

**Report on SCW8: The Eighth Biennial *Slayage* Conference on the  
Whedonverses**

**Sponsored by the Whedon Studies Association**

**and the University of North Alabama**

**Florence, AL, USA**

**June 21-24, 2018**

**Reporters: Elizabeth Gilliland, Darrell J. Jordan, and Robin**

**Robinson**

**Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> June  
Welcome Reception**

The eighth biennial Slayage Conference was hosted in Florence, Alabama, by the University of North Alabama. Florence is a beautiful college town located two hours south of Nashville, Tennessee and two hours northwest of Birmingham. Florence is small in size (just shy of 40,000 residents), but big in heart. A quintessential college town, its downtown area is filled with quirky businesses and locally owned restaurants serving traditional southern cuisine. It is home to a number of festivals, both music and social, in addition to various museums, parks, and historical sites. The welcome reception venue was downtown at the Shoals Gold Record Room, a venue that honors musicians such as Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan, and Bob Seeger.

The conference officially began with the wine reception at Shoals Gold, where attendees could register, obtain Slayage gear, and reconnect with old and new friends. After an hour of socializing, Local Arrangements Chair and WSA President Dr. Cynthia Burkhead

welcomed the presenters and attendees to the city of Florence, her university, and the conference. Burkhead continued by giving a brief history of Florence and UNA and quelled any hesitation about the location of the conference by announcing a weekend partnership with Shoals Diversity.

Burkhead closed the reception by thanking the board and volunteers and by offering moving words about the tragic loss of Whedon scholar and *Slayage* co-founder, David Lavery. The reception continued for another hour as those in attendance discussed their favorite Whedon works, papers, and upcoming presentations.

### **Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> June**

#### **Welcome and Opening Address**

The conference's first day of formal presentations opened with a welcome from Cynthia Burkhead, as well as a reminder of two of the projects going on throughout the weekend. The first were buttons provided to any volunteers who wished to help those who wanted a buddy/escort during the events of the conference and in and around Florence. The second was a silent auction taking place, including items from David Lavery's memorabilia as well as items donated by members of the organization, with the purpose of providing a David Lavery scholarship for future conference attendance.

We were joined by David Lavery's wife and daughters, as Matt Spencer and Hillary Yeager explained the David Lavery Pop Culture Archive, an extensive collection (including items from TV studies, Buffy studies, film studies, and counterculture materials, as well as every piece he wrote/edited and other pedagogical materials). They hope this collection will advocate the importance of pop culture studies (primarily television studies) and eventually become the hub of future television studies. Inquiries can be addressed to Matt and Hilary at [mis8a@mtmail.mtsu.edu](mailto:mis8a@mtmail.mtsu.edu) or [hilary.yeager@mtsu.edu](mailto:hilary.yeager@mtsu.edu).

**Keynote: “5x5’: A Memorial Tribute to David Lavery, with Rhonda Wilcox, Stacey Abbott, Tanya Cochran, Cynthia Burkhead, and Stephanie Graves”**

Rhonda Wilcox began the tribute by speaking of Lavery’s innovation and remarkable work ethic, citing both the *Slayage* conferences and *Slayage* Journal as being “really his idea.” In addition to cofounding other journals and publishing books on television studies, Lavery lectured around the world and was a great teacher, proud father and husband, and loyal friend and colleague.

Stacey Abbott followed, discussing Lavery’s pioneering contribution to television studies with his work on *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files*, noting that he made close analysis of television a valid academic pursuit and opened doors for many to follow. He was also innovative in that he did not differentiate between “prestige TV” and pop culture, recognizing artistry and innovation regardless of genre and platform.

Tanya Cochran spoke of her grief over Lavery’s passing and encouraged others to take this as an opportunity to get to know things they did not already know about Lavery, to get to know him all over again. She explained that grief is the evidence of love that cannot be fixed, only carried, and that the burden becomes easier when it is shared.

Cynthia Burkhead spoke of Lavery’s influence on persuading MTSU to have an English PhD, citing his passion on the subject as their reason for ultimately approving the program. She spoke of his tireless advocacy for students and his professional generosity, as well as the “Lavery Effect,” noting how many only came to the program after meeting him.

Stephanie Graves followed by explaining how Lavery provided a different model for what it meant to be a scholar and mentor. She noted the power of his work in legitimizing the television studies field and proving it could be just as thoughtful as literary scholarship. The session closed with time for those in the audience to share their own memories of Lavery.

## **1 Heroes, inside/outside of the Law – “Time for some thrilling heroics”**

### **Ami Comeford: “Helping the Helpless and Saving Souls: Team Angel – An Experiment in Liberal Arts Education”**

Ami Comeford’s presentation highlighted the importance of the liberal arts degree and the various fields within, and how Angel’s team essentially only functioned properly because of their liberal arts collaboration. Comeford disclosed that the top qualities in a Google employee are the following: empathy, coachability, and good communication – all traits of humanities and liberal arts education. Each of Angel’s team members represents a facet of education: Angel represents social and behavioral sciences; Lorne represents the visual and performing arts; Gunn embodies business; and Cordelia is the humanities ...sometimes. Wesley is the liberal arts integration of all of the methodologies, allowing all of the others to succeed as a unit. He knows which team member’s skill should be used at which time. Comeford further explained that he is a crucial member almost from the start, as opposed to other members growing into their roles. She ended her presentation by asserting to the audience that the aforementioned examples show how a liberal arts education can work in modern society.

### **Mary Alice Money: The *Firefly* Capers: “Ariel” vs “Trash”**

Mary Alice Money energetically opened up her presentation by informing the room that the episodes “Ariel” and “Trash” are rarely talked about, especially compared to much more popular episodes such as “Jaynestown” or “Out of Gas.” She then explained the similarities between a heist and a caper, a heist focusing on the execution of thievery, while a caper, similar in nature, introduces elements of comedy. Money considers *Firefly* more of a heist series. She continued by explaining that a heist is a brilliant way to build a television series, and the characters within.

The opening of “Trash” finds protagonist Mal naked, sarcastically reflecting on the past 72 hours, thereby firmly cementing the episode as a caper. The item that Saffron wishes to steal, the Lassiter, is a sly nod to those familiar with the caper genre, as it is the same title as a 1984 caper

film starring Tom Selleck. This is a stark contrast to the heist episode “Ariel,” as the stakes are much higher. Money ended her presentation with the quip, “A bad episode of *Firefly* is probably better than an average show of something else!”

**Michael C. Gilbert: “The Family of Heroes and the Heroic Family: The Structural Co-Emergency at the Root of Whedonverse Stories”**

Michael Gilbert opened up his presentation with the encouraging message of saving the world together. He then detailed systems theory as it relates to the family. More specifically, he connected the theory to Buffy and the gang of Scoobies, and why they work as a cohesive unit. Gilbert described Buffy’s entourage as a heroic family dynamic, because they have a certain number of characteristics: they take in causes, new people, tools, loss, and a purpose, and they put out change. They change the world, through their effective leadership, and put out power into the world. Gilbert clarified by saying the heroic family can never be closed, because there is something more important than all of them. In this case, Buffy is literally saving the world.

Gilbert explained heroic openness as the cause (saving the world) helping to organize the family. The cause gives each person their purpose and roles without strictly defining their relationships. Members of the family can strive for something without harming one another. The family can grow and shrink without trauma, but if there is trauma, it can be truly healed. In the Whedonverse, the family never truly revolved around Buffy, rather around the cause—belonging through a purpose, which makes each member better for themselves and for their purpose.

**2 Roundtable 1: Creative Approaches to Studying Joss Whedon  
Casey McCormick, Hannah Beach-Byrnes**

Casey McCormick began by speaking about her excitement in getting the opportunity to teach a Whedon-centered course, which was tempered by the release of Kai Cole’s letter in August of 2017. Rather than ignoring the accusations leveled against Whedon, McCormick opted to turn it into a “teachable moment”; while these new statements were upsetting as a fan, they gave a new critical edge to the teaching.

McCormick outlined the course goals and resources for her class (including *Slayage*, *Watcher Junior*, and *Joss Whedon and Race*), and explained the use of course hashtags and weekly blogging prompts. She displayed some of the sample blog prompts, such as “close reading fanfiction,” “wiki editing for authority and agency,” and “an open letter to Joss Whedon,” and included some examples of the students’ responses.

Hannah Beach-Byrnes, one of the students of the class, spoke about her own experience in engaging with Whedon’s work, critical scholarship, and assignments for the class. McCormick also explained the final projects for the class, which could be creatively based, including essays with gifs/videos. She spoke of some limitations of the class, such as the difficulty in assessing these more creative final projects, then broached approaches to Whedon studies that need to be further addressed in the future, such as, “How does #metoo affect Whedon studies and our critical methods?”; and “How can teaching Whedon help us rethink Whedon studies?” The panel then opened for discussion about teaching methods, successes, and difficulties.

### **3. Psychology – “You’re supposed to do some mind mojo”**

#### **Heather M. Porter: “Corporate Tools: Examining the Use of Psychology in the Corporations and Organizations in the Whedonverse”**

The presentation opened with Heather Porter giving a brief description of industrial and organizational psychology, by detailing that it is the study of human behavior in the work place and within organizations. She did, however, assure the audience that I/O psychology is more than just human resources, and extends to branches of marketing and management. As there are numerous corporations in the Whedonverse, both large and small (Wolfram & Hart, Rossum, and Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. to name a few), they make for a great case study.

Porter continued by explaining that one of the main goals of I/O psychology in the workplace is to hire employees that are a good match, as this saves on absenteeism and turnover. There are a number of steps to take: (1) Recruitment, (2) The Interview, (3) Testing and Assessment,

(4) Employee Selection, (5) Training, and finally (6) Socialization. At each juncture, missteps and mistakes can occur that will lead to a less positive outcome. For Rossum in *Dollhouse*, they damage the relationship from the start by kidnapping people as their form of “recruitment.”

Porter then presented various motivational models: General Expectancy Theory, Locke’s Goal Setting Theory, and the Reinforcement Model, the final being the most common in the Whedonverse. For example, a positive outcome of the Reinforcement Model would be if Lilah (in *Angel*) gets a new office, there will be a positive work-related outcome; a negative outcome would be if Lilah gets a promotion, because someone else gets decapitated. She further explained that smaller teams tend to be more democratic and less authoritative; for Angel’s team, everyone gets a voice and Angel actually listens to everyone.

Porter closed her presentation by reflecting on a similarity that many of the organizations in the Whedonverse share. No matter how successful they may be in the hiring process, they all tend to be untruthful. This dishonesty ultimately leads to employee dissatisfaction, and rebellion from within.

#### **4. Gender I – “Why Am I always picking up after you boys?”**

##### **Renee St. Louis: “Demon Magnet in the Friend Zone: Reconsidering Xander Harris in the Age of #MeToo”**

Renee St. Louis noted how Xander is constructed and treated very differently from other characters. Often academics tend to steer away from any criticism of him—and, by extension of Joss Whedon. However, with the passage of time and the ability to return and reexamine these texts, we can see how much ideas have changed over the course of 20 years. *Buffy* continues to remain part of current pop culture, with *Buzzfeed* still running articles on the show and cast members turning up in other projects. News stories about Nicholas Brendon cover addiction, depression, and drug abuse, information which becomes increasingly difficult for some fans to separate from Xander. St. Louis argued that when we re-examine Xander’s behavior, we may note

that he is controlling and objectifying; critical and fan response makes note of this, but often excuses his behavior and/or blames it on the women around him. Xander is a character Whedon based on himself, which makes this notable, especially in the wake of #metoo and the letter from Kai Cole.

