 6:46). Buffy suggests here that her relationship with Dawn goes beyond their being sisters. While Buffy could have just as easily emphasized her love for Dawn as proof that they are family, she instead

highlights the fact that Dawn was created out of her in a sort of maternal pride. When the spilling of Dawn's blood opens an interdimensional portal and only its stopping can close it, Buffy chooses to sacrifice herself because the two share the same blood, again highlighting biological connection. Buffy exchanges her life for Dawn's, a sacrifice made so that Dawn can go on to grow up. Because Dawn was created to be protected, she is the pinnacle of innocence, a fact Xander highlights in the episode during a discussion of whether or not they can kill Ben since he is "innocent but not, like, Dawn innocent" ("The Gift" 8:31). Dawn's innocence, like that of early-seasons Buffy, is seen as necessary to be protected. She, not Buffy, now represents that intangible quality known as "girlhood," with being the key serving as its own metaphor for the horrors of fitting in as a teenager. Buffy's exchange of her own life for Dawn's replicates the social valuation of youth that results in the devaluation of older women.

An immaculate figure, Buffy's sacrifice results in her going to heaven, further valorizing her maternal role. While she is dead, her friends pick up the labor of Slaying but find it too difficult even as a collective, so they conspire to bring her back. The Buffy that returns is a markedly different Buffy, suffering from depression, finally having that deathwish Spike warned about. She is angry and alienated from her friends throughout season six, only recovering in the finale when Willow narrowly avoids ending the world and Buffy turns out to be relieved. Buffy spends this particular apocalypse trapped in a crypt fighting monsters with Dawn. The two have a touching moment as Buffy hands Dawn a sword and asks her to fight alongside her, and apparently this is enough to renew Buffy's faith in the world once it does not end.

DAWN: Wait, is ... is that happy crying?

BUFFY: Yes, dummy. You think I wanted the world to end?

DAWN: I don't know. Didn't you?

BUFFY: Dawn ... I'm so sorry. I'm sorry.

DAWN: It's okay, Buffy. It's okay.

BUFFY: No. It hasn't been. It hasn't been okay.

BUFFY: But it's gonna be, though. I see it.

DAWN: See what?

BUFFY: You.

BUFFY: Things have really sucked lately, but it's all gonna change. And I wanna be there when it does. I want to see my friends happy again. And I want to see you grow up. The woman you're gonna become. Because she's gonna be beautiful. (“Grave” 38:39)

Buffy apologizes for having been depressed, as though she is not even entitled to her own feelings as Slayer/mother. All of a sudden, Buffy looks at Dawn as if with new eyes, realizing that she wants to be there to see her sister/daughter’s future, and therefore finding new reason to live. None of the actual reasons for Buffy’s depression, such as the fact that all of the reproductive and Slaying labor are still on her, are addressed here and yet the arc is resolved as though simply remembering one’s children is enough to add value to a life. All season, Buffy has had to adjust to the realities of adult life, and this moment can be read as her finally growing up and accepting the responsibilities thrust upon her, for better or for worse.

Season seven finally attempts to address the fact that Buffy cannot do everything. As Dawn begins her freshman year at Sunnydale High, Buffy’s age is immediately apparent; she is mistaken for Dawn’s mother and later rushes into Dawn’s classroom, embarrassing her. Buffy attributes it to her “mom hair,” but at twenty-one, she seems markedly older than in past seasons. Yet her struggles to bear the burden of Slaying continue. The First Evil poses a threat she cannot face alone. Her failures at Slaying parallel her failures at protecting Dawn, as well as her failures at her new job as school counselor, forgetting the kids’ names and not listening to them as they share their problems. Amidst all of this, how can she lead the Potentials into battle? Rather than a wise leader, Buffy appears out of touch in comparison to the Potentials, despite the fact that they are only a few years younger than her. The word “potential” recalls Anita Harris’ language of the “can-do” girl, a category to which Buffy no longer seems to belong. She appears washed-up, unable to lead.

