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Academics Assemble: A Report on New Scholarship at SC5

Introduction

[1] Any way you choose to arrive in Vancouver, British Columbia, whether by train, plane, boat, or automobile, it's not at all hard to immediately see why the city has become one of the foremost locations for film and television production outside of Hollywood, CA. Indeed, so significant is the industry's presence there that it is often referred to as "Hollywood North," though the title is also claimed by Toronto. Despite this, movies or TV shows shot here always seem to carry with them a bit of the magic and mystique that belong uniquely to Vancouver.

[2] There's no one thing to pinpoint what makes the international hub such a special and enticing place for these visual arts—its international character notwithstanding—but there are a few that come easily to mind: the evergreen, old-growth forests; the perennially overcast skies, a comfort to some, foreboding for others; and the diverse backdrops provided by the city's urban core. The opening credits of *Battlestar Galactica* showcase a glistening city on the water's edge backed by green mountains and though this sequence is CG, it's not actually too far off from the reality of the city and surrounding areas where the show was largely filmed.

[3] Of all the cities that have welcomed the *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses, Vancouver was perhaps the most industry-relevant. Previous conferences took place in Nashville (Middle Tennessee State University, 2004), Barnesville (Gordon College, 2006), Arkadelphia (Henderson State University, 2008), and St. Augustine (Flagler College, 2010). Our host school for the fifth biennial conference, the University of British Columbia—just minutes away from downtown Vancouver—offered us a prime setting to discuss popular culture and the power of visual storytelling. UBC has been a sought-after space for on-location filming for over a decade. Walking tours of the most popular filming locations on campus were among the many wonderful coordinated efforts made by the local arrangement chairs, Sharon Sutherland, Hélène Frohard-Dourlent, and Sarah Swan. SCW attendees who participated in these tours got the behind-the-scenes look at the unique architecture and scenery used in filmed media such as *Battlestar Galactica*, *Fringe*, *Kyle XY*, *Stargate Atlantis*, *Supernatural*, *X-Files*, and *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. Vancouver and UBC are laden with intertextuality.

[4] Interestingly, until 2009 no Joss Whedon property had ever been shot in Vancouver. It was then that filming began on *Cabin in the Woods*, written by Whedon and Drew Goddard and directed by the latter. Due to financial problems on the part of the film's original financier, MGM, the *Cabin* wasn't released until spring of 2012. Alongside Whedon's superhero blockbuster *The Avengers*, released just a few weeks later, the appetites of Whedon scholars, fans, and fanscholars were more than whetted in the months leading up to Slayage Conference on the Whedonverses. In the

months that followed, news broke of the upcoming Whedon-helmed Marvel universe show *S.H.I.E.L.D.* To say that Whedonites were spoiled in 2012 might be an understatement.

[5] One of the great things the scale of Whedon's recent films has achieved is to extend the potential for dialogue on intertextuality between his work and the artists he works with, veterans and newcomers alike. Also worth mentioning—particularly in the case of *The Avengers*—is the hundreds of millions of dollars his work has raked in for producing and distributing studios worldwide. In the time since the previous *Slayage* conference, Whedon's audience has expanded beyond what most writers, producers, and directors dare to dream of. If *Slayage* conferences had subtitles like sequels, this year's might have been called, *Slayage Conference on the Whedonverses 5: No More Mister Niche Guy*. Vancouver's identity as an intertextual and international nexus helped support discourse surrounding the growth of the Whedonverse in critical and entertaining ways.

Opening Night Reception

[6] On the evening of Thursday, July 12th, SCW attendees descended on the beautiful and less-than-one-year-old building where the majority of *Slayage* events would take place over the course of the long weekend.

[7] Conferees were introduced to various conference personnel, including the roving superchairs, who would quietly check on the sessions during the conference: Bronwen Calvert, Julie Hawk, and Dale Koontz. After much mingling among friends new and old, Middle Tennessee State University professor and long-time contributor to the field of Whedon studies David Lavery took his place at the front of the room to present the night's main activity: a quiz game of his own creation. "The School of Whedon: A PowerPoint Audience Participation Game," took teams of SCW attendees through sometimes quite challenging questions on where actors in the Whedonverse have come from and gone. The quiz poses the question whether the Whedonverse is more than the texts but the actors as well. Defining or undoing the boundaries of the Whedonverse has become somewhat of a hallmark of Lavery's work. He argues those who have acted in Whedon's work have been marked in some way. Their other work is an extension of the Whedonverse, he suggests, because they have taken something of the "whedonesque" with them.

[8] The game, which can be downloaded [here](#), also helped fuel new debate throughout the conference whether "Whedonverse" or the plural "Whedonverses" is the more accurate term. Of course, the conference itself uses the plural form in its name, suggesting these designations are not mutually exclusive. Each show or film possesses its own unique storyworld or -verse as it were, but the signature Whedon tropes and shared talent among these unite them under the singular banner of the "Whedonverse."

Friday, July 13th, 2012

Plenary Opening Session and First Keynote—Cynthia Masson

[9] The conference officially opened with greetings from Whedon Studies Association co-founder Lavery, reminiscing about the first *Slayage*

conference, held in 2004 in Nashville, Tennessee. Local arrangements co-chair Sharon Sutherland introduced Mr. Larry Grant, a Musqueam nation elder, who greeted the group on behalf of his people, explaining that UBC – and indeed, most of British Columbia—is located on “unceded tribal lands.” What does this mean? One [explanation](#). The Associate Dean of Law, Ben Gould, welcomed the conferees enthusiastically, explaining that he is also a *Buffy* fan—quite a contrast from the first international *Buffy* conference in 2002 at the University of East Anglia, where a university administrator, assuming the whole enterprise was a bit of a joke, greeted the assembly wearing vampire teeth.

[10] Not that Whedon scholars have no sense of humor! Cynthea Masson’s opening keynote, “Break Out the Champagne, Pinocchio: *Angel* and the Puppet Paradox,” combined philosophy, spirituality, and fun in analyzing paradoxical puppet metaphors in *Angel*, particularly Season Five. The episode “Smile Time,” in which *Angel* literally transforms into a puppet, was central to illustrating her arguments. Though Masson’s presentation made serious points about free will and transformation, the opening and closing sing-alongs from “Smile Time” brought the audience together and sent us out to our various sessions—smiling.

