



**Rod Romesburg**

**Regeneration through Vampirism: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* New Frontier**



[1] After three years at Winchester, an English prep school, Joss Whedon returned to America and began his undergraduate work at Wesleyan University. He knew he wanted to study literature and film, but little suspected the caliber of professors he would encounter at his new school. In an interview, he explains how he enjoyed "lectures that were so complete, so complex, so dense and so simple that I almost had trouble following them, and by the end would realize they were dealing with things that were already in me. They were already incorporated in the way I thought about story, because they are the American mythos. . . . I don't have a thought about story that is not influenced by those teachers" ("An Interview with Joss Whedon"). Among the most significant of those Wesleyan professors was Richard Slotkin.<sup>[1]</sup>

[2] Slotkin built his reputation through his important studies of the regenerative myths of violence playing through American literature. Slotkin's scholarly trilogy, beginning with *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, argues each step of American "progress" is preceded by violence on the frontier. Each time the American community faces a physical or psychic challenge, whether external or internal, the American spirit is redeemed "through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and *regeneration through violence*" (c. The call to regeneration through violence springs from the very first Europeans who come to America for a fresh start, personally, politically, and spiritually. They see the possibility of rebirth, but it comes only at the price of wresting control of the land from the current inhabitants: the wilderness and the Native Americans. In his second book, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890*, Slotkin envisions the same scenario replayed in the nineteenth century, with the lower classes and those races traditionally assigned to these classes fitting the slot previously occupied solely by the Native American "savages." Finally, in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America*, the American frontier fully transforms from geography to ideology. The Frontier and the West become frozen in time, and the archetypes and icons of the mythic West become codified in the Western movies, television, and fiction of twentieth century America. However, after Vietnam American faith in the old myths begins to unravel, and, despite efforts by many to restore that nostalgic footing, America currently resides in a space of uncertainty.

[3] Whedon's most obvious references to the myths of the Western and the frontier appear in his television show *Firefly* (2003) and the accompanying film *Serenity* (2005), which essentially put archetypal Western characters in space. Less clear, on the surface at least, are the connections between Western myths and Whedon's first television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)*. This show, with its cast of primarily Southern Californian teenagers, seems far removed from dusty tales of the Wild West. But Sunnydale, the fictional setting of *BtVS*, sits atop the Hellmouth, a conduit to Hell that attracts demons of this world and those beneath. Sunnydale thus acts as a frontier space, marking the border between civilization and the wilderness of the underworld. In this paper, I will argue that

not only do Joss Whedon and his writers invoke Slotkin's ideas throughout the series, but that the translation of those ideas in *BtVS* frequently reveals the limitations of America's dependence on viewing itself as a frontier nation capable only of "regeneration through violence." Most significantly, the series finale offers an alternative direction for American myth.

[4] Any discussion of the American West and the myth of the American frontier begins with Frederick Jackson Turner. In his legendary speech of 1893, Turner famously pronounces the American frontier closed. Until his era, Turner argues, the frontier border that ever shifts westward defines America, giving the young country its identity in "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (3). This "meeting point" helps America identify itself by what it is not – primarily Europe, the "savage" native Americans, and the wilderness. Turner felt that as the geographic border closed upon the reaching of the Pacific Ocean, land's end, the first era of American identity closed with it. At this point, a new touchstone would have to be forged. Instead, as Slotkin observes, America turns the frontier myth inward, employing the imagery collectively understood as Old West to clarify America's and Americans' position in the world.<sup>[2]</sup> Old West and frontier become essentially the same myth, and Americans and American culture both employ the myth and measure themselves/itself against it.

[5] We see such measuring-against-myth very early in *BtVS*. In one of his first conversations with Buffy, Xander laments, "not much goes on in a one Starbucks town like Sunnydale," linking Sunnydale's pokiness to the one-horse towns of the Old West ("Welcome to the Hellmouth," 1001). In the second episode, "The Harvest" (1002), after Buffy's classmate Xander has discovered vampires exist, he asks, "So, what's the plan? We saddle up, right?" employing the mythic language of countless Western movies. Buffy, however, immediately quashes this, warning her task is "deeply dangerous." She recognizes she holds the special powers of the Slayer, while her friends are purely human and thus more vulnerable. Xander, however, reads her rejection through the Western conceptions of man/woman and concludes, "I'm inadequate. That's fine. I'm less than a man." Western man acts; Western woman waits behind. Xander thus finds himself in some strange space that is "less than a man," and yet not woman, who, as in Buffy's case, plays the active role. Xander *wants* to read himself through the Western pose, but the pose fails him and he's left groping for a new identity.