St. Louis focused on episodes like “The Pack” and “Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered” and incidents like Xander encouraging the murder of Angel in season 2 to show how Xander’s actions are routinely protected, ignored, and even validated. Yet as much as Xander perpetuates these negative behaviors, St. Louis argued, he is also a victim of them. Episodes like “Teacher’s Pet” show how Xander’s almost-rape is normalized, and how his sexual encounters with Faith (rejection, assault) are framed very differently than Buffy’s similar experiences.

St. Louis discussed toxic masculinity in the series and how Xander is shown at odds with hyper-masculine groups (such as Sunnydale’s swim team and Jack’s group in “The Zeppo”). Other hyper-masculine groups, such as the Initiative and the Trio, are shown to be problematic, but many of the issues are never fully addressed and as such, are never fully closed. St. Louis encouraged reading the series with fresh eyes and to make a sincere examination of its flaws, then to incorporate these new readings into our love of the show, not exempt them from it. St. Louis closed her argument stating that we must acknowledge both sides of Xander – the problems and the victimization.

### **Elizabeth Gilliland: “Death of the Author? Joss Whedon and the Question of Feminism”**

Elizabeth Gilliland discussed her personal attachment to (and virtual hero worship of) Joss Whedon and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to introduce how complicated the feelings surrounding new reports about Whedon and re-examinations of the series can prove to be. She explored Roland Barthes’s idea of the “death of the author” in an attempt to distance Whedon’s personal views and beliefs from the series, but explained the difficulty in doing so when he has played such an integral role in the ethos of the show. Rather than removing Whedon’s influence, Gilliland proposed a possible solution by comparing Whedon’s



problematic feminism to his expressed views on atheism that do not always align with *Buffy*'s sometimes blatant Christian symbolism.

Gilliland looked at the examples of "Amends," "The Gift," and "Grave," all of which feature a savior figure helping another character on the path to redemption. She pointed to specific references to Christ that show these comparisons were not coincidental, but seemingly intentional, and questioned why Whedon would include these moments when he claims to be a "hard-line, angry atheist"? Gilliland argued Whedon is not secretly a Christian, but rather that the show may illustrate his honest examination of ideas he finds interesting, even if he may not believe them himself. Similarly, we may view Whedon's exploration of feminist themes not as a manipulation of the audience or an intentional deception about his own ideals, but an honest examination of ideas that he admires but may not fully believe himself (or be able to live up to). Ultimately we can still retain our relationship to the texts and divine our own meaning, choosing to privilege our relationship with the series as the audience over Whedon's as the author.

### **Featured Speakers:**

#### **Ian Klein: "Home is Where the Hart Is: The Domesticated Workplace in *Angel*"**

Ian Klein discussed the importance of Wolfram & Hart's offices to the final season of *Angel*, noting that when Angel and his team move to the offices, more changes than just a blurring of professional and personal spaces. Rather, the site becomes a focused lens of the domesticated workplace. Klein detailed the age-old struggle between corporate America and its "rival," the family, and how corporations try to create a pseudo-family/community by bringing "home" into the office (free food, pets). For Angel, similarly, the incentives at Wolfram & Hart include money, clothes, women, and a juice bar.

Klein further argued that Wolfram & Hart is evil by nature, but in the hands of Angel, it takes on a touch of the sacred; the shared purpose will keep his "family" together; and, in fact, the mission becomes the family. Wolfram & Hart seems to hold up its end of the bargain, but we

constantly wonder how much of this is an illusion (bolstered by the fact that all of it is an illusion, since it was built in Hollywood).

This led to Klein's discussion of the aesthetics, architecture, and logistics that were taken into account in creating the new set (such as Whedon's desired ability to wander seamlessly from room to room without having to cut, a favored filming technique of his). Further, Angel is given his own bachelor pad in his office, eliminating the space between work and home, which means he never has to leave. The open spaces and windows are meant to give the feeling that everything is being done in the open, when in fact we as the audience know Wolfram & Hart operates in the shadows.

Wolfram & Hart relies on a blurring of home and work, right and wrong, good and evil. As such, Klein argued, the workplace becomes a character unto itself, which puts pressure on the dynamics of the group and proves that place/home is an act of creation.

### **Bronwen Calvert: "A Genealogy of the Female Villain in the Whedonverse(s)"**

Bronwen Calvert noted that the "strong female characters" in the Whedonverse get a lot of critical attention, but this usually refers to the heroines, not the villains, unless it is in relation/contrast to the hero character. Similarly, the "hero" figure more broadly in literature has a defined path (Joseph Campbell's Monomyth), but the villain is defined only in relation to the hero as a plot device, what the hero is not. A female villain is further restricted by being what a woman "is not" or "is not meant to be." They are often one-dimensional stereotypes that are oversexualized and inferior to her counterparts. She may have compelling qualities (such as a striking visual presence—Calvert specifically noted the "evil cleavage" trope) but often remains underdeveloped and understudied.

Calvert proposed some broad categories (not meant to be all-encompassing) that can help us to think more closely about female villains. The "recurring character who turns evil" (such as Faith, Dark Willow, and Cordelia) is a character who may or may not be redeemable, whose "good" alter-ego also often shows signs of badness to come, and who is often paralleled/doubled against the hero. The "fluctuating status

as a villain” character (such as Lilah, Adele, and Maggie Walsh) are often represented as having ambiguous motives, and further shown to be operating in male-dominated environments (the corporate world, the military). The “supernaturally powerful woman” (such as Illyria and Anyanka) are capable of destroying the world but must be made less powerful to be rehabilitated into the team (and fit into the hierarchy below the hero). The “powerful non-human entities” (such as Glory, Jasmine, Ada) are uncompromisingly villainous characters, as well as aesthetically pleasing bodies; interestingly, Calvert argued, they don’t need to be female to threaten the universe, but their identification is highly gendered nonetheless. Calvert ended by encouraging us to take inspiration from some of these villainous women to disrupt and subvert the world around us.

## **5 Form “Those of us who write spend our entire lives in an endless English class”**

### **Matthew Pateman: “Edited Out: The Excluded Part of the Troika”**

Mathew Pateman began his session by stating that the TV editor is underappreciated. To strengthen his argument, he reviewed the award categories of the most esteemed entertainment organizations and noted that TV editors are excluded. In addition, the editor is often ignored in academic writings. Pateman argued that the editor is overlooked and underrepresented as a part of the creative process. He challenged academics to consider the role of the editor in their analysis of Whedon’s works.

After his introduction, Pateman provided a preliminary audit of editors involved in Whedon’s shows and discussed how a trusted editor can impact a television program. He focused on the editor Lisa Lassek, who has worked on several projects in the Whedonverse, to demonstrate his point. Lassek has been on the editing teams of *Angel*, *Buffy*, *Firefly*, and all but two of Whedon’s films. She began as an Assistant Editor on *Angel* but was quickly promoted to editor of the series *Buffy* in season six.

In Lassek's first role in the Whedonverse, she served as an assistant editor on the show *Angel* under showrunner David Greenwalt. She worked in a high-stress environment, because Greenwalt had *Buffy* writers write the first few episodes of *Angel* rather than using his newly assembled *Angel* writing staff. Pateman suggested that Lassek was promoted from assistant editor to editor quickly because of her ability to perform during turbulent times. Pateman explored how Lassek's tenure offers stability and centrality to the creative process.

Pateman ended the session by posing several questions about the role of the editor and his or her importance. He asked, "Does the role of editor in TV matter as it does in film? Can the editor contribute to the director's and producer's vision without eclipsing it?" Pateman challenged academia to address the role of the editor in more of their writings and to consider their role when conducting narrative analysis.

### **Molly Brayman: "I'll Be in My Bunk: Sexual Euphemisms in the Whedonverse"**

Molly Brayman's presentation was moved to session 18 (Sunday, 3:45-5:15) due to illness.

### **Tamy Burnett: "Everything You Think You Know ... Is a Lie": Exploring the Double-Double Cross Narrative Technique in *Buffy*, *Firefly*, and *Angel*"**

Tamy Burnett began her session with a thorough explanation of both the definition and origins of the term double-cross. It is a form of the narrative device doubling in which characters and storylines parallel each other. Both narrative techniques are found throughout Whedon's works. However, she argued that Whedon's use of the double-cross remains largely unexplored; even further ignored is the double-double cross.

Burnett explained that the double-double cross is an inversion of the classic double-cross plot device. What separates the double-cross from the double-double cross is who is involved in the deception. While in the double-cross one party is unaware of any deception, in the double-double cross both parties are deceitful. She defined the double-double cross as when one side is anticipating the other party is going to double

cross them, so they prepare to do so beforehand. Burnett explains that this narrative device reveals character and personality traits. It is also an opportunity for audiences to observe the heroes behave in an atypical manner. While the hero or heroes may be attempting to protect themselves from being deceived, their deception is still an act of bad faith. To heighten the tension, the audience is unaware of the hero's double-crossing intentions. This deception of the audience allows them to greater enjoy the upcoming reveal.

Burnett explored the concept further by analyzing the double-double cross in Whedon's narratives and characteristics unique to the Whedonverse. In Whedon's world, the strategy is always executed as a group. The group dynamic increases the tension of the double-double cross and adds an additional level of irony. The team attempting to perform the double-double cross must trust each other despite creating a plan to be distrustful with another entity. The irony is not lost on the team members. If there are already mistrust, cracks, or insecurities amongst the team, the pressure of executing the strategy will heighten them.

Burnett used the episode "Enemies" (1999) of the *Buffy* series to demonstrate her argument. In the episode, Faith double-crosses the Scooby gang and recruits Angel as an aid in her deception. It appears as though Faith, Angel, and the Mayor are working in conjunction. It is later revealed that Angel was acting as an agent for Buffy and was never aligned to Faith's evil plot. Burnett explained how this episode demonstrates the principles discussed earlier. It is enjoyable for the audience, unaware of Angel's true intentions, to see a white-hat behave atypically and makes the final reveal more impactful. The double-double cross provides greater character development of Faith, about whom the audience learns more. Finally, weak points in the team are revealed. For instance, Buffy's insecurities about her relationship with Angel are heightened and a wedge is formed between them. Furthermore, two members of the Scooby gang are excluded from the planning of the double-double cross. This exclusion brings forth strong emotions and heightens mistrust, anger and resentment amongst the team.

## **6 Roundtable II: Art vs. the Artist**

### **K. Dale Koontz, Ensley Guffey, and Paul Smith**

This panel was led by Koontz, Guffey, and Smith (we were missing Masani McGee), and it may have been one of the more interactive roundtables of the entire weekend. Both Koontz and Guffey have authored various publications on Whedon/Whedon-adjacent topics, while Smith hosts a popular podcast aptly called, “Conversations with Dead People.”

The first topic of discussion concerned Whedon and his ex-wife. Koontz described having a physical reaction to the news; not just that Whedon had reportedly had an affair, but that he was described as essentially gaslighting his former spouse. Whedon has worked to make feminism a part of his brand, and Koontz expressed that this situation left the fans feeling betrayed. Guffey countered this by saying he was not surprised that Whedon failed to live up to an idealized version of himself. He followed this notion by saying that just because you are a “lousy spouse” it does not mean it strips away your feminism credibility or your ability to be a feminist. Smith seemed to find himself in a more neutral position. He believes in the need to separate art from the artist and was not as surprised by Whedon’s alleged actions as much as he was by the online vitriol from the fandom.

Koontz offered even more brilliant insight by suggesting that part of the issue is time; Whedon is still alive and active, and these wounds may only begin to heal with the passage of time. Various people in the audience offered their reactions. One scholar said she found the news quite disappointing but did not let it impact her writing or her research. “His interpersonal feminism aside,” she said, “he did help feminism.” Another said that, “if someone promotes gender equality or creates gender or feminist art, then they are still some type of feminist.” Others questioned if it was antifeminist to want to reject Whedon for his indiscretions, but not to reject women who have done the same thing.

