



**Ewan Kirkland**

## **The Caucasian Persuasion of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer***



### **Introduction**

[1] In his discussion of the representation and construction of whiteness, Richard Dyer (1997) argues: 'There is a specificity to white representation, but it does not reside in a set of stereotypes so much as in narrative structural positions, rhetorical tropes and habits of perception' (12). This paper explores *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a particularly white text. By this I mean, the series is both populated by archetypal white characters, and informed by various structures, tropes and perspectives Dyer identifies as characterising whiteness. The classic *Buffy* episode opens at night, in a graveyard, with the protagonists battling the forces of darkness; it ends in bright Californian daylight, as the victorious Scoobies reflect on events, the world saved once more, and oblivious to their efforts. This simplification of the *Buffy* narrative's symbolic mobilisation of light and darkness reveals a whiteness extending beyond its leading cast's skin colour. White sensibilities inform the series, producing an extremely white view of the world, of history, of the universe, and white people's role within it. As such, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* constitutes a valuable focus for deconstructing whiteness as constructed cultural identity, a text variously representing and reflecting upon what whiteness means.

[2] It is easy to find examples of threatening non-white 'others' in the *Buffy* series. There are the African hyenas who possess Xander and several fellow students in 'The Pack' (1006), whose subsequent descent into juvenile delinquency, rape and cannibalism, accompanied by a ritualistic drum beat, evokes numerous negative colonial and post-colonial tropes of African natives and black teenagers (though these teens are white). There are the Chumash who lay siege to Buffy's Thanksgiving dinner in 'Pangs' (4008), the Inca princess who consumes various Sunnydale teenagers in 'Inca Mummy Girl' (2004), the African mask which brings the dead to life in 'Dead Man's Party' (3002), the black gangsta Mr Trick of Season Three, and the original Slayer who threatens the sleeping Scoobies in 'Restless' (4022). Together with the conspicuous absence of non-white central characters, the barely-noticed disappearance of Olivia, and Riley's black friend Forrest's subsequent transformation into a zombie cyborg, this suggests a negative or dismissive attitude towards non-white races.

[3] A tentative case might be made for *Buffy* as a white-supremacy text. *Buffy's* anti-authoritarian streak, identified by Wall and Zryd (2002), includes the proliferation of shadowy institutions such as the Watchers' Council, the Initiative, the Mayor's office, various monstrous Others' infiltration of government and commercial organisations, and frequent indications of conspiracy between Sunnydale's state apparatus to keep residents from discovering demonic truths. Far right American political perspectives are connoted in the white protagonists' survivalist mentality, stockpiling weaponry and rejecting police and military authorities for direct action in their self-appointed role as guardians of the Sunnydale community. The secrecy of the Scoobies' nocturnal activities, their fetishisation of arcane rituals, texts, artifacts and titles, resembles a sinister cult founded on the destruction of non-normative groups. Discussing the racial dimensions of *Buffy's* suburban

Californian location, Boyd Tonkin (2002) notes an anti-desegregation white supremacy group of the 1950s called the Spookhunters (44-5) a connection suggested in the Klan-evoking 'Whitehats' inhabiting the Wishverse Sunnydale (3009).

[4] However, such an assessment ignores the overwhelming whiteness of *Buffy's* villains, as well as protagonists. It is not my intention to criticise *Buffy*, mobilising familiar discourses of racist representation, stereotypes and positive or negative narratives, or to assume a liberal white male position, criticising my own culture for its representation of social groups to which I do not belong. Furthermore, I am writing as a fan of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* with a critical focus on the intersection between my fandom and my ethnicity. Racist representations, together with discourses of white supremacy, constitute limited if comparatively accessible means of exploring whiteness. The former conveniently avoids examining whiteness, focusing instead upon non-white identities; the latter sidesteps more dominant modes of whiteness in favour of political extremism. In contrast, a whiteness not solely associated with demonising non-white others, and more commonplace white identities inhabiting less vocal, less noticeable, more moderate, bland and central spaces, are harder to theorise or even identify. This totalising, embedded, invisible construction of whiteness, frequently defamiliarised, satirised or mobilised for *Buffy's* narrative or thematic ends, will be this paper's focus. Largely with reference to Dyer's work, I shall consider *Buffy's* generic roots, then its central characters and villains as constituting archetypal representations of whiteness. Finally, I shall explore the ways in which the whiteness of *Buffy* reveals white anxieties and insecurities concerning racial identity.

### **White Picket Fences: The Generic Whiteness of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

Mr Trick: Sunnydale. Town's got quaint. And the people? He called me sir. Don't you just miss that? I mean, admittedly, it's not a haven for the brothers. You know, strictly the Caucasian persuasion in the 'Dale. But, you know, you just gotta stand up and salute that death rate.

'Faith, Hope and Trick' (3003)

[5] In "'My Emotions Give Me Power": The Containment of Girl's Anger in *Buffy*', Elyce Rae Helford (2002) is not alone in criticising the limited class and ethnic representations of femininity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. However, *Buffy's* predominantly white casting only anchors the series' whiteness. Undeniably central to the show's racial orientation, whiteness extends beyond the proliferation of Caucasian faces populating Sunnydale's streets, malls and municipal facilities, evident in the series' generic sources. Western horror, Dyer argues, is a predominantly white genre, an ethnicity enveloping both monsters and protagonists (1997, p210). *Buffy* sets this white genre within a particularly white district, the small town, a recurring theme and location within American popular culture.