[6] An even more direct example comes in the episode, "Bad Eggs" (2012), when two outlaw cowboy vamps, Lyle and Tector Gorch, mosey into town to stir up trouble and challenge Buffy. Marti Noxon renders the Gorches through our expectations of cowboy Westerners. They speak the twangy Western accent, wear the proper hats and outfits, and enjoy fighting for fighting's sake. Perhaps most significantly, Lyle and Tector Gorch share their names with two characters from the 1969 Western, *The Wild Bunch*.<sup>[3]</sup> Unlike Xander, the Gorches fit the mold of the Western man. And yet, because they measure up to the frontier mold – because they are "authentic" Westerners – they clearly do not belong in Buffy's world. The Gorches' "Old West" identity signals they are out of time (nicely made possible because as vampires, they never age) and place (more suited to riding the range than haunting the malls), but primarily they are a joke. They are cowboys, and cowboys belong on the frontier, "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" – which suburban Sunnydale is not.

[7] Before I overturn the last statement, as clearly I must do, let me develop the "suburban" over the "Sunnydale." The suburb seems the anti-frontier. Civilization dominates suburbia – in fact, the typical critique of suburbia is that it is all civilization and no culture. Cynthia Morrill calls suburbia "the fast-food version of the American dream, providing excellent value for its price, but offering little nutritional value for the soul" (Morrill). Especially through Hollywood's eyes, suburbia is the late-fall landscape of *American Beauty* (1999), the teenage wasteland of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), the cookie-cutter pastel housing blocks of *Edward Scissorhands* (1990). The tensions implicit in Turner's frontier have passed on, and instead of flux we have stasis.

[8] The teenagers inhabiting suburban Sunnydale understand this all too well. They long for that which is cool, and that which is cool is that which is on the edge – not too old, not too safe, not too anything. The premier episode, “Welcome to the Hellmouth” (1001), gives the main characters a chance to declare the numerous ways Sunnydale is not cool. Before inviting her into the popular clique, alpha co-ed Cordelia tests Buffy’s “coolness factor” through a few questions assessing Buffy’s knowledge of the latest trends. More tellingly, though, she also outlines the geographic pecking order by conceding that since Buffy’s just moved here from L.A., a locale of infinite edginess, she doesn’t have to take the written. Buffy passes the test, so Cordelia invites her to The Bronze, a club in the “bad part of town,” which is “about a half a block from the good part of town.” Cordelia is obviously slamming Sunnydale’s smallness as a strike against it, but also intriguing is that she highlights The Bronze’s location in the “bad part of town.” The club gives the safe, suburban teens a place to feel they’re testing themselves against savagery – while playing pool, dancing, and listening to bands. They long for excitement while agreeing they live in the most boring of spaces.

[9] However, everything that makes the suburbs so boring for teenagers reassures their parents. Buffy’s mother, Joyce, moves her daughter to Sunnydale after Buffy burns down her gymnasium at the previous school (to destroy a vampire nest). Joyce, in classic comic book tradition, has no inkling of her daughter’s secret identity and feels Buffy just started running with the wrong crowd.<sup>[4]</sup> Suburban Sunnydale thus tenders the fresh start, away from the dangers of the city. The suburb offers the American dream, the one-owner home with “natural” lawn contained within picket fence – in other words, perfect, wonderfully dull, security. But the security is, of course, an illusion.