The show finally makes a critique of the amount of power it has placed on Buffy. As the season goes on, Buffy becomes more and more authoritarian, telling everyone that “democracies don’t win battles” (“Empty Places” 37:04). The show explicitly portrays Buffy as in the wrong for taking on a position as elder and seeing herself above everyone else. The Potentials and Anya question Buffy’s leadership, wondering whether her physical advantage as Slayer makes her actually better than everyone else. Eventually, Faith is chosen as the new leader, and when she leads the group into a surprise ambush it becomes clear that the answer may not be as simple as electing the right leader. The season ends with the supernatural empowerment of the Potentials and all girls, suggesting that collective power is the only way forward.

Yet it is ultimately Buffy’s plan, hidden from the audience until the moment of climax, that ultimately saves the day. Arwen Spicer has argued that, although the metanarrative of season seven champions power sharing, the narrative level refuses the type of dialogic communication that has always been a mainstay of the Scooby Gang’s process. When the gang gathers to discuss the plan, Spicer notes that the most critical stances are that it is radical, but no one outright questions the plan. Instead, Buffy’s plan is presented as the only good option. Yet the plan makes little sense. Yes, once activated, the Potentials-turned-Slayers are able to combine the fighting skills they have gained from Buffy’s boot camp to fight the First’s vampire army, but thirty-odd fighters can barely make a dent. It is ultimately Spike’s amulet, delivered by Angel at the end of the previous episode, that decimates the vampire army. Spicer remarks that “There is no visual evidence that Spike’s sacrifice constitutes ‘just cleaning up,’” as he says, and goes as far as to say that without the amulet, Buffy’s plan would have failed (4). It is thus not the collective empowerment of “all girls” that saves the day, but ultimately the sacrifice of one man. Even

though Buffy tells Angel earlier on that she does not need a boyfriend, Angel and Spike are instrumental to the final battle, suggesting that Buffy would fail without a romantic partner. For all of the season's debates over how to stop the First Evil, its forces are beaten back once and for all *not* by sharing power but by ceding control to Buffy, the individual sacrifice of her one-time sexual partner, and the deus ex machina appearance of the amulet and scythe. Although one might argue that the show had to end with the sharing of the Slayer power, this was not the only way to go about it, and an alternate vision might have had Buffy and the Potentials working together to unleash the power of the Slayer, perhaps through a quest similar to Spike's quest for a soul. As it stands, the final season's emphasis on collectivity ultimately falls short as the final plan lies in the individual. While the season's critiques of individualism gesture at the limits of placing all the responsibility on Buffy, at the end of the day her status as leader is vindicated.

### **The Limits of the Slayer Line**

The Slayer line suddenly becomes very important in the later seasons, with the season four finale introducing the character of the First Slayer. After Willow performs a spell calling on the First Slayer's strength, the latter attacks the Scooby Gang in their dreams. The show clearly locates her within a premodern African context, complete with stereotypical music. She stalks each member in their dreams, the sight of her locs striking fear into their hearts. She invokes the Africanist character as savage long before we even get a full view of her. Even once she appears, she has no voice, and Tara must speak for her:

FIRST SLAYER: I have no speech. No name. I live in the action of death, the blood cry, the penetrating wound. I am destruction. Absolute. Alone.

BUFFY: The Slayer.

FIRST SLAYER: The first.

BUFFY: I am not alone.

FIRST SLAYER: The Slayer does not walk in this world

BUFFY: I walk. I talk. I shop, I sneeze. I'm gonna be a fireman when the floods roll back. There's trees in the desert since you moved out. And I don't sleep on a bed of bones. Now give me back my friends.

FIRST SLAYER (in her own, raspy voice): No...friends! Just the kill! We...are...alone! ("Restless" 39:00)

Like Kendra, the First Slayer is denied agency and autonomy through her lack of speech and name. But like Faith, she revels in the violence of Slaying. She is unlike any Slayer we have seen thus far, reduced to a caricature of an angry, animalistic *Black* presence. Her character mobilizes stereotypes of Africa as backward and oppressive, similarly to how Jamaica is constructed in Kendra's background. Buffy's response suggests a linear move to a free present, signaling the passage to both the modern era and the California landscape when she tells the First Slayer that there are "trees in the desert since you moved out." She further emphasizes the material conditions of her own freedom by asserting that she does not "sleep on a bag of bones." She can be the Slayer and live a normal life—not only does she "walk in this world," but she "shop[s]," portraying her ability to be a consumer as an aspect of her modern freedom. Another aspect of this freedom is the ability to get an education, which allows Buffy upward mobility and helps her form connections that keep her tethered to the human world, unlike the First Slayer. The show has always placed great importance on Buffy's relationships with both her friends and family, showing how the traditionally feminine value of emotional intelligence can also be powerful. In contrast, the First Slayer's rejection of human connection marks her as unfeminine and inhuman.