[6] Small town iconography resonates with traditional white representations. Neat rows of identical houses, white picket fences, immaculate lawns, all constitute a façade of order and civility masking dark primeval forces bubbling beneath the surface. The murderous mobs of 'The Lottery' and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the seedy strip joints of Bedford Falls' Pottersville (*It's a Wonderful Life*, 1946), the writhing insects of *Blue Velvet's* Lumbertown (1986), the prison cells and torture chambers rotting beneath *Silent Hill's* Historical Society, and the vampires and demons of Sunnydale symbolise the internal primitive which white society regards itself as burdened to repress. Indeed, many recent American small town films, *The Ice Storm* (1997), *Pleasantville* (1998), *American Beauty* (1999), *Far From Heaven* (2002), might be fruitfully analysed in such terms. Combining horror, suburbia and teenage protagonists, while self-consciously mobilising 'B movie' characters and clichés, *Buffy* parallels another popular contemporary series: the *Goosebump* books. Indeed, Tim Morris' (2000) critical description of the series' 'unerringly

white middle-class, unmarked Americans' whose adventures represent 'the controlled and processed dark side of white America' (69) applies as readily to *Buffy*.

[7] Contrasting with the small town text, *Buffy* also self-consciously evokes the action hero movie, with its quipping protagonist, fighting sequences and (fairly) clear-cut hero/villain dichotomy. In *White Guys*, Fred Pfeil (1995) defines the narrative formula of the *Lethal Weapon* and *Die Hard* films as:

a white male protagonist... triumphs over an evil conspiracy of monstrous proportions by eschewing the support and regulation of inept and/or craven law-enforcement institutions, ignoring established procedure and running "wild" instead, albeit with the aid of a more domesticated semi-bystanding sidekick. (1)

Substituting female for male, actual for metaphorical monsters, the ineffectual Sunnydale police force for FBI and government agencies, the Watchers Council for bureaucratic obstruction, and the Scoobies for the traditional action hero's sidekick, this formula remains virtually intact. *Buffy's* relationship with Snyder frequently evokes that of rogue cop and exasperated police chief, as do early exchanges between Slayer and Watcher. The show's generic debt is knowingly acknowledged in the *Die Hard* (1988) pastiche episode, 'School Hard' (2003).

[8] As Gregory Erickson (2002) illustrates, the role of Christianity in *Buffy* is neither consistent nor straightforward, and yet it constitutes a repeated presence within *Buffy* as a religion 'thought and felt in distinctly white ways for most of its history' (Dyer, 1997, 17). Evident in recurring crucifixes, holy water, churchyards, demons, hell dimensions and the pervading themes of guilt, redemption and resurrection, Christian themes inform most season's finales: *Buffy's* sacrifice of herself in Season One ('Prophecy Girl' [1012]) and Five ('The Gift' [5022]), of Angel in Season Two ('Becoming,' Part 2 [2022]) and Spike in Season Seven ('The Chosen' [7022]), and Xander's unrelenting declaration of love for Willow in 'Grave' (6022). The union of Giles, Willow and Xander, as mind, spirit and heart constitute a Holy Trinity, creating the Über*Buffy* of Season Four's penultimate episode ('Primeval' [4021]). Elsewhere traditional European myths and narratives inform *Buffy's* adventures. Anita Rose [2002] observes parallels with Shelley and Whale's *Frankensteins* in Season Four's Adam (134); Catherine Siemann (2002) discusses the Gothic influence on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, while Sarah E. Skwire [2002] labels *Buffy* a 'modern-day Gothic fairy tale' (195). Traditional folk tales, authentic or fabricated, such as Hansel and Gretel in 'Gingerbread' (3011), Little Red Riding Hood in 'Helpless' (3012) and 'Fear, Itself' (4004), the Kinderstod of 'Killed by Death' (2018), the Gentlemen of 'Hush' (4010), or the horror literature of *Dracula* ('*Buffy* vs. *Dracula*' [5001]), *Frankenstein* ('Some Assembly Required' [2002]), *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* ('Beauty and the Beast' [3004]) frequently provide narrative themes and imagery. Religious iconography, folk narratives, English literature and Christianity, together with the Scoobies' medieval weaponry, crossbows, stakes, swords and lances, produce a text steeped in white history and white culture.

