

“Whose Revolution Has Been Televised?: *Buffy*’s Transnational Sisterhood of Slayers”

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While I am about as technologically literate as Giles, I am going to start with a clip. This is from Season’s Seven finale, “Chosen,” and it’s a moment of revelation:

Here’s the part where you make a choice. What if you could have that power *now*? In every generation one Slayer is born, because a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago made up that rule. They were powerful men. This woman [pointing to Willow] is more powerful than all of them combined. So I say we change the rules. I say *my* power should be *our* power. Tomorrow, Willow will use the essence of the scythe to change our destiny. From now on, every girl in the world who might be a Slayer, *will* be a slayer. Every girl who could have the power, *will* have the power. Can stand up, will stand up. Slayers – every one of us. Make your choice: are you ready to be strong? (“Chosen” 7022)

I wanted to try and pause on this final image, [girl with baseball bat] but it is a feat beyond my ken, so I want you to imagine as backdrop that you’re being stared at by this all-American symbol of goodness, who’s about to whack you into the New Girl Order. Have you got that image? So...

At this moment at the series' conclusion – as the archaic matriarchal power of the scythe is wrested from the patriarchal dictates of the Watcher's Council – we see a series of vignettes from around the world as young women of different ages, races, and cultures sense their strength, take charge, and rise up against their oppressors. This is a “Feel the Force, Luke” moment for girls on a global scale. It is a revolution that has been televised.

### But Whose Revolution Has Been Televised?

In extending the Slayer's powers to young girls across the globe, *Buffy's* season seven can be seen to begin to address – albeit belatedly and incompletely – the national, cultural and racial privilege the series has assumed throughout its seven-year cycle. Bringing ethnic diversity and racial difference to the Slayer story, a generous reading of *Buffy's* finale might see it as an exemplary narrative of transnational feminism. A more critical reading might see it as another chapter in a long, repetitive story of U.S. imperialism. The opposition that I'm drawing here is another version of the good Buffy/bad Buffy dilemma that haunts feminist responses to the show (and that I've written about elsewhere): Does *Buffy's* Season Seven present a utopian vision of global emancipation, or a misguided celebration of, and justification for, U.S. domination? My paper today juxtaposes these readings of the series finale, and then goes on to think about our desire (well, maybe my desire) for resolution on such issues. Do we need to choose between these admittedly dramatic and drastic readings? How does ideologically, or in some cases, morally

motivated critique mesh with and influence our choice of methodology. And can such opposed interpretations be reconciled, or re-imagined in productive ways?

So. First. Buffy and Transnational Slayer Suffrage

Season seven of *Buffy* eschews to a certain extent the metaphorical slipperiness and pop-cultural play that is typical of its evocation of demons and instead presents a monster that is, quite literally, an enemy of women. Over the seven years of its cycle, I believe that the show has consistently challenged – and expanded – our ideas of acceptable femininity. Giving the cultural cliché of the cheerleader a, like, complete makeover, the series continues to model the transgressive performance of gender as a mode of oppositional politics and praxis. But in staging the series' final showdown with a demon that is overtly misogynist – and in creating an original evil with a clearly patriarchal platform – I think *Buffy's* season seven raises the explicit feminist stakes of the series considerably.

So you know the drill. Unable to take material form, The First Evil employs as its vessel and deputy a former preacher turned agent-of-evil called Caleb. Spouting hellfire and damnation with fundamentalist zeal, Caleb is, of all of the show's myriad manifestations of evil, the most recognizably misogynist: "There once was a woman. And she was foul, like all women are foul" ("Dirty Girls" 7018). Dubbed "the Reverend-I-Hate-Women" by Xander ("Touched" 7020), Caleb is a monstrous but familiar representative of patriarchal oppression, propounding a dangerous form of sexism under the cover of pastoral care. "I wouldn't do that if I were you sweet pea," Caleb at one

point warns Buffy; “Mind your manners. I do believe I warned you once” (“Empty Places” 7019). At other times he calls her “girly girl” (“End of Days” 7021), a “little lady” (“Empty Places” 7019), and, once (but only once), “whore” (“Touched” 7020). Buffy’s response (before kicking him across the room) is to redirect the condescension and hypocrisy couched in this discourse of paternal concern: “You know, you really should watch your language. Someone didn’t know you, they might take you for a woman-hating jerk” (“Touched” 7020).