Upon defeating the First Slayer, Buffy tells her, "You're really gonna have to get over the whole primal power thing. You're *not* the source of me. Also, in terms of hair care, you really wanna say, 'what kind of impression am I making in the workplace?'" ("Restless" 41:13). By referring to the First Slayer's "primal power," Buffy denies her any interiority and relegates her wholly to the realm of raw aggression, in contrast to Buffy's emotional intelligence. Her mention

of the workplace is ostensibly humorous because it relies on the assumption that the First Slayer is *not* the kind of person who would or should be in the workplace due to her attitude or Blackness or both, while we know from past episodes that Buffy is the right kind of person to have a successful career. Buffy's quip utilizes the discourse of respectability to again cast the First Slayer as Other for her Black features and uphold Buffy's white girlhood as the ideal.

While the First Slayer is shown to be wholly different from Buffy, the final season of *Buffy* attempts to grant her sympathy, if not agency. Buffy gets magically transported to the origin of the First Slayer, only this time she is in the First Slayer's position. Three Black men called the Shadow Men chain her up and try to force the essence of a demon inside of her. The Slayer, therefore, derives from the violation and literal dehumanization of the female body. When Buffy protests, the Shadow Men comment that "The First Slayer did not talk so much," emphasizing Buffy's ability to resist over that of the First Slayer and casting the First Slayer as a passive victim. Buffy realizes, "You're just men. Just the men who did this to her. Whoever that girl was before she was the First Slayer" ("Get It Done" 37:18). For the first time, Buffy grants the First Slayer recognition as a girl just like her. It is only through knowledge of the First Slayer's violation that Buffy is able to identify with her. This is a recurring pattern throughout the show, beginning with the season two episode "Inca Mummy Girl," and repeated again with Kendra, where Buffy fights a character then later learns of her oppression (usually shown through a lack of choices) that causes her to be more sympathetic to that character. There is usually a parallel drawn between this character's experience and Buffy's struggle to balance her life as the Slayer that causes Buffy to take a renewed interest in the other character's life. In the case of Ampata, the titular Inca mummy girl, this does not prevent Buffy from killing her and restoring the natural order of things, but in Kendra's case it results in an attempt at assimilation.

When Buffy is made aware of the struggles of other girls, she can only enforce a return to the status quo (while feeling bad about it) or attempt to bring them into the fold of white American girlhood, showing Buffy's superiority.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Buffy's recognition of the First Slayer's plight is less about identification with her experience of sexual violence and more about identifying the perpetrators as symbolic of all male domination, co-opting the First Slayer's experience. Buffy refuses the power that the men offer her, refusing dependence on men and therefore remaking the First Slayer's experience into one of disavowal of masculine power. Candra K. Gill has noted that "having the physically slight, white female confront three Black men and accuse them of violation smacks of early twentieth-century rape narratives in which white women were depicted as the prey of Black men" (51). While Buffy may see the Shadow Men as emblematic of men in general, as Gill points out, there is a specific visual narrative being told by casting Black men as rapists. The show does not interrogate what Buffy's whiteness might mean in this context, instead treating her as an adequate substitute for the First Slayer due to her gender and thus ahistorically positing the existence of a universal patriarchy in precolonial Africa. While misogyny and rape are by no means exclusive to the era of colonization, the show automatically associates Africa with all male domination.