[9] *Buffy's* only non-white generic component is the Hong Kong action movie, evident in the series' many fighting scenes. However, Dave West (2002) observes *Buffy's* moves rarely approximate authentic martial arts culture, and notes anxieties expressed amongst the show's producers that fighting scenes might appear incongruously 'kung fuey' (181), an incongruity resulting from the predominant whiteness of the series' milieu. In a chapter on *Jewel in the Crown*, entitled "'There's nothing I can do! Nothing,'" Dyer (1997) explores white femininity's constructed passivity. On the subject of active screen heroines, Elizabeth Hills (1999), amongst many critics, observes tendencies within (white) female action movies towards transgressive 'post-Woman woman' gender representations (46). White heroines, such as Ripley (*Alien* series [1979-1997]), Sarah Connor (*Terminator 2: Judgement Day* [1991]) or Thelma & Louise (1991), in gaining narrative agency either abandon or transform their femininity. In contrast, *Buffy* can be understood alongside more recent post-feminist texts (*Charlie's Angels* [2000], *Miss Congeniality* [2000], *Legally Blonde* [2001]) whose heroines retain a recognisable femininity while nevertheless

becoming physically active. Refusing to masculinise its protagonist, *Buffy* modifies its white heroine's race rather than her gender in a superficial incorporation of a non-white combat style ethnically located outside the dominant white/black dichotomy, whose balletic emphasis on grace, precision and control coincide with physical virtues traditionally associated with white women.

### **Whiteness Chomping On Whiteness**

[10] I now turn my attention to the racial qualities of *Buffy's* cast of characters, representing various stereotypical white constructions.

Giles: We begin, predictably, with research.

'Amends' (3010)

[11] Rupert Giles with his clipped upper class English accent, spectacles, tweed jacket and sweater-vests, symbolises many characteristics associated with whiteness: intelligence, authority, control, propriety, but also lack of spontaneity, awkwardness and sexual repression. European, but specifically British, Giles's nationality geographically and historically locates his racial character, a rare reference within *Buffy* to white colonialism. If the Watchers Council constitutes *Buffy's* clearest representation of the cold, heartless, privileged masculinity controlling white society, Giles' increasing antagonism towards the Masonic organisation, and *Buffy's* outright rejection, constitutes a negotiation of white history's unsavoury past, even as the Council structures the show's central relationship. Giles enforces the Scoobies' particularly 'white' style of fighting evil: asking questions first, staking later. This extremely academic approach to battling the forces of darkness focuses around meticulous research, calculation, and planning, involving the translation of European text books or documents stolen from other cultures. In battles, Giles' preferred weapon is more leather-bound Latin volume than crossbow, when not dispassionately observing and chronicling *Buffy's* progress. The training methods Giles employs as *Buffy's* Watcher typically favour intellect over physicality, less bodily strength, more force of will, concentration and mind over matter. While carrying non-white mystical Eastern connotations, such an approach encapsulates Dyer's (1997) description of whiteness' emphasis on spirit triumphing over body (23). In 'A New Man' (4012) Giles' transformation into a clumsy, incomprehensible, dark skinned monster employs a temporary loss of whiteness to symbolise his estrangement from his friends, while the Watcher's acoustic performance of 'Behind Blue Eyes' ('Where the Wild Things Are' [4018]) bemoans the anguish disguised by an inscrutable white countenance. Parodied by Spike in 'Bargaining Part 1' (6001) as "Cuppa tea, cuppa tea, almost got shagged, cuppa tea", Giles' disastrous sex life is both nationally and racially derived. Giles shares some on-screen intimacy with Olivia, his casual Season Four girlfriend whose race (and nationality) function to reflect the Watcher's temporary estrangement from his white American friends. Lacking the character development or self-contained narratives of other 'orgasm friends,' Olivia's barely mentioned and comparatively inconsequential departure following a racially-loaded confrontation with the Gentlemen in 'Hush' (an episode themed around the Scoobies coupling-up and reuniting), underlies her distance from Giles,' and the show's, primary activities. Arguably, Giles' most orgasmic moment is discovering Jenny's body in 'Passion' (2017), a climax scored by ecstatic classical music, marked by cultural whiteness, a lack of physical contact, and death.

Willow: The energy, the collective intelligence, it's like this force, this penetrating force, and I can just feel my mind opening up, you know? And letting this place just thrust in and, and spurt knowledge into...

'The Freshman' (4001)

[12] Willow's Jewishness might problematise this analysis were it not so marginalised, only occasionally mentioned, and never permitted narrative centrality. [**Editor's note 1**] Indeed,

Willow's Jewishness represents the extent of ethnic colour permitted within *Buffy's* central cast, constituting occasional one liners about crucifixes and *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Willow shares Giles' slightly nervous, unassuming, initially sexually inept qualities of mainstream whiteness, together with his thirst for knowledge. The Watcher's enthusiasm for ancient tombs accompanies Willow's New World fetishisation of information technology. If Giles' sexiest moment is discovering his dead girlfriend, early Willow's is attending college, an experience described employing highly sexualised imagery. If nerdy Willow of earlier seasons represents one mode of whiteness, later witch Willow represents another. Discussing teen witch fiction, Rachel Mosley (2002) mentions *Buffy* amongst many contemporary texts which 'predominantly inscribe and validate a respectable white hegemonic glamour' (421, emphasis mine). Negotiating feminist and post-feminist constructions of femininity and female power, the benign witches of *Charmed*, *The Craft*, *Sabrina* and *Practical Magic* (1998) are characteristically long-haired, dressed in natural fabrics, floral prints, lace and embroidery. While emerging after Mosley's paper, both Willow and Tara fulfil this traditional model of white femininity, their college dorm a medieval sanctuary of candles, wooden furniture and tapestries, a cultural whiteness overriding Willow's potential Jewish Otherness. Willow's battle with magic, symbolised by her blackening eyes, hair and veiny skin, represents whiteness' struggle to suppress its destructive urges, the devastating consequences of failure personified by dark Willow literally removing the (white) skin of her victim. Light's centrality in white visual culture (present in both *Sunnydale* and the series' heroine, *Buffy Summers*), is outlined in Dyer's (1997) study of Western pictorial representation, and informs Willow's redemption in 'Chosen', when magical light streams from her face and body, absolving her dark past. Wicca Willow is also lesbian Willow, and Dyer notes that popular representations of homosexuality are predominantly white representations, betraying white insecurities surrounding reproductive inferiority and anxieties that 'white sex is queer sex' (219-220).

