

**Where Do We Go From Here?  
A Round Table Discussion of *Buffy+* Studies and Whether,  
How, or Why to Forge a Path Forward**

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[Editorial Note: I gathered a group of four scholars of *Buffy+* studies to meet via video conference and discuss the current state of their fandom and interest in studying the *Buffy+* 'verses. I circulated some prompts and themes beforehand to allow the participants to plan their thoughts and lightly edited the transcript for clarity and flow, with help from the participants to ensure it represented their ideas accurately. Steve Halfyard, James Rocha, and I are all new board members at *Slayage*, and James and Alia Tyner-Mullings are both contributors to this issue. Linda Jencson is a longtime *Buffy+* scholar and has published in *Slayage* in the past.]

Ananya: Thank you all for being here. To introduce folks, Steve and James and I are all new to the editorial board for *Slayage*. And then, Alia, and my partner, and I know each other from graduate school and attended a popular culture studies conference many years ago, and Rhonda [Wilcox] was there, and there were some *Buffy* panels. I know Steve from the *Slayage* conferences too. James and I have emailed but are just meeting today. Could we start with everyone sharing something about your backgrounds with these texts?

Steve: Okay. Me and the history of *Buffy*. Well, there's only four of us, so I'll tell you the whole story. I was doing my PhD on

the experimental music of the Darmstadt school, in the mid-'90s, and I was earning my living working in a cinema, which meant I got to watch an awful lot of films and I absolutely fell in love with the film *Interview with the Vampire* and realized the fourth or fifth time I saw it, that actually it was the music that was utterly doing it for me.

And that started an interest in film music and in vampire film music, particularly, because this was completely atypical horror music. So a couple of years later, two things happened. One is a bunch of students who knew that I was a post-grad who were interested in film music and in doing another course with me, said, "If you offered a course on film music, we would all take it." And I thought, "Yay, money!" They all took my film music course, and I've been teaching it ever since. But it made me really kind of very rapidly engaged with the tiny amount of scholarship that was out there on film music. And there was nothing on television, not at that point.

Ananya: And this was in the '90s?

Steve: So, this was in the '90s, this is 1996 . And '97, of course, is when *Buffy* started. And I, because of my interest in vampires, I was at that point just watching everything new coming out on vampires. I thought, "Well, I have to watch that." And it was really heavily trailed on BBC 2 in the UK for weeks. And I thought, "Yeah, I'm definitely gonna have to watch this." So I was watching it from the word go, absolutely loved it. And then in 2001, I went to the UK's first ever film music conference. And over breakfast in the student hall of residence on the first morning, I and the only other person there, ended up having breakfast together. And I don't know whether your studies have

brought you into contact with Richard Dyer. He's a kind of big name in British film and television studies.

Ananya: [laughs] Yeah.

Steve: And that turned out to be who I was having my breakfast with that morning [chuckle]. And he asked me, "So are you presenting?" I said, "Yes, I'm presenting on *Interview with the Vampire*." "Oh," he said, "Vampires, you must like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." I think this is April, 2001, and I was going, "How could he possibly know that I like this children's TV program?" And he was the one who told me there's this whole academic community that has suddenly sprung up, they've even launched their own journal. And I went home from that conference, found *Slayage*, there it was online. I had my first paper published in December 2001.

So that's how I got into it. But I loved *Buffy* from the moment I started watching it in '97. There we go, that's my story. And I've also been part of the *Slayage* community since its first year.

Ananya: Okay. And that was 2004 in Nashville was the first meeting, right?

Steve: 2004, well, 2002 was the UK conference at University of East Anglia. And David and Rhonda came over for that, and Stacey Abbott was there.

Ananya: Yes, we were there too, and Lorna Jowett presented on Drusilla, and Roz Kaveney and a lot of others [presented].

Steve: And then 2004 was Nashville, and I've been to most of them, there were two that I couldn't get to for various reasons, but yeah. I've been to all, but two of them.

Ananya: Okay. Thank you, that's so helpful. Wow, that's so interesting too, that you just ended up having breakfast with Richard Dyer like that [laughs].

Steve: Yeah. But you see the kind of upshot of that is that I quite accidentally, because of *Buffy*, have become one of the kind of ground-zero television music scholars, because I probably published one of the very first things in English about television music. There was quite a bit in German, but very, very little in English when my first *Buffy* paper came out, which is about the theme tunes of that and *Angel*. Yeah. So thank you, *Buffy* [chuckle].

Ananya: Yeah, it's a reminder for me too when I feel jaded now, how groundbreaking *Buffy* really was in so many ways. Alia, do you want to go next?

Alia: Sure, I'm kind of new to this. I'm both new and not new to it, I guess. I started watching *Buffy* with the last episode of Season Two, that was the first episode that I saw. And I thought, "This is interesting. I'd like to see where they're gonna go with this."

And at the time I was very much into all of these mostly WB shows, which is where *Buffy* aired in the US, and a lot of WB shows had these soulmate stories. I was just very interested in that idea of soulmates and forbidden soulmates and people who aren't supposed to be together. I think it was *Charmed* and

*Dawson's Creek*, and maybe there was something else. And I thought, "These are interesting." I think I came back to *Buffy* in the middle of Season Three, and then that was it. I was caught in there [laughs].

In terms of studies, I met Ananya in graduate school, and as a sociologist you can really study anything [that interests you]. We started to connect around the fact that we were *Buffy* fans and I would have *Buffy* watch parties and people would come over and watch together. And then we started to talk about various aspects of the show and it just became interesting to think about what kind of scholarship could be created from it. I wrote a paper about it that I presented at one of the Pop Culture Association conferences. I think it was somewhere in Florida, maybe Jacksonville.

Ananya: Yeah, Jacksonville, with that tropical storm offshore.

Alia: Yeah, and then I had this idea of us doing an edited volume or something. I had written a proposal for a chapter, and then I forgot about it.... But Ananya remembered and contacted me for this, and I thought, "Oh, I'll look back at that." But my area really is Sociology of Education, and so I've mostly been situated there. My research is moving into some stuff about Disney, and, in general, thinking about the creators and their relationship with the art that they create is something that, if you're gonna do pop culture, you have to have these conversations. But really I wanted to come to this conversation to hear what the discussions were about where things should go from here.