While discussions did tend to get heated in this roundtable, everyone remained professional, and the panelists made sure everyone had a seat at their table.

### **Conference Dinner**

The *Slayage* Conference dinner was held at The Mane Room. During the function, winners of the Student, Sineya, and Mr. Pointy Awards were announced. Cynthia Burkhead announced the winners of the Student and Sineya Awards. The Whedon Studies Association provided three student awards of \$750 to help defray conference and travel expenses to students. The recipients were selected based on their proposals and other relevant factors, such as prior conference attendance and/or publications, by current WSA officers and board members. Student Award winners were Jessica Hautsch, Elizabeth Gilliland, and Rosa Gutierrez. Runner-ups were Darrell Jordan and Robin Robinson.

After the recipients of the Student Awards were recognized, a new award category was announced. The Sineya Award is named for the First Slayer in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Sineya, who is largely silenced in the show. The award is intended for a presenter of color, regardless of gender, sexuality, or religion, who presents a conference paper at the upcoming *Slayage* Conference. The long-term goal of the award is to increase diversity within the WSA organization and further its mission of inclusiveness. The recipients of the two \$200 awards were selected by a three-person panel of judges who considered the submitted proposals. The judges included Dr. Ananya Mukherjea (College of Staten Island, CUNY), Dr. Bertha Chin (Swinburne University, Sarawak, Malaysia), and Dr. Lynne Edwards (Ursinus College, Philadelphia). The winners of the Sineya Award were Anna and Rosa Gutierrez (split) and Robin Robinson.

Next, Mary Ellen Iatropoulos announced the winners of the Whedon Studies Association Awards, which are informally known as the “Mr. Pointy” awards. The awards are given annually to the best scholarship in the field of study, honoring published books (Long-Form Award) and essays (Short-Form). Since *Slayage* is a biennial gathering, both the 2017 and 2018 awards were announced. The 2017 Short Mr. Pointy was awarded to Janet Halfyard for the chapter titled “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” published in her book *Sounds of Fear and Wonder: Music in Cult TV*. The 2017 Long Mr. Pointy was awarded to Mary Ellen Iatropoulos and Lowery A. Woodall III for editing *Joss Whedon and Race*:

*Critical Essays*. The 2018 Short Mr. Pointy was awarded to Julie L. Hawk for her essay “Scythe Matters: Performing Object Oriented Ontology on Domestic Space in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*” published in the collection *At Home in the Whedonverse: Essays on Domestic Place, Space and Life* for which editor Juliette C. Kitchens was awarded the 2018 Mr. Long Pointy. The night culminated with a group sing-along of the songs in the iconic musical episode of *Buffy*, “Once More, with Feeling.”

### **Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> June**

#### **Keynote: Cael Keegan “Apocalypse and Everything After: Queer Heroes at the End of the World”**

Cael Keegan noted that in today’s world, each new day feels like the apocalypse, which makes *Buffy* uniquely valuable all over again. Keegan argued that *Buffy* deals with apocalypses not by seeking to put the world back together, but rather by helping us live in destruction, grasp its power, and use it as a tool. Using the term “queer” not just as environments of LGBT but a political perspective on reality, Keegan discussed the idea that perhaps the old world is not worth saving – maybe it is worth getting rid of.

Similarly, Keegan noted, queer figures in pop culture can be those who express resistance to the dominant reality (such as Magneto, Killmonger) whose arguments prove to be somewhat true; the world is fairly bad, so why not tear it down and build something else? Hollywood perpetually raises this question but then collapses it. *Buffy* matters, then, Keegan argued, because no other TV show has matched Buffy’s queer ingenuity, offering a utopian and radically queer aesthetic that barely exists today. Rather than blend into bourgeois heterosexual values, *Buffy* demonstrates the power of queerness to reject assimilation and imagine something entirely new. In Season 7, Willow embarks on an apocalyptic mission to end the world by enabling Buffy to create a Slayer army, and in doing so liberates the future from becoming a monotonous extension of the present.

More broadly, Keegan discussed how the show uses magic to signify queer desire, breaking from the natural world. Willow’s queerness



was unprecedented in network television (and not often repeated). She also appeared at a tense moment in American culture that demanded “positive” queer representation (Ellen, *Will and Grace*). Though there is potential criticism against her representation (she does not identify nominally as a lesbian, for example), Keegan argued that Willow’s non-normalized representation of queerness continues to make *Buffy* a radical text.

Keegan then addressed how the show embraces the “negative potential” of queerness to rebuild the world. As a “non-sentimental queer,” Willow can imagine an alternative future in destroying Sunnydale, moving the show from the law of the “chosen one” to a new democratic vision. The power of one becomes the power of all. Much like Buffy herself, the text is willing to sacrifice its own existence to bring this about. Each previous season has been spent trying to save Sunnydale, but its destruction allows for alternative possibilities, showing that the queer does not capitulate to the social, but that the social must capitulate to the queer to make way for the new.

## **7 Philosophy – “I had this philosophy book checked out from the library for, like, a year...”**

### **Stephen Melvin: “‘Trouble Always Comes Around’: Sisyphian Philosophy in the Whedonverse”**

Stephen Melvin examined the Whedonverse through the lens of Camusian philosophy exploring the *Myth of Sisyphus* and the idea of “philosophical suicide.” He began his session with an overview of Albert Camus and the absurdist philosophy outlined in Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Melvin posed the question, “What is the absurd?” and outlined Camusian philosophy that argues life is meaningless. He then discussed how the realization of the absurd impacts behavior. Those who realize the world is absurd and lacks meaning feel out of place. Melvin argued this principle is demonstrated in the Whedonverse where all characters are out of place, exiled, or outsiders. He offered the following examples from Whedon’s work. Buffy is out of place when she moves to Sunnydale from Los Angeles. The Scooby Gang is made up of high

school outsiders. Last, Captain America is a man from another time who feels out of place in *The Avengers*.

Melvin explained possible reactions to the absurd. The question was posed that if life has no meaning, is the solution to commit suicide? Camus would argue against suicide, and Melvin explained that Camus believed suicide is confessing that life holds no meaning. Whedon's works hold true to this Camusian argument. Melvin drew from the *Angel* episodes "Reprise" and "Amends," the *Buffy* episode "Get it Done," and the suicide attempt of Bruce Banner in *Avengers* to show examples where suicide was depicted in a negative light.

Melvin prompted the audience by asking if suicide is not the answer, what is? He explained an additional option Camus provides – Philosophical Suicide or Leap of Faith. This is an attempt to create meaning, typically using religion. Camus finds this tactic irrational, and the film *Age of Ultron* demonstrates the consequences of leveraging this technique. The characters attempt to create their own meaning, and only the destruction of their leaps of faith allows the film to conclude.

Melvin explained that Camus directs us to look to the Sisyphian Hero for a solution to the conundrum. The Camus solution is to find meaning in the meaningless. Camus used the Greek myth of Sisyphus to visualize his concept. Sisyphus is doomed to push a rock up a mountain for all eternity. This parallels the human struggle. Humans continue to struggle against their repetitive life knowing they will never succeed. However, Camus argues, Sisyphus going up is not what's important but the fact that he goes back down to do it again. He accepts the absurd, and in doing so, he finds happiness.

Then, Melvin described Albert Camus' idea of The Rebel. The Rebel knows the world is evil but still feels it is their duty to fight the bad in the world. The Rebel takes up this fight understanding that the fight will never end. Melvin demonstrated how the philosophy is reflected in the Whedonverse consistently. In the *Angel* episode "Epiphany" and the *Buffy* episode "Gingerbread," Angel and Buffy continue fighting a never-ending battle because there are things worth fighting for. The philosophy is also reflected in the tendency for Whedon's series to have open-ended finales and his films to have open-ended storylines. Neither the *Buffy* nor *Angel* series ended conclusively.

Both ended with work still needing to be done and emphasized the idea that the fight is never over. The season finale of *Buffy* ends with Giles announcing there's another Hellmouth in Cleveland. In the film *Serenity* (2005), after the final battle ends and it appears the heroes have won, a piece falls off the ship. Melvin concluded by arguing the philosophical principle encouraging a continued fight against the indefinitely evil world is in the Whedonverse just as much as it is in Camusian philosophy.

### **Madeline Muntersbjorn: "Dismembered Monsters & Dissembled Selves: Recollecting Fred/Illyria"**

Madeline Muntersbjorn separated her presentation into three segments: Philosophy, History, and the Fred/Illyria storyline. She began her session by discussing the study of philosophy and the central question philosophers ask, "What does it mean to be a person?" She argued that while the question can be explored in different ways, the majority of philosophers argue either body, soul, or memory are responsible for personal identity. Muntersbjorn doesn't accept the "pick one and champion it" approach. She ventured that body, soul and memory work together. She asked attendees, "Who are you? A body, a soul, a story, or a spirit?" She pushed the audience to consider how we negotiate being self-determined but also products of our environmental conditioning.

Next, Muntersbjorn provided a history of monsters and how they have evolved. She started by debating that there is a consensus on the creepy since individuals have communal and inherited baggage. She discussed the origin of the word monster and monster's ancient history. She used a picture of an ancient figurine depicting a monster to demonstrate how deeply rooted monsters are in human history. She reviewed famous philosophers' thoughts on monsters and their origins. Helen de Cruz argued we cannot see humans and animals as separate until we see them together. Aristotle found monsters to be failures and mistakes. Ambroise Paré stated that monsters are outside the course of nature. Francis Bacon believed that nature divides into three states: natural, artificial, and monstrous. Muntersbjorn furthered the discussion by explaining that monsters evolve and concluding that monsters matter because they are as old as human civilization.

Muntersbjorn used the Fred/Illyria storyline in the series *Angel* to challenge the idea of contrasting body, soul, and memory in the quest to define humanity. This strategy could not help us understand Fred and Illyria's interconnected stories when Fred is possessed by the demon Illyria. In fact, Illyria forces Fred to reconcile her past when she was captive in a demonic dimension by demanding everything Fred could not have at the time. Fred does not fully process her captivity until she is possessed by Illyria, who demands power.

Muntersbjorn ended her session by returning to the central question sought to be answered in the study of philosophy: What does it mean to be a person? She argued that the triad of body, soul, and memory should not be contrasted in the hopes of arguing one provides the definition. She contended that our bodies depend on other bodies. Therefore, the triad is best understood as a funhouse mirror whose absurd distortions reflect our fragmented self.

### **Kathrina Schneckloth: "Threshold Guardians in the Works of Joss Whedon"**

Kathrina Schneckloth used Joseph Campbell's text *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which outlines what Campbell calls the Hero's Journey, to explore the narrative structure of Joss Whedon's works. While the text outlines several steps the hero must take, Schneckloth focused primarily on the stage "Crossing the Threshold." In this stage the story moves into Act II, and the hero chooses to take on the journey.

Schneckloth began by defining the threshold guardian archetype. She explained that the threshold guardian signals the move from the ordinary world into the new or special world of the journey. The threshold guardian is often a herald of danger or of consequences resulting from choices the hero made previously. Threshold Guardians are not the main villain or antagonist. They can be a neutral figure that is part of the landscape of the special world. In rare cases, they are secret helpers. They are often lieutenants of the villain.

After providing a description of the archetype, Schneckloth provided several examples of threshold guardians in the Whedonverse, including but not limited to Topher Brink in *Dollouse* and Marty in *Cabin in the Woods*. Marty and Topher are foils of each other and both

characters are portrayed by the same actor, Fran Kranz. This speaks to the intertextuality of the Whedonverse in which many actors portray characters across Whedon's works.