Characters (I)

[11] Whedon’s shows are known for having large casts of regulars or semi-regulars, providing no shortage of characters for analysis. Laura Berger considered the development of Giles, *Buffy*’s middle-aged Watcher, applying the *Bildungsroman* model of growth from lack of awareness—usually represented as a young person’s innocence—to mature wisdom.

[12] Joe Lipsett laid out the five-fold function of *Buffyverse* “Big Bads,” focusing on Season Five’s *Glory* as an especially effective example of these seasonal villains who force *Buffy* to find ways to reconcile aspects of her two “selves”: the *Buffy* who is “just a girl,” and the Slayer.

[13] Sherry Ginn considered *Lilah Morgan* of *Angel*’s evil law firm, *Wolfram & Hart*, and *Adelle DeWitt*, supervisor of the *Dollhouse*—two of the very few recurring female characters with white-collar jobs. Incidentally, *Professor Walsh* of *Buffy* Season Four is another, but she does not last very long. Placing these characters within a context of real-world statistics on women’s job positions and earnings, Ginn argued that in Whedon’s worlds, women achieve and hold positions of power and authority—breaking the glass ceiling—only by choosing ruthless, merciless actions.

Angel (I)

[14] Matthew Hurd followed Masson’s talk as the first presenter in one of the opening sessions. His talk intrigued audience members by its attention to the unaired episode of *Angel* entitled “Corrupt.” Hurd suggested that though the process of creating the episode, written by David Fury, was halted just a few days before production, the various themes that originally appeared in the script were later incorporated into the complex narrative fiber of the series as a whole, while other aspects of the episode were rejected outright and never appeared again. Hurd observed that “Corrupt”

suggests an original tone much darker and grittier than what ended up happening in the series, but Hurd's contention is that by choosing to cut this episode in favor of what ended up being the opening episode, "City Of," the writers set the stage for what would ultimately be the show's major theme of redemption.

[15] AmiJo Comeford followed Hurd's presentation, also focusing on *Angel*, though this time attending to Cordelia Chase as a narrative center, not just the emotional heart, as has often been addressed. Comeford contended that Chase serves as a narrative type, almost a chorus-like figure who provides the truest, most accurate narrative connection to the series, its themes, its arcs, and its character relationships. With Cordelia Chase as the central figure, the chaotic narrative in Season Four cannot help but indeed operate in that way as a result of Cordelia's loss. This sense of narrative drift would not be restored again until Season Five's "You're Welcome" with Cordelia's return to the series, if only briefly, to put the narrative back on track again.

Law and Language

[16] Erma Petrova guided her audience through the concept of necessity in the context of legality. Necessity typically comes into play in states of exception or full powers, when democratic procedures are replaced with the power to issue decrees. The declaration of a state of emergency tends to be the dominant paradigm of governments, opening doors for the emergence of dictatorships or totalitarian regime often at the exception of humanitarian issues. In Season Three of *Buffy*, Faith declares "We are the law," a sentiment further refined by Buffy leading up to a battle with hell itself in Season 7 when she claims executive power with her statement "I am the law." In a way, Sunnydale is always in a state of emergency, necessitating sacrifices to normal governance because of lack of public awareness of vampires and demons. Because authority may lead to monstrosity, the hereditary right to claim exception on the part of the slayers can be disruptive among their friends and allies. Fortunately, Buffy learns to lead others to play positive roles in the final fight.

[17] Petrova was followed by *Slayage's* ever-present legal duo Sharon Sutherland and Sarah Swan, who for years now have been applying their expertise to explore concepts related to the function of law in the Whedonverses. With one notable exception, Whedon's shows are "non-law" shows that offer valuable insight into juridical practice often by questioning who is inside and who is outside of the law. That one exception? *Angel*. "*Angel is law*," Sutherland says. For so short a series, *Firefly* has hundreds of examples of legalistic issues and the series *Dollhouse* begins with a contract negotiation scene. In this talk, Sharon and Swan once again demonstrated the potential for an entire book of collected essays related to law in the Whedonverse. If Nick Fury's verbal sparring with the S.H.I.E.L.D. Council in *The Avengers*, is any indication, the *S.H.I.E.L.D.* television series is likely to cover more jurisdictional ground.

[18] Rounding out the panel session was Rhonda V. Wilcox who, with an investigation into the creative use of soliloquy and monologue, showed the audience "one more door to open for study in the Whedonverses." It takes special skill, Wilcox says, to create "noticeable use of a monologue

without it becoming pompous oratory." That Whedon and his team of writers so deftly weave these revelatory, often philosophical, moments into the lives of their fictional characters contributes to our view of them as creators of art.

Music in the Whedonverses

[19] Neil Lerner focused his attention on the ways in which the music that accompanies Spike's appearances in Season Seven of *Buffy* progresses throughout the series. One of his key questions was whether or not Spike's theme is a love theme in the same way that Angel's and Riley's themes seem to function as love themes. Lerner noted the lack of scholarship about the instrumental music that accompanied Spike's character. Lerner suggested that Spike's theme, which occurs in the second episode of Season Seven and continues to re-occur throughout, up to his final heroic end, is "melancholy and mourning," being comprised of mostly unresolved musical tension in the form of dissonance and minor harmonies. In the end, the motif often occurs in key moments between Buffy and Spike, even if it contains musical dissonance and unresolved tension.

[20] Steve Halfyard's presentation focused specifically on *Dollhouse's* opening musical theme. She suggested that this theme is different from other Whedon shows since the credit portion contains just thirty seconds of a much longer musical theme, a theme that contains lyrics rather specific to the show itself. In the title track, however, we only hear the segment that contains no lyrics, though it is voiced. Halfyard focused on the relationship of the full song and its lyrics to the series as a whole and suggests that the lyrics' omission in the title sequence is suggestive and ripe for attention, since lyric music is used elsewhere in the Whedonverse, such as in *Firefly*. Halfyard's attention to the full song lyrics was insightful and provocative, introducing those in the audience to a new dimension of the series.

