

## **In and Out, Around and Through: *Buffy+* on the Cusp**

**An Introduction to the Anniversary Issue of *Slayage*'s Twentieth Year**

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We, the editors of this special anniversary issue of *Slayage*, have both been involved in scholarship of the *Buffy+* universe for at least the twenty years this journal has been in existence. Working together on this issue has been a labor of love for the community of *Buffy+* scholarship and of affinity and respect for each other as scholars and teachers and writers and mentors. We have sought to offer something of a fond and celebratory look back on these past two decades of scholars gathering virtually at this site to share, read, and consider these engrossing texts, their varied meanings, provenances, and consequences.

At the same time, we seek to assess the current situation and consider the path forward. As the texts age, as recent, disturbing revelations about Joss Whedon's behavior affect perceptions of the shows, movies, and comic books that he was

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key to producing, and as social and cultural moods and expectations evolve, the authors featured in this issue contemplate how and why to continue this field of inquiry. Should we—or how should we?—continue to watch *Buffy* (1997-2003), *Angel* (1999-2004), or *Dollhouse* (2009-2010) for entertainment, for example? Can we afford to keep writing about this universe when all association with Whedon feels fraught and barbed? Or do we perhaps have an obligation to keep offering critique and commentary given all we have learned in the past couple of years, maybe even to reclaim these texts as belonging more to their readers, actors, and other creators than to Joss Whedon as single *auteur*? The last piece in this issue is a roundtable discussion among scholars who have read *Slayage* over the years and who have contributed to the journal or are doing so now as they ponder these very questions. As editors, our job is only to structure the venue and provide the materials for readers to digest as they make their own contributions to this field, as readers of it or as writers or interlocutors. Thus we have tried to offer a variety of approaches to *Buffy+* scholarship now.

With roots that go back to Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* and the focus on speaker, message, and audience, college writing textbooks often suggest angles of approach including biographical studies, textual studies, and cultural studies (Aristotle 1.2.3, p. 17). We know that these matters are much more complicated than a freshman text might suggest. Studies of screen narratives, if we aim to do them correctly, should echo the complexity of life itself. Starting in the last century, scholarship on *Buffy* (and later, *Buffy+*) has included both praise and critique. In 1999, in a *Journal of Popular Film & Television* issue that contained an article of largely aesthetic praise for *Buffy* by one of this journal's future founders, A. Susan Owen

made a cogent case that the series was “conventional in its uncritical embrace of American capital culture” and “Racially [...] very conservative” (30). Text should be treated carefully, if its true implications are to be assessed. But it is also true that we must see the text in context. With this anniversary issue of *Slayage*, we are attempting to highlight a fuller consciousness of context.

Readers of *Slayage* know that while its content has been driven mainly by those offering generally positive assessments of *Buffy+* texts, the journal has also always included critique. From the beginning, *Slayage* has published critical assessments. For example, in 2001, in the first issue of the first volume, Bruce McClelland discusses the legitimation of violence that, he argues, means “Buffy is allowed to get away with murder” (par. 33). In 2002, in the second volume, Sherryl Vint questions whether or not images of *Buffy* star Sarah Michelle Gellar in the popular press (including advertising campaigns) clouded its feminism and blurred in viewers’ minds with the TV series’ images of Buffy – thus in a way anticipating questions about the shadowing of viewers’ experience of the text by our changed view of the series’ initiating creator. In 2003, in the third volume, Naomi Alderman (now known as a novelist) and Annette Seidel-Arpaci discuss the “complicated and sometimes vexed” treatments of “‘Blackness’ and ‘Jewishness’ in the *Buffy/Angel*verse,” concluding, “It seems that even shows that are produced with an ambition to deconstruct racialized ‘identities’ may still reproduce them, unable to escape the internalized forces of the dominant culture” (pars. 1, 50). We could go on with such cases through the years – not as a means of apologia, but because it is worth remembering the arguments of these scholars. For that matter,

there is often critique woven into the generally positive assessments as well.

We have gone in, out, and around these matters, but we are not through. Such scholarship depended on the individual scholars welcomed, it is true, but not consciously sought by the editors and board. We hope, in this and future issues, to keep at the forefront (for staff, contributors, reviewers, readers) a more conscious purpose to expand consideration of these connected texts in terms of both their aesthetics and their social contexts and implications, and to expand the circle of contributors, helping us become still more conscious. We believe that we should be ever more aware of social contexts. However, we also believe that close attention to the text—the aesthetics—is crucial to understanding screen stories. What is in the text connects to what is out in the world, what is all around and through the text. And it is close reading and deep attention to these texts that is the common ground shared by most *Buffy+* fan-scholars. In making her critique of *Buffy*, for example, A. Susan Owen also called the much-loved and essential character Spike by the name of Sid, a significant lapse in attentiveness. We also need a word for the way that we attentively experience screen stories. So often we use the default term and say that we “see” a film or television or streaming series; but what we do is so much more than that. Long ago, Fiske and Hartley used the term “reading,” and that helps to convey the action of textual and contextual awareness that we wish to promote (as opposed to the often passive connotation of “seeing”). But can we find an even better word?