Schneckloth concluded by examining Whedon's preoccupation with choice and possibility. She shared a statement from Whedon in which he finds the "notion that every choice you make means that other possibilities are eliminated forever" scary. Schneckloth contended that this is what makes the study of threshold guardians interesting. They have the ability to affect the hero's journey and choices by blocking and steering the adventure.

## **8 Music – "Like you were in a musical!"**

### **Darrell J. Jordan: "Gender-Coded Diegetic/Non-Diegetic Music: A Stake Through the Heart of Gendered Musical Traits"**

Jordan opened up the session by thanking the conference. He then gave a brief history of gender-coded music, spanning from opera, to Hollywood in the 1940s, and to modern television. His research referenced Philip Tagg's work on television themes and gender association. Feminine musical traits are seen as having longer phrases, even rhythmical divisions, and commonly incorporating stringed instruments; male musical traits are seen as often presenting irregular rhythmical patterns, being much faster, and using electric instruments.

He continued by addressing fellow presenter Halfyard, and her research on Buffy's theme. Buffy's theme, much like Buffy herself, reverses expectations. The reversal of musical expectations extended to the underscoring of the music in Buffy, and the source music, including the musical episode. Jordan even suggested that in the musical episode, Buffy's feminine musical language is used as her strength when dealing with her sadness, while her masculine musical traits were used as a way to showcase the weakening of her constitution. He concluded by saying Buffy's occasional departure from rigid gender musical coding should be viewed as an empowering depiction of femininity and how gender need not restrict character narrative.

### **Jessica Hautsch “Hamilton Goes to Sunnydale: Intertextuality and Rhetoricity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Hamilton* Mash-Ups”**

The visual images of Hautsch’s presentation were notably engaging. She opened up by showing various images of Tumblr blogs and remixes, and reminded the audience that while the mashups are humorous, they observe parallels between characters and themes. The mashups, Hautsch observed, lend themselves to conceptional blending (or blended spaces): (1) Generic Space, (2) Input One, (3) Input Two, and (4) Blended Space. Essentially, the writer can use another word while retaining the original meaning. Neither *Buffy* nor *Hamilton* disappears in the remix, though to be rhetorically impactful, the viewer needs knowledge of both.

Various still images from *Buffy* were then presented, with text from *Hamilton* overlaid. The first image was of Giles in the episode “Two to Go” with the text, “All the way from London! Damn!” Then an image of Buffy with yellow eyes from the episode “Primeval” and the text “Oh look at those eyes!” Neither the lyrics nor the image are funny on their own, though humor emerges from the blending of the images. One of the last images was of Buffy and Dracula, with the lyrics “Down for the count” displayed. Hautsch concluded by addressing the question of racial exclusion. Is this whitewashing and erasure by pairing lyrics from actors of colors with actors with white bodies?

### **Janet (Steve) Halfyard: “Buffy/Faith, Music/Death: Tracing the ‘Death Motif’ Through the Score of *Buffy*, Season 3”**

Halfyard, a regular *Slayage* presenter, greeted the room via Skype all the way from the UK. She commented that the small series of pitches (three notes) she was highlighting are definitely a motif, and not a theme as it is so short. The motif is first introduced in the episode “Helpless” right before Buffy is about to be staked. The three notes are again heard in the episode when she is knocked over by a school bully. Finally, the motif makes a final appearance in the episode, though the third pitch is modified: this represents Buffy feeling betrayed by Giles. Halfyard continued by saying from here, the motif begins to be connected to Faith for the remainder of the season. When Faith sets Buffy up in front of Giles, Buffy again feels betrayed and again the motif is played. When

Faith and the Mayor casually converse about the death of Buffy, the three pitches are again distinctly heard in the underscore.

The motif is modified and becomes longer and more lyrical when Faith attempts to seduce Angel; this may be a different type of threat to Buffy, but it is still about the plot to betray and kill her. The modified motif returns again when Willow and Faith are talking, and Willow insinuates that Faith is irredeemable. In this moment, the threat is turned back around onto Faith, and the music becomes about *her* and her death. The motif again returns in “Graduation Day, Part 2” but this time played on a cello, directly after Buffy has stabbed Faith. Halfyard concluded by saying the “death” the motif predicted was originally Buffy’s, but now it is her own guilt of almost killing Faith.

### **Whedon Studies Association Meeting**

The meeting opened with a brief welcome from President Cynthia Burkhead. Stacey Abbott, Past President, then gave the official report. WSA currently has 514 official members, while the Facebook group had 1185 at the present time. This was the first year for the Sineya award, an award conceived by Samira Nadkarni, intended for a presenter of color. The student award also had three winners this year, with two honorable mentions. There was a brief treasurer’s report from Dale Koontz, before the meeting officially ended.

### **Shoals Pride Kick-Off Event**

The Whedon Studies Association teamed up with Shoals Diversity Center, an LGBTQ+ community advocate group based in Florence, Alabama. Money was raised and contributed to the organization to support their 2018 Pride event.

## 9 Representation I – “Cause the black chick always gets it first?”

### Cori Mathis: “One for the Ages? *Buffy* as a Teen Drama”

Cori Mathis began her presentation by defending the study of teen dramas as an important part of television history. She advocates their study and teaching but concedes some qualifiers need to be added. Mathis commended *Buffy* as a pioneering teen drama for multiple reasons. *Buffy* proved that teens could follow complex storylines. It demonstrated that not all teen dramas have to focus on romance and high school drama. It established that teens want to watch their peers figure out the world. Furthermore, Mathis highlighted how *Buffy* gave visibility and power to its lesbian characters.

Next, Mathis explored *Buffy* within the Young Adult Fantasy landscape and the genre tropes. In this genre, teens understand the world and its dangers better than adults. In fact, teens exert power over adults in this genre. Another trope is that teens age emotionally faster due to the weight of the world on their shoulders. Mathis argued that many of these genre conventions were developed by the series *Buffy*.

Still, Mathis admitted that *Buffy* has its limitations. *Buffy*, who is positioned as our moral center, offers a privileged perspective. According to Mathis, the result is a white, American, and middle-class goal. In addition, there is an erasure of blackness. Mathis reviewed the three black slayers in the series to discuss the show’s treatment of African-American characters. Kendra, exotic and inferior, advances *Buffy*’s emotional growth by demonstrating what *Buffy* should be. Sineya is depicted as primitive and menacing. Nikki is only significant in death. Fortunately, 21<sup>st</sup> century teen dramas have progressed, and there is an expectation of diversity.

Last, Mathis explored *Buffy* and class differences. She used the series’ depictions of Xander and Faith as examples of how the series addresses the working class. Xander struggles with his working-class background. He depicts the working class as something you pull yourself out of and something of which you should be ashamed. Faith’s character depicts that class is an indication of inappropriate transgression. Both characters have troubled home lives and the series equates working-class backgrounds with a dysfunctional home life. Where *Buffy* failed, current



teen dramas fair better. Mathis provided examples of series post-*Buffy* that depicted characters with a more diverse socio-economic status such as *Veronica Mars*, *The OC*, *Riverdale*, and *Vampire Diaries*. In many of the shows post-*Buffy*, the protagonist is of the working class and the morality lies with them.

Mathis concluded her presentation by restating *Buffy*'s importance to the teen drama genre and how it changed the course of television. She maintained that without *Buffy* many of the shows on air today would not exist. While there is a need to address the series' shortcomings, the show can still be admired.

### **Robin Robinson: "Inferior Black Slayers: Race in *Buffy*"**

Robinson argued that while *Buffy* was hailed for its feminist themes and strong female protagonist, it offered little for the black, female spectator. The series has few non-white characters and the few black women in the show serve to uphold *Buffy*'s white womanhood as the ideal beauty and further act as cautionary figures – warnings for *Buffy* to stay inside the social norm.

Robinson demonstrated this by looking at the three black slayers in the show: Sineya, Kendra and Nikki Wood. Robinson explained how Sineya, the First Slayer, is depicted as a primitive savage who cannot speak. Her lack of speech dehumanizes her, and her primitive appearance served as a stark contrast to *Buffy*'s image of ideal white beauty. Sineya is defeated in the episode "Restless" after, Robinson contends, she urges *Buffy* to become independent of the Scooby Gang. Robinson argued that the series used Sineya as both a tool to uphold *Buffy*'s superiority and a way to keep *Buffy* in line with feminine norms of interdependency.

Robinson then explained (following the work of Lynne Edwards) how Kendra furthered the evolved tragic mulatta myth in which the mulatta attempts to legitimize herself and gain acceptance into white mainstream society. Kendra is only accepted when she becomes more like *Buffy*. Her assimilation into the dominant culture weakens her threat and is the cause of her death. *Buffy*'s representation of superiority reigns as she is the slayer that survives.

Last, Robinson examined the slaying of Nikki Wood by Spike, Buffy's eventual love interest. Nikki is one of the two slayers killed at the hands of the vampire. Both are women of color, and Robinson contended that their murders convey how white slayers are valued over non-white slayers. While Spike kills the non-white slayers, he loves the white slayer Buffy. Their inferiority is expressed through the callous nature with which Spike treats them contrasted with the compassion he expresses for Buffy.

Robinson offered two reasons for the negative racial imagery despite the good intentions to produce a show advocating female empowerment. First, the lack of deliberate thought put into creating a text that addresses feminism and gender in a complete and inclusive way by the show's creator. Robinson shared a quote in which, she argued, Whedon admitted to wanting to make a feminist show but not having an interest in talking politics. She challenged this objective since feminism, race, and representation are political issues. Second, women are underrepresented behind the camera. Robinson shared a chart with historical comparisons of women working behind the scenes on broadcast network programs from 1997 to 2017. Women are severely underrepresented behind the camera, and there has been little improvement since 2007. Robinson concluded by reemphasizing hooks' call for an oppositional gaze. There is a need for black female spectators to politicize their gaze and demand alternative texts of their experiences.

### **Catherine Pugh: “Why Can't I Stay?": Sickness, Disability and Redemptive Power in *Angel*”**

Catherine Pugh began her presentation by stating that disability is underrepresented on screen. When it is, the representation typically falls into two stereotypes. The first depicts the person with the disability as their own worst and only enemy. This stereotype is depicted as a person who suffers from self-pity. This character could overcome their disability by trying harder. They need a positive attitude. The character Xander in the series *Buffy* falls into this stereotype. He is the only character in the Scooby Gang without superpowers. Therefore, his lack of superpowers is a form of a disability within the series. He often relies on self-pity and

self-degradation to cope with his “disability” or lack of supernatural powers.

The second stereotype is the “supercripple.” This character beats their disability or obstacle by overcoming it and having a positive attitude. As a result, their disability gives them powers beyond their disability. Cordelia and Doyle’s visions are examples of the supercripple. These visions, while painful and debilitating, allow them supernatural abilities.

Next, Pugh examined how representations of sickness or disability in the Whedonverse can offer characters opportunities for redemption. Pugh analyzed how sickness can be a narrative plot device by reviewing the *Angel* characters Darla and Fred’s dealings with illness. When Darla is resurrected by Wolfram & Hart, she finds herself dying from syphilis, the same disease she suffered from before being sired. As Darla deals with her sickness, she is given an opportunity for atonement by embracing her humanity.

Fred, who is possessed by the demon Illyria in the episode “A Hole in the World,” does not undergo a redemptive arc. Instead, death pushes Fred to fight. Still, Pugh argued, her illness is a plot driver that stimulates growth in all the other characters. In these examples, disability forces characters to rebuild themselves.