***Dollhouse* (I)**

[21] The panelists on this first of two *Dollhouse* panels formed a kind of mini-powerhouse from skilled undergraduate and published writer, Ryan Jawetz, to PhD candidate in Modern Thought, Samira Nadkarni, and scholarly partners and *Slayage* alums Agnes Curry and Joe Velazquez. It was evident even before the session began that this would be a very full experience.

[22] Jawetz started the session off with a compelling take on "Identity and Moral Agency in *Dollhouse*." His presentation echoed many of the key conclusions he draws in his contribution to *Joss Whedon: The Complete Companion*, published by Titan Books in association with PopMatters. In it, Jawetz picks up where René Descartes left off with his assertion that the philosopher did not delve deeply enough into what constitutes the "I" in "I think, therefore I am." Defining the "I," Jawetz suggests, plays a significant role in driving narrative in *Dollhouse*. If the "I" is in question, what does that do for morality and the responsibility associated with it?

[23] While it was her first time at *Slayage*, Nadkarni, who followed Jawetz, is no stranger to the field of Whedon studies being a frequent presence at the annual meeting of the Southwest/Texas Popular Culture and

American Culture Association. Nadkarni focused her *Slayage* presentation on the series' explicit and subtextual references to the events of the Holocaust. Her exploration of witnessing and memorialization of past events demonstrates the somber fact that these actions do not guarantee terrible things will not come to pass again in the future.

[24] Continuing their trend of bringing a fresh literary angle to the works of Joss Whedon with each *Slayage* conference, Curry and Velazquez positioned Echo's multiple personalities in relation to the often complex relationships between images present in poetry. In their analysis of the more one-off episodes that characterize the first eight episodes of *Dollhouse*, the pair found Echo's character unified by a narrative which emphasizes maternity as much as it does redemption.

Fandom (I)

[25] Fandom is a multivalent term in pop culture. David Kociemba presented preliminary results of research in progress in "Surveying Online Fans about the Values Expressed by Joss Whedon's Work." The surveys began in 2010 with *Buffy*, *Angel*, and *Firefly*, and now include the very recent additions, *The Cabin in the Woods* and *The Avengers*. It appears that the values expressed and the online fandom have become more diverse. Courage, freedom, and "true friendship" appear as the top three values across all five; the contested values are even more spread out. It seems notable that *The Cabin in the Woods* had the most positive values that "almost never" appear, and the most "contested values." This controversial film requires more time to settle.

[26] Patricia Pender analyzed the sexual politics of the perhaps now infamous "Buffy vs. Edward" video by Jonathan McIntosh, whose essay on his vid, "What Would Buffy Do?: Notes on Dusting Edward Cullen," received the 2010 Short Mr. Pointy Award. Pender explained how "metaleptic transgression" helps us understand story, interpretation, and fan appropriation in this and similar videos, referring to Tisha Turk, "Metalepsis in Fan Vids and Fan Fiction."

[27] Tanya Cochran's "By Beholding, We Become Changed: Joss Whedon, (Anti)Fandom, and Lived Religion" began by discussing the impact of Whedon's Whedonesque.com [post](#) concerning the "honor" killing of Du'a Khalil & extreme violence in media, "Let's Watch a Girl Get Beaten to Death," along with fan responses to that post and other Whedon texts. The fan response, varying from praise to doubt to abuse of Whedon, nevertheless supports the unstated warrant that "stories matter," argued Cochran. Fans' investment in Whedon's work and his point of view in general led Cochran to consider the metaphorical "transubstantiation of narrative," connecting narrative's ability to change fans' lives with the Logos of John 1.1 ("In the beginning was the Word...") and the title quote from Seventh Day Adventist teacher Ellen G. White, "By beholding [the divine] we become changed." Undoubtedly many fans have testified—to use another religious term—to the impact of *Buffy* or *Firefly* on their lives. When Spike says, "You're the one, Buffy" (7.20 "Touched"), he speaks for all who have become better men for her sake. If "Joss is god," however, the applicable word here may be "theosis," rather than transubstantiation. Nevertheless, Cochran presented a fascinating exploration of fan investment.

The Grotesque Across the Whedonverses

[28] Cynthia Burkhead began the session she also chaired by focusing on the grotesque with the importance of the various versions of the “cute grotesque,” a combination of overt and exaggerated sweetness but combined with exaggerated violence. Burkhead suggested that in *Angel* Season Five’s “Smile Time,” puppet Angel is created as a grotesque figure, representative of the cute grotesque in his puppet form. In this state, Angel has to find ways of coping with and dealing with his emotional and physical vulnerabilities. Burkhead’s presentation then addressed the various ways in which the grotesque appears in Whedon’s work with *Harmony* also embodying the cute grotesque as well as *Echo* and *Mellie*, whose costuming sometimes suggests anime dolls, which when combined, especially in *Mellie*’s case with violence, creates a grotesque expression.

[29] Rachel Mellen’s essay also explored the use and elements of the grotesque in the *Buffyverse*. She noted that the element of the grotesque “enhances the morbidity” of the episode in which it is used. This occurs, according to Mellen, due to a combination of the grotesque and the fairytale, which enhances the episodes because of the contradictions inherent in each, the fairytale often ending positively while the grotesque ends rather differently. Mellen utilized the gentlemen from “Hush” as an example as well as the death demon from “Killed By Death.” Mellen closed her exploration with a discussion of *BtVS* Season Three’s “Gingerbread,” which incorporates both the fairytale and the witch, with witches representing the tabooed and the grotesque. The episode’s horror is further enhanced by the demonic taking on the role of children, another combination that results in a grotesque combination, which aids in the overall terror of the episode.

[30] Jared McCoy posited that masks are an essential tool for survival in *Firefly*. He suggested that acts of masking and unmasking provide clues to characterization. Specifically, McCoy observed that Mal wears masks according to his particular narrative situation, the most frequent of which is that of the outlaw. McCoy went on to explore the romantic mask Mal puts on for his relationship with Inara, a relationship wherein masks of condescension also come into play, the physical and social masks with those in the upper classes; the mask of a “humble worker,” and finally the mask of the hero. In the end, McCoy argues, Mal can finally remove the heroic mask and accept himself simultaneously as the thief and the good man, even though he is perfectly adept at wearing or not wearing masks in order to achieve his desired goals.