In comparison to the supernatural demons of previous episodes Caleb’s evil might seem unusually parochial, old-fashioned, and even ridiculous, but successive encounters with the Slayer underscore the fact that his power is all the more insidious and virulent for that. Mobilizing outmoded archetypes of women’s weakness and susceptibility: “Curiosity: woman’s first sin. I offer her an apple. What can she do but take it?” (“Dirty Girls” 7018), Caleb effectively sets a trap that threatens to wipe out the Slayer line. Within the context of the narrative, his sexist convictions: “Following is what girls do best” (“Dirty Girls” 7018), and more importantly, their unconscious internalization by the Slayer and her circle, pose the principal threat to their sustained, organized, collective resistance.

Exploring the dynamics of collective activism, *Buffy’s* final season glances at the charges of solipsism and individualism that have frequently been directed at contemporary popular feminism. “Want to know what today’s chic young feminist thinkers care about?” wrote Ginia Bellafante in a notorious 1998 cover story for *Time* magazine: “Their bodies! Themselves!” (“Is Feminism Dead?” 54). One of the greatest challenges Buffy faces in season seven is negotiating the conflicting demands of

individual and the collective empowerment. Trapped by the mythology, propounded by the Watcher's Council, that bestows the powers of the Slayer on "one girl in all the world," Buffy is faced with the formidable task of training Potential Slayers-in-waiting who will only be called into their own power in the event of her death. On the eve of their final battle, after decimating her advance attack, Caleb makes fun of what he calls Buffy's "One-Slayer-Brigade" and taunts her with the prospect of what we might think of as wasted Potential:

None of those girlies will ever know real power unless you're dead. Now, you know the drill . . . "Into every generation a Slayer is born. One girl in all the world. She alone has the strength and skill . . . ." There's that word again. What you are, how you'll die: alone.

("Chosen" 7022)

Drawing attention to the Slayer's increasing isolation, Caleb highlights the political crisis afflicting her community, but in doing so he inadvertently alerts Buffy to the latent source of its strength, forcing her to claim a connection she admits "never really occurred to me before" ("Chosen" 7022). In a tactical reversal Giles claims "flies in the face of everything . . . that every generation has ever done in the fight against evil" ("Chosen" 7022), Buffy plans to transfer the power of the Chosen One, the singular, exceptional woman into the hands of the Potentials; to empower the collective, not at the expense of, but by force of, the exception.

As Shelley Rees argued very compellingly in the seminar on Feminism and Gender yesterday (and this is a poor paraphrase of a much more eloquent argument), one of the

the final assertions of *Buffy* is to deny the zero-sum paradigm [that fosters women's competition] and instead allow women to empower other women. I find this argument convincing – partly because I want to be convinced. I *want* to read *Buffy* in this way. But I also need to take into account a different reading that paints season seven's triumphalism in a far less favorable light.

Now. Second. Buffy and Benevolent World Domination!

The Buffster, as we are well aware, bears the burden of the exceptional woman. But the exceptional woman, as Margaret Thatcher and Condoleezza Rice have amply demonstrated, is not necessarily a sister to the cause; a certain style of ambitious woman fashions herself precisely as the exception that proves the rule of women's general incompetence. In one of the more disturbing character developments in the series as a whole, Season Seven presents Buffy's leadership becoming arrogant and autocratic, her attitude isolationist and increasingly alienated. Following in the individualist footsteps of prominent "power feminists," not to mention George W, Season Seven sees Buffy forgoing and denouncing her previously collaborative community and instead adopting what fans in the United States saw as a sort of "You're-Either-With-Me-Or-Against-Me" attitude ominously reminiscent of the Bush administration. Season Seven's Buffy is imbued with an incipient despotism and absolutism exemplified by what Anya (with characteristic and endearing candor) calls her "Everyone-Sucks-But-Me" speech ("Get It Done" 7015). (Rhonda Wilcox talked about this in her keynote address at the Adelaide conference).

I think that the idealized vision of universal sisterhood with which *Buffy* concludes needs to be read against the immediate political context in which its final season screened; and indeed against the long history of U.S. “intervention” in international affairs. The show’s celebration of what is effectively an aggressive international alliance under ostensibly altruistic American command demands special scrutiny. In the context of the indefensible arrogance of Bush’s “War on Terror” – and in the context of the spurious universalism of his “Coalition of the Willing” – *Buffy*’s final gesture of international inclusivity is imbued with unwittingly inauspicious overtones.

*Buffy*’s racial politics are, I think, inarguably more conservative than its gender or sexual politics, a situation pithily summarized by one of the few recurring black characters of seasons one through three, Mr. Trick: “Sunnydale. . . . Admittedly not a haven for the brothers – strictly the Caucasian persuasion in the Dale” (“Faith, Hope, and Trick” 3003). While the final season of the show has seen an expansion of *Buffy*’s exclusively white, middle class cast with the introduction of character Principal Robin Wood and the international expansion of the Slayer line, such changes can easily be dismissed as mere tokenism. Season seven makes repeated recourse to racial stereotypes – most notably in its primitivist portrayal of the “First Slayer” and the “Shadow Men” as ignoble savages, and its use of formulaic markers of cultural difference to distinguish the international Slayers.