### **10 Roundtable III – Joss Whedon vs. Horror**

**Stacey Abbott, Bronwen Calvert, Erin Giannini, Stephanie Graves, Lorna Jowett, and Kristopher Woofter**

Woofter opened up the roundtable discussion by explaining its conjunction with the book *Joss Whedon vs The Horror Tradition*, coming out in September 2018. This discussion, he continued, was also a way to inspire those who study Whedon and/or horror, detailing how the book will focus on Whedon’s revisionist horror, horror concepts and conventions in the Whedonverses, and the TV horror industry.

Abbott’s section was titled, “Monstrous Puppet Masters: Negotiating Violence and Horror in the Whedon Tele-verse.” She encouraged the listeners to think how Whedon’s brand of horror can be seen as reinforcing certain conceptions of the horror genre, and how the

brand often gets discussed in an intellectual way, e.g. monsters used as an allegory. For example, in *The Cabin in the Woods*, they explore the conventions of horror, and remove the restrictions of a conventional horror story. She ended her opening portion by asking whether the small screen is more restrictive because of the confines of television production.

“*Dollhouse’s* Terrible Places: Hauntings, Abjections, and the Repressed” was the title of Calvert’s section. She said that the series is most often cited as problematic for the viewers because of the voyeuristic nature, i.e. technology that can swap personalities. Is this framed specifically as horror? Giannini’s section, “*Forever Knight, Angel, and Supernatural: A genealogy of TV horror/crime hybrids*” examined the influence of *Forever Knight* on *Angel*. She also discussed the casting choices of *Supernatural*, and how it owes a debt to the Whedonverse. Graves framed a close reading of the text and the horror genre, tropes, and illusions through where the references originate in her section, “Inscriptions and subversion: *The Cabin in the Woods* and the postmodern horror tradition.”

Jowett’s section, “Whedon, Feminism, and the Possibility of Feminist Horror on Television” elicited a number of questions: Is Whedon’s work in horror actually famous? Has it inspired a new generation of women? If so, why are white, cisgender men still taking credit? What impact might an experience that is not shaped by a white, cisgender male have on horror? She continued by explaining two bullet points: (1) Horror is about us, power and society, boundaries and limits, things that we the audience member care about, and (2) Horror goes for physical and emotional; it endures as a genre because it tells a story about us and makes us feel. She ended her section by saying that horror allows women to feel emotions that every other day might be repressed. Feminist horror is made to be sensational.

Woofter’s section was titled “Weird Whedon: Cosmic Dread and Sublime Alterity in the Whedonverse.” He discussed *Buffy* and *Firefly*, and how Whedon has placed them between the gothic tradition and the weird tradition in an attempt to turn the gothic away from the past, and toward a violent, terrible cosmic truth, e.g. we are alone in the universe. He also mentioned the radical otherness of monsters (the Reavers in

*Firefly*). This also extends to Buffy and Willow, who struggle with a reality that will not contain them, e.g. Willow trying to destroy the world in season six, or Buffy and Willow radically changing the world in the series finale.

The audience was highly engaged (and possibly star struck?) by the panel of scholars. The session ended with the thought that horror changes because we change; not everyone is watching it from the same vantage point or experience.

### **11 Politics and Nationality – “Still you have to admit I am very British. I don’t say hard ... ‘Rs”**

#### **Katia McClain: “Joss Whedon’s *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*: ‘Sokovia...it’s nowhere special”**

Katia McClain has discussed her concerns about representations of Eastern Europe in *Angel* and *Buffy* in previous conferences, but turned her attention to *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* in this session. The titles in the film establish that the Hydra Research Base is in Sokovia, an imaginary Eastern European country. McClain explained that there is a long history of made-up Eastern European countries in literature and film, from *Prisoner of Zenda* to *Adventures of TinTin: King Ottokar’s Sceptre* to *Molvania: A Land Untouched by Modern Dentistry*. Typical representations of Eastern European people usually have two variants: bloodthirsty brigands engaged in ancient hatred or bumbling Ruritanian peasants. People often seem to be confused about where countries are; in fact, “Eastern Europe” is not a geographic space so much as a cultural representation space.

Whedon does not control the Marvel Universe, but does put his name on the film (calling it a “Joss Whedon Marvel film”) and thus, McClain argued, seemingly claims authorship. His “Sokovia” is filmed in Italy and England, with added Soviet statuary/murals, companies called things like “Sokovia Electric,” and the “natives” speaking a sort of Cyrillic hybrid.

McClain further contended that Wanda and Pietro Maximoff’s names are strange; Maximoff is a Hollywood spelling. Wanda sounds

rather Polish, but Pietro is definitely not Slavic. They reference childhood memories of a war, but there is no indication of what this war is or where it is being fought. The Sokovian people have little to no representation and exist solely to be rescued by the Avengers. The twins' accents go in and out constantly, and some Latvian products mysteriously appear in stores on the shelves. McClain called this "back-droppy representation," which indicates Whedon must not think the audience is smart enough to know the difference.

**Erin Giannini: "The Body Doesn't Matter, It's the Mind That We Want: The Framework as Contemporary Political Commentary in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Season Four"**

Erin Giannini discussed the parallels of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, Season Four, with the current American political climate. She described the penultimate episode of season four displaying through the character Ada an unhinged narcissist with unlimited access to power, which Giannini argued is a metaphor for the U.S. government. She discussed how the show illustrates the dangers of separating the rational from the emotional and concentrating power in the hands of a few.

Giannini explained the show's use of Holden Radcliffe's Framework, in which the mind matters over the body. When the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents enter this space, they live out their regrets/fantasies, as controlled by Ada. One consequence is that in this space, Hydra takes over and institutes a fascist state. Hydra's go-to weapon is mind control and compliance; those who do not agree are sent to "reeducation" facilities. They take control of the media, a process which Giannini argued allows the show to make a number of metafictional digs against the current government (specifically "alternative facts," the Access Hollywood tapes, the softening of historical political issues in textbooks, and the 2016 Presidential election). Just as the media is complicit with the government, Giannini contended, S.H.I.E.L.D. becomes complicit with Hydra.

Other issues also come to the forefront according to Giannini, such as the role of the absent/destructive father and the resulting toxic masculinity in some of the characters (such as Grant Ward and Fitz). Further parallels to the current administration emerge in Fitz's alternate

persona in the framework, in which he says about Daisy, “nevertheless, she persisted,” mirroring Mitch McConnell’s attempted silencing of Elizabeth Warren in Jeff Sessions’s confirmation hearing. Giannini concluded that the show allows a sustained and timely critique on the political and social moment.

## **12 Roundtable IV: Female Leadership in the Whedonverse**

### **Cynthia Burkhead, Julie Hawk, Vickie Willis, Juliette Kitchens**

Not surprisingly, this roundtable briefly touched on a topic that the Art vs The Artist Roundtable heavily discussed: the Whedon scandal. Hawk had an emphatic answer, saying she was not that surprised by the ordeal: She could see Whedon as a one-trick pony, offering a fetishized version of female leadership, whose super power always has an origin story rooted in patriarchy.

Willis asked how Buffy fits in with the martial arts experience. Even though she is trained by Watchers/Giles, she trains the Potentials in a way the Watchers never did. She has a much more hands-on approach, perhaps showing female leadership that might be missing from other perspectives. Willis referenced the *Cobra Kai* series as a positive model of a martial arts woman. One person followed up that Giles could never have trained Buffy that way because Buffy’s methodology has a much more militaristic approach. Hawk commented on the Tai chi scene with Angel and Buffy, and how that may be one of the only times Buffy inhabits the space of truly learning how to fight (and also that it was a ridiculous scene). Burkhead added that in *Into the Badlands*, the audience is dropped into a world where the women already know how to fight and are being trained by other women.

Burkhead stepped in to offer her opinion, saying she is not a huge fan of the way female leadership is modeled. Beginning with *Buffy*, we have a young woman who has to manage and do all of these tasks but is never given autonomy to do it. This represents women climbing the ladder; authority by women is seen as something that has to be taken, not as a right to have in and of itself. As a contrast, Burkhead referenced Princess Leia from *Star Wars*. Leia was sent out, without being watched, to complete her tasks and is given the autonomy to do so.

The next subtopic brought up was female villains. Burkhead commented that the women use more male forms of leadership, like Lilah from *Angel* stepping into the corporate patriarchy. The counter to this would be the hyperfeminization of Glory and Drusilla. Harmony could even be seen as a satirical form of this.

One of the last questions was on Tara, and whether she was a true leader. She did not fall into a male style of leadership role. She was the first to stand up to Willow, and one of the only characters to firmly and gracefully stand her ground. Would Tara have become even more of a leader had her character lived?

### **Cocktails and Conversation with Shoals Diversity**

The Whedon Studies Association teamed up with Shoals Diversity Center, an LGBTQ+ community advocate group based in Florence, Alabama. Money was raised and contributed to the organization to support their 2018 Pride event.

### **Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> June**

#### **Keynote: Mary Ellen Iatropoulos “The Savior and the System: Interrogating the White Savior Complex in Joss Whedon’s Works”**

Mary Ellen Iatropoulos began by discussing the PSA-style ad “Save the Day.” Directed and produced by Joss Whedon, the ad used a number of celebrity cameos to encourage people to “save the day” by voting in the 2016 American President Election, framing a political call to action in terms of the superhero genre. Unfortunately, Iatropoulos noted, the ad did not work; the world did not end November 9<sup>th</sup>, but things have changed, and the impact has especially been felt by immigrants, people of color, and trans individuals.

Further, Iatropoulos argued, the moral imperative to save the day is a problematic pretext for political action and social change; the “savior” mentality can actually be detrimental, especially when it is white people trying to do the saving, as the white savior complex becomes a tool of white supremacy, and one that often occurs in the



Whedonverses. Iatropoulos noted there are a number of “savior” characters in the Whedonverses, who sacrifice themselves in service of others. However, if saving means preventing threats to the social order, how do we reconcile that when the social order is a threat in and of itself?

The idea of an individual solving systemic problems has a long tradition in American cinema, according to Iatropoulos, but this is ultimately a mantra for the privileged. Only a superpowered person can save the day, and these very superpowers can embody imbalanced dynamics of power. The “white savior complex” encompasses people acting from a place of privilege who believe they are the only ones who can solve the social ills befalling the less fortunate, while also dismissing the acts of oppression which have resulted in these social ills that are, in fact, the same systems supporting and sustaining their privileged lifestyle.

Iatropoulos compared this concept to the episode “Chosen” in which Buffy meets the first Slayer—a black woman from an unspecified location in Africa. The episode depicts Africa as a primitive place stuck in the past, and Buffy becomes indignant that these men did not give the first Slayer a choice to accept her powers; however, it can be interpreted that Buffy does the same when she and Willow choose to share the Slayer power at the end of the seventh season. The potentials present in Sunnydale can agree to this choice, but many around the world have no say in this huge power being foisted upon them. Negative consequences of this can be seen in *Angel* with Dana, who is mad, when she is given her newfound powers.

At the end of *Buffy*, we see a montage of women standing up, which is an emotionally charged scene; but Iatropoulos argued that this moment ignores how this act of saving perpetuates an imbalance of some having the power to save and not others, and how some are not given the freedom to choose.

**Keynote: Lowery Woodall “Closing the Hellmouth: Confronting the Joss Whedon Problem and Forging a Path Forward for Whedon Studies”**

Lowery Woodall began by stating he was going to address the elephant in the room with Joss Whedon’s alleged indiscretions, in the

hope of confronting it and moving forward. He explained the background of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, and noted there have been a number of famous public figures subsumed in these accusations. Woodall compared Whedon's situation to that of Louis C.K.; it is not simply that he is alleged to have had multiple affairs, but that his coworkers may not have been in a position to grant consent since, Woodall opined, he could use his power-relationship over them in an abusive, predatory, misogynistic way that deserves to be accounted for. Furthermore, even if coworkers could arguably consent, Woodall argued, fans might not have that same level of access or agency.