Beyond the Televisual Text: Format, Authorship, and Meaning in the Whedonverse

[31] The first thing attendees of this panel noticed when they walked in the room were the props or “paratexts” as Casey McCormick would reference them in her presentation, “Paratexts Across the Whedonverse and the Disbursal of Narrative Signification.” Displayed across the podium were DVDs, comic books, novels, action figures—all extensions of the Whedonverse beyond the boundaries of the core narratives themselves. McCormick argued that not only these items are worthy of study, but that

even paratexts not created by a studio or licensees are integral parts of the created universe. Blogs, fan fiction, reviews, and even individual tweets are jumping-off points for scholarship about these worlds. One result of this talk: the word "paratext" was thrown around a lot more in the halls and question-and-answer portions of panels throughout the remaining days of the conference. Jess Bower's paper for this session echoed McCormick's concern about the critical value in considering work across platforms such as comics created with the same media properties.

[32] Julie Hawk followed McCormick with "'Watch how I soar': Finding Serenity in the Death of the Author and the Death of the Book." Hawk expanded on the statement that the character of Hoban "Wash" Washburne "carries the voice of Whedon" by pointing out other avenues by which we might find the voice of the author within Whedon's oeuvre.

[33] Marc McKee's presentation "Topher Brink and Joss Whedon: The Death of the Author as the Gift of Narrative Agency" was a pleasant bookend to Hawk's presentation. His thesis stemmed from the idea that most of Whedon's narratives contain a "whedonesque" surrogate. Here, McKee presented Topher Brink as the most evident of this in *Dollhouse* and *Echo* as the pinnacle of his artistic ability.

The Intertextual Whedonverse

[34] Only the first of these two papers truly focused on intertextuality: Camille Lefevre's examination of Summer Glau's "performative presence" in the Whedonverse. Lefevre helpfully distinguished between two types of intertextuality: vertical, i.e., the television show(s) and external texts or experiences that may influence it and horizontal, i.e., the television show(s) or actor and other shows related to it. Thus, Summer Glau's ballet training is part of the vertical intertextuality that informs all her roles, each of which involves dancing of some kind. In terms of horizontal intertextuality, it seems that all her roles (so far) have qualities of liminality and instability, especially mental instability.

[35] Julianna Beaudoin compared "Gypsy" characters in the Buffyverse with real world Romani, based on her own anthropological research. As enlightening as this paper was, it probably would have fit better in a "characters" panel, or as a counterpoint or companion to the other Jenny Calendar paper in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (II).

Firefly and Serenity (I)

[36] In order to accommodate travel plans, *Slayage* vet and author of *The Aesthetics of Culture in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Matthew Pateman spoke in this panel in lieu of a previously scheduled slot. His paper *The Director's Cut* gave voice to the less appreciated talent that has so much to do with "manifesting the visual" that precedes fandom and fan consumerism. Because television directors are in most cases not, as Whedon is, the "creators" of a given program, they are often neglected in study. Whedon's production company, Mutant Enemy, is often considered in terms of a writing school, but perhaps Whedon might be considered a facilitator of the

directors' art too. In this talk, Pateman served as a persuasive advocate for the talented men and women that help bring life to Whedon's shows

[37] Visual storytelling enthusiast and one of the organizers of the *Joss in June* academic conference (coming in 2013) Dale Koontz followed Pateman with another tremendous presentation. Koontz's impressive visual aids made her delineation of the parallels between the colorful Anime space western, *Cowboy Bebop* and Whedon's own foray into the mixed genre all the more enjoyable. Most notable is the shows' shared identity as narratives that trace the lives of characters living together on the frontier. It was clear from the reactions in the room that *Cowboy Bebop* was not only a new show for many but a surprising revelation for some about the complexity of the Anime form—not to mention that of cartoons in general—and hopefully an impetus for further intertextual exploration with Whedon's works beyond shared talent, media, and culture.

Genre and Narratology

[38] Richard Albright's presentation added to the scholarly discussion surrounding Whedon's tendency to blend genres seamlessly inside of his television shows. Specifically, Albright focused attention on the roles that documentary techniques work to reveal information inside the narrative that are otherwise not available. Though the presentation certainly included analysis of *Buffy* Season Seven's "Storyteller," Albright also included insightful commentary on embedded documentary style in *Dollhouse* and *Serenity*. Albright suggested that in each instance, documentary-like footage is used to first create the myth and then break down that same myth with the documentary footage making that breakdown all the more dramatic.

[39] Mary Ellen Iatropoulos' Mr. Pointy Award-winning essay explored the ways in which the Whedonverse treats, comments on, and provides space for discussion about disability and physical impairment. After providing a practical research and theoretical background on disability studies and its implications, Iatropoulos posited, through a thoughtful and careful consideration of characters in *Angel*, *Dollhouse*, and *Buffy*, that the shows' writers created an ethical framework and platform that expresses and creates an accepted space for physically impaired individuals. In fact, Iatropoulos argued that Whedon actually presents impairment as a way of bringing up issues rather than to validate any discriminatory practice. When faced with disabling situations, Whedon characters have the option to choose how they negotiate the situations and their paths and positive paths are indeed opened to them through the narrative.

[40] Stan Beeler explored the role of urban fantasy in the Whedonverse. He began by pointing to the historical roots of urban fantasy, which he traces as going back as far as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. He defined urban fantasy as magical narratives set in contemporary society, a place where character building is essential and where monsters live in a world similar to our own. Through an attentive focus on the definition of urban fantasy and distinguishing it from high fantasy and hard science fiction, Beeler concluded that the particular movement into television urban fantasy and the accompanying formula was developed out of Whedon's constructions on *Buffy*, particularly in narratives wherein the supporting cast works out

and develops parallel narratives, which preclude the single-vision narrative that characterizes much of the urban fantasy novels.