[10] A few critics have observed how *BtVS* takes advantage of its setting to critique the American Dream of perfect security. For writers, Southern California has long been a setting of contrast – the sunny skies drawing eyes to the heavens, the better to disregard the darkness at their feet. Boyd Tonkin argues that although Sunnydale’s exact locale is nebulous, the show is particularly Southern Californian, especially in its benign façade concealing environmental and societal upheaval. Cataloging the woes of California, from geological faults to corrupt government to growing pains to gangs, Tonkin relates them to the metaphorical threats that drive the conflicts of the program. He argues *BtVS*, and even more its L.A.-based spinoff *Angel*, follows the classic California noir stories of Raymond Chandler and Ross MacDonald with protagonists whose work takes them into the realm of darkness most citizens willfully ignore. The Southern California city, painted as a utopia of climate and opportunity, becomes in art dystopia. It becomes, in Thomas Hibbs’ words, a “peculiarly American nightmare” in which the suburban paradise of Sunnydale “is but a storm drain resting over the cauldron of hell” (52). The inhabitants of Sunnydale, for the most part, choose not to see the events occurring around them, preferring to envision a vampire feeding as a gang hopped up on PCP or to pretend a bizarre incident never happened rather than expose the dark underbelly of their shiny locale. Parents feel secure by believing their suburbia is deadly dull, and their teenagers feel secure by complaining how their suburbia is deadly dull.

[11] Sunnydale is fascinating, though, precisely because it may be deadly, but not dull – and here I return to emphasize the “Sunnydale” over the “suburban.” Despite its suburban character, because it sits atop the Hellmouth, Sunnydale marks a frontier space between the realms of demons and humans, “the meeting point between savagery and civilization.” The frontier battle in *BtVS* determines who controls the physical and ideological space of Sunnydale, and despite Buffy’s frequent desire to live the life of a normal teenage girl, this battle is precisely what shakes her and the Scoobies from laconic suburban life. Whedon makes this clear in the first season finale when Willow discovers a group of boys slaughtered by vampires in the Sunnydale High School AV room. She cries to Buffy, “I’m not okay. I knew those guys. I go to that room every day. And when I walked in there, it . . . it wasn’t our world anymore. They made it theirs. And they had fun” (“Prophecy Girl,” 1012). High school should be dull. It should have its difficulties of not fitting in and of being ignored – themes the show deals with in its early seasons – but

these are dramas played out in a bubble of safety.[5] The vampires bring violence into the literal. They strip the high school, the suburbs, of their dullness and, as Willow notes, have *fun* doing so. The vampires' presence helps the main characters realize the ridiculousness of high school jockeying and suburban angst (and also long for the delusions of their classmates) – in their way, the undead vampires bring the characters to life.

[12] As with the slaughter in the AV room, for all of Sunnydale it's the "unreal" elements that rip away the broader illusion suburbia typically imposes. In other words, it's the unreal that's real. Rarely does anyone outside the Scooby gang publicly acknowledge that Sunnydale's a little different from everywhere else, but when they do, the revelation comes courtesy of the supernatural. In one instance ("Gingerbread," 3011), a demon takes the form of two small, dead children and inspires Joyce to found MOO, Mothers Opposed to the Occult, and start a witch hunt. At a press conference, after the mayor's offered some platitudes, Joyce steps to the microphone:

Joyce: Mr. Mayor, you're dead wrong. (people begin to murmur) This is *not* a good town. How many of us have, have lost someone who, who just disappeared? Or, or got skinned? Or suffered neck rupture? And how many of us have been too afraid to speak out? I-I was supposed to lead us in a moment of silence, but... silence is this town's disease. For too long we-we've been plagued by unnatural evils. This isn't our town anymore. It belongs to the monsters and, and the witches and the Slayers.

By publicly declaring what everyone chooses to ignore, Joyce brings the darkness into the light. But it takes the continual presence of magic for the citizens to acknowledge magic. Once the demon's been killed, the citizens go back to studiously ignoring the "unnatural evils" that plague them.