According to Kai Cole's letter, Whedon admits to using their relationship as a shield to avoid being scrutinized as being anything other than feminist. Woodall considered this to be Whedon gaslighting both his wife and fans of his work, those who believe in his support of feminist causes. It is not that feminists "can't be assholes," Woodall argued, but that Whedon predicates his public identity on being a human who would not act in these ways. Woodall asserted that this was not some momentary lapse in judgment, but allegedly a long-term, planned decision to do this over and over again.

In words that Cole states to be excerpts from a letter by Joss Whedon, Woodall says Whedon seemingly blames the women and sees himself as a victim. Woodall addressed other instances surrounding Whedon that have shown a lack of commitment to feminist causes, such as the 2005 material claimed to be a scrapped script for *Wonder Woman*, which was largely panned as sexist, misogynistic, and tone deaf. Further, the firing of Charisma Carpenter from *Angel* apparently for her pregnancy is troubling. Further troubling to many is that Whedon has never publicly apologized or accepted culpability for his alleged actions. Woodall asserted his belief that the other shoe has not fallen yet and that there may be some potential professional fallout for Whedon, which could result in a loss of syndication for his television programs, fewer new Whedon projects to base our scholarship on, fewer fans being exposed to the show, and less attention to scholarship being written about Whedon's works.

Woodall suggested some concrete steps to salvage Whedon Studies, including acknowledging the problem, articulating our intent to

solve it, and taking steps toward a solution, which may include special sessions/issues in *Slayage* dealing with sexual violence, donating to sexual violence charities in the name of the organization, and perhaps considering a change in the society's name. Woodall ended by reminding us we are, in his view, Whedon's intellectual children, with a responsibility to talk back to him and not keep our mouths shut.

### **13 Film – “TV is a question, movies are an answer”**

#### **Lewis Call: “To Bind Me, or Undo Me”: Dominance and Submission in Joss Whedon’s *Much Ado About Nothing***

Call began his paper by stating that Whedon uses feminine comedy to challenge the status quo in his 2012 version of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Lewis said that Whedon employs two strategies to achieve this: (1) A linguistic strategy: He omits lines from the original play that would limit a woman's power or agency. This would change certain connotations to make women more powerful. (2) Employed visual techniques: He used set designs and scene composition to drive home the argument without being distracting. By doing the aforementioned, Whedon attempted to create an egalitarian atmosphere.

While the concern for sexual power was already in play, Whedon offers a different kind of dominance; a female dominance, with male submissiveness. Benedick is submissive to Beatrice, as he learns to accept a woman's sexual power, and even finds her sexual power intoxicating. Visual scenes suggest this, as well. In one scene, Benedick's submissiveness is shown as he literally goes into a closet and emerges with a silly hat. When Beatrice is holding a mask with a long nose, it asserts that women can wield the phallic power.

#### **Nancy Roche: “Gender Politics, Booze, and Subterfuge in Iambic Pentameter: Joss Whedon’s *Much Ado About Nothing*”**

Roche opened her paper by explaining the critical reaction to Whedon's film, especially in comparison to the 1993 Branagh film of the play. Critics found Whedon's version charming, while taking on a more feminist viewpoint. Whedon gives Beatrice (and other female characters)

more agency than both the film from the '90s and the original Shakespeare play through blocking and filming technique.

During the famous "Oh that I were a man" scene, the '90s film limits Beatrice's movements; her agency is decreased, and the camera lingers more on the male character. In Whedon's version, fewer lines were cut from Beatrice's dialogue, and in addition she was able to move around in a much larger space. The wedding scene in the '90s version is far more violent and results in Hero being thrown to the ground, while in Whedon's version she is simply thrown into her father's arms. Roche brings up the idea of subterfuge during the wedding scene, as well; not only is the non-diegetic camera present, but there is also the camera within the wedding scene, the wedding photographer. Roche ended by saying Whedon's adaptation comments on our social and political landscape. Whedon displays the helplessness and power of women and provides a villain female power and sexual liberation.

### **Michael Starr: "The Only Thing I Like About Myself Is You': The 'Terminal Identity' of *In Your Eyes*"**

Starr began by discussing the idea of the terminal identity. As author Scott Bukatman explains, it is "both the site of the termination of the conventional 'subject' and the birth of a new subjectivity constructed at the computer terminal or television screen." Starr further explained that technological advances and surrealism are present throughout the entire Whedonverse (The Initiative in *Buffy*, Serenity in *Firefly*, etc.). He called *In Your Eyes* a paranormal romance and listed a number of other movies that contain unexplained connections between people: *Brainstorm* (1983), *I Know Who Killed Me* (2007), and even *The Last Jedi* (2017).

Starr referenced images of the film when the two main characters "cross over" and commented on the stark contrast between a domestic and rural existence. Issues of identity begin to occur in the film when Becky's husband begins to think she is mentally unwell; this is met with her wanting to shed the shackles of her current identity. Likewise, Dylan's quoteworthy line from the movie emulates this idea: "The best thing about myself - the only thing that I like - is you." This experience has brought the two of them together, but has it alienated them both from the rest of the world? The moment of terminal identity occurs

when they actually meet. Starr ended his presentation with the question: do these two characters integrate better in the real world now that they are virtually connected and physically in the same place?

**14 Gender II – “I have thirty-eight brains. Not one of them thinks you can sign a contract to be a slave. Especially now that we have a black President.”**

**Eve Bennett: “I’m awake now’: Female Cyborgs, Consciousness and (Qualified?) Rebellion in *Dollhouse* and *Westworld*”**

Eve Bennett argued that the hosts of *Westworld* owe a debt to *Dollhouse*; both hosts and dolls have dreamlike memories, and both shows foreground female cyborgs who come to a realization and rebel against their “creators”; further, *Westworld’s* Dolores is often referred to as a “doll.” Bennett discussed the history of female cyborgs, noting they are no longer the one-dimensional villainesses they have typically been. We feel sympathy for them as they fight back against the typically all-male systems that created them.

Both *Dollhouse* and *Westworld* have a “coming to consciousness” narrative at their center, a “waking up” or regaining of memories fostered by men (in *Dollhouse*, Boyd, Ballard, and Topher; in *Westworld*, Arnold, Ford, and the Man in Black). She noted Dolores is especially reminiscent of Echo, with two personalities spliced together. With Dolores, it is sometimes questionable how real her consciousness and freedom are if they are seemingly part of Ford’s plot; Echo differs, in that there is little question that she is changing the narrative itself. *Westworld’s* Maeve similarly is shown to actively rewrite her story and make her own decision at the end of the first season by getting off the train.

However, Bennett continued, both Dolores and Maeve remain trapped in largely feminine roles, as dutiful daughter and mother, respectively, for all their subversive violence. Echo, on the other hand, takes on the masculine role of saving the dolls, and is shown to do so even better than her male “rescuer” Ballard, who spectacularly fails. In both series, Bennett noted that we see the cyborgs besting and bettering

the men around them (Topher, Lee), first by becoming more technologically savvy, then by eliciting compassion and conscience.

Bennett further discussed how both series reference Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, though they show a reversal by not hating the "monster," but rather by developing sympathy and fondness. The power dynamics between creator and cyborgs is different between the two series as they currently stand, with the humans and dolls working together by the end of *Dollhouse*, and Ford continuing to use cyborgs for his own end in *Westworld*, though as Bennett observed, we will have to see how this continues to play out.

### **Zelda Engeler-Young: "You Love Humans": The Unconventional Redemption of Anya Jenkins"**

Zelda Engeler-Young noted that though much academic interest is given to the redemption arcs of Spike and Angel, less is given to Anya. Some have read her as a reformed prostitute re-entering society, but Engeler-Young sees her less of a prostitute than an everywoman, who serves as a counter-idea to Buffy's development. This can be seen in her behavior during the apocalypses at the end of seasons three, five, and seven.

Using Lawrence Kohlberg's definitions, Engeler-Young described Anya's behavior at the end of Season Three as the pre-conventional stage morality, where a child will choose her own self-interest instead of the better good; Season Five as conventional morality, where she struggles for the approval of the Scoobies, not for the good of humanity, but to uphold her romantic relationship with Xander; Season Seven as post-conventional morality, where faced with the choice between fight and flight, Anya chooses to fight, having developed into a citizen of the moral world.

Engeler-Young also discussed how many of Anya's identities have revolved around and been defined by men (her Viking husband, D'Hoffryn, Xander). Further, Anya's identity relies on roles rather than action, according to Engeler-Young; she performs a single role or societal archetype and attempts to embrace this as her identity. Her lack of understanding of self can also be seen in her largely inconsistent hairstyles and wardrobe, which changes on almost a weekly basis.

Engeler-Young argued that this shows Anya trying on identities, including a sort of mirroring of Buffy, as she dyes her hair blonde and uses her return to vengeance demon status to save people rather than carry out vengeance.

It is not until the episode “Selfless,” when Anya displays regret for killing the fraternity boys and undergoes self-examination, that she begins to attempt to live authentically—not as any prescribed role (housewife, vengeance demon), but as Anya the person. In doing so, she is able to connect with Andrew, who has similarly relied on archetypes, and help him break free of this unhealthy reliance on narrative. In the end, Engeler-Young concluded, it is not Xander’s love that makes Anya human, but her own actions, and her active choice to become so.

## 15 Intertextuality – “I hear *Buffus the Bacchae Slayer* is playing next door”

### Jefri Bussolini: “*Buffy* and *Maharakshak Devi*”

Jefri Bussolini compared the Bollywood television production, *Maharakshak Devi*, with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The Hindu series centers around a young woman named Devi who has supernatural powers to fight demons and who is guided by the efforts of an older male teacher. Bussolini explored how the series offers a look into the lasting influence of *Buffy* while comparing the shared mythology of the two series.

Bussolini examined how gender is represented in both series. In Devi’s story, she is the most powerful and fearsome warrior. While Buffy’s power is created by men, Durga (Devi) is created by male gods. However, the male gods’ power and influence over her diminishes. In fact, Durga remains so powerful that demons try to manipulate her into marriage to diminish her power.

Bussolini explored other similarities between the series. Both feature a single woman responsible for saving the world as the protagonist. Both have a male guide to oversee their training and to guide them. *Devi* even offers an episode featuring cursed milk that is heavily influenced by the *Buffy* episode “Band Candy.”

Bussolini contended that considering this recent Indian series as an offshoot of and mythological precursor to *Buffy* allows a re-visitation of the influence and feminism of *Buffy*.

**Stephanie Graves: “I Don’t Need No Stinking Reboot: The Enduring Cultural Significance and Influence of *Buffy*”**

Stephanie Graves’ presentation served as a reflection on *Buffy*’s cultural significance after its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary and was a response to the presumption that *Buffy* is not academically important. She cataloged *Buffy*’s lasting impact on television and culture. She also contended that the television series *Supernatural* is a not just an intertext of *Buffy* but a metatext.

Graves argued that *Supernatural* owes an overwhelming intertextual debt to *Buffy* for its narrative structure. She outlined the similarities of the series and provided examples of *Supernatural*’s narrative structures, themes and tones that parallel *Buffy*. Like *Buffy*, *Supernatural* offers both comedic and horror undertones while featuring a monster of the week episode structure with longer seasonal arcs. In addition, Graves provided specific examples of *Supernatural* episodes with similar *Buffy* storylines and cited *Supernatural*’s musical episode as further proof of *Buffy*’s influence.

Graves further argued that *Supernatural* acts as a reunion for Whedonverse actors. The roster of cross-over actors is long and extensive. This is not coincidental, as actors portray characters outside their typecasts.