Comics

[41] "Comics" panel chair Elizabeth Rambo shares about the unique experience she had in this panel:

"The main thing Lowery Woodall, conference attendee Sarah Smith, one UBC student "minion" (responsible for tech support), and I learned from this panel is that even fewer Whedon Studies scholars have read or perhaps care much about Whedonverse graphic fictions than anyone anticipated. The four people listed comprised the entire attendance for this panel, and since two of us were presenters, I believe we may have set an academic conference session attendance record low. Fortunately, Woodall's essay on "post-racial thought" in *Astonishing X-Men* will appear in a forthcoming collection from McFarland on Whedon, race, and ethnicity (co-edited by Woodall with Mary Ellen Iatropoulos). In my presentation on the unfortunately little-known *Sugarshock!*, I attempted to demonstrate ways in which it is a jewel of Whedonesque comedy."

5th Biennial *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses Banquet

[42] At the banquet Friday night, author Nancy Holder drew on her experience as a writer connected to the Whedonverses to explain "Why Joss Whedon Matters," describing the continuing influence of *Buffy*, *Angel*, and *Firefly* in television and film, even as Whedon gains wider recognition with *The Avengers*. The 2012 Mr. Pointy Awards for *Buffy* Studies Scholarship in 2011 were [announced](#), including two special awards to Nikki Stafford, whose blog "Nik at Nite" hosted [The Great Buffy Rewatch](#) in 2011, and Alysa Hornick, whose ongoing Whedon Studies bibliography project, [Whedonology](#), continues to be a valued resource to all in the field.

Saturday, July 14th, 2012

Second Keynote—Jonathan Gray

[43] The second full day of the conference opened with Jonathan Gray's keynote presentation that allowed audience members to step back from the texts somewhat to consider the role of Whedon as author, a common theme at SCW5. He began his presentation with a theoretical framework based on Roland Barthes' famous essay "The Death of the Author." Gray went on to explore the connections between Whedon as author to his own text and then to the readers, noting that because Whedon's texts are so present, life moving on in between viewers' watching of individual episodes and such, readers themselves change in the interim, which suggests a continuum wherein author and text are not in a moment of static creation. Rather, the text, author, and reader exist simultaneously. This being the case, Gray suggested, we need to re-consider what the role of the author is to the text and then to the readers. Gray suggested three uses we might consider for the author as we resurrect the importance of the author

following the poststructuralist de-centering of the author: "Creating extra sites of meaning, providing cultural legitimacy, and acting as cultural mediator."

[44] After the keynote, conferees were formally introduced to the new Whedon Studies Association officers they had elected: President Tanya R. Cochran, Vice-President/Rising President Stacey Abbott, Treasurer Cynthia Burkhead, and Secretary Kristopher Woofter.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (II)

[45] Jessica Hautsch's essay began by asking a provocative and thoughtful question about how Spike participates in recreating and exemplifying colonial roles and psychological situations as a colonized other. Hautsch posits that *Buffy's* fourth season is the moment when Spike shifts from racialized other into colonized other, a moment that begins what Hautsch addressed as his "assimilation narrative." By the time the narrative reaches Season Five, Spike has fallen in love with Buffy and abandons his desire to feed, desiring to please Buffy by assimilating and adopting her values. As the last piece, then, Spike's quest for a soul is his full assimilation into reproducing and adopting human values. Hautsch concluded that Spike's internalization of the colonizing influences and ideology that have colonized him make him into the colonized other.

[46] Katia McClain's essay on Jenny Calendar was one of the most unusual presentations at the conference. McClain's expertise in Eastern European culture and language provided a truly fascinating lens for Jenny Calendar's shift in *Buffy* Season Two into a "gypsy." According to McClain, the Romani culture and references in the show have had very little scholarship devoted to them in Whedon Studies. McClain began by noting the two different stereotypes into which Romani women are often presented, the seductress and the fortune teller, neither of which are used in Jenny's presentation. McClain suggests, however, that even though Jenny avoids these stereotypes, she is treated to a full-scale erasure rather than given a complex and thoughtful identity as a Romani woman, since her race or ethnicity is never even mentioned until mid-Season Two. McClain then observed that in the origin of the Angel curse story, the correct term of Romani is used but afterward, the writing moves into using the more standard English-speaking term "gypsy," a term that McClain indicated has historically distorted Romani culture and contains negative connotations and implications for the culture. In the end, McClain thoughtfully and thoroughly concluded that aside from calling Jenny a Romani, nothing else in the text places Jenny within the Romani culture or tradition. Rather she is presented as a more typical, normative American, which prevents her from displaying a voice that might come from a marginalized culture.

[47] Linda Jencson's presentation took on the much-studied episode "Pangs" from *Buffy* Season Four. Jencson took a unique perspective by suggesting that standard tropes in the episode are actually subverted. For her reading, Jencson utilized the framework of Richard Slotkin's cultural history scholarship. She noted that the episode is very much about white people reacting to a myth of the Native American, since according to Jencson, the Chumash warrior is not created as an actual Native American but rather as a type that represents the trope in the national myth. In the

end, if this episode were confirming the usual tropes, Buffy would have been triumphant, but instead, the characters close the episode with a disjointed and chaotic holiday experience, indicating that the episode works toward breaking down the American myth of the Native American rather than the Native American himself.

Characters (II)

[48] Ana Carolina Gutierrez approached Buffy's emotional state in Season Six through the lens of clinical depression. By placing her own personal experience with depression in conversation with Buffy's evident symptoms such as unhealthy coping mechanisms including alcohol and arguably Spike, Gutierrez presented her audience with a strategy for using *Buffy* in adolescent therapy sessions. Hearing Gutierrez walk through what this might look like in practice opened the door to a broader conversation on how TV might be used in treating one of the most common mental illnesses we witness. Where's a licensed psychologist to weigh in when you need one?

[49] Jessica Ratcliffe followed Gutierrez's focus on Buffy by tracing mentor Giles' assimilation into American culture specifically as demonstrated by the environments within which he operates from the library, to home, to the magic box. Ratcliffe's careful analysis of these spaces and their personal and public meaning was a welcome reinforcement of the importance of production design in scholarly Whedon discourse.

[50] Just as Julie Hawk and Marc McKee identified Wash and Topher respectively as surrogates for the voice of Whedon, Katherine Whaley in this panel spoke to Xander Harris' proximity to the role of the viewer due in no small part to his identity as a non-magicked character.