[13] This willful ignorance ties in nicely with one of the biggest complications with Slotkin's theories about regeneration through violence. As stated earlier, Slotkin says that nearly since its inception, American culture (including colonial America) has looked to violence to solve all perceived challenges thrown at it. Like a phoenix rising from ashes, something in the American mythos needs the purging fire to allow the glorious rebirth. The frontier becomes the locus for the regenerative violence, the clashing point where "good" Americans will face "evil" in a time of conflict, in order that stability can be imposed. Slotkin shows how America tells and retells itself the story, recasting the "evil" and redrawing the frontier as necessary. Always, however, the frontier is viewed as temporary – a pause on the way to stability.[6] The frontier space is always in the process of becoming, either evolving forward or slipping back. If we conceive the frontier in terms of American imaginings of the Old West, the frontier town is always becoming increasingly civilized or a ghost town. This shifting nature compels a longing for wholeness and away from instability. So the citizens of Sunnydale, rather than acknowledging the frontier/instability has not moved on, *choose* not to see it. They choose to believe the myth – that their violence has purged them from their problem – rather than see what's "really" happening.

[14] The frontier conception of the American West, in other words, forces us into viewing space as a binary, with one possibility (civilization) naturally and rightfully superior to the alternative (nature/savagery). Slotkin recognizes this happening not only in American culture, but as a problem with myth itself. He agrees with Roland Barthes that all myth simplifies reality, "buttonholing" (Barthes' term) life into "a few traditional 'either/or' decisions" (Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* 19).[7] The "regeneration through violence" myth imposes this bind – the society must devolve into primitive, animalistic violence before it can regenerate itself, leaving the primitive behind and embracing its future. We're left again with being/becoming wholly one or the other in an effort to avoid living in uncertainty.

[15] This, of course, works only until the myth fails to accommodate life's events. Slotkin spends much of *Gunfighter Nation* detailing how the myth plays through the

Western movie bonanza of the mid-twentieth century and encourages American involvement and understanding in World War II and even Korea. But, for Slotkin, the myth fails with the U.S.'s war in Vietnam. There, facing an enemy that refuses to abide by the rules the myth sets for it, violence seems not to solve the problem but instead accelerate it. The frontier pushes not steadily forward, but remains in place – and even spreads to American shores through societal unrest. The only solution the myth can offer, more violence, fails. In an analysis of how the Western film *The Wild Bunch* signals this failure of myth, Slotkin writes of the protagonist Pike and antagonist Mapache:

As with the American “mission” in Vietnam, Pike’s “failure of intelligence” leads to a surprising catastrophe. Instead of greeting the *gringos* as liberators, Mapache’s people assault them as the enemy. Had the Americans understood the “revolutionary” implications of their role – had they understood the nature of the conflict in which, for their own private reasons, they had enmeshed themselves – they might have predicted the Agua Verdean revulsion against them, and they would certainly have understood that a conflict with Mapache could not be settled by personal duel or even *coup d’état*, that only the power of a social order equivalent to that of Agua Verde – the power of the village/revolution – would be sufficient to the task of undoing Mapache (610-611).

America may try to employ the myth again, say in the Middle East, but because there is a cultural crisis of faith in the myth, there may not be the will or desire to trust the old solutions will work. Whedon picks up on such doubts on *BtVS*, in the famous musical episode “Once More with Feeling” (6007). Confronted with yet another menacing demon, Buffy sings, “Apocalypse, we’ve all been there / the same old trips / why should we care?” Her line can be taken both as a call for bravery and as an admission of malaise. Violence works to put down a demon, but another always pops up. This leaves three options: one can ignore what’s happening, as the town does; stick with the myth and its accompanying violence-as-solution, as Buffy does for the first six seasons; or find a way to rewrite the myth and forge a new way to envision the conflict. I argue that the genius of the *BtVS* series finale is that it does exactly this by valorizing hybridity over wholeness.

[16] To work my way towards the importance of hybridity, I want to first return to Joyce’s claim that demons are “unnatural.” Although all the characters think of the demons and vampires drawn to the Hellmouth as “unnatural evils,” the show clearly links them more closely to nature than humans will ever be. Buffy’s Watcher Giles explains,

This world is older than any of you know. Contrary to popular mythology, it did not begin as a paradise. For untold eons demons walked the Earth. They made it their home, their...their Hell. But in time they lost their purchase on this reality. The way was made for mortal animals, for, for man. All that remains of the old ones are vestiges, certain magicks, certain creatures. (“The Harvest,” 1002)

If we define nature, as is common, by what precedes human involvement, then demons are nature. To establish their claim to this world, humans have two options.