Ananya: Well, the other thing that you already mentioned that is really interesting to me to is just community building. So we used to gather at Alia's apartment uptown – we watched the end [episodes] of... I think the end of *Buffy* there and the end of *Angel* and the end of *Dollhouse*. And that was productive, there are people that I know only from those watches, and it also made me think about whenever people do a *Great Buffy Rewatch*, maybe through a Facebook group, and it's really not just watching but watching together. There can be something really, particularly generative about these texts often – socially, that is – that's rich.

James: So I suppose my journey with the Whedon stuff, it got a rough start as these things happen. So me and my partner, Mona, who's my life partner and my writing partner and partner in everything else, we used to go to free movies a lot, and usually they tell you what the free movie is, but every once in a while you go to a free movie and they refuse to tell you anything about the movie. So we walked into this free movie knowing nothing about it, and thinking, if this doesn't seem like our type of movie we'll just walk out. It turned out to be *Serenity*, and we had not seen anything Whedon had done at that point, and when the Reavers started...when the Reavers came on the screen, we walked out and lots of other people were walking out too. So there was a group of us who were asked to give our reasons for walking out, and we were just like, "This seems like a horror movie, we don't watch horror movies, we're leaving."

And so after that, I was in grad school at the time, and I started talking to other grad students and they were like, "No, you should have given this a chance, you should try these shows,

they're actually really good." And I think we still put it off for another two or three years, and then eventually we watched... I don't even remember what we watched first, but I think we immediately went back and we bought *Buffy* DVDs, 'cause back then, that's what you used to do. Kids today might not know about buying DVDs, but we had to go and actually buy physical DVDs, and we started watching *Buffy* from Season One, and then we bought Season Two, and we really loved it. Mona started writing on *Buffy* academically before I did, and she started getting published writing on *Buffy*, and it wasn't until *Dollhouse*, where I thought to myself, "Okay, I really see that this is philosophical." That is, I thought *Buffy* was philosophical but *Dollhouse*, I thought, was philosophical in a way that connected with me, and I thought there's stuff I can add here, there's stuff I can say here.

And so I started writing about *Dollhouse*, and for a long time I'm sure many of us go through this – but for a long time, there was this kind of tension between the philosophical interest I was taking in these shows and my anxiety asking: “how are my peers, the ones who are judging me for tenure, how are they going to look at me writing about the sci-fi and fantasy shows?” And so I kept it as a low proportion of what I was doing, and I downplayed it when I went up for tenure the first time. And then I got a second job and I started doing more, and then I got tenure at the second job, and now it feels like I'm just free to do as I please, and so I'm working a lot more on not just Whedon stuff, but just generally pop culture and the philosophical ramifications of pop culture, and I'm really... I'm much happier doing this than what I was doing before.

Ananya: What you just said about being much happier doing this, I mean that's something I've heard again and again at conferences. I've often found at these conferences that there was such an investment in and intimate familiarity with the text and this commonality of the watching and this experience. It felt like there was just a lot more traction for conversations of depth.

Steve: Yeah. Can I jump in with a couple of things, actually? One is that, absolutely, yes, it's that shared investment which actually turned us all into a family. It always felt like this was kind of my other family because we had that commonality of the thing that we loved. Which is why part of the last year or so has been so unbelievably painful. Never mind we'll come to that. But I want to pick up on something James said about the kind of "Let's not mention that we're doing this pop culture stuff." Back in the really early days of the conferences, I think it was David Lavery who mentioned we all were going, "Oh yes, we've all had this experience" of what he called the snigger factor. He and Rhonda refer to it as the snigger factor of when you say you were doing *Buffy* studies.

And I was actually having a conversation recently I was on a *Supernatural* panel on Sunday. Long story. But I was talking about *Supernatural* and I got into *Supernatural* because of *Buffy*, thank you. And one of the things we were talking about there was how, circa 2005, yeah, a definite snigger factor going on. These days not so much. These days, it seems far more acceptable. Or maybe we've got over ourselves. We've got over being embarrassed on behalf of other people for loving this stuff and finding it valuable and interesting. So we don't feel people are going to snigger at us anymore. And if they do, we



don't notice and we don't care. That's kind of how I feel about it these days. But yeah, that has been a definite change.

Ananya: Yeah. And it's also, I think, partly about the now longevity of the field. So many of us who came into this early in our careers, we've grown up with this field and become senior scholars ourselves. And I find a lot of people that I like and respect are doing pop culture studies. And so it's hard to laugh at something that people I really respect are doing.

Steve: Yeah. And when you've got a lot of people saying, "This is our modern mythology, you know..." Myths don't go away. We just tell them in different ways. So yeah, don't knock it [chuckle].

Ananya: So can I ask, because you referenced it? What does each of you know about the fallout with the former WSA, Whedon Studies Association? I, myself, haven't been that involved in the *Slayage* conferences or really the journal for several years now [just because of other pressing responsibilities]. So there was this big fallout, which I was recently talking to Alia about a little bit, which Steve just referenced, around the future of both these organizations, the former WSA and *Slayage*, going forward because of all these ugly revelations about Joss. And I just wanted to sort of get a sense of what people know or feel about that.

Steve: I've always felt... I felt throughout the process that it's been much more difficult for the WSA than it has been for *Slayage* because the WSA has the name in its title, whereas *Slayage* predates the positioning of Whedon as central to what

was being done. *Slayage* initially started off placing *Buffy* as central.

Ananya: Right.