The end of the final season is also put in terms of universal male domination. First of all, there is the character of Caleb, a former priest who now serves the First Evil. Both Caleb and the First Evil paint a picture of evil, and specifically misogyny, as a totalizing force, rather than something all humans are capable of perpetuating against one another. Caleb is a caricature of Christian misogyny, railing against "Curiosity, woman's first sin" and calling girls "dirty"

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<sup>1</sup> For more analysis on the pattern that begins with Ampata and continues through to Kendra, see Ono, "To Be a Vampire on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*."

(“Dirty Girls” 17:09). No longer in shadow, patriarchy now has one face. Interestingly, Caleb’s first episode also features Xander having a sexual dream about the young Potentials, but it and his resulting erection are played for laughs. Because Xander is part of the group, his casual misogyny and feelings of entitlement towards women’s bodies take a backseat to the real fight, which is explicitly figured as against patriarchy through the figure of Caleb. It is further worth noting that the show also does not allow girls to be “dirty,” as shown through the figure of Faith who is sexualized and consequently shown to be immoral.

Buffy invokes misogyny and the Shadow Men again in her grand speech in the finale when the Potentials become empowered, saying, “In every generation one Slayer is born, because a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago made up that rule. They were powerful men. This woman is more powerful than all of them combined. So I say we change the rules. I say *my* power should be *our* power” (“Chosen” 28:30). Buffy again connects the First Slayer’s symbolic rape to patriarchy and male domination, not through the lens of sexual violence but through the language of men telling girls what to do. It would appear the First Slayer’s violation is less important to Buffy than the fact that the men made up rules that would affect her in the future. It would seem that having rules is the ultimate offense to Buffy, who has spent all of her time as the Slayer breaking them. In combination with Caleb’s strict ideas about what women can and cannot do, the show refigures patriarchy to be about men telling women what to do, to which the correct response is the ostensibly feminist assertion that men cannot tell women what to do. By activating all of the potentials, Buffy effectively tells the Shadow Men that they cannot tell her what to do, unlike the First Slayer, who is denied speech both historically and in the present. Through the invocation of patriarchy, the First Slayer’s symbolic rape becomes redefined as generic misogyny that is then used to consolidate the Potentials under the sign of

universal girlhood. The First Slayer becomes recast as purely a victim of patriarchy whose cause modern girls can take up and champion under the 1990s language of women's empowerment.

### **The Limits of Girl Power**

The seventh season "opens upon an Orientalist vista," writes Trish Salah, referring to the first Potential Slayer, a Turkish girl being chased through the streets of Istanbul (159). She ultimately fails to escape and gets stabbed by one of the First's "Bringers," deployed to end the Slayer line. Meanwhile, Buffy trains Dawn in the cemetery, telling her, "It's about power. Who's got it, who knows how to use it" ("Lessons" 2:05). Dawn dodges the vampire, knocking him against a headstone with a clean shot at staking him. She misses and ends up in the vampire's arms, only for Buffy to rip him away and join the fight, evidently satisfied enough with her sister's progress to jump in to save her by beheading the vampire with a sword. "It's real. It's the only lesson," she tells Dawn, "you did pretty well," unlike the untrained and unable to defend herself Turkish Potential. The juxtaposition of these scenes trivializes the Turkish Potential's death, using it as a cheap comparison to the more liberated and powerful white girl. Patricia Pender has written that

[T]he death of the brown girl is central to the 'lesson' for the white girl, in a way that uncannily mirrors the terms of Gayatri Spivak's classic post-colonial feminist critique in "Three women's texts and the critique of imperialism. *Buffy's* Season 7 shifts the ground of Spivak's nineteenth-century British colonial context to one of twenty-first century US imperialism but the message is decidedly similar: the death of the brown girl is necessary to provide for the individual growth of the white girl into a (neoliberal feminist) woman...Whedon and Co. present the Turkish Potential, in Spivak's terms, as the 'self immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer.' (73)

We have seen this before with Kendra. While Kendra's death on its own does not elicit much of a reaction from either Buffy or the show, her lack of autonomy in life served as a lesson to Buffy in

her own individual freedom. While the show makes great effort to show through the figures of Buffy and now Dawn that girls can be powerful individuals, women of color are never granted the same autonomy, or even identification. Instead, they serve as visual reminders of unfreedom, drawing on ideas of the Global South as underdeveloped and backward, particularly with regard to their treatment of women.