Xander: 'My valentines are usually met with heartfelt restraining orders.'

'Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered' (2016)

[13] Given the constructed association between whiteness and middle-to-upper classness, Xander's working class background poses similar problems as Willow's Jewishness, were it not similarly erased. *Buffy* permits Xander few working class signifiers: his cheap clothes, drunken parents, basement habitat, various blue collar jobs and eventual employment in construction. A more substantial class code, like Xander's academic failure is frequently contradicted by his research skills in Giles' library, while his mismatching clothes imply more white nerdiness and eccentricity than less-white poverty. Discussing the series' use of language, Karen Eileen Overbey & Lahney Preston-Matto (2002) describe Xander's quick-witted, word play as generating 'a vocabularic shield' enhancing his status within the group. Using humour through language, 'wrapping yummy SAT words in chocolaty self-deprecation', an expression of his sexual frustration (76-8), aligns Xander with the wordiness of white education, together with the apology and sexual discomfort of white masculinity. Sharing Willow's self-effacing demeanour, the Geek Trio's anal knowledge of white popular culture, and Giles' disastrous sexual history, Xander is regularly feminised or emasculated: almost devoured by potential sexual partners in 'Inca Mummy Girl' (2004) and 'Teacher's Pet' (1004), dressed in drag for the frat boys' amusement in 'Reptile Boy' (2005), catching "funny syphilis" in 'Pangs' (4008), serving as "butt monkey" to The Prince of Darkness in 'Buffy vs Dracula' (5001). In successful partnerships Xander personifies a white masculinity subordinated to women, dating the ball-busting Cordelia from Seasons Two to Three, and the man-hating vengeance demon Anyanka from Four to Seven, losing his virginity to the aggressively sexual Faith in an encounter concluding with post-coitus ejection in 'The Zeppo' (3013), an episode themed around Xander's comparative ineffectuality within the female-heavy Scoobies. Xander's comic role within 'Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered' (2016) explicitly mobilises his whiteness. A spell-afflicted Xander traverses a school corridor drawing admiring gazes from Sunnydale females, and jealous glares from male students. Scored by funk music, this

sequence plays upon the disjuncture between the black music and the scene's white subject. [**Editors' note 2**] The over-determined whiteness of *Buffy* feminises Xander's masculinity, queers his heterosexuality, and middle-classes his working-classness.

[14] *Buffy's* supporting cast are equally white coded. Angel - literally whitened-up by the use of make-up in early episodes - shares Giles' European origin, his name evoking whiteness' Christian associations, the luminous depiction of white people in visual culture, religious models of white men's closeness to God (Dyer, 1997, 22), and white women's association with angels (126-7). Consumed by guilt, Angel's angst represents white misgivings over its genocidal past. Fittingly, Angel's curse is cast by European gypsies. Cordelia constitutes a spoiled, selfish, shrewish feminine whiteness. Like Willow's dark Wicca/Wishverse double, Oz's inner werewolf symbolises the white spirit's struggle to master the white body, repressing appetites and urges heavily sexualised through Oz's bestial tryst with Veruca in 'Wild at Heart' (4006). By 'New Moon Rising' (4019) Oz has triumphed, but sexual jealousy shakes his white spirit upon discovering Willow's relationship with Tara. If *Buffy* evokes the 1980s action movie, Spike most embodies its male protagonist, personifying Pfeil's (1995) description of the 'taut, torn, upper torso of the white star brandishing his lethal weapons' (3). Extremely white visually, Spike combines Angel's paled skin with bleached hair, the Aryan superman with white subcultures of punk and Gothicism, Giles' Britishness together with traces of all components Dyer (1997) lists of muscle men movies: Classicism, Californianism, barbarism and crucifixion (150). Finally, the race of Principal Robin Wood, *Buffy's* only non-white major character, undergoes a similar erasure as Willow's ethnicity and Xander's class. Wood contrasts with *Angel's* Charles Gunn, whose voice and body language, allegiances to an urban black community, and frequent references to his cultural and ethnic heritage distinguish him from his white colleagues. Less culturally marked, Robin Wood resists simplistic assumptions about his African American roots, dryly informing Buffy his formative 'hood' is Beverly Hills ('Help' [7004]); his ethnicity derived instead from maternal parentage, son of Slayer Nikki from 'Fool For Love' (5007), whose racial coding functions largely as kitsch shorthand locating Spike's narration temporally and geographically in 1970s New York via the Blaxploitation film cycle. Characterising Wood's racial assimilation, in 'Storyteller' (7016) Buffy places a pink band-aid on the principal's forehead without comment (reproducing the Sandy Huffaker cartoon 'White is a flesh coloured band aid' [Dyer, 1997, 41]), representing a particularly white liberal blindness to racial difference, celebrated as politically positive and affirmative of 'racial minorities', while ultimately reinforcing white hegemony.