Steve: But yeah. I mean, I am very aware. I went to the [virtual] town hall meeting. And I'm aware of a lot of people experiencing pain and feeling very betrayed by the whole thing and feeling very uncomfortable. And at the same time, there are some people who've always been quite critical, some people who've been deeply within Whedon studies, but nonetheless always deeply critical of some of the processes of representation and the way that things were being constructed within those narratives, particularly in relation to race and gender. And those people, to some extent, have almost felt vindicated. And there's been a tension there. You know, the family has been having a bit of an internal squabble. I don't want to downplay it or belittle it in any way because I think that people were differently invested in the figure of Joss Whedon. Personally, I was always invested in the shows and Whedon was actually less important to me. So for me, personally, with my interest in music, you know... Weirdly enough, he did write some of the music. But I'm much more interested in Jonatha Brooke as the writer of the theme song for *Dollhouse*, and of Christophe Beck and Thomas Wanker and Robert Duncan as the composers of the *Buffy* scores. So my perspective is a bit different. I feel slightly at a remove from it compared to others.

Ananya: That's really helpful. Alia, you didn't know much about that before we talked about it, right?

Alia: No. I didn't really know any of it before speaking to you.

Ananya: James did you... Has it affected you?

James: I would say I was watching from more of an outside position. So I wasn't taking part in the debates. I was just watching from the outside.

Ananya: Okay. And that was for me as well, at least logistically. So in some ways I think that helps us to have this conversation. So as you say, Steve, you're the closest of the four of us to that conflict, but you describe yourself as at a remove from it also. I think we can kind of leave that to the margins of this conversation.

[Editorial note: For those who know about this debate within the former Whedon Studies Association, the format of this roundtable discussion in no way means to imply that this debate was entirely, or even largely, about Joss Whedon, his reputation, or the many allegations about him. The discussion within the association pertained to multiple issues on several levels, among them longstanding patterns of membership, interpersonal interactions, and other power dynamics. Because the journal is separate from the association, and because this roundtable conversation was aimed at considering experiences and negotiations as scholar-fans, to use Matt Hills' term (expanding on Alexander Doty), rather than as association members or editorial board members, we focused on the former Joss Whedon's relationship to these texts, the toxic fallout surrounding the allegations against him, and its ramifications for these works and our ability to continue to enjoy, discuss, and/or study them.]

Ananya: So what I wanted to know is, given these revelations about Joss Whedon starting with Kai Cole's open letter and the more recent revelations about his behavior to Charisma Carpenter and Michelle Trachtenberg and others on the Marvel movies, with respect to that, does that change how we view and consider these texts? Some of it, too, is with respect to social awareness and political movements since #MeToo and since the murder of George Floyd not exclusively about these movements because those of us who are politically engaged and invested have always thought about and cared about these issues but seeing them so foregrounded and emphasized, I think that gives a different weight to all of this as well. What responsibility do we feel? What expectations and standards do we have? Have they changed? It's not that we can't watch and enjoy and value the texts anymore. I was happy for this opportunity to co-edit this issue, and I do think that the stories that are told are still rich and have value. They don't have to be primarily about Whedon. But I go back and think about this talk that I saw the late, great David Lavery give a few times, which was really about Joss Whedon as an auteur, as a persona, about his character. And for those of you who didn't see the talk, he compared Joss Whedon to Michael Bay because they both went to Wesleyan film school together [and he later published the talk in his last book]. And they both have had a lot of success, but different kinds of success. This is before Joss Whedon was doing the Marvel movies, so it was a different level of monetary success. But the upshot of his presentation basically was, here's this man, Michael Bay, who openly trades in sexism and shallow materialism and it's brought him a lot of money and a lot of power in Hollywood, but he does not make great films. And here's this man with better perspective and better values who makes really great stories, right? But now I

find that if we continue to work with these stories, we have to either contend with the fact that that's not true or just disconnect these stories from Joss Whedon to a great extent. Or maybe not. That's what I'd like us to figure out, even as I go back and contend with some of the discomforts and tensions I always felt with his stories and characters and think through whether I really addressed that discord before or just pushed it aside because of what I did like in the texts or enjoyed in the realm of scholarship about them. My goal in this conversation is to untangle some of that. I'm curious to what extent this is even part of your experience right now as a fan, as a scholar. Do you feel like it changes your trajectory forward as someone who works with pop culture generally and these texts in particular?

James: So, I'm going to answer differently as a fan than I would as a scholar. I feel like as a fan, I'm more hurt by it and more concerned and I maybe lose some enjoyment. These are real problems. They're upsetting, and I don't want to diminish anything about how bad they are. And as a fan, I definitely feel that.

For me, as a philosopher, I feel like there's a lot of philosophy where we are studying bad people. And so there's a sense in which, as a scholar, I'm more used to separating the person as they were as a living human versus what they created. I am trying, both in my writings and in my classes, to kind of say, "We can recognize this is a bad person. We can recognize their racism, their sexism, and how, in many places, they're horrible people. But we're also trying to learn from them." Because it so happens... I think this is something that philosophers know... It may not be that I wish the world were like this, but it does seem to be the sort of thing where privilege can help you

produce better work. [Editorial note: Of course, Virginia Woolf makes the same point in *A Room of One's Own*.] And sometimes it's hard to deal with the fact that privilege sometimes comes with improvement, right? And especially from a historical perspective, because I'm dealing with philosophers who are long dead, it would have been much harder to produce the work that they were producing if they weren't privileged people. And if they weren't kept away from the difficulties of oppression and kept away from the structures that were holding so many other people down, they wouldn't have been able to produce nearly as much as they did. But pretty much everyone that I'm writing about from 200 to 600 years ago is an old, fairly well-off white man.

And that's why they were able to produce the books they were. This isn't to say that people who weren't privileged couldn't produce great works too. They often did. But it is to recognize that privilege helps, and privilege makes things easier. And sometimes we get works from bad people who were privileged enough to get the very best education and to get the time and energy to dedicate to their work. And so for me, there's an easier transition as a scholar from someone who works on Immanuel Kant, who's a Prussian philosopher from the 18th century, who's a horrible person, very racist, very sexist, very homophobic.... Kant was just a bad person. And some people think that Kant invented racism. I think that's probably not entirely accurate, but he was there. He was playing a part. He wasn't completely separate from the invention of racism, although I maybe wouldn't put it on him as much as some of the scientists of the day. I also recognized Kant produced some great works of philosophy, and there's a lot of good stuff in there. And I feel like it's a little easier for me to transition from

working on horrible philosophers to working on horrible people who make pop culture.