[17] First, they can erase or rewrite demon history, as Giles refers to with his reference to “popular mythology.” Suburbia markets itself a place to get away from the city but not go back to the wild; a small town, new-old-world living that never was. With its meticulously furnished model homes, themed developments, and ad campaigns designed to sell a feeling of belonging to another time or place, the suburbs take a physical place and actively redefine it. Like the frontier that is always shifting and never truly locatable, the suburban ideal exists only in the mind – it’s a utopia, a no-place. In order to exist in physical space, both frontier and suburb must actively erase the world that preceded them and establish themselves as the new idea that will replace the old. In the American West, cries of Manifest Destiny and national progress encouraged Americans to see themselves entering an empty land (that was, of course, far from empty), a paradoxically ancient, virgin wilderness that could be conquered through violence in the name of this young civilization. Similarly, the residents of Sunnydale must mask the past to stake their claim

to this space. Giles explains how the Spanish inhabitants of this space called it "Boca del Infierno," translated into English as "Hellmouth" ("The Harvest," 1002). That name, however, won't sell many houses. "Sunnydale" is lain down like a rug over a bloodspot to mask the "real" nature of this place. In the same way that Spanish settlers use language (in addition to unnamed acts) to name and thus claim the area as their own from previous inhabitants and American settlers proceed to write out the Spanish, humans have written demons from truth into "popular mythology."

[18] The second method humans use to establish their claim to this world is to convert this part of what is natural into the *supernatural*, the unreal. This option is more potent than a simple renaming because it not only makes demons unreal, but places them against nature. The demons' very existence offends any sense of "natural" order. This method proves even more potent than early American colonists' efforts to connect Native Americans with nature, and thus merely an obstacle, like a tree, that could be razed if it impeded the progress of civilization. With this technique, demons become not merely uncivilized but unnatural. Because of this, eradicating demons becomes *nature's* will – by sticking a stake through a vampire's heart, the Scoobies are doing nature's work.

[19] However, as Giles' story exposes, and many references within the series reveal, the supernatural is not non-natural, but intricately linked to nature. In "The Harvest" (1002) Xander's friend Jesse is converted into a vampire. Xander, knowing Jesse now must die, says he's sorry. Jesse responds, "Sorry? I feel good, Xander! I feel strong! I'm connected, man, to everything! . . . I, I can hear the worms in the earth!" In an episode from the final season, Willow (now a powerful witch) uses remarkably similar language to explain to Giles how she can use her magicks to grow a Paraguayan flower in the English countryside: "It's all connected. The root systems, the molecules . . . the energy. Everything's connected" ("Lessons," 7001). In both, the supernatural is the natural, and those intimately connected to the supernatural are likewise more intimately connected to nature than the ordinary humans. Even more, the language each character uses reveals the magic makes no distinction between Willow's "good" supernatural and Jesse's vampiric "evil." Those designations originate with whoever gets to tell the story.

[20] Or, as both Buffy and The First (the final season's apocalypse-desiring Big Bad) say in the episode that opens the show's final season, "It's about power" ("Lessons," 7001). This simple line, delivered by both hero and villain, reverberates back through the series. Though each season's apocalypse ostensibly threatens the world if not the universe, it's always played out in the frontier town of Sunnydale, so that Sunnydale becomes, in essence, the world. The fight going on here merely, mythically, represents the fight replayed everywhere over who will take this world and make it theirs. The residents of Sunnydale and the Americans in Slotkin's studies long for a return to wholeness and stability – a pristine imposition of one over the other. But Buffy's final battle reaches for different conclusions, seeking not merely to impress the power of civilization over the power of savagery. Buffy, instead, will battle the very concept of the civilized/savage binary.

[21] In the simplest interpretation, the battle between humanity and demonkind on *BtVS* is, using Slotkin's terminology, a "savage war." Slotkin says America early on latches onto a "doctrine of 'savage war'" that allows it to rationalize two key actions. First, because Americans are fighting "savages," the enemies are wholly different and not truly human. This allows a clear "us and them" differential, "pitting the symbolic opposites of savagery and civilization, primitivism and progress, paganism and Christianity against each other" (*Fatal Environment* 53). Secondly, because the savages are less than human and "inherently disposed to cruel and atrocious violence," the "civilized" America must itself become savage in an effort to save itself from annihilation. Only with total destruction of the enemy – not conversion or diplomacy – will America be preserved (53-54).