The following episode opens with another Potential unsuccessfully fleeing the Bringers, this time in Germany to signal, before the following episodes abandon the motif, that this is a worldwide phenomenon. The death of the German girl serves to bring this phenomenon closer to home, showing that it can happen anywhere. Of course, in subsequent episodes Buffy gathers more and more Potentials in Sunnydale, positing the United States and specifically suburban California as the site of resistance to girl-ending evil. Of the Potentials Buffy manages to save, the majority are white, with one African American girl, Rona, and one Chinese girl, Chao Ahn. While Rona does get to speak back to Buffy, pointing out how “the Black chick always gets it first,” this and other lines serve to characterize her as the angry Black girl, as she is the primary skeptic of all of Buffy’s plans (“Potential” 2:26). Chao Ahn, for her part, is the only signifier of transnational Slayer sisterhood, and her character primarily serves to be the butt of jokes about how she does not speak English. While the show gestures at transnational Slayer sisterhood, it ultimately fails to grant the same level of agency and autonomy to girls of color that it does Buffy.

Buffy takes in all of the girls and subjects them to a rigorous training program, metaphorically turning them all into proper, disciplined subjects. The season seven narrative casts her in the role of sovereign leader. As I argued earlier, the ending of season seven reifies Buffy’s position as leader of the girls, undermining the message of collective empowerment.

Only Buffy's expertise is treated as valid, and the other girls must become like her. For Rona and Chao Ahn, this can be read as a form of assimilation into white American society, though all of the girls are trained to respect Buffy's authority and fall in line. Buffy is upheld as the ideal subject, having been shown throughout the rest of the show to be the right kind of leader: individualistic yet self-sacrificing, emotional yet tempered. She is the ideal neoliberal subject, and the rest of the girls must become like her in order to have a chance at defeating evil.

Buffy and the Potentials are ultimately able to stop the First Evil through the magical dissemination of the Slayer power to all girls. This ending can only be said to empower girls if "empowerment" is taken to mean "physically empower girls." Like the premise of the show itself, the ending seems to assume that girls' oppression stems from their physical bodies, an inherent weakness, rather than structural forces. Unfortunately, girls' position as a class is determined by far more than just their physical prowess, considering that most societies are long past deciding issues of power based on physical might. Physical strength might help the girl who is chased down an alley by a monster (or a rapist), but it does not stop girls from being put into dangerous positions in the first place.

In addition, the Slayer power is rarely useful against sexual violence, as shown by Spike's attempted rape of Buffy. This scene is deeply controversial, and not only because it feels out of character. James Marsters, who played Spike, would later explain that the scene came from

One of the writers, a female writer, [who] had a situation in her life where she... and her boyfriend were breaking up and she decided if she just made love to him one more time, that they wouldn't break up. She ended up trying to force herself on him and decided to write about that. The thing is, if you flip it and make it a man forcing himself on a woman, I believe it becomes a whole different thing. (411 mania)

While the original writer may not have viewed her own actions as rape, that is exactly what the scene portrays. Rape is a particular problem for the series, one that Buffy consistently cannot

handle on her own. Whedon originally wrote the show out of frustration with the trope of a blonde girl getting chased down an alley and killed by a monster, which can be seen as an allegory for sexual violence. Buffy is the answer to this trope, a blonde girl who gets chased down an alley and can defend herself. But whenever Buffy is seriously threatened by the specter of sexual violence, she is never quite able to defend herself. For example, when she is accosted in an alley by three strong “samurai” vampires and it looks like things will take a turn for the worse, Angel appears behind her (“Angel” 4:35). When the Master drinks Buffy’s blood and leaves her for dead, it is Xander who comes to her aid (“Prophecy Girl”). Buffy is never allowed to save herself from sexual violence, and in fact she must always be saved by a male character who protects her innocence. Sexually-coded violence appears to be at the limit of Buffy’s power to defend herself. Conversely, literal sexual violence can only occur when Buffy is de-powered. Spike’s attempted rape of Buffy comes only after a particularly hard fall onto a gravestone, leaving her at a disadvantage. Buffy’s injury makes her conveniently vulnerable to Spike, allowing for this moment to happen before she pushes him away at the last second. She looks at him, eyes full of tears, betrayed in a way we have never seen before. It does not feel like a victory. The girl has defeated the monster who followed her down the alley, but just barely. The relations between men and women are not shifted by the physical empowerment of girls.