And in a way, one of the things... When Mona and I wrote our book on Joss Whedon, one of the things that we wanted to really highlight in the intro, even though we felt it was too hard to carry out, is that we keep talking about Joss Whedon but we have no idea how much is credited to Joss Whedon, right? And we said in the intro that Joss Whedon is a placeholder for us because we don't really know who created this, who thought of this idea, how the writers' room came together to make some great pieces of work. And so, in a way, that gives me a bit of a hedge when I'm dealing with these pop culture works as opposed to, well, Kant wrote alone, and Kant lived alone and rarely went to parties. He never stayed out late, always woke up early and wrote philosophy all day.

But these, now, are collective works. And part of me feels like maybe it wasn't the best compromise to use Joss Whedon as a stand-in for all those other works, especially now that we know how bad things were on the set. But I also do want to respect that there are great pieces of work that Joss Whedon was the leader of, but we don't really know how much his leadership mattered since so many people were contributing in various ways to making those pieces great. I still feel like the pieces are worthy of study. And I don't doubt that Joss Whedon contributed, but I also don't want to stop studying them because he's a bad person.

Ananya: Right. That makes sense and that's a good point, too, about collaboratively producing all these works. So we really

don't know. He may well be the impetus or he may not even be that. It's really hard to tease out, certainly from our perspective.

Alia: What I've noticed is, when I'm watching things, whether I'm watching it as a fan or as a scholar, there are more things that make me uncomfortable than used to. And there are places where before I might have glossed over something and not thought about it that I do now. And this is what I wrote in the introduction to my paper. There were things that we all noticed were happening and didn't like. And some of us thought, "Well, you know, these things are just happening," but maybe didn't delve too much. Or maybe we were young or not yet as critical of popular culture. When I first started working on this paper 10 years ago, I had an introduction that was very much about him [Whedon] and all the ideas that he had and how he included these great critiques about education and demonstrated this idea of Buffy being educated in a progressive educational model, and that this was him promoting these ideas. But now, going back to that, I edited it because all this horrible information has come out and I am much more critical of what I was seeing and realizing, "Okay, yeah, Buffy gets the progressive educational model, but nobody else gets that." And everybody else gets these more traditional models where they're trained and punished, and all these other dynamics are happening. My scholarship has become much more critical. There are still times in my personal life when I quote things from *Buffy* episodes or *Angel* episodes to people because they have been in my mind for so long but I'll always preface it with, "This is from *Buffy*, so you can take it how you want." I'm certainly much more critical of it than I was before. And I was telling Ananya earlier that, for the paper that I was working on, I was watching the last few episodes from the last season of



*Buffy*, and there are some things that I noticed that made me really uncomfortable. Like when all the Potentials are in the house and Xander starts having a fantasy about two of the girls making out with each other. I'm just like, "Oh, this is so painful." I knew it was there before, but now it feels different. I just felt dirty even watching it. And I felt like that about other things when I've viewed or reviewed them recently, like when I tried to watch *The Nevers*. I feel like maybe there's an idea in here that I like, but then there are other things making me uncomfortable. So I don't really know where my fandom goes after this, or where my *Buffy* scholarship goes after this. But there's just so many things that I overlooked before that I can't overlook now.

Ananya: I remember some lines from *Buffy*, even twenty years ago, thinking, "Are those things okay for a feminist show to say?" They're not. But in my head at the time it was fundamentally a feminist show albeit with flaws. There are many other things I go back to now, and I think should we have paused more and probed more at that time. Thinking about the shows separate from the joy of watching them with others... I agree also with what you're saying, James, that it's one thing to consider as a scholar going forward. It's a little bit harder as a fan, which is a much more emotional engagement.

Steve: Okay. So, gosh, this is complicated trying to get my thoughts in order on this. The first thing for me, and actually this goes back to my PhD on experimental music of the Darmstadt Age in the 1960s, is that an awful lot of that is bound up with post-modernism and post-structuralism, which fundamentally questioned the categories of truth and knowledge, and instead placed responsibility on the reader and

on the listener to understand the text for themselves. All of us must find our own way through this particular labyrinth. The author is dead. And we, as readers of these texts, we have the right and the responsibility to understand them in our own way. There is no such thing as an incorrect reading. There may be a reading the author didn't expect or intend, but the author is dead, the author is absent from the text. So, for me, within this whole Whedon debate, I'm going, "Why is everybody getting so upset about Whedon?" Okay, we wanted him to be nice, and he's not. But that, for me, does not impact on the text in the same way. I've got no idea what Shakespeare was like as a person. But that doesn't mean I don't think *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of the best things ever written in the English language, with a fantastically sophisticated multi-layered plot that I adore. So for me, it's a different set of arguments because of where I came from, academically and philosophically.

And I can really appreciate the people who were very invested in Whedon himself and David... I'm so glad David never had to see any of this. He would have been devastated. But, yeah, for me, it was never about Whedon in the same way. Because actually, I came to *Buffy* in some ways from also having studied Tim Burton, another auteur. But I was studying Tim Burton through the music of Danny Elfman. And I was always really aware, therefore, of there being this collaborative community of people that Burton had gathered around him. But what he was producing with his go-to designer and his go-to composer was absolutely a collaborative project and a collaborative product. Therefore, I've been a bit I don't want to say complacent but [perhaps] some people would say I was very complacent about this because I fundamentally don't care about Joss Whedon. I care about the work. And for me, I can separate them out. My

first moment of thinking "ooh" was Kendra in Season Two. Kendra was kind of, "Well, that's an interesting choice." And that was the first time that anything in Whedon made me uncomfortable, with this terrible accent that just seemed like some awful caricature. And, yeah, everything about the way Kendra was put together was unfair to the character. She could've been a way more interesting character.