[22] Importantly for my analysis, Slotkin writes that the savage war springs from differences "rooted in some combination of 'blood' and culture" (*Gunfighter Nation* 11). Slotkin's word choice is intriguing, naturally, for on a show about battling savage

vampires, differences between humans and monsters must clearly involve blood. In the Buffyverse, a human becomes a vampire when they are bitten and then drink the blood of the vampire who has bitten them. Once blood is shared, the human becomes not only connected to nature, as Jesse proclaims, but soulless and evil. This clearly displays old fears of mixed blood; fears of racial purity marked by impurity. At the series' beginning, the characters usually see their world in such black and white terms: humans are good, vampires and demons evil. Such clear delineation allows the main characters to define themselves by what they are not. The character Angel is an exception to the rule, because he is a vampire with his soul reinserted, thus making him potentially a force for good. But even here, there is always the threat that his soul (human part) will be stripped away and he will revert to his savage, natural state.<sup>[8]</sup>

[23] As the series progresses, however, the main characters find the lines between demon/magic and human increasingly blurred. Willow learns witchcraft and even becomes addicted to and overcome with her powers in season six. Xander falls in love with the vengeance demon Anya. And Buffy, especially, becomes immersed in grayness. Dying at the end of season five, Buffy is resurrected at the start of season six, only to find herself feeling different. In the episode "Smashed" (6009), Buffy is fighting with the now microchip-neutered Spike.<sup>[9]</sup> Spike has fallen for Buffy, and Buffy, feeling lost after her resurrection, has turned to Spike in an effort to feel emotions of any kind. At the same time, however, she feels disgusted with herself for consorting with him. In their fight, Spike knocks Buffy to the ground and is surprised to find his head not aching. Buffy rises and hits Spike, saying, "You're a thing. An evil, disgusting, thing," clearly distinguishing herself from him, denying him any sense of identity other than thing-ness. Spike soon discovers the chip's working fine – it's Buffy who's changed. He confronts her, gleefully taunting, "You came back wrong. . . . Came back a little less human than you were." Buffy angrily rejects this and later turns the accusation back on Spike, jeering, "Poor Spikey. Can't be a human, can't be a vampire. Where the hell do you fit in?"

[24] Buffy's question to Spike serves equally well for all the characters. Their once clear visions of who is good and who is evil, of who is human and who is demon, of who is civilized and who is savage, become muddied over the course of the series.<sup>[10]</sup> Like Sunnydale, like the West, like the suburb, they have themselves become frontiers. They have become what Slotkin calls "the man who knows Indians" – the mythic American hero who straddles the borders laid down to demarcate difference and establish proper and improper identity (*Gunfighter Nation* 14).<sup>[11]</sup> Slotkin says these heroes blend knowledge of both sides, but achieve victory for the American culture by suppressing the "dark" side of their own character. He provides the example of Daniel Boone in early American literature and concludes, "an American hero is the lover of the spirit of the wilderness, and his actions of love and sacred affirmation are acts of violence against that spirit and her avatars" (*Regeneration* 22). The irony here is clear – the hero must quench that within him/herself that makes him/her unique in order that the larger culture can progress. For Slotkin's heroes, and those heroes in *BtVS*, they must eradicate the demon/natural part of themselves in order for American culture to become whole (fully human/civilized).

[25] To see an example of this in the Buffyverse, we need only look to the finale of the spinoff series *Angel* ("Not Fade Away," 5022). As with *BtVS*, *Angel* ends with its heroes facing an apocalypse. As the rain pours down, the four survivors gather in a dark alley: Gunn, Spike, Illyria, and Angel. They make brave small talk as hundreds of demons approach their position. Asked about his plan, Angel replies, "We fight." As the horde attacks, the shot cuts to focus solely on Angel as he says, "Let's go to work." He swings his sword and the screen goes black. The two characters most removed from inflicting bodily harm have already been removed. Lorne, the gay-coded karaoke singing demon, has done his duty, declared the fight "unsavory," and walked away. Wesley, the acknowledged brains of the bunch, has already been killed. What's left are two vampires-with-souls, a fallen god, and human Gunn – whose primary skill throughout the series has been his ability to inflict violence. Angel's only plan is to "fight," and though all present know fighting cannot work, they will be "men" (though one is a male deity in a woman's bodily

shell) and fight bravely until they die. But, because we do not witness their deaths, the ending permits us to still believe in the myth of regeneration through violence as not a solution but the only solution. It's what Americans do when we "go to work."<sup>[7]</sup>