[15] Yet *Buffy's* whitest character is Buffy herself. The principle joke of the series, located in its title, concerns the incongruity between '*Buffy*', a harmless white-evoking combination of 'bunny' and 'fluffy', and the strength, power, violence, darkness suggested by '*the Vampire Slayer*'. Buffy is unsuited to this role, as female, middle class, Californian, diminutive, blonde, young and white. Whiteness (particularly white femininity), and its associated frailty, ineffectuality and weakness, is mobilised by *Buffy* for comic effect and narrative tension. Dyer's (1997) discussion of the blonde white woman's significant position in visual discourses of whiteness (124), together with Rhonda V. Wilcox & David Lavery's (2002) observation that Buffy has grown blonder and blonder (pxviii) suggests an increasing investment in her whiteness, her blonde hair frequently indistinguishable from her blonde tanned skin, often echoed in beige, grey or white backgrounds. Buffy's ice skating scene in 'What's My Line? Part 1' (2009) characterises racial identity's construction through *mise-en-scène*, the whiteness of ice, protagonist and culture producing a striking fit, paralleling Dyer's description of the Romantic ballerina as exemplifying Victorian white femininity (1997, p130-1). Buffy's whiteness is further emphasised by all other pre-Season Seven slayers' non-whiteness: the African first slayer of 'Intervention' (5018), the Korean slayer mentioned by the dummy in 'The Puppet Show' (1009), the black and Chinese slayers killed by Spike in 'Fool For Love' (5007), and Kendra, Buffy's replacement in Season Two. Excluding Potentials, only Faith breaks this rule, her character foregrounding class over race.

[16] The relationship between Buffy and Kendra deserves significant consideration. Lynne Edwards (2002) describes Kendra as an updated 'tragic mulatta', seeking legitimacy and acceptance within the white community through assimilating white cultural values, symbolised by Buffy's more relaxed approach towards slaying. Initially perceived as a threat, Kendra's eventual acceptance, Edwards argues, is contingent upon adopting Buffy's (white) attitudes and perspectives, although ultimately doomed to failure. More critical of Kendra's status as Other, and the privileging and normalising of white values inherent within this process, Elyce Rae Helford (2002) interprets the many instances where Buffy ridicules Kendra's difference as anti-immigrant racism (26-30). Certainly, Buffy is openly hostile towards her replacement, their growing friendship predicated on Kendra modifying her behaviour to accommodate Buffy, while the heroine remains unchanged. Kendra's death in 'Becoming Part 1' (2021) acknowledges her incongruity and disposability, serving largely as plot complication when Buffy is suspected of the murder. Her treatment recalls Yvonne Tasker's (1993) description of the cinematic convention whereby black sidekicks sacrifice themselves for the white hero (36). More complexly, Kendra functions to secure Buffy's whiteness as another contrasting non-white slayer, while highlighting that Buffy is not *too* white. While black in skin colour and accent, Kendra embodies many stereotypically white characteristics absent in Buffy: coldness, studiousness, obedience, control, a lack of emotion, humour and personableness. Kendra arrives at Sunnydale readily-assimilated, evident in her immediate bonding with Giles along academic lines. In contrast, Buffy appears impulsive, rebellious, emotional, and reckless, characteristics traditionally associated with non-whiteness. The conflict between Buffy and Kendra, between black and white-coded sensibilities in which the ownership of racial characteristics is reversed, parallels the biracial buddy action movie's 'invigorating tale of cross-racial influence' discussed by Pfeil (1995, p13). In encouraging a more sassy, streetwise, less book-bound slaying style, Buffy bestows upon Kendra qualities white culture traditionally regards as lacking in itself, and excessive in others, neutralising non-whiteness while constructing its Caucasian heroine as benevolent, invigorating, and cool.

[17] The easily-identified presence of non-white villainy in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has been noted. However, this apparent prominence results not from the villains' frequency but from their contrasting visibility against the white backdrop of the show, and the explicit mobilisation of ethnicity this frequently involves. Mr Trick's introductory comments on Sunnydale's Caucasian persuasion highlights *Buffy's* whiteness, the racist anxieties evoked by white culture's black villains, and America's history of segregation. In contrast to the assimilated Principal Wood, Trick's race saturates his accent, body language and clothing, many exchanges between Trick and The Mayor being inflected with subtle racial undertones. Similarly in 'Pangs' (4008) vengeful Native American spirits are racially historicised, the injustice inflicted upon the Chumash regularly vocalised by a conflicted Willow, a typical display of white guilt which nevertheless contextualises the violence suffered by Native Americans in the Westerns 'Pangs' transforms into pastiche. The black-coded dance demon Sweet ('Once More, With Feeling' [6007], the only African American performer to grace the Bronze stage, pays tribute to black musical traditions, while his villainy recalls Dyer's (2000) discussion of non-white exclusion within classical musicals. Even Kendra's first appearance in 'What's My Line,' erroneously suggesting she is a demonic bounty hunter, is founded on racial difference.