History, Culture, and Pop Culture in the Whedonverses (I)

[51] In this session, Leslie Pearson gave a new angle on the good girl/bad girl and "final girl" tropes, focusing on Willow rather than Buffy. In this paradigm, Willow, seeing herself as a "good girl," believes the only way she can acquire the power she needs/wants is through dark magic. However, her final encounter with power is to channel it for the benefit of all women—if we view the Potentials as metaphorically representing women in general—not to use it herself.

[52] Jenny Platz placed 1970s New York slayer Nikki Wood in the context of 1970s "blaxploitation" films that presented early "strong women characters" such as Coffy and Cleopatra Jones. These film heroines triumph, however, whereas Nikki is killed by Spike, dismantling the power of the black slayer. Similarly, Platz pointed out—as have others—that Jamaican slayer Kendra and other black characters are swiftly dispatched. Nikki Wood's agency is denied; only her death matters to reinforce Spike's connection to the white Buffy. Wood, an equally capable slayer, dies so Buffy can learn from her mistakes. There were many points to ponder here, including the question: "If Nikki were equally capable, wouldn't she have survived?"

[53] Jeffery Bussolini concluded the session by placing *Buffy* in its international context, presenting some findings from a project of examining the problems and constraints involved in translating *Buffy*, with its

idiosyncratic dialogue style of “Slayer slang” (Adams) interspersed with American pop culture references. Even the title can be problematic, and the issue of dubbing versus subtitles raises additional hurdles, as those who have tried to watch the show in another language can surely attest. Bussolini’s project reminds us that *Buffy* and other Whedon shows are international phenomena. They may be best appreciated in the original English, but nevertheless have found fans in many languages.

***Dollhouse* (II)**

[54] *Dollhouse* is probably Whedon’s most controversial series, and two of the papers in this session demonstrated some reasons why. Marcus Recht brilliantly analyzed the visual representation of Adelle Dewitt as a female leader, as shown through her physical presence and demeanor, dress, office situation and design. One could not help wishing that this presentation, with its emphasis on the visual and the glass ceiling, could have been more immediately juxtaposed with Ginn’s paper on Dewitt and Lilah Morgan as ruthless women leaders.

[55] Taylor Boulware intertwined queer theory, neoliberalism, and the quest for a multivalent subject to explore Echo as a “queer ideal” whose trajectory escapes “normalizing fictions.” This same concern for escaping “normalizing fictions” seemed to inform Lorna Jowett’s “Interrogating Romance in *Dollhouse*,” which was, as the title suggests, largely made up of questions. If the premise of *Dollhouse*, as stated by Whedon in at least one interview, is to deal with society’s discomfort with sexuality, then why all the fan desire—even, she confessed, her own—for certain characters to fall in love and have a “happy ending”? Is romance the fantasy and love the real? Do soulmates exist, and if so, what about free will? Does Victor love Sierra or vice versa, or not? Can you wipe away a soul? *Dollhouse* seems to say “no,” but Jowett did not go into this. Certainly the question of souls in the Whedonverse continues to be vexed. Victor and Sierra post-apocalypse seem to have choices as Antony and Priya—but are they still programmed? Do personalities not matter? Somehow we want them to have a happy ending. It seems less easy to fight our own desire for happy endings—apparently the dreaded heteronormativity is still, well, normative.

Fandom (II)

[56] “The Whedonverse was made for burlesque,” says *Ink-Stained Amazon and Cinematic Warriors* author Jennifer K. Stuller in her aptly titled paper, “Numfar! Do the Dance of Seduction! Nerd Burlesque, Performing Fandom, and the Whedonverse.” Accompanied by friend and *Whedonesque Burlesque* producer Jessica Obrist, Stuller teased us with context about the connections between fandom and performance studies, which remain relative strangers in scholarship. The correlations between burlesque performers who embody feminine strength and the strong women in the Whedonverse that were outlined in this presentation brought the two fields that much closer together.

[57] Bertha Chin has had her finger on the pulse of Whedon fandom since the nascent days of the Whedonverse, going back to the near legendary online fan community for *Buffy*, “The Bronze.” Using examples of

fan parties attended by cast and crew, Chin gave us insight into both the evolution of social hierarchy in fandom as well as noted the decline in discourse surrounding live fan events which has been eclipsed by that regarding the social media sphere.

[58] Of course, no panel on fandom is complete without at least a passing mention of fan fiction, and Derrick King delivered much more than that in his presentation, “‘Us Together, Without the Magic’: The Sexual Politics of Willow/Tara Fan Fiction.” King posited that due to the challenges of televisual queer representation during *Buffy’s* run, fan fiction was a way to contribute to the narrative, allowing viewers to see or imagine what could not be displayed in the canonical text.

History, Culture, and Pop Culture in the Whedonverses (II)

[59] Frances Sprout’s essay explored the connections and narratives surrounding a gift economy, especially in *Buffy*. Sprout helped us understand particularly Dawn’s gift to Buffy of a stolen leather jacket in Season Six’s “Older and Far Away.” Sprout draws a connection to this gift as a center point that directs our attention back to Season Five’s “The Gift,” in which Buffy gives her life as a gift for Dawn, and then points our attention forward to Season Seven’s “Selfless,” in which Anya offers her life to restore the lives of the fraternity boys she has killed as a vengeance demon, only to discover the pain that comes from realizing that the greatest sacrifice is not one’s own life but the life of someone one loves. Sprout closed her presentation by suggesting that more work needs to be done on the notion of sacrificial death as well as the gift economy in both *Buffy* and *Angel*.

[60] Erika Lindgren’s essay delved into the extensive use made of medievalism in *Buffy*, even relating Buffy herself to a medieval knight. Lindgren began her presentation with a brief historical background about medievalism and its social value and acceptance, ending with the important point that by the twentieth century, medievalism had become a standard element of popular culture, including in *Buffy* where medievalism is prominent through the props, characters, and dialogue. Though the trope prevails throughout the series, Lindgren did note that very little knowledge about the period is actually necessary for viewers to recognize the strong presence of medievalism.