And can we find an even better way? “Can We Separate the Art from the Artist?” asks a recent *New York Times* piece by Jennifer Finney Boylan—a question that has been asked for centuries, though rarely as often or with such intensity as now,

in these times of society-wide sickness. Can we ignore the occasional bitter taste in the mouth as we watch? Or perhaps we need to recall it. In response to a question from a *Buffy* fan, Wil Wheaton—who, as a former cast member of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994), knows something of the relationships among creators, texts, and viewers—comes down on the audience side of the Aristotelian three-legged stool, eloquently arguing that fans can choose to continue engagement with a text (Reneau). We would add that both fans and scholars (or, in Matt Hills' terms, fan-scholars and scholar-fans) should feel free to continue such engagement—and that, as scholars, we hope to do so with careful consciousness of the complexities around these texts.

Shared texts offer a singular opportunity for the exploration of ideas. The scholars that this journal has published have the advantage of having a group of texts to which many have paid close attention. We hope to gradually spread the *Buffy+* texts to include others made by connected creators of similarly thoughtful, if inevitably flawed, artistry. On this *Buffy+* expansion, we refer you to the statement of re-naming and re-dedicated purpose on the journal's home page.

If we work with care, perhaps we can come through the interwoven crises that have been growing so long towards rupture. That is our hopeful goal—to make it through. But as scholars and as readers we should never stop working working in the texts, seeing out of and around them. With this work, we should know that we will never be through.

As *Slayage* and its readers and contributors work to continue on its trajectory towards an ever more inclusive, relevant, and varied future, this issue offers a French

translation, by Malaurie Prévost, of a foundational *Buffy+* studies article by Stacey Abbott, published in this journal twenty years ago: “‘A Little Less Ritual and a Little More Fun’: The Modern Vampire in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,” or “‘Un Peu Moins de Rituel et un Peu Plus de Fun’: Le Vampire Moderne dans *Buffy Contre les Vampires*.” Abbott’s article parallels the development of *Slayer* and vampires, setting the series in the larger historical context of vampire studies while examining the modernizing changes common to the hero and the monsters, and Prévost makes this argument available to a new group of readers. While *Buffy+* studies has been translated from and to English and a variety of languages, including French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Dutch, we are proud that Prévost’s translation of Abbott’s article contributes to this body of scholarship, working against intellectual silos just as a multidisciplinary field like popular culture studies does.

While Abbott parallels *Buffy* and the monsters, Alia R. Tyner-Mullings, also focusing on the originary text, shows how some characters can be destroyed or made into monsters as a result of the difference in their type of educational path from the *Slayer*’s. In “‘School Hard’ and Traditional Education in the *Buffyverse*,” Tyner-Mullings analyzes the series in terms of the sociology of education and progressive versus restrictive “banking” pedagogical methods. She argues that the latter style, designed to prevent leadership and critical thinking, is often applied to persons of color not only in life but also in the series, as can be seen in Black characters such as Forrest Gates and, notably, Kendra, the second *Slayer* we encounter: That traditional style of education can literally be a dead end.

As Tyner-Mullings discusses the implications of education within the narrative of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Jenna Bates explores the complications of pedagogy as practice

out in the real world in “Exploring the Whedonverses: The Challenges of Creating a Whedon Survey Course.” Comparing the experience of teaching a course on *Buffy* and related texts during two different years, Bates recognizes not only the need for revising assumptions about students’ familiarity with the texts, but the difficulties of confronting the issues of creator(s)-versus-creation, while acknowledging the possibilities for engendering “meaningful conversations about topics such as race and misogyny.” Bates’s detailed record and explication of her methodology, moreover, may be useful not only to teachers of *Buffy+* series, but of any contemporary screen narrative.

The multiplicity of perspectives provided by Bates’s two different classes translates to another kind of perspective change in Seth Wilder’s article on an episode of *Buffy*’s spinoff, *Angel*: “Vicious Bitches?: Joss Whedon, ‘Billy,’ and the Cultural Retext.” As recently as 29 October 2021 (less than two months prior to this writing), an online article in the popular press praised the episode “Billy” for its treatment of misogyny (Coates). Wilder, however, asks that we as scholars consider the episode through the lens of Taylor Cole Miller’s idea of “retext,” in effect a new television text made by the audience’s changed information (for example, about the series’ co-creator) and placement in a changed world. The world around the work, in other words, infuses its tone into the world of the work. In Wilder’s step-by-step positing of a retextualization, the episode is far more problematic in terms of gender politics and should also be critiqued in terms of its treatment of race, specifically relating to the character of Charles Gunn.