It is also important to address the girls we are shown on-screen as becoming empowered. As Buffy’s plan takes effect, we are presented with a montage of moderately diverse girls all feeling the power. They consist of a young white girl playing softball, a Black high school student, a South Asian girl lying prostrate on the ground, a Japanese girl standing up from the dinner table, a white woman stopping her abuser from hitting her, and the softball-playing white girl again, now confident as she is about to hit the ball. Similarly to how at the beginning of the

season, Turkey and Germany acted as shorthand for transnational Potential Slayers, South Asia and Japan serve a similar purpose to show that, even though there are no Asian characters treated with dignity in the show, the Slayer power supposedly extends to them as well. The sequence starts and ends with the all-American softball-playing girl, countering our transnational detour with a return to an image of girls that we are more used to. On the would-be abuse victim, Patricia Pender has written that she “reads to me like white trash ‘getting smart.’ In fact, visually this woman signifies difference primarily by the fact that she is *larger* than all the others...Buffy generously extends her powers to girls whose dress size has edged into double digits” (77). This sequence ultimately shows the limits of *Buffy*’s vision of empowerment for girls. Furthermore, while I would not go as far as to say that the empowerment of girls around the world literally places on them the same burdens that are placed upon Buffy, the fact that it is girls who must change still places a certain amount of responsibility on them. Plus, as Giles mentions in the finale, there is another Hellmouth in Cleveland.

### **Conclusion: The Limits of Sunnydale**

Before their final battle, the Scooby Gang jokingly discusses what they are going to do tomorrow. “I was thinking about shopping, as per usual...I’m having a wicked shoe craving,” Buffy says, showing us that fundamentally, she is the same Buffy she has always been (“Chosen” 25:14). But when Spike’s amulet destroys not only the Hellmouth but the entire town of Sunnydale, going to the mall turns out to be an impossibility. Faith points out that now Buffy is “not the one and only chosen anymore. Just gotta live like a person,” recalling how normalcy has been Buffy’s goal this whole time (“Chosen” 42:51). But now Sunnydale is gone, and so is the mall, so there is no normal for Buffy to return to. She now occupies a liminal space, unable to go

back to her teen years but no longer driven to take responsibility for the whole world. The former paragon of feminist empowerment, Buffy is finally fully empowered by the opportunity to control her own life, presenting choice as the ultimate feminist goal. Girls, imagined through Buffy, can finally do anything—that is, anything that can be imagined by a middle-class, Southern California white girl.

There is perhaps a way to read the destruction of Sunnydale contrary to the show's intended meaning. Throughout the show, Sunnydale has functioned as a signifier for all that must be protected—the home, the family, civil society. The forces of darkness—vampires and demons, but also drugs and crime—lurk in the shadows of the town, metaphorizing the seedy underbelly of suburbia that must remain hidden for the town to maintain its status. If these forces are not stopped, we are told, Sunnydale society itself will be destroyed. And yet in the end it is not these dark forces that destroy the town but those fighting them; the evil is destroyed right along with the rest of the town. I would suggest therefore that the destruction of Sunnydale is the destruction of the lie of suburbia itself, that the good and the bad can be neatly partitioned off from one another. While the show may not be trying to say so, the destruction of Sunnydale actually has the potential to free Buffy from the constraints of having to maintain a normal life, since the Sunnydale mall no longer exists as an aspirational site. This would in turn suggest that it was suburbia, and by extension its cultural norms regarding the maintenance of “normalcy,” holding Buffy back all along.