I mean, there's been an awful lot of criticism, for example, of Inara in *Firefly*. But I actually felt that Whedon was doing something quite interesting there in the relationship between Mal and Inara and the way he really put front and center the way that Mal constantly drew attention to her profession in a negative way, constantly putting her on the defensive and actually making me, as a reader, see Mal's insecurities. The fact that Mal wasn't a perfect person by any means because he couldn't cope with this aspect of Inara. He couldn't cope with the combination of his attraction to her and his discomfort with her profession. And it put him constantly in the wrong. And so I found that interesting because I don't think any part of that actually put Inara in the wrong in anyone's opinion except Mal's. So I really do hope that Mal wasn't representing Joss's opinion there. But at the same time, I don't care because there are readings to be had there that are interesting regardless of what the author may or may not have intended. [Editorial note: Cf. Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy."]

Same with *Dollhouse*, which I think is the most misunderstood of Whedon's texts. That it's been dismissed, and I'm quoting here, as "sexy nonsense," which totally misses the point of what it's about, it's not about sexy nonsense. The sexy nonsense is always a cover even within the diegesis of the show itself. So,

it's not that I'm forgiving Whedon at any level, but I don't care about him. I care about what he's done. I'm horrified to learn of the way that Charisma Carpenter, in particular, was treated. That is shocking beyond belief. That wonderful, wonderful actor to be pregnancy-shamed for crying out loud. I mean, it's horrific. So I am utterly unforgiving of Whedon the man. But I fundamentally don't care about Whedon the author because, "the author is dead." The author is absent from his text. I can read it for myself, thank you very much. I mean, there are things about even *Buffy* that I think... There's an aspect of it being of its time.

[Editorial note: In more freeform conversation following the roundtable discussion, two points came up that bear mentioning here. The first is that the discomfort scholar-fans feel about these texts as fans, of course, may affect their ability to do the scholarship. If an impetus for doing *Buffy+* studies has long been an enthusiasm for *Buffy+* shows, movies, comic books, etc., then a sense of unease about texts associated with Joss Whedon might lead to diminished interest in studying that material. The other point, made by Alia following the roundtable, is that financial profit and capitalism render this situation somewhat different at its heart than a consideration of Kant or Shakespeare because Whedon is still alive and garnering profits or residuals when fans pay to stream these movies or shows, though actors and others also receive residuals. Neither point received much attention during the roundtable, simply for lack of time, but they are worth noting.]

Steve: I'm going to go to the music here because I don't think *Buffy* now, for the first time being launched, would have that theme music. That theme music very consciously adopts

masculine musical codes as part of setting her up as a superhero. If you look at what happened with *Wonder Woman* much more recently – sorry, I'm digressing a bit now. Well, no. No, I'm not actually. There is a point in here.

In the *Batman vs Superman: Dawn of Justice* film, Hans Zimmer and Junkie XL, they wrote for [*Wonder Woman*] this piece which they called a “banshee.” Literally they wanted it to sound like a banshee. And it's being played on electric cello. It's so fast. It's so aggressive. It's relentlessly aggressive, even more so than the Buffy theme tune. And my reaction to it was "Oh, great." So, you got your two superheroes and you're giving him these big, heroic, brass-led, melodic, ascending marvelous themes. And you're giving her the bloody electric guitar, which is what it sounds like. Nobody can tell it's an electric cello. You're giving her this electronica yell, this banshee scream, because that's what a female hero sounds like. And I was really disappointed.

And then the *Wonder Woman* film came along and Ralph Gregson-Williams, brother of Harry (the more famous brother), was given the score for this. And he had to use the banshee theme, but he only uses it twice. And instead, he wrote her proper ungendered superhero music that has all the great big, lovely, heroic, ascending themes with the open fifths and all the type of heroic coding that Superman and everyone else have always had. And he wrote that for her, and he used the banshee theme only in the moments where she, as goddess, is so furious with what someone is doing that she unleashes her god-like power. And she does it twice in the film, and that's the only time you get that banshee theme. And it makes sense. But as her only theme, as the theme of her heroism, it would have been

horrible. And that's why I think *Buffy*'s music now would not have been written that way. But at the time, it was groundbreaking. In 1997, no woman, with a possible exception of *Xena*, had ever been scored like that. And *Xena*, again, it's a different kind of thing, but it's got that same slightly too overt rhythmic aggression about it that now, twenty or thirty years later, we don't need to do that anymore to make women seem heroic, super-heroic. And actually that's one of the things that *Buffy* gave us. It was Whedon's decision to use that music, which was suggested to him by Alyson Hannigan. The band was called Nerf Herder. Probably still is! Surfer punk band. And so, yes, it was this groundbreaking moment in relatively mainstream teen TV. Okay, on a small channel. I think BBC Two in this country, which was... well, we didn't have that many channels in those days [chuckle].

Ananya: WB was small here, too. So, yeah.

Steve: Yeah. But it was of its time, absolutely groundbreaking and absolutely necessary and part of a journey towards constructing the idea of the female heroic quite differently. And it was a staging post. We've moved beyond it now, but it was an important staging post.

Ananya: So, I have been wondering how much of the retroactive criticism is just about time, is just about the fact that texts age but stay static, and we age but also grow—we're dynamic, we continue moving and our standards grow higher and more specific. And so I do wonder, for myself at least, partly it's what *Buffy* was itself and also the role it played in sort of starting off a slew of other stories that were similar. Alia, you mentioned the soulmate stories and, Steve, you mentioned

*Supernatural*, and there are all these TV shows and films that have happened that couldn't have happened before *Buffy*. But it's also the point that happened in my life, in our lives, that although it's twenty years old, twenty plus years old now, it still can feel contemporary often. I wonder to what degree I forget to think of it as an old, a twenty-year-old text.

Steve: I don't think we would have had a female Captain Marvel without *Buffy*. There's even a specific visual reference to *Buffy*, the little girl with the baseball bat. It couldn't be more of a quote of that moment, in [the finale episode] "Chosen," if it tried. So yeah, I'd put female Captain Marvel in a direct line back to *Buffy*. But it was of its time, television tends not to be timeless.