[61] Ensley Guffey’s paper explored the connections across historical American memory utilized in the narratives of *Angel*, *Firefly*, and *The Avengers* and how the writers used that memory to create a new narrative with memories counter to the dominant historical one. Guffey thoughtfully tracked these memories throughout the visual texts, focusing on *Angel’s* Season One episode “Hero” and its parallels to Nazism; imagery and costuming in *Firefly* that connects the Alliance to Nazis and the Browncoats to Americans; and Captain America’s role in *The Avengers* in bringing the traditional memory of American purity and the counter-memory of conspiracy into one, reconciling them. Guffey’s scholarship in this fine presentation adds significant evidence to Whedon scholarship that suggests Whedon’s work exists in a decidedly non-binary space, where mainstream narratives and counter-narratives are equally present and equally complex.

Featured Speakers

[62] As is tradition, every *Slayage* the Featured Speakers panel is that one attended by all conference goers to share in the experience of hearing from some of the most distinguished academics in Whedon scholarship.

Alyson Buckman

[63] Alyson Buckman began her talk by observing that actors crossing over from one creative space to another can actually create meaning, not limit it as some might assume. Rather Whedon's use of performers from one Whedonverse to another provides a layering of meaning, especially in cult audiences that follow from one show to another that would not otherwise be available. This is perhaps even more important in the Whedonverse since, according to Buckman, there is a unity across the Whedonverse encapsulated by thematic unity. As audiences begin to expect a particular set of themes, tropes, genres, etc. from one auteur, they are led from show to show. When they encounter familiar actors they are given something additional that non-cult followers do not have, Buckman noted: allusions, roles, and memories that create additional instant meaning. This means, of course, as Buckman concluded in her paper, that subtexts for fans are deeper and more extensive for non-fans due to the crisscrossing of particular actors within the varied Whedonverse.

Hélène Frohard-Dourlent

[64] One of the great recurring jokes on *The Colbert Report* has to do with Stephen Colbert's assumed persona asserting his blindness to race. By taking political correctness to an extreme and erasing race, this character exhibits the trend toward a social structure wherein it is actually more difficult not to discriminate. Frohard-Dourlent asserts that this kind of race erasure demonstrates not an actual absence of racism but in fact racism of a different type. Through "Nobody's Asian in the Movies" from the *Commentary the Musical* feature which accompanies *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, Frohard-Dourlent questioned the decision to downplay racism through humor rather than address it more direct ways in her pursuit of the notion that racism no longer functions in blatant ways.

Ananya Mukherjea

[65] Ananya Mukherjea reframed "mothering" as "an ethic of care," an attitude and way of behavior toward others that has no necessary connection to gender, or to bearing or caring for children, but rather an ethical perspective within which all people are interdependent and benefit from helping each other. The powerless, especially, need to be protected. It is more about actions than emotions. Through four characters—Melaka Fray of the graphic novel *Fray*, Simon Tam of *Firefly/Serenity*, and Adelle DeWitt and Boyd Langton of *Dollhouse*—Mukherjea demonstrated that in the Whedonverses this "mothering" care may be performed by either gender, with success dependent on the character's other choices and circumstances.

Sunday, July 15th, 2012

Third Keynote—Tamy Burnett

[66] Over the past few years, it has been a pleasure for many of us to hear threads of work that will appear in the upcoming book on medical and disability narratives in the Whedonverse from Iatropoulos' "Defining Joss Whedon's Disability Narrative Ethic: The Impairment Arcs of Lindsey McDonald, Bennett Halverson, and Xander Harris" to Dr. Tamy Burnett's keynote address, "'I've Got These Evil Hand Issues': Amputation, Identity, and Agency in Angel." Hands, Burnett explained, represent one's primary source of agency. Because of this, the loss of one's hands is often the most traumatic experience a character can go through. The discoveries Burnett shared from her research were both fascinating and well crafted. The full, published work cannot come quickly enough.

Race and Gender in the Whedonverses

[67] Susan Fanetti considered the roles of four key male characters in Buffy's life, Angel, Spike, Riley, and Xander in "The Eunuch, the Neuter, (the Rebound Guy), and the Butt-Monkey: Problematic Masculinity and Complicated Feminism in the Buffyverse"—examining how each is willing to risk destruction and transformation to be recognized as men.

[68] In "Women and the (Space) Frontier," Gianna Martella disagreed with assessments of *Firefly* as primarily a "study in masculinities." *Firefly's* women aren't "typical" science-fiction women, perhaps, but may be more typical of real/historical western women. *Firefly's* female characters are often smarter than the men, more competent in many ways, and balance the male characters' strengths and weaknesses.

Philosophy and Religion

[69] "All conference, people have been saying 'oh, so you're the guy with the title,'" said panelist Mike Starr in reference to his oh-so-intriguing presentation entitled "'The Bad Guys Always Go Where the Power Is': Sunnydale as Deleuzoguattarian Heterotopia." Now, there is a naturally a difference between "exposure" and "learning" when it comes to hearing about new topics. Fortunately, Starr's confidence and masterful handle on the theories of post-structural French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari meant that much less went over the audience's head than perhaps anyone anticipated. Starr explained how these thinkers made philosophy "spatial" particularly in the formative effects of "striated" versus "smooth" space on societal hierarchy. Applying this theory from *Buffy* to *The Cabin in the Woods* and *The Avengers*, Starr impressed and educated in a most satisfying way.

[70] Aimee Rust provided a substantial platform for dialogue on post-humanism in the Whedonverse by evaluating various characters against their more animalistic qualities. Humans, Rust reminded us, like to think they are unique compared to other creatures but there is plenty of evidence to support the contrary. In *Buffy*, Slayers are both predators and prey. Angel

and Spike are simultaneously vampires and persons. By pulling in thought from Peter Singer and his work in the animal liberation movement, Rust advocated alternate considerations of “being” in light of a future wherein personhood will further be called into question.

Bibliographic Work in the Whedonverses

[71] This panel offered Don Macnaughtan and Alysa Hornick, the principal bibliographers of Whedon’s work, an opportunity to publicly discuss two projects they’ve spearheaded that collectively aim to organize and describe the massive amount of literature on the Whedonverses.