Last, the recurring *Buffy* theme of “chosen family” is critical to the *Supernatural* series. While *Buffy* has her surrogate family of Scoobies, Sam and Dean have a similar chosen family. Graves highlighted other examples of *Buffy* signatures that exist in *Supernatural* including witty dialogue, killing off loved characters, and addressing complex moral issues.

Graves concluded her presentation by contending that *Buffy* laid the groundwork for the series *Supernatural* and fundamentally changed the course of television. She reasoned that *Buffy* legitimized the genre and proved the material was bankable.



**Rhonda V. Wilcox: “Smoking the Hat: Fred/Illyria in *Angel* and Juliette/Eve in *Grimm*”**

Rhonda Wilcox examined the compound character of Fred/Illyria in *Angel* versus the transitional character of Juliette/Eve in *Grimm*. David Greenwalt, who served as co-executive producer of *Angel*, also served as co-executive producer of *Grimm*. Though the *Angel* character of Fred transitioned to the character of Illyria after Greenwalt left *Angel*, the compound character has significant similarities to the transitional character of Juliette/Eve in *Grimm*. However, there is a fundamental difference in how these characters evolved. Juliette makes a choice that results in her turning into Eve while Fred is forced to turn into Illyria. Wilcox’s paper further explored the similarities and differences in the pair of characters.

Both Fred’s and Juliette’s transformations result in characters who “no longer have the same gender presentations or sexual interests.” However, Illyria is still saved by the love of a man in *Angel*. In contrast, after Juliette’s transition she turns away from heterosexual romance. Juliette becomes a supernatural after she chooses to risk herself to save Nick for the greater good. She doesn’t allow Nick to take on the guilt of her decision. It was her choice to smoke the hat that led to her becoming a Hexenbiest. Now, Juliette no longer has romantic interests and heterosexual relationships don’t drive her storyline. She values her career over romance and children. Unlike Fred/Illyria, she is not saved by the love of a man.

While Illyria is a “rewriting” of Fred, Eve is a transformed character who maintains some of the personality traits of Juliette. She thus displays “a forceful evolution of identity rather than an evacuation of it.” Juliette/Eve demonstrates “the unpredictable results of our choices and their impact on our identities while evincing an internal continuity of character.”

**16 Roundtable V: Giving the Audience (and Characters) What They “Need”: Joss Whedon and Trauma**  
**Renee St. Louis, Catherine Pugh, and Alyson Buckman**

The audience was very engaged, and each panelist was able to contribute significant to each question. The panel members began the discussion by positioning themselves in the conversation. St. Louis explained her relationship to the topic: she has graduate training in domestic violence and sexual abuse and works with people who have been subjected to the aforementioned, in addition to reintegrating veterans back into society. Pugh initially studied horror films for her Ph.D. with aspects of looking at mental illness and madness, and since then has worked in trauma and disability studies, working to create a new dialogue. Buckman has been working with trauma and its representation in the Whedon world (and also in *Orphan Black*). They all approach these from both an academic and personal angle, and believe it can be virtually impossible to separate them.

St. Louis explained that trauma is bound with pain, and that it makes the language sometime difficult, or that trauma can actually strip us of language. Pugh followed up by saying trauma can reduce us to “screams and whimpers.” St. Louis added that trauma can be thought of as inherently non-sharable. Representations of trauma can be quite difficult. Buckman continued, saying trauma is hard to put into language because sometimes not only are the traumatized unable to speak, but our society does not want to hear them, either. Pugh clarified an early statement, saying that she refers to mental illness as in the clinical sense and “madness” is the literary version of mental illness.

Pugh brought the topic back to the Whedonverse. If Whedon wanted to create tension in *Buffy*, he would put Willow in danger. The same is true with Fred in *Angel* or River in *Firefly*, and they would be revictimized again and again. Basically, he is putting a character through countless versions of trauma for years (in a television show). St. Louis referred to unaddressed trauma in the Whedonverses, specifically Xander. He is seduced by a teacher and essentially raped by Faith, but never given a place or time to process this. She commented that perhaps he was not given the chance to process his past because men are usually

expected to internalize violence, either through substances or comedy, or more violence.

There is, however, some representation of recovering from trauma. In the musical episode, Buckman said, Buffy is able to tell her secrets. Though Buffy is given more time to recover from trauma than other characters, Willow is given a space to recover in the form of the witch's coven in England. Pugh said that in *Dollhouse*, they are bringing traumatized people in and erasing their memories; this may remove emotional damage, but there could still be permanent physical damage. This is why the space in *Dollhouse* could be seen as half nurturing/half sinister.

Buckman brought up speaking about one's own trauma to begin the process of healing. This happens with many Whedon characters: Victor and Sierra in *Dollhouse*, Sweet making all of the Scoobies lament about their pain in *Buffy*, and when the Avengers finally start to talk about what they saw because of the Scarlet Witch, that is when they begin the journey to mental wellness. Pugh mentioned how Mal from *Firefly* regains his agency and recreates his own story.

St. Louis brought up an interesting point of going back into physical spaces of trauma, specifically Giles living in his loft where Jenny was murdered, or all of the cast living/staying in Buffy's house where both Joyce and Tara died. Pugh mentioned that maybe we should go back to these spaces to recode them into a positive.

**17 Production – “Well, the guy is a bona fide hero, would it kill him to put on some tights and a cape and garner us a little free publicity?”**

**Elizabeth L. Rambo: “Making Hell Look Pretty in Pink: *Buffy: the High School Years Comics*”**

Elizabeth Rambo began her presentation with a discussion on *Buffy's* original reception when it first aired on television. The series was compared to *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003, ABC and WB) due to its supernatural elements. However, many found the horror elements too

frightening and mature for teen viewers. It was difficult to categorize the series and its target audience due to its dark theme and tone.

Rambo examined how parallel *Buffy* texts originally mimicked this dark style and tone. She provided examples from “The Origin Comic” in which the tone stays true to Whedon’s original vision. However, more recent parallel texts of *Buffy* are diluting the original tone in an attempt to appeal to a younger audience or the nostalgia of the aging original audience. Rambo contended that *Buffy* is becoming more and more cute.

In her presentation, Rambo provided examples of a diluted *Buffy* by examining the comic *Buffy: The High School Year*. It features manga-style art and a lighter tone than the television series. This version of Sunnydale is simpler and prettier than Whedon’s. She also offered *Buffy* Bobble Head dolls and a soon-to-be published picture book as examples of Whedon’s *Buffy* being further tempered. In the picture book, there are no stakes, fighting is discouraged, and it ends with *Buffy* having a sleepover with the Scooby gang and monsters. The picture book has a very different message from the original text.

While the messaging and depictions of these new simplified versions of *Buffy* conflict with the series, many still love cute *Buffy*. The contrast and irony makes these alternate texts adorable. Still, Rambo ended her session by asking attendees, “How do we rectify the two contrasting images?”

### **Marcus Recht: “Gender Images *In Your Eyes*”**

Marcus Recht’s presentation explored the visual staging of gender in Joss Whedon’s *In Your Eyes* (2014). The visual material was analyzed through looking at the following visual gender categories: vestment, body and gesture, gaze, space, and image composition.

When considering character vestment, Recht found that the protagonist Dylan’s working-class status was depicted with work wear, flannel shirts, and stained clothing. However, as Dylan falls in love, his wardrobe improves. In contrast, the female lead offers various wardrobe changes. She is often depicted wearing frilly dresses even when it is inappropriate considering the weather.

Recht also provided examples of visual gender constructions concerning the body. When the audience is first introduced to Dylan, they see his entire face. Yet Rebecca is introduced in fragments. The camera offers close-ups of various body pieces before revealing her entire face. In addition, Rebecca is often shown in the fetal position or exhibits other child-like, infantile posturing. In contrast, Dylan is postured in a way to highlight his muscles and physical labor.

Recht provided examples of visual gender construction in the aesthetics of space as well. While Dylan is shown in vast spaces, Rebecca is often depicted in limited spaces.

Recht concluded that film uses contrasts to construct class and gender. In addition, it is evident essential gender roles are supported visually in film.

### **Brenna Wardell: “Fooling with Fashion: Costume as Comic Catalyst in Joss Whedon’s *The Avengers*”**

Brenna Wardell discussed how Whedon’s strategic use of costuming highlights Whedon’s signatures. In particular, Wardell considered the comic function of costumes and argued costumes are witty leavening agents to dramatic situations. Wardell contended that Whedon can insert wit into a film character’s story using costuming.

Wardell strengthened her argument with a conversation on comedy, the power of laughter, and the carnivalesque. Clothing is a vibrant part of festival life and can serve as a visualization of the internal.

Wardell also included a discussion of the costume designer in her presentation. She argued the costume designer plays on our expectations. Film allows viewers to linger on costuming details longer and in way that is not possible in theater.

Wardell listed early film comedians and their use of clothing and costumes. She built on the concept by providing several examples in *Buffy* where clothing provides a comedic outlet. This included simple examples in which vampires are easily spotted due to outdated clothing to more complex examples. For example, Buffy wears a leather jacket with her Spring Fling dress in the episode “Prophecy Girl.” This serves as a setup for a comedic line later but also echoes the series’ tonal and

genre mixing. Wardell also examined cross-dressing in *Firefly* and cross-dressing's long history in comedy.

Last, Wardell outlined how costumes play a critical role in the characters' journey and narrative story in *The Avengers*. Each costume serves as a source of spectacle and displays signs of each character's individuality. The costumes can heighten tension but their over-the-top complexity can add to their cohesion. They also offer comedic opportunities as the heroes poke fun at each other. The costumes help balance tone and genre in the series. They ground the heroes in a fantastic world. Furthermore, the comedy humanizes the characters.

Wardell ended by concluding that Whedon's characters' costumes present their humanity.

## **18 Representation II – “I think it’s ‘cause he’s just so ... old. I’m not sure how old he is, but I heard him use the world ‘newfangled’ one time”**

### **Molly Brayman: “I’ll be in My Bunk’: Sexual Euphemism in the Whedonverse”**

Molly Brayman discussed masturbation and masturbation jokes within the Whedonverse, asking, when is it disgusting? When is it normal? She addressed how euphemisms are needed to get around censors on television, but the way in which we mask language with these euphemisms can tell us about how we see sex. Without euphemism, taboos become defective; thus, euphemisms can promote a repressed aspect to the language. Taboos tend to be bodily oriented (race, sex, excretion, disease, death); how we talk about these taboo subjects (or around them) tells us how we construct morality about these topics.

Brayman argued that we can see this in how masturbation is dealt with in the Whedonverse, and used a number of examples to illustrate this; for instance, Kaylee talks openly about masturbation, but it is Mal who tries to shame and silence her, since he does not want to think about her that way. She compared this to Jayne's "I'll be in my bunk," which is used purely for humor, and has no negative response from people hearing him. Mal also discusses his own masturbation in "Heart

of Gold,” showing that he, too, can be open about it, but doesn’t want to hear about Kaylee’s experiences.

Brayman offered more examples of euphemism in the Whedonverse, such as “semi-metaphors” that can be read two ways but are often put together (e.g. stakes as phallic objects equated with sex and violence and sometimes both). “Fully creative metaphors” only exist within their context, such as magic being equated with lesbianism, but also in other instances representing other things, like addiction. Visual euphemisms also abound, such as Kaylee eating strawberries, Angel’s “bad” Tai chi, stakes being plunged into bodies that then explode, Anya’s and Buffy’s respective gestures in “Hush,” and so forth.