[18] However, as Tonkin (2002) notes, the series more frequently 'refuses to encode its infernal crews with a clear racial identity' (45), meaning they frequently assume the non-racialised identity of whiteness. Considering the relationship between whiteness and death, Dyer (1997) discusses whiteness's prominence within vampire mythology. Despite being drawn from the liminal whiteness of Southern Europe, Judaism and New Orleans, vampires are characterised by pale white skin, and the bringing of whiteness, as well as death, to victims. Images of 'white people chomping away at white people' recur within the horror genre (211), and despite exceptions, *Buffy's* whiteness characterises both heroes and villains. The generic vampires, demon gangs and villainous Sunnydale residents constitute a predominantly white challenge for the series' white protagonists. Representing

various ethnic stereotypes, these include: Ethan Rayne, Giles' old school chum in 'Halloween' (2006) and 'Band Candy' (3006), the redneck vampire brothers in 'Bad Eggs' (2012), the wannabe vampire teenagers, eager to be eaten by the Other, in 'Lie to Me' (2007), the huge white impotent demon in 'Bad Girls' (3014), the unscrupulous werewolf hunter of 'Phases' (2015), the sexually repressed children in 'Where the Wild Things Are' (4018), the Scandinavian troll in 'Triangle' (5011), the tall, pale, effete Gentlemen of 'Hush' (4010), coded, according to the director's commentary, as Victorian industrialists, and Season Seven's Caleb, a southern preacher fashioned after Robert Mitchum's character in *Night of the Hunter* (1955). Female vampires are similarly white: the sardonic blonde Sunday ('The Freshman' [4001]), the unicorn-collecting Harmony ('The Harsh Light of Day' [4003]), 'Real Me' [5002]), described by Spike as his 'little foam latté', and Season Two's Drusilla, whose cockney British, frail, neurotic, hippy femininity complements the whiteness of Spike, Angel and Darla. There is Kathy, Buffy's anally-retentive secret demon roommate from 'Living Conditions' (4002) who enjoys light FM, drinks decaf lattés, and labels her hardboiled eggs; the cookie-baking computer salesman and homicidal robot dating Buffy's mother in 'Ted' (2011); and the Zeta Kappa frat house boys in 'Reptile Boy' (2005), a monstrous cult feeding women to a prehistoric lizard, linking generations of rich powerful (mostly white) men to ritual sacrifice and satanic practices.

[19] Each season's main villain bears prominent white codes. The Master of Season One, clearly modeled on the original European *Nosferatu* (1922), combines a lifeless white complexion, prissy feminine masculinity and fascistic black outfit; while Angel, Spike and Drusilla constitute the Big Bad of Season Two. The Mayor of Season Three, described by Wilcox (2002) as a 'gosh-darn, germ-hating, *Readers' Digest*-reading ... emblem of the all-American politician' (14), and Shuttleworth (2002) as combining 'homespun folksiness and demonic plotting' (224) represents a more complex, critical reflection on whiteness. As all-American, Midwestern, middle class and middle brow, the unerringly chipper Mayor Richard Wilkins III (also I and II) suggests white power maintains itself through a quasi-aristocratic, quasi-eugenic, ultimately incestuous, demon-coded system of arcane inheritance. Wilkins' feminine counterpart is Season Five's Glory, a spoilt, selfish, borderline insane god, surrounded by adoring flunkies with diseased complexions. Representing the fetishised blonde femininity central to white self-image, the pampered privilege of whiteness, and its constructed associations with heavenly light, Glory maintains her composure by consuming others' sanity, evoking whiteness' investment in intellect, its fragility and parasitic nature. The Knights of Byzantium, a medieval order bent upon destroying Glory and Buffy's sister, despite containing black recruits, bear the cultural and historic signifiers of a white European Crusaders. The Initiative, Season Four's secretive government organisation, overseen by another blonde female, Dr Maggie Walsh, represents the cold clinical scientific disposition of white civilisation, enhanced through a *mise-en-scène* of white lab coats and silver surfaces. A history of colonialism and genocide synthesise in the castrating chip implanted within Spike's head to neutralise his difference. Adam, the Frankenstein-monster like creature constructed by Initiative scientists, his name recalling white religious genealogical mythology, exhibits similar calculating emotionless detachment from his surroundings and violent actions. Season Six's villains are the Geek Trio, three puerile young men who exemplify Willow and Xander's white nerdy characteristics, testified by Xander's affinity with Andrew in Season Seven. Sci-fi cultural references litter their conversation and habitats; their designs on supervillainy appear inspired by both sexual frustration and over-immersion in comic book culture. The joke of Jonathan taking over Sunnydale in 'Superstar' (4017), like Buffy as Vampire Slayer, is founded on white ineffectuality. Finally, Season Seven's villain, The First, having no form or substance, assuming only the appearance of dead people, recalls whiteness' lack of identity, its tendency to presume a universal, depersonalised position, and its close relationship with death.

## **The Overrated Experience of Being White**



Trying to think about the representation of whiteness as an ethnic category in mainstream film is difficult, partly because white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular but also because, when whiteness *qua* whiteness does come into focus, it is often revealed as emptiness, absence, denial or even a kind of death.'