[72] The bibliographic panel provided a wonderful insight into how the Whedon bibliographies have been compiled as well as gave practical usage and continuing strategies to make these bibliographic references continuing projects with ever new and exciting possibilities. Macnaughtan and Hornick invited others to feed into this project and send them information. Both bibliographers collect and organize Whedon artifacts and literature materials for scholars. They noted that Whedon scholars should be proud of the tremendous bulk of work they have produced, including 1,500 individual pieces on *Buffy* and 2,000 for Whedon overall, which is what makes up Hornick’s project, as a compilation of the academic resources on Whedon studies. This project is available [online](#) for free use. She noted that her project is updated every few months, is not annotated, includes unpublished papers, and currently contains about 2,200 citations. Macnaughtan’s hard copy project contains materials that are popular as well as academic, is annotated, and comprises artifacts and resources produced between 1992-2010. Both projects are a tremendous resource for Whedon scholars, and attendees at this panel certainly left with a greater appreciation for the work undertaken by these two bibliographic scholars and for the importance of their work to the continuing body of Whedon scholarship.

***Firefly* and *Serenity* (II)**

[73] In the second session devoted to *Firefly* and *Serenity*, Natalie Stevens considered *Firefly* as a “road movie,” arguing that although there are no literal roads in space, the thematic metaphor of the road is still functional. The movement or travel on the road symbolizes freedom from social restrictions—“keep on flying”—and the heroes learn from the tests they experience along the way. It is possible to go too far, though—as illustrated by the Reavers.

[74] Mary Alice Money’s paper, “The Liminal ‘Verse of *Firefly* and *Serenity*” provided an effective companion piece to Stevens’, since traveling between hither and yon on “the road” is certainly one of the classic liminal spaces.

[75] Philosophers J. Douglas Rabb and Michael Richardson’s “Finding the *Serenity* in Tai Chi and Tai Chi in *Serenity*, Joss Whedon’s Movie That Is” not only enlightened the audience regarding the use of tai chi concepts in the Whedonverse, but also provided a serenity-invoking conclusion to a day of sitting as they got everyone in the room up to participate in basic tai chi, then demonstrated some rather impressive slow-motion martial arts moves.

Pedagogy

[76] In her piece "Let's Talk About Writing: How the Buffyverse and Fandom Work to Create a More Self-Aware Conversation Between Writers and Their Form," Kelsey Campbell demonstrated why the character of Dawn Summers can be viewed as a piece of fan fiction and a form of analysis. An inherent conflict exists between what the monks wrote for her and what she writes for herself—often literally on screen—calling attention to her liminal existence. Might Whedon have in some way been supporting the notion of fan fiction as a literary source itself? In asking this, Campbell, like McCormick and King earlier in the conference, offered further support for the legitimacy of studying fan fiction in conversation with canon.

[77] Panel chair Trish Salah began her presentation by affirming Whedon as a practitioner of progressive feminist pedagogy. In "'I am Du'a Khalil': Considering Joss Whedon's feminist Pedagogy in the Context of Postfeminism and 'the War on Terror'" Salah proposed that rather than wondering whether Buffy herself is a feminist or not, we need to consider the more nuanced form of feminism that has arisen since *Buffy* aired. In the show, global sisterhood was recognized through the systematic murder of slayers on an international scale at the beginning of Season Seven, but more general concern with human equality is part and parcel of the post-feminist movement. In his letter about Du'a Khalil posted to Whedonesque—which Cochran mentioned on the first day of the conference—Whedon does not use the word feminism once. "True enlightened activism," Whedon writes, "is the only thing that can save humanity from itself." Feminism certainly has multiple faces, Salah notes, but it is fascinating to think how much feminism we get from this one man.

The School of Whedon

[78] Tamara Wilson began her presentation by suggesting that one way to help students, pedagogically, to identify with and understand major themes inside of John Milton's masque *Comus* is to utilize the dance scene between Dawn and Sweet from Season Six's "Once More With Feeling." This scene incorporates the damsel in distress motif in a way that is positive for students. Wilson continued her presentation in drawing unique parallels between *Comus* and "Once More With Feeling," not limiting these comparisons to this one scene or even two just these two characters. In the end, however, Wilson posits that one key difference is crucial between the masque and the episode: in the masque, a clear victory is achieved over Comus and his revelry, but in the episode the lyrics of "Where Do We Go From Here?" suggest ambiguity, no final victory or triumph.

[79] Well-known Whedon scholar Stacey Abbott began her presentation by noting that Whedon has continued to assemble solid creative teams to surround him as he functions as the overseeing creative auteur. However, while Whedon scholars have indeed begun to study the various arms of this creative team, one writer in particular had not had as much scholarly work devoted to him: Tim Minear. Abbott's paper is part of a larger project that examines the varied creative elements of a combined writing team. Abbott noted that Minear's episodes are consistently on the favorites

list for cast, crew, and fans, and often these episodes provide turning points for the narrative and/or the characters. One of the most unusual and important creative tools used and perfected by Minear, according to Abbott, are the flashbacks. Minear utilized flashbacks not just for narrative exposition but journeyed further to create links from past to present to allow comparative space in the narrative between those time cuts. Certainly, Abbott's scholarship is a wonderful and needed foray into the world of Whedon's creative team and their individual contributions to the success of the various components in the Whedonverse.

[80] The conference closed, as usual, with the Whedon Bookers session (formerly "Buffy Bookers"), during which those who have published books in the field answer questions to help inform and encourage future authors.

Thanks

[81] On behalf of the Whedon Studies Association and all conference participants, we would once again like to thank the University of British Columbia's Faculty of Law at Allard Hall, among them Sharon Sutherland and Associate Dean of Law Ben Goold, and the other local arrangement chairs H  l  ne Frohard-Dourlent, and Sarah Swan for welcoming us onto campus. Equally important for us to thank are the Musqueam people including elder Larry Grant for the privilege of holding our conference in this beautiful part of the world.

[82] Wherever *Slayage Conference on the Whedonverses 6* takes us in 2014, we will always remember and appreciate the hospitality, organization, and opportunities offered by the staff of University of British Columbia and its affiliates.