Moreover the whole premise of the Potentials is somewhat dubious. *Buffy*’s radical innovation, her turning of the tables on tradition, involves transferring power from one uberwhite, middlingly privileged, Californian teenager to a heterogeneous group of women from different national, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds. But

how diverse is the Potential pool? In the clip that I showed you at the beginning of this talk we have a Japanese slayer rising from the floor, a second slayer whose difference is coded for me at least mostly as class – this is the second clip: the woman is wearing what with exquisite taste Americans call a “wife-beater,” she seems to be resisting some sort of wife beater, and she reads to me like white trash “getting smart.” In fact, visually this woman signifies difference primarily by fact that she is LARGER than all the others. As a gesture of benevolence it’s in kind of poor taste: Buffy generously extends the her powers to girls whose dress size has edged into double digits. The third slayer, the final image of emancipation, is the girl I’ve asked you to visualize behind me – the all-American image of internationalism. This is international in the same way that a baseball competition called the “World Series” consists exclusively of American teams, which is to say — not.

Now at this stage it is customary to make some sort of qualification. It’s a qualification I’ve heard here in some wonderful readings of race and postcolonialism in *Buffy* and it goes a little something like this: Now don’t get me wrong... (can you tell what comes next?) Now don’t get me wrong – I REALLY LOVE *BUFFY*! And it’s at this point that my interest in our collective hermeneutic kicks in. Because it is a sad comment on *Buffy* Studies if critique – serious minded critique – is seen as *an inappropriate response to the text*. I know that you know this, but I think it bears consideration. The implication is that a critique of *Buffy*’s race politics somehow threatens our idea of the beloved object. But if this were a conference on Shakespeare, I can’t see that many of us would feel the need to testify to our passion for the Bard.

I am as prone to this type of justification as anyone else. In fact, it's the way I read texts of all kinds, the way I think we are taught to read critically. IF *Buffy* advocates successfully for a transnational feminist sisterhood, and IF it simultaneously resists the temptation to idealize (and therefore instantiate) American aggression in the name of assistance, then Season Seven rocks, *Buffy* can retain the laurel for most enlightened primetime broadcasting, and I can rest easy in my bed because I can reconcile my politics with the utterly undeniable pleasure I take in the show. But I would like to advocate for a suspension of this kind of certitude, for some kind of check on our desire (my desire) for a definitive reading. I don't think Season Seven is EITHER a fantastically emancipatory text displaying a new recognition of white racial privilege OR a willing and witting endorsement of American military might. I do think Season Seven mobilizes both of those discourses and that the real insights that might be gained from studying *Buffy* in this way concern our own complicities with and investments in those discourses.

Gayle Wald, one of my favorite cultural critics, has warned that feminist scholarship must be wary of uncritically reproducing simplistically celebratory readings of popular culture that focus on gender performance "as a privileged site and source of political oppositionality." She makes the point that, when we do this, "critical questions of national, cultural, and racial appropriation can be made to disappear under the sign of transgressive gender performance." There has been a lot of great feminist criticism of *Buffy*, but with significant exceptions, there is a tendency to focus of the series' transgressive play with gender at the expense of considering other, less obviously liberatory aspects of the show. For some, this has reached a level of saturation. In a great panel on postcoloniality yesterday, for instance, the chair rather excruciatingly

expressed his relief that there was no mention of feminism. It's interesting that this celebration of feminism's putative absence occurred in a panel devoted to race. It was almost as if this chair were endorsing the separation of these kinds of critique. If feminist scholars see a critique of *Buffy's* white racial privilege as an attack on the beloved object of Buffy Studies, then this separation will solidify by degrees. Instead, I want to suggest that a critical analysis of *Buffy's* racial representations need not be considered a critique of the palpable pleasures provided by the show, but rather, as Wald suggests, "a critique of the production of pleasure through gendered and racialized narratives that signify [and in Buffy Studies have been celebrated as] as new, transgressive, or otherwise exemplary." My analysis of *Buffy's* Season Seven is not designed as a critique of pleasure, but rather, a critique of the way our pleasure is produced by, dependent on, and occasionally circumscribed by narratives of race and nation that are generally objectionable. My engagement with this material is also, ultimately, a critique of the need to justify that critique by the appeal to the fact that – despite everything – I REALLY DO LOVE *BUFFY!*