(Dyer, 2002, 126)

Angel: Looking in the mirror every day and seeing nothing there. It's an overrated experience.

'Out of Mind, Out of Sight' (1011)

Buffy: I could be dead... Wouldn't be much of a change. Either way, I'm bored, constricted, I never get to shop, and my hair and fingernails still continue to grow. So really, when you think about it, what's the diff?

'What's My Line Part 1?' (2009)

Buffy: Give me something to sing about.

'Once More With Feeling' (6007)

[20] As this catalogue of white-coded villains illustrates, *Buffy's* construction of whiteness is hardly unproblematic. From Glory's psychosis to Adam's emotionless dismembering of his victims, to Warren's misogyny, whiteness is a far from angelic condition. Anxieties represented within *Buffy*, relating to Dyer's discussion of whiteness as death, whiteness and queer sexuality, and whiteness as an invisible, insubstantial, non-existent identity will now be explored.

[21] White people's affinity with death is inherent in Buffy's Slayer status, bringing death to the dead, her actual deaths in Seasons One and Five, and her necrophilic sexual relationships. Told by the first Slayer that 'Death is your gift ('Intervention' [5018]), Buffy emphasises the Slayer's proximity to death when addressing Season Seven's potentials, stating: 'This whole thing is all about death... Death is what a slayer breathes, what a slayer dreams about when she sleeps. Death is what a slayer lives" ('Potential' [7012]). Many episodes, 'I Only Have Eyes For You' (2019), 'The Body' (5016), 'Dead Things' (6013), 'Conversations With Dead People' (7007), revolve around death and the dead, while Season Seven's *The First* in some ways personifies death itself. Whiteness is a double edged sword, both purifying and annihilating. The white light of 'Chosen' (7022), which absolves Willow, also destroys Spike.

[22] Discussing the whiteness of Andy Warhol's artistic persona, Ruth Adams (2000) draws upon many characteristics identified by Dyer. Warhol's extreme pallor, personal and artistic affinity with death, vampiric Dracula associations, the affected blankness of his dumb blonde mannerisms, his frustrated desire to possess no reflection, and aspiration to become machine-like, all reflect whiteness' darker elements. The white man as android, Adams argues, embodies the Enlightenment ideal of observing without subjectivity, passion or personality. Robots in *Buffy* are infrequent but notably sexually motivated: the cyborg internet stalker of 'I Robot, You Jane' (1008), the android Bluebeard 'Ted' (2011), Warren's sex slave April ('I Was Made to Love You' [5015]), and the Buffybot, Spike's 'checkers partner'. **[Editors' note 3]** This sexualisation of robots in *Buffy* recalls Dyer's (1997) consideration of non-reproductive androids in *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Alien* (1979) as a 'contemporary mode for approaching white non-existence' (212), revealing suspicions that whiteness and sexual reproduction are mutually incompatible (216). Abortive reproduction runs throughout *Buffy*. In 'Witch' (1003) Amy is possessed by her ex-cheerleader mom striving to relive her glory days. 'Bad Eggs' (2012) sees students distributing brain-controlling monsters that hatch from their sociology project surrogate children. 'All the Way' (6006) suggests Sunnydale's Lovers' Lane is primarily a hunting

ground for vampires. Discussing the slash-friendliness of *Buffy*, Esther Saxey (2002) describes a show in which 'the whole gamut of non-normative sexual expression is thrown together' (203). Buffy's frequently catastrophic romps with sterile vampires, Willow's bestial relationship with Oz, Xander's various abortive trysts, Spike's relationship with Angel, Walsh with Riley, Giles with Ethan: if white sex is queer sex then there is something peculiarly white about *Buffy*'s propensity for queer readings. The sterility of white sex is personified by Buffy and Riley's lovemaking in 'Where the Wild Things Are' (4018), a cold, deadening, almost mechanical activity with disastrous repercussions.

[23] White identity has traditionally constructed itself as no identity at all: as non-specific, impartial, representing everything and nothing. While a significant component of white hegemonic power, the identity-less status of seeming to be nothing in particular leads to a certain existential angst amongst white people, equally represented in *Buffy*. Instability of identity is a recurring theme. Xander's personality is split in two in 'The Replacement' (5003). 'A New Man' (4012) has Giles transformed into a (black-coded) demon. 'Halloween' (2006) sees the Scoobies possessed by seasonal costumes, assuming new personas as army guy, ghost and gothic heroine. In 'Tabula Rasa' (6008) *Buffy*'s characters suffer from amnesia, (often wrongly) constructing their roles and relationships from clothes and surroundings. Angel becomes Angelus, Faith becomes Buffy ('This Year's Girl' [4015]), Willow becomes Warren ('The Killer in Me' [7013]), Drusilla becomes Jenny ('Becoming," Part Two' [2022]), Buffy becomes Anne ('Anne' [3001]), becomes Joan ('Tabula Rasa' [6008]), becomes Faith ('This Year's Girl' [4015]), while the First becomes anyone dead. Identity in *Buffy* is unstable, illusive and easily stolen, testified by the emblematic image of Sarah Michelle Gellar concluding Seasons Six and Seven's opening credit montage being not Buffy herself, but the Buffy-bot and the First respectively. "I can't even see if this is really me", Buffy sings in 'Once More With Feeling' (6007). "I don't know if there's a me left to save" bemoans Anya in 'Selfless' (7005). "What am I? Am I real? Am I anything?" demands Dawn ('Blood Ties' [6013]) upon discovering her status as the key, a mystical energy made human, personifying whiteness as absence, without authentic history, memories or identity. Sexlessly constructed from nowhere, with a fabricated past and personality, in realising her non-existent past, Dawn confronts the emptiness at the heart of white identity and cuts her own skin.