## CODA: “ONE GIRL IN ALL THE WORLD...”

I first watched *Buffy* when I was sixteen, during the pandemic when my family and I were looking for a new show to watch. It was my dad who first suggested it, knowing my lifelong love of vampires. I remember not liking *Buffy* at first, both the show and the character. I personally could not imagine wanting to give up being a Vampire Slayer for normal, boring suburban life. And I agreed with Angel in the first episode when he says he thought that Buffy would have bigger muscles, because what was the point of having a girl with super strength if she did not look the part? Sure, she was powerful, but she looked exactly like every other popular high school girl on television. From her blonde hair to her perfect makeup and curated outfits to her extensive knowledge of fashion and what’s trendy, Buffy never fails to perform femininity even in the face of world-destroying evil. Let’s just say this was not my experience in high school. Most of all, I resented the way shopping was portrayed as a freedom for Buffy, as though consumerism were some innate aspect of femininity all girls gravitated towards.

I have been writing my frustrations about *Buffy* since freshman year. The concept for this thesis began then, when I wrote a paper for my Introduction to Gender Studies course about white feminism and femininity in *Buffy*. I have long been skeptical of the show’s dependence on the association between femininity and womanhood, and was thinking about how conventions of femininity are built around white cisgender heterosexual women while women who do not fit into that category are heavily policed for their presentation. I saw Kendra as a key example of how Black women are excluded from the category of womanhood. But it was not until I embarked on this thesis that I began to examine Kendra as a foil to Buffy. Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* greatly helped me to move away from the frameworks of diversity and exclusion and understand the role of Black characters in

white fiction. Although Morrison was writing about early American literature and not 1990s television, I noticed how the same tropes persisted across forms. I had begun my study of *Buffy* alongside reading David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, and had been thinking about the role of freedom and individualism in the show, so Morrison's work caused a lightbulb to go off in my head. *Buffy* was not only *representing* a certain kind of girl, but *producing* the right kind of girl. The ideal subject is defined through the creation and repudiation of an Other.

In Chapter One, I analyzed the figure of Kendra as an Africanist Other, characterized as passive, subsumed by her work, and unintelligible as a girl according to the standards the show sets forth. With Kendra as a contrast, Buffy appears to be an autonomous individual. That Kendra is introduced during career week while Buffy is contemplating her future options serves to foreground the two characters' very different relationships to labor and work. Buffy's attitude shows her to be a go-getter who will rise through the ranks quickly to have a successful career, while Kendra is constructed as the kind of person better suited to menial labor. The show thus mirrors the logic of racial capitalism, naturalizing the idea that certain kinds of people are suited to certain kinds of work and thus certain class positions. The ease with which Buffy is able to imagine Kendra taking over for her reflects the way American freedom has always depended on the availability of racialized Others. *Buffy* thus clearly shows how the possibilities of empowerment for white girls in the United States as imagined through economic freedom are bound up with the exploitative relations of production that govern the international division of labor. The empowerment of white girls via the free market is shown to be directly tied to the exploitation of girls in the global majority.

The show articulates its vision of what it means to be a girl not only through race but through class as well. In Chapter Two, I argued that Faith is Othered by the show for her failure

to perform bourgeois femininity. Faith is from the beginning shown to be excessively sexual and lower class, tying these two traits together when she uses her sexuality to bargain for a motel room. Faith's sexuality and class status adultify her, barring her from the category of girl. Faith fares slightly better than Kendra in that she does not die but instead goes to prison, a literal policing of her gender and sexuality. Prison seems to have the desired effect on Faith, as she returns in season seven ready to join the fight against the First Evil. That Faith is able to be redeemed and return while Kendra is easily killed off is due to their difference in race. Faith's behavior is shown to be malleable, while Kendra's is shown not to change. Though Kendra begins to become more like Buffy in clothing and attitude toward the end of her second episode, when she returns in the third she is killed in a way that highlights her passivity, being hypnotized by the vampire Drusilla. Kendra is thus doomed to her passivity, while Faith's bad behavior can be fixed by the disciplinary apparatus of prison. Faith also appears less transgressive because of the shifts the show has undergone between seasons three and seven, where now all the main characters are adults with their own sex lives. This is not to say that the show's sexual politics have changed however, as through her Principal Wood Faith learns that there is more to relationships than kinky sex. As a result of her changes, Faith is able to be called upon when Buffy's leadership is challenged, something that would never be the case with Kendra because her very character is based around being a follower rather than a leader. The show is able to handle the difference that Faith represents once she is shown to be redeemed because at the end of the day she is white.