Alia: There are certainly things that I notice as I've gotten older, because when it came out, I was in college or just out of college. So certainly, now, being older, being a sociologist, being someone who understands the world better and looking back at it now, some of my reactions that are directly coming out of that. I definitely think that time plays a role. And also sometimes you see that as people are building off of a model, they take it and they go in different directions and realize it's really moved. I was earlier thinking about *Moana* and how, when I saw *Moana*, I was so angry looking back at *The Princess and the Frog*. At the time I watched *The Princess and the Frog*, I was like, "Oh, it's ok, it's a step forward. There are things I like about it, then there are things I don't." And then the first thing in *Moana* when they're taking time to explain and being respectful and introducing the culture, and then I was like, "Oh

my goodness. You could've done that so much better before." And now, I'm so angry at how that movie started.

So I do feel like, you see somebody do it better and then you think, "You could have done this too. You could have been more progressive or inclusive." You could have treated people better but also, you could have been more inclusive in what you created, how you presented it. And you could have incorporated more because now we have seen somebody do it better. Even though we know it gets done better because of what came before.

For me that is where some of the difficulty is because the link that we use to tie all these pieces together is the person. If it was just *Buffy* and *Angel* or if it was just *Firefly* and *Serenity*, it would be easier for me to disconnect it from the individual. But because there's this collection of shows, he [Whedon] becomes that link that is tying all these things together. And so it's harder for me to pull these things apart. Because we've put them together through this link who is now a very damaged and damaging character.

Ananya: I think that's true. As improvement happens, I think our standards get more exacting also. Linda Jencson's just joined us now. I want to hear James' thoughts and then I'll introduce Linda and she can catch up a little bit.

James: I want to agree with a lot of the things that Alia and Steve said before me and I really want to echo this idea of how groundbreaking *Buffy* was, and I think in a way you can locate the time period where television comes to full maturity as



starting with *Buffy*. Some people like to start with *The Sopranos* which comes after *Buffy*, but I think *Buffy* is really starting this era where TV really starts producing great works of art. And I'm not trying to imply there weren't great TV shows before this [of course there were], but I'm talking about the time period where we can start expecting great works of art on TV. And I think we all have raised our standards because TV has gotten so much better starting when *Buffy* came on the air and shortly thereafter when we get shows like *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*.

I think to a certain extent it's hard to compare *Buffy* to what we've seen since, and hard to compare the other Whedon shows to what we've seen after they aired because TV has gotten much better. But *Buffy*'s kind of at the start of that. But I also want to note, and this is again going back to some of the things that Alia and Steve said, especially when Steve brought up Kendra, I feel like we should and hopefully we did we should have always noticed that Joss Whedon shows were very bad about race, and it wouldn't be surprising to find out that Joss Whedon has racial problems. I think the shows have consistently been bad in this territory, and it's almost strange to think that we have to re-judge him as if he wasn't always a problem as if there weren't always signs of problematic behavior, especially racially, but also when he kills off Tara, ending the relationship between Willow and Tara, and not really dealing with that well.

There were always signs that even if we want to give credit for some of the good things that were happening in *Buffy*, and some of the good things that are happening on *Firefly* and other shows, there was always reason to be suspicious. There was always reason to criticize. And the shows were never perfect,

and I think that it is true that today with a lot more great TV, it's harder to compare simply because TV's gotten better. I also think there's always been problems in the show that we should have been aware of, and I think we actually were aware. I think there were criticisms of the Whedon shows in the Whedon and *Slayage* scholarship, there were these criticisms, and it's just become more agreed upon now that they're good criticisms, but they were always good. Just some people weren't recognizing how good, and how necessary they were. Well, also we can recognize that you can have these criticisms while also praising other things because it's mixed, as anything we study is.

Ananya: That's a really good point. And that's, I think, something that's sometimes a little bit lost in these conversations just because we collectively recently learned that Joss Whedon maybe is kind of a misogynist, but that doesn't mean that's new. It doesn't mean he just turned into one. It was always there, and that somehow was balanced with these also to a significant degree – feminist stories that he could tell. And scholars have been pointing that out all along too.

So Linda, we had a conversation recently about a paper Linda has been working on that has caused her to go back and think about some of the messages about democracy in *Buffy*. So we've talked about gender, we've talked about race, we talked about class a little, but let's also consider the political orientation of *Buffy* or of the other shows.

Linda: Okay, I do Disaster Studies, or I did before I retired. Well, now I live a perpetual disaster with all the rest of us. Several, simultaneously, in fact. I've been writing something about what *Buffy* can say about having prepared us for global

warming, for a crisis of democracy, for some white people suddenly discovering that we have a racist culture, while other white people dig in their heels and go on the attack, and for the COVID crisis, which is revealing economic inequality that's always been there but is now more visible and harsher, and the return of fascism globally. All going on at once while people are flooding and burning and there are famines and refugees. Two months ago, I actually said out loud to somebody, "Where's the major volcanic eruption? It's the only thing we're missing." We've got that now too. So in the process of trying to write, I had written something before about *Buffy* and disaster, and disaster researchers realized that like news coverage, they might have a fashion editor, but nobody has a disaster specialist. None of the major networks or newspapers have disaster specialists on their teams, even though a lot of people tune in when there's a disaster. So they're spewing out all kinds of misinformation, rather than learning much about what to do in a disaster from the news or from reading or watching documentaries. Instead, we tend to learn about what to do in a disaster by watching fiction. "Oh, yeah. We need to be prepared to turn on our neighbors when they turn on us." Although that's not at all what usually happens in the real world.

And so I started to think about the [current state of things] and it's a compound disaster and it's a long time in coming. *Buffy* is relevant for having prepared us—or maybe not prepared us for this—because it's such a long time in coming. Its roots go back before *Buffy*. I couldn't help but think about the extreme critique of David Graeber for superhero narratives in general, that they prepare us to react and only react. [Editorial note: Cf. Kordesman.] Don't try to analyze what's going on and see what will come next and be prepared for that or organized for that,

just keep reacting. Wait for the next supervillain and then react to him. Don't try and analyze where the next supervillain might come from. Or don't try to figure out social trends or racism or sexism or classism and how it sets up or is going to impact the next situation. Just react.