[26] In contrast to *Angel*, however, *BtVS* overturns the traditional mythic solution in favor of a reimagining of the problem itself. Angel and his crew seek to make the world whole – free from demons/savages and the fragmentation they present. Likewise, as Krista Comer observes, many Western writers of the 1960s and 1970s positioned themselves against the New West's urban spaces in a nostalgic attempt to reestablish those characteristics which, at least in myth, distinguish the region from the rest of the U.S.A. These writers, in other words, worked to make themselves and their region once again "whole" after its perceived fragmentation. Comer says the "ultimate expression" of what Western writers work against, is the hybrid and "notions of hybridity and hybridized subjectivity" that by its very nature challenges wholeness (5). Because of the multiple questions Western authenticity, "There can be no defensible, insider, regional discourse, no ethnic or racial purity, no sure opposition between masculinity and femininity, no 'natural' nature, no final claim on what counts as westernness" (5). Reading both Slotkin and *BtVS* through Comer, we see the heroes' attempts to perform "acts of violence" against the "dark" side of their character as a desire to smother the Other (*Regeneration Through Violence* 22). For Slotkin's "man who knows Indians," civilization wins when the hero smothers his/her inner savage and the larger culture violently puts down their enemies. The hybrid figure, however, challenges the desire to become wholly one or Other and in that challenge, forges the possibility of a new type of mythic figure. It's not the savage who must be defeated – what needs vanquishing is the myth that requires wholeness via destruction.

[27] Seeking the power to defeat the The First, Buffy initially transports herself back to the men who used magic to create the original Slayer, but rejects their solution to give her strength by making her more demon and less human ("Get It Done," 7015). So far, this aligns with Slotkin's model, with the hero rejecting that which connects her to the savage, which gives Buffy her unique strength. Buffy's solution to defeat The First, however, upsets the traditional move toward purity and wholeness as victory/progress. Buffy realizes it was these ancient men who made the rule that there could be only one Slayer at a time, and that like the either/or binary construct, there is nothing inherently "real" about this rule. It exists because they said it exists.

[28] Significantly, Buffy gains both the idea and the tools to implement her solution from a weapon (the Scythe) forged by the "Guardians," a group of women who gathered in Ancient times to monitor the Shadow Men, those men who created and then tried to control the Slayer. Buffy's solution must come from outside the system of power she has believed to be reality. Willow uses the Scythe to cast a spell that passes the Slayer skills onto all "potentials" – all the worlds' girls who could potentially become Slayers – thus negating what had heretofore made Buffy unique.<sup>[13]</sup> A montage of young women asserting themselves, gaining confidence, shows as Buffy's voice intones, "Slayers . . . every one of us. Make your choice. Are you ready to be strong?" ("Chosen," 7022). Rather than seeking wholeness, Buffy spreads hybridity, as now all those who were before purely human have become part demon and therefore, Slayers. At the episode's end, Faith observes to Buffy, "you're not the one and only chosen anymore. Just gotta live like a person." Rather than eradicating her "dark" side, Buffy exposes the darkness that already existed in all. Her act has made, or maybe better revealed, the hybrid that was always already there to be the norm. Buffy and her band of newly-energized Slayers do beat back an army of übervamps long enough for a magic amulet to shoot the demons with sunshine and dust them. But that violence is secondary – the solution comes with the rewriting of the myth and the acceptance of hybridity over the "cleansing" power of violence.