Lewis Call, on the other hand, contends in “‘Alien Commies from the Future!’: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Season Seven of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*” that these desiderata can increasingly be found in a series more distant from *Buffy*, a

series that is not just Whedon-connected but Whedons-connected: *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-2020). With a nod to Joss Whedon as co-creator, Call emphasizes the primary role of co-creators and showrunners Jed Whedon (brother of Joss Whedon) and his spouse Maurissa Tancharoen, an Asian American woman who is the first person of color to helm a *Buffy+* series (both of whom were heavily involved in *Dollhouse* as well). Historian Call carefully examines the text of the series in terms of its context, particularly highlighting late-series episodes of time travel used to illuminate issues of race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Without skirting some of the problematic aspects of the series as pointed out by other scholars, particularly regarding the early seasons, he argues that the series has moved forward in incorporating a more progressive social context. As he notes, the series addresses both real-life and filmic racial and gender tropes as well. Through major characters played by actors such as Chinese American actor Ming-Na Wen, Mexican actor Natalia Cordova-Buckley, and African American actor Henry Simmons, Call makes the case that *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* moves into new territory for a *Buffy+* series.

Moving farther into the “plus” territory of *Buffy+*, James Rocha and Mona Rocha examine *Angel*, *Grimm* a show co-created by *Angel*'s co-creator, David Greenwalt and *Supernatural* a show whose creator Eric Kripke declares *Buffy* as an important influence (not to mention the number of *Buffy*verse actors the series employed). In “Representing Peoples Through Their Monsters: Native American and Latinx Representations in Fantasy Television,” Rocha and Rocha, like Abbott (and others) before them, investigate the monsters in these series in part because in most cases there are so few major characters of color. Rocha and Rocha analyze episodes that



represent monsters from Latinx and Native American cultures in terms of respect for the source material and the peoples associated with the source material, sometimes directly comparing a character, such as La Llorona, as depicted in more than one series. The authors specifically define and caution against cultural appropriation and negative representation. Rocha and Rocha ground their detailed analyses of the legends and the television representations in careful research of the source materials and cultures. *Grimm* (2011-2017) fares better in the respectfulness, variety, and accuracy of its representations than *Supernatural* (2015-2020) or *Angel*. But Rocha and Rocha conclude that television needs systemic change, not just scattered episodes of success.

Of the shows discussed in this issue, *Once Upon a Time* (2011-2018) is the farthest *Buffy+* branch from the root series. In “The Never-Ending Happily-Ever-After: Serial Fairy Tales in *Once Upon a Time*,” Svea Hundertmark notes that the *Buffy* fairy-tale-themed episode “Gingerbread” has a teleplay by Jane Espenson, who served as writer, consulting producer, and co-executive producer on *Once Upon a Time*. While describing basics of seriality that the two series share, Hundertmark focuses on the complex collation of multiple fairy-tale worlds and “human”-world narratives of *Once Upon a Time*, commenting on the tale variations, especially the Disney versions, leading to and within this Disney-owned ABC series. Further, she contends that the interwoven worlds deepen the characters. Applying Gérard Genette’s theories of intertextuality, Hundertmark argues that, at least in terms of its web of transtextual references and play with levels of reality, with outside and in, *Once Upon a Time* uses fairy tales in a fashion more complex than *Buffy* does. As a scholar of, but outside, the US, Hundertmark adds another element to the

variety of perspectives for this journal another kind of branching from the root.

Along with work from outside the US, we are pleased to present contributions by scholars from multiple disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, literature, history, musicology, and film/television/moving image studies. The last piece in this issue is a roundtable discussion of the problems and possibilities of *Buffy+* scholarship. It is worth noting that the participants represent a diversity not only of academic interests, but also of age, gender orientation, geography, and race/ethnicity. While they represent just one set of perspectives on what to make of *Buffy+* texts and their study at this moment in time and moving forward, the very cooperative, collegial, and dialectical manner in which they conducted their conversation is as elucidating as their thoughts on, among other issues, the death of the author, representations of capitalism and democracy on screen, and their own responsibilities in interacting with these texts as parents and educators as well as fans and scholars. We hope and expect this conversation is one of many as readers of and contributors to *Slayage* seriously address this question of problems, possibilities, and a path forward for *Buffy+* Studies on the cusp.

We would like to conclude the introduction to this twentieth-anniversary issue with some expressions of gratitude. We are truly thankful to the contributors for this issue, whose work illuminates in such varied ways. Thanks also, as always, go to Associate Editor Shiloh Carroll and Assistant Editor Janet Brennan Croft, as well as editorial assistants Rachel Dalton and Olivia Gunn. Special thanks go to *Watcher Junior* co-editor Deborah Overstreet for web help. Deep appreciation goes to the many thoughtful blind peer reviewers, including those for submissions that appear in this issue and those for submissions

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