And clearly that's what Buffy did. And Whedon told us time and time again, "The monsters will keep coming. There's nothing you can do about that. All you can do as a superhero, whether Buffy or Angel or Spike or Kendra, all you can do is react." So that's one of the problems with superheroes in general. They react. The other problem is that, especially with superhero narratives becoming the dominant narrative of our culture, superheroes teach us that only the special chosen one, the guy who got bitten by the radioactive spider the whatever only that one single individual will be able to react well enough to do anything. It's not democracy. It's not groups of people forming affinity groups or working on the next stage of better democracy without racism and sexism and classism. It's not people together. It's not the average person who can do anything about anything. We must wait for the superhero. And superhero narratives teach that. Furthermore, they tend to teach that democratic institutions are absolutely helpless. It takes Batman to repeatedly save Gotham City. The elected government of Gotham City can never ever do anything for the citizens of Gotham City.

So that's what I'm working on now. Whedon is further compounded by being one of the early vehicles that brought a pre-existing narrative to the fore in the '90s that contributed to belief in the deep state, belief that they are putting chips into

our bodies, belief that they are into mind control. And we've clearly got that in *Firefly* as well as in *Buffy*.

And, of course, in *Dollhouse*. And now we have millions of people in the United States who believe that if they get the vaccine, the government is going to put a chip in them. And *Buffy* is one of multiple cultural sources of that trope.

Ananya: There's also the allure and constant celebration of iconoclastic thinking. Just the notion that it's one person acting on instinct regardless of training, regardless of protocol, that that's what you need to fix a catastrophe. So not just one person with special powers but one person who's willing to break all the rules. And I think that there's a place for the valorization of that, but, also, that's a real Hollywood fixture and highly problematic as such.

Linda: However, I still applaud the final season of *Buffy* where we saw the roots of democracy when all of the Potentials were turned into Slayers, and Buffy turned into little Miss Dictatorial. They refused to take that kind of order. And you see a struggle for a small affinity group with democracy, unlike any of the other superhero narratives.

Ananya: I'm also remembering that last scene where they're all standing there collectively. That it is really this notion that you must work together to make things happen. So my last question is a two-part question. One is a sort of practical matter. Are there certain texts that you think have stayed relevant for longer and, if so, why? Because I agree with James and Steve that while *Dollhouse* has its problematic aspects, it's also one of the richest

texts in this canon. So are there some texts that you think have stayed relevant for longer?

And then my other question is if these stories may be, as you're saying Linda, if they have really problematic implications that are not necessarily progressive or liberatory in intent or function, does that then affect our enjoyment or our use of them? Does the intent of their making matter to us as fans and scholars and scholar-fans or fan-scholars?

Steve: Well, for me, I couldn't choose, to be quite honest. I couldn't pick out one and say this is the one that stands out for me and stays relevant because all of them still speak to me in their different ways. I have different levels of affection for them. The thing I've written about most recently is on *Dollhouse*. It's in Heather Porter and Mike Starr's collection coming out next year. And so at the moment I'm very much in love with *Dollhouse*. The more I look at it, the more interesting I find it. The levels in it fascinate me. I'm going to go back to my Shakespeare analogy. No idea if Shakespeare was a nice man or not. I'm not going to stop wanting to investigate these texts, to interrogate these texts. As a musicologist. I've still got so much that I think can be said. There's so much of the music that hasn't really been talked about.

Nobody's ever talked about the Season Seven music except for me, a tiny bit, in Nikki Stafford's blog on the *Great Buffy Rewatch*. And it's actually a really, really good score by Robert Duncan. It's the only one he did. So anyway, there's still more to be said. So it all still stays valuable to me. I'm not sure I even understand your second question now, but what I will come

back to, which is where I kind of started, is that idea of community. That for me, discovering *Buffy* studies, discovering *Slayage*, was quite literally life-changing. It was career-changing. I really had published almost nothing. My research career had never really taken off until I came to *Buffy*. That conference that I mentioned at the beginning, in 2001, where I had breakfast with Richard Dyer—two things came out of that conference: The commission to write a book about Danny Elfman's score for *Batman* and the information about *Slayage*. That conference changed my life. But the community that I found around *Buffy* has been a defining aspect of my research career. And nothing can take away from that. Nothing will change that. And so for me, I remain invested.

Alia: I'm still not sure about where my fandom is going to go. But as long as the work still exists, I think you have to be there, and you have to analyze it, and provide the insight that people are talking about or not talking about. And I think about it in a very practical way, and not like there's a bunch of people who are saying, "Well, I'm thinking of watching *Buffy* again. So I'm going to go and find all the journal articles about it and read that while I'm watching it." But rather that these discussions have to be had as long as the work continues to exist and to have a life. Disney now owns a bunch of these shows and they are considering rebooting them or recreating them or whatever it is that they were thinking about doing. And they may or may not be still considering these things, but at some point, when the new version comes out, the old version is going to re-emerge and it's going to re-engage people. Scholars have to continue to examine these texts, and I hadn't thought of the Shakespeare example or the Kant example, about these people

who either we don't know how horrible they were, or we do know they were horrible.

As I was saying earlier, with my research on Disney, we have all these notions about who Walt Disney was already and how we feel about that. We often know that there are creators who we don't agree with as people, we don't like them as people, we don't want to hold them up as people, but they create these things that we keep going back to and that others keep going back to and that people will be going back to for years. And engaging in the scholarship around those things is important because it's important for people to understand that, when you're watching this movie, there's aspects of it that you should be aware of and discussions that are going on around them that you might want to engage in. For my work with Disney, I'm very focused on the idea of a parent watching especially since I'm a parent myself now. But, as a kid, I was always a big Disney fan, and I always watched all these movies and didn't necessarily think about a lot of these things. A lot of my friends now who are parents don't really remember the Disney movies that they watched as a kid, or they stopped watching them at some point. But with Disney Plus, you and your kids can watch them all, and some of them have warnings in front of them that say, "These represent outdated cultural depictions." But they're still there, the depictions are still there, the movies are still there, and people still enjoy them. There's a website that you can visit to find out more about it, but my daughter is six, she's not visiting a website to find out what the problems are with *Lady and the Tramp*. I have to address that myself. And so, I think it is up to the people who are doing the analytical work to be there for those who aren't, to make sure the conversations happen. When you engage in the analysis, you understand where there



are great messages, where there are positive things, and where there are problems, what they are, and what it means for the problems to be there. What are things that you should think about or talk to your kids about if you're going to be engaging in these movies or shows? So I, again, go back and forth about my own personal feelings about where I'm going to go as a fan, but I think the scholarship needs to exist as long as the art exists.