[29] Further evidence of this comes with what happens to Sunnydale. As the gang speeds away in a school bus, the ground behind them collapses, stopping only when the "Welcome to Sunnydale" sign topples into the chasm that was the suburb. The suburban

space that seemed so dead to its teenage inhabitants, but was really quite lively thanks to its undead inhabitants, now truly is a void. Lacking the darkness/vampirism that energizes the hybrid characters/space, Sunnydale has consumed itself. The city's end hints that rather than seeking regeneration through violence that quashes darkness, progress actually requires the continued *existence* of the Other. For though Sunnydale is gone, as Giles wryly notes, there's another Hellmouth under Cleveland. The frontier was never just Sunnydale and Buffy was never the only hero; that's just the way they understood the story. The finale of *BtVS* becomes more than just the end of one of the finest television series ever produced. It offers a new mythic figure and structure – the hybrid – for America to envision itself outside of regeneration through violence.

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[1] Whedon reveals this in numerous interviews, including, *An Interview with Joss Whedon*, June 23, 2003, IGN.com, Available: <http://filmforce.ign.com/articles/425/425492p1.html>, August 10, 2003.; Janet, "Joss Whedon Answers 100 Questions," February 21, 2003, SFX Magazine, Available: [http://www.buffy.nu/article.php3?id\\_article=366](http://www.buffy.nu/article.php3?id_article=366), August 10, 2003.; Holly J. Morris, "Fictional Heroes," August 10, 2001, U.S. News and World Report, Available: <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/doubleissue/heroes/fictional.htm>, August 10, 2003.; Emily Nussbaum, "Must See Metaphysics," September 22, 2002, New York Times, Available: <http://jossisahottie.com/firefly/news/arc8-2002.html>, August 10, 2003.

[2] America and Americans here clearly applies primarily to white America. As the dominant majority, the conquering force, they get to write the myths. People of color naturally have a very different vision of the American West.

[3] In *Gunfighter Nation*, Slotkin does an extensive analysis of the movie as a model for how America's Western/frontier myths spin apart in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

[4] Susan Owen takes this comparison further, picturing Joyce "as an exemplar of how clueless suburban parents (especially mothers) are about the dangers their children face." **(Page number?)**

[5] Reality intruded upon the fictional world of Sunnydale when the WB network postponed showing two episodes of season three ("Earshot," 3018 and "Graduation Day" 3022) when they decided the episodes too closely paralleled the recent Columbine High School shootings.

[6] As Patricia Limerick observes, "[Frederick Jackson] Turner's frontier was a process, not a place. When 'civilization' had conquered 'savagery' at any one location, the process . . . moved on" (26).

[7] Barthes uses the term in his work *Mythologies*, p. 124.

[8] In season two, after Angel has sex with Buffy and experiences a moment of perfect happiness, the gypsy curse that forced his soul upon him is lifted and he reverts to Angelus, the evil vampire. That the savage is released through the sex act can be read as a warning against miscegenation.

[9] Spike ends up falling in love with Buffy and, in an effort to win her heart, fighting a demon to regain his own soul. Thus, through, technology, Spike reclaims some of his humanity.

[10] At a *BtVS* panel, the pseudonymed Hercules reports, "Someone asked Whedon how he defined 'a soul' and how Angel (a vampire with a soul) differed from the soulless vampires (like Spike). Whedon posited that soulless creatures can do good and souled creatures can do evil, but that the soul-free are instinctually drawn toward doing evil while those with souls tend to instinctually want to do good." In the quote, then, we see the shading Whedon has instilled into the pure good/evil binary.

[11] In several places, Whedon says he deliberately "built 'Buffy' [herself] to be a cult figure," an "iconic figure," in line with Slotkin's "man who knows Indians," with Buffy crossing the line between demon and human and challenging roles of woman-as-victim and archetypal heroes (see "An Interview with Joss Whedon" and Holly J. Morris.)

[12] In this and many other ways, the end of *Angel* compares strongly with the movie *Bataan*, which Slotkin sees as a key transition text in the revisioning of the myth of regeneration through violence. Even though all the American soldiers in *Bataan* die, the final character's "berserker" charge on the enemy becomes viewed as "a potentially successful model for fighting and winning our jungle war: rage against the 'monkey' race empowers the doomed sergeant, for although we know he is about to die, we never see him fall" (482).

[13] Continuing the theme, Willow, pleasantly overwhelmed with power coursing through her, exclaims, "Oh...my...Goddess."