[24] Whiteness as invisibility is a recurring theme in Dyer's (1997) study. Given colour's symbolic association with life and presence, the apparent colourless-ness of 'whiteness' also signifies a more general absence. The translucence of white photographic representation, the transparency of white faces on film, the illumination of white figures in pictorial discourse, renders white subjects as without substance. The purity of idealised whiteness may, Dyer suggests, constitute a non-existence. The disembodied, depersonalised, dispassionate position from which white authority claims to speak seeks to erase the speaker's presence and detectability. In *Buffy*, the invisibility of whiteness becomes literal invisibility, running through 'Out of Mind Out of Sight' (1011) featuring an invisible schoolgirl, 'Gone' (6011), in which Buffy is herself turned invisible, and 'Same Time Same Place' (7003) in which Willow becomes invisible to the other Scoobies, and vice versa. The Season One episode features Marcie, a student experiencing the white paranoid fantasy of fading from view, as colleagues and teachers stop noticing her. This process, represented in sepia-tinted white-coded flashbacks, significantly featuring a black literature teacher previously seen discussing anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice*, foregrounds the racial dimensions of Marcie's invisibility. Buffy's transparency in Season Six will eventually result in her disintegration, the reversal of which Spike tellingly labels returning Buffy to 'living colour'. One of Season Six's most memorable images is of a love-sick Willow constructing an invisible Tara from her estranged girlfriend's clothes, a moment touching and poetic, but tinged with whiteness' absence, longing and loss.

[25] If such reflections on whiteness inscribe the pernicious "me-too", "we're oppressed", "poor us" position Dyer resists, such discourses arguably characterise the whiteness *Buffy* represents. If being a Slayer constitutes a metaphor for being white, Buffy increasingly suffers under the white woman's burden. Described by Wall & Zryd (2002) as:

'a power that was never sought, merely bequeathed' (60), Slayerdom confers great strength, status and authority, but also overbearing responsibility. If guilt consumes and personifies Angel, it frequently characterises Buffy's actions. Guilt at her failure to save cousin Celia motivates her actions in 'Killed by Death' (2018). Transferred guilt at Kendra's murder in 'Becoming,' Part 2 (2022) turns her into a fugitive. Guilt at her inability to protect Dawn renders her comatose in 'The Weight of the World' (5021). Guilt at her apparent murder of Katrina in 'Dead Things' nearly leads to imprisonment. Time and time again Buffy expresses anguish at her failure to save another vampire victim, her desire to lead a normal life free of obligation to fighting evil, her sense of loneliness and isolation. Buffy never stops complaining, despite the privileged position she enjoys. But as Anya says "You didn't earn it. You didn't work for it. You've never had anybody come up to you and say you deserve these things more than anyone else. They were just handed to you. So that doesn't make you better than us. It makes you luckier than us" ('Touched' [7020]). Although speaking of Buffy's slayer status, Anya may equally be describing her race.

## Conclusion

[26] This paper aims to make whiteness visible. Arguing that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a text resonant with whiteness, I have illustrated the ways in which whiteness expresses itself, through white characters, white iconography, white cultural traditions and white anxieties. Rather than naturalising these qualities, I hope this analysis throws into relief the constructed nature of whiteness, so that white hegemony may be better understood, deconstructed and ultimately challenged.

[27] From its often-quoted opening sequence, where female vampire Darla turns the tables on her would-be male seducer, *Buffy* consciously signals its operation within discourses of gender. Rhonda Wilcox (2002) observes the prominence of readings of *Buffy* as feminist television (3). Anne Millard Daugherty (2002) labels *Buffy* a "'post gaze" production' and 'a feminist spectator's dream' (149), while Frances H. Early (2001) describes *Buffy* as a transgressive female warrior interrogating patriarchal institutions. This emphasis on gender, it might be argued, has deflected critical discussion from the show's racial characteristics; but *Buffy's* ethnicity might be productively considered alongside its gender representation, the programme's extreme whiteness being a symptom of the text's femininity. In foregrounding its progressive gender politics, other identity formations, namely race and class, have been compromised. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* consequently constitutes a revealing insight into the limits and negotiations of progressive popular television.

**Editor's note: See Naomi Alderman and Annette Seidel-Arpaci, "Imaginary Parasites of the Soul: Vampires and Representations of 'Blackness' and 'Jewishness' in the Buffy/Angelverse."**

**Editors' note 2: This scene also visually and musically recalls the opening credit sequence of *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), in which John Travolta struts to music down a New York street.**

**Editors' note 3: See Bronwen Calvert's "Going Through the Motions: Reading Simulacra in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*."**

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