In all of these options, Brayman contended, sex is often treated as either “gross” or a joke; alternately, it can also be shown to be assault, such as invisible Buffy’s performance of fellatio on Spike. Linguistic euphemisms are often used in the show, and in ways that can reclaim women’s sexual power, such as Saffron’s myth of the universe. Further, silence can be used as a euphemism, such as when Buffy initially refuses to articulate her relationship with Spike as a sexual relationship, instead hedging with lines like “what he does to me.” In addition, the attempted rape by Spike does not get named until much later, and this unwillingness to name it can make it lose some of its power, as we also see with Jonathan’s sexual relationship with the twins in “Superstar” which robs them of their consent supernaturally, and even Willow’s actions that strip Tara of her agency that are never quite named as abuse. Brayman concluded that the more we use direct language and don’t pathologize, the more we can have “good sex.”

### **Michael Buso: “Buffy, Billy, and Queer Slayer Subjectivity in the *Buffy* comics”**

Michael Buso discussed the importance of Billy, one of the few openly gay males in the Buffy-verse, who is granted visions from the first Slayer, though he is ultimately relegated to ally status rather than full Slayer because he is male. In the television series, Buffy defines herself as a Slayer, not a killer, though other characters often challenge this. Violence is inherent to being a Slayer, but violence is also performed upon the Slayer; as such, Billy is called out by the narration and turned

into a Slayer. He argues he is not a “real” Slayer, but this calls into question what makes a real Slayer. Though traditionally a title given to women, Billy chooses this role, and accepts the calling, rather than having it thrust upon him. Yet though he patrols with Buffy and she tells him he “belongs,” there is still some ambiguity, since other Scoobies do the same and are not considered Slayers.

Resistance becomes a primary part of Billy’s identity, Buso continued, which sets him apart from the other female Slayers. Slayers are generally chosen, and try as they might, they cannot resist, nor deny subjectivity within the larger ideological structure. Yet, Buso noted, Billy has a choice; the system calls to him, but he could have walked away, unlike Nikki Wood, Faith, and other Slayers. Buffy is similarly often shown to resist, such as when she fights off the assault of the demon spirit in “Get it Done,” and when she rejects being an instrument of the Council. However, she cannot refuse the initial calling. Buffy argues for Billy being a Slayer, and with the new rules of magic as rewritten by Giles, the power itself becomes the chosen one and the one who chooses.

Ultimately, Buso concluded, this solves nothing, since the Slayers still lack the ability to resist ideological pressure; further, Billy’s relationship to them remains unchanged, since he can choose as female Slayers cannot. However, he represents a new kind of hero in that wanting it so badly, he made it happen; his desire made it possible.

### **Sofia Gieysztor: “‘Eww Ick’ and Other Perspectives on Age in the Buffyverse”**

Sofia Gieysztor noted the prevalence of ageism in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and encouraged us to keep two questions in mind: what is the purpose of age-related or ageist statements? What happens to the function of the statement if you replace “old” with “gay” or “black”? She detailed a number of Buffy episodes which have featured ageist statements and ideas, including “Teacher’s Pet,” in which Xander has a crush on an older teacher who is belittled by Buffy and Willow. In many episodes, Giles’s age is mocked, including “The Real Me,” “The Witch,” “The Yoko Factor,” “Wild at Heart,” “Tabula Rasa,” “Bargaining,” and “Where the Wild Things Are.” Other characters, like Joyce and Angel,



are also sometimes considered inappropriate sexualized objects because of their respective ages. Gieysztor argued that age and ageism in *Buffy* are largely unexamined by our community, which perhaps says more about us than the show.

Gieysztor further explained that the concept of “old,” much like gender, is a social construction, as there is no defining age when somebody becomes old. Much like in real life, intergenerational relationships on *Buffy* might be considered “wrong” because of imbalances of power, but in both the show and reality these power dynamics are complicated. Negotiations of power mean that in a relationship, the entity of the self and power between both in the relationship becomes a shared dynamic. Giles may begin as an authority figure, but his relationship with Buffy is altered once his title is removed and she actively chooses to have him as her Watcher again; she consents to the relationship and makes him an equal partner. He shares this power by providing knowledge and sharing power with her. Further, on *Buffy*, older characters can exist and be sympathetic but are often not viewed as sexual.

Is it about bodies, Gieysztor asked? Traditionally, the young are considered more attractive because of their fertility, but as a society, we no longer support the notion of fertility being the only reason for a romantic relationship; biological imperative is not the most important thing. If ageism stems from a fear of a power imbalance, then this fails to take into account the inherent power imbalance between men and women, between two partners with culturally different backgrounds, class differences, racial makeup, and so forth. Lest we think ageism has nothing to do with bodies, vampires on the show prove that age is not really a deterrent in a relationship if the body remains young-looking. Gieysztor concluded by arguing that instead of submitting ourselves to society’s notion of the distribution of power, we should subvert it.

**19 Millennial Students and *BtVS* – “You exterminated his race. What could you possibly say that would make him feel better?”  
Rosa Elena Gutierrez and Ana Carolina Gutierrez: ““Two seconds of conflict with an indigenous person, and I turned into general Custer”: Colonial Issues in *Buffy*”**

This presentation opened with both of the women giving generational context: Ana, the older sister, is firmly a Millennial, while her younger sister, Rosa, would be considered part of the iGen group, or Generation Z. They also openly discussed their heritage, and how the dialogue on colonization has changed from the early days of *Buffy*.

They remarked that in the episodes “The Pack,” “Pangs,” “Mummy Girl,” and “Dead Man’s Party,” there is an obvious pattern: an indigenous artifact. Each time a white person deals with the artifact, an indigenous spirit becomes activated and Buffy has to kill it. In “Mummy Girl” the character Ampata is the “other” and is also a metaphor for becoming “normal.” If she is normal, she ends up killing (coincidentally a bunch of white people), but if she is not normal, she will end up dead. There is no winning for her. She is forced to adopt or assimilate into the dominant culture. She also fits the Latin stereotype of being oversexualized.

For “The Pack,” they asked the question of what the balance is between artistic creativity and historically accurate information. This episode is also one of the few representations of the huge continent of Africa. They remarked that possession is culturally bound, meaning it can be seen as a negative, specifically in American culture, but can be seen as a positive spiritual experience in other cultures. Furthermore, the paint on the zookeeper in this episode is laughably wrong.

They then turned their focus on Kendra and the colonial history of Jamaica. She, a black/mulatta character, is “colonized” by her Watcher, meaning her identity is stripped away. She is taken from her family and friends, never recognized by her last name, and is literally transported to Sunnydale as cargo. The Gutierrez sisters were ready for every question thrown their way.

**Amanda Martinez: “Teaching the Millennial Student: Addiction in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*”**

Martinez presented the audience with a definition of addiction, condensing by saying, “anything that gives a ‘brain reward’ could be seen as an addiction.” One in six young adults battle some form of addiction. Martinez took the idea of addiction in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and created a sample lesson plan/syllabus for a class.

[178] It should be obvious that Willow and her struggle with magic would be a primary focus (though not the only focus), with “required viewing” being: “Life Serial,” “Wrecked,” “Normal Again,” “Entropy,” and “The Dark Age.” Episodes that were “recommended” but not required were: “Into the Woods,” “Tough Love,” “Bargaining, Part 1,” “Bargaining, Part 2,” “Tabula Rasa,” “Smashed,” and “Lessons.” Martinez had a number of insightful observations dealing with addiction in *Buffy*. More than just Willow and magic, Season 6 in particular also dealt with Dawn and her kleptomania, Spike’s desperation for Buffy, Buffy’s using Spike, and even Buffy’s response to being alive again, almost like an addict coming back down from a high. She ended by asking whether or not Willow was more addicted to magic or the empowering feeling that magic gave her.

**Whedon Bookers: The Past, Present, and Future of Whedon Studies + Closing Remarks – “They can’t stop the signal, Mal. They can never stop the signal.”**

The session ended with a panel on publishing, with four panelists who had recently had books published: Kristopher Woofter, Eve Bennett, Erin Giannini, and Mary Ellen Iatropoulos. Each discussed their own publishing history and provided advice.

Woofter has a collection coming out with Lorna Jowett in December with I.B. Tauris, *Joss Whedon vs. the Horror Tradition*, a project which originated at SCW7 in London. He suggested that conferences are the best places to make these connections. It helps to be a good editor if one is going to take on a project like this, and also a good communicator. He suggested giving people at least one month’s notice about deadlines.

Bennett's adaptation of her Ph.D. thesis, *Gender in Post 9/11 Apocalyptic Television*, will be published with Bloomsbury. She noted that she received help and feedback from various people in the room. She had some sticking points working with her publisher: the title (the editor rejected anything fun in favor of key words) and the cover (she had to choose from a specific image library). She claimed the advantage to working with a big publisher is their marketing, but cautioned one must work within certain constraints.

Giannini's book, *Joss Whedon vs. the Corporation*, also started from a conversation at a Slayage conference. It will be published by McFarland and will focus on *Roseanne* to *Age of Ultron*, with a particular focus on *Dollhouse*. She also did not get much input on the cover, and because of limited resources did the editing herself; however, she would recommend getting another pair of eyes on it, and suggests that if you read something for someone else, they will read your project in exchange.

Iatropoulos was also inspired by the keynote speech from a Slayage conference for her book, *Joss Whedon and Race: Critical Essays*, which she co-edited with Lowery Woodall and which was published by McFarland. She suggested to practice pitching ideas until you feel so confident you can walk up to anyone and start trying to sell them on the idea. She noted that an edited collection requires you to have your own vision but to also realize it may deviate from this. There should be an organizing principle for accepting submissions, but you must also be prepared to help each individual author to the best of their ability. Their point will not necessarily be something you agree with, but you should help them make their argument in the best way possible. She suggested writing the introduction as you are doing revisions and to be careful using musical lyrics because of copyright reasons. She encouraged the listeners to not take silence as a rejection, but to keep asking publishers until you receive an answer. If you have an idea, that is worth pursuing.

Some closing business for the conference included a reminder that *Slayage* is now MLA indexed, which makes a great difference. It was announced that \$635 was raised for the Shoals Diversity Group, and that the winner of the Mr. Pointy Award for best presentation of the SCW8 conference was Renee St. Louis for "Demon Magnet in the Friend

Zone: Reconsidering Xander Harris in the Age of #MeToo.” Special thanks was given to the University of North Alabama and all who helped organize the conference.

---

**Elizabeth Gilliland** completed her Ph.D. in English Literature with an emphasis in British Literature, Media Studies, and Adaptation from Louisiana State University in August 2018, with a dissertation focusing on Jane Austen adaptations. Her article “Double Trouble: Gothic Shadows and Self-Discovery in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*” appeared in *Slayage* 16.1 (after originally debuting at the 2016 Euroslayage Conference). Student reviews of her teaching have often focused on her infectious love for *Buffy*, which she didn’t think she talked about that much, but apparently does.

Seattle-based lyric baritone **Darrell J. Jordan** has been praised for his “shining, beautiful voice” (Broadway World), his “expressive acting” (*The Sun Break*), and has been called “the star of the show” (*Columbia Heart Beat*). He received his B.A. in both Music and Psychology, and his M.M. in Voice Performance from the University of Missouri. He is currently a second year doctoral student in Voice Performance at the University of Washington under the tutelage of Dr. Kari Ragan. When he is not performing, he can be found binge watching episodes of *Buffy* with his husband and their two cats: Dr. Kitty Fantastico and Xena Warrior Kitten Princess.

**Robin Robinson** is an M.F.A. candidate at the Watkins Film School with a focus in screenwriting. She is the Programming Coordinator for the Academy Award-qualifying Nashville Film Festival, where she manages their Screenwriting Competition and serves as a Senior Programmer. While solely responsible for their Episodic programming, she also has experience programming narrative, documentary, and new director films. Her works primarily focus on the exploration of identity and the pressure to conform to societal masks.