In Chapter Three I examined some of the limits to the order established by *Buffy*. One of these limits is that adult women are not granted any agency. Women are revered as mothers, particularly after they are dead, but never have any bearing on the actual plots. While the show is

primarily about the empowerment of (white) girls, it fails to account for the fact that girls grow up to be women and will not always be young and peppy. The show signals Buffy's growing up through the arrival of her sister, Dawn, and pushes Buffy into a maternal role, showing that it cannot imagine women in important roles if they are not also nurturing and domestic. As Slayer, Buffy becomes the heroic woman who can have both a career and a family life. The cultural phenomenon of the woman who can "have it all" is exactly the kind of surface-level feminism that the show has demonstrated all along, praising women for doing the work that has always been expected of them while not addressing the labor inequalities inherent in this work. The story of the First Slayer serves to highlight the conditions of modernity that make possible Buffy's success. According to the linear narrative put forth by this story, women everywhere were universally subjected to the rules of men, but now women have the freedom to stand up and change the rules. But who gets to change the rules? Clearly, Kendra is still subject to the rules of Slaying, showing freedom to be not a linear but spatial acquisition. Faith, too, challenges the rules, but in the wrong way, claiming her freedom by doing what she wants, leading to her going to prison. The show finally shows us what it means for women to change the rules at the very end when "every girl who might be a Slayer, *will* be a Slayer" ("Chosen" 28:30). This version of empowerment conveniently ignores the fact that it was Slaying that was oppressive to Kendra, or that physical strength was not enough to get Faith out of poverty. Being the Slayer is only empowering if one assumes girls' greatest struggle is the assumption that they are weak. Indeed, this may be Buffy's greatest struggle, but if the show has taught us anything it is that Buffy is *not* emblematic of most girls; she is the exception.

Judith Butler has written that "juridical subjects are invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not 'show' once the juridical structure of politics has been

established” (3). My analysis of *Buffy* brings to light the way that Buffy’s character is produced through the exclusion of girls of color and working-class girls, making Buffy’s white middle-class identity the ideal subject position. The show’s intervention into a representational discourse grounded in the slasher film tradition caused the show to center around one particular type of girl, who comes to stand in for all girls. She is not the final girl or the victim, but a wholly new combination of the two that maintains conventional standards of beauty while pushing the narrative of girls as success-bound subjects of the new meritocracy. While in the real world, girls of color are often recruited to play a part in this narrative, *Buffy* reveals its hyper-white, capitalist foundation. *Buffy* thus showcases the pitfalls of representation: that by choosing to represent girls, and furthermore by choosing one particular girl to represent girls, what is represented will never stray too far from hegemonic conceptions of what a girl is. Perhaps the closest the show gets to representing “girl power” lies in “The Zeppo,” featuring an apocalypse set into motion by an all-female race of demons whom, due to the episode’s focus on Xander, the audience never actually sees; within the constraints of the show, true collective female power is unimaginable and thus unrepresentable.

I opened this section with my initial complaints about *Buffy*, but somehow the show found its way into my heart. I cannot help but find its attempt at feminist horror deeply compelling, even if ultimately unsuccessful. There is so much failed potential in the characters of Kendra and Faith, as well as Spike’s quest to become a better man. The show succeeds in creating sympathetic characters, even if they are not always consistent and at times their dialogue makes one cringe. There is an earnest quality to them that can only stem from the initial campy high school drama of it all. And for all my complaints about the way *Buffy* represents a regressive turn to traditional femininity, I cannot help but root for her. Plus, what other show has

a praying mantis substitute teacher, a vampire that loses his soul by having sex, a secret U.S. military complex that experiments on demons, or a lesbian witch who skins people alive out of grief? Along with enjoyable characters, the show's zany plots constitute a deeply compelling internal logic that just has to be seen all the way through. For these reasons, I truly do love *Buffy*, even if at times I also hate it.

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