Ananya: What you said also reminds me that I know that there were so many problems just in the production and the representations of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* movie, but just the kind of character she was, just the fact that it was her story being told was so exciting at the time. There was so much conversation around that, just that there was someone like her on the screen, fighting, yes, but also refusing to be dismissed. That was new and a step forward, even with the problems.

Linda: And in this world, I think a lot of *Firefly*, where you have the core rich nations who got capitalism first, or the core planets, and you have the periphery, the under-developed, the struggling where resource extraction and theft are taking place. They depicted the process of resource extraction and the devastating effect it has on human beings. I can't think of anybody who's done that critique better. And so for the world we live in now, even though at the same time he was doing that, he was having his characters speaking Chinese, because the two main civilizations that created the outer space civilization, one of them was China, and yet there aren't any Asian characters, there aren't even many Asian minor characters. They must have managed to wipe out the Chinese people while still saving something of their culture and commerce.

I could almost see the comic book that goes into that backstory, some kind of explanation. There are things that he makes me think about still, and also in *Buffy*, the gender issues that were there, and the personal experience of turning it on consistently week after week after week, and seeing those gender issues so consistently covered, and then a whole new insight into gender, and then a whole new expression of feminism.... And so I treasure that. It's still there.

Ananya: Yeah, that's really helpful. Also, going back, despite her summary death, Tara was a regular lesbian character on TV when that was not so common at all and, later, Andrew was a consistent and pretty obviously gay presence on screen. We take that for granted now, but it wasn't a given then.

Linda: I mean, on *Serenity*, it's a spaceship full of white people who are third world peripheral and they're mostly white. But they are the resource-extracted people of the Global South, without ever saying that they are. They are the way they're shown. And so to be able to create that sympathy and identification with the Global South that they managed to pull off in that way is incredibly valuable to me as a viewer.

James: So I'm not sure there's any shows I would leave behind. There might be seasons of *Angel* or maybe seasons of *Buffy* that I would leave in large part behind, but I'm going back to what Steve said. I feel like all the shows — with maybe the possible exception of *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* — in all the other shows, there's something there that I find very valuable. And I think there might be something in *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, but it's a little harder for me to find.

And kind of transitioning from the first question to the second, I just want to talk about how, from a philosophical perspective, philosophy is constantly doing these kinds of weird little examples, and we need them. We need weird little examples to kind of imagine what if the world was a different way. What if this happened, what if that happened? What would it be like if we were bats, as a question from a famous philosophy paper asks. And so I think fiction is a great way for us to turn and ask these questions because sometimes fiction is much better than others at answering the questions. The final episode of *Firefly*, "Objects in Space," it's a clear attempt to try to grapple with existentialism and kind of ask, could existentialism be a real view? Could someone live as an existentialist? Jubal Early presents this horrific version of existentialism and River presents this much more beautiful, nice version of existentialism. And I think there's a sense in which Joss Whedon may think that the River version is better than the Jubal Early version.

And he's probably wrong about that in terms of judging from an existentialist perspective. He shouldn't be judging at all. But the fact that he put them out there – or his team, I should say, put them out there, and the team of people behind *Firefly* philosophers can kind of look at that and say, "Oh, this is what existentialism could look like in real life. It could look like Jubal Early. Maybe this is bad. Maybe we should rethink some of these things" (but now I'm judging). And so the TV shows and the movies, they push us to think about things deeply, and I think they do a good job of it. And so I feel like I'm mirroring something that Steve said or something that Linda and Alia also

said, I want to leave Joss Whedon behind in a sense, but I want to keep the works. I want to keep all the works because I think they did a good job of raising these questions and playing things out in philosophically interesting ways and ways that we can all learn from.

Ananya: Okay, so thank you all. I think these were the main issues I wanted to address, but is there something else that you all would like to say?

James: Okay. This is just me wanting to get to ask Steve a question real quick. So Steve, is there... You were talking a lot about the music for *Wonder Woman*. And I'm wondering whether you know, in your expertise, are there differences between the music between the Joss Whedon *Justice League* and the Zack Snyder *Justice League*?

Steve: Enormous. The Zack Snyder *Justice League* score is a travesty of horrible proportions, particularly as far as *Wonder Woman* is concerned. It's a completely different score and especially for *Wonder Woman*. Holkenborg wrote the music for the Zack Snyder version and he resurrects a musical trope that is referred to in the late '90s, early 2000s as "Wailing Woman" for *Wonder Woman*. And it's just the kind of the ethnic, wordless, ululating, sad voice. Sad voice lady. Think *Gladiator*. But yeah, he puts it in and it's just kind of, "Oh, please no, that does not need the trope of miserable wailing woman, please." But yeah, so I was really disappointed with the Zack Snyder score. It was a mess, to be quite honest.

Alia: Does that mean you liked the other score? The beautiful one.

Steve: It's funnier. [chuckle] It's Danny Elfman who's being a bit naughty and he's evidently been told, "Yeah, yeah, refer back to the old films." So there's bits of the 1989 *Batman*'s themes in there, the original 1978 *Superman* theme is in there. He's having fun and it is, it's a knowing little score. In some ways, I do prefer the Zack Snyder cut, but I prefer the Joss Whedon score if you see what I mean. So, yeah, that's where I am.

The one thing that I wanted to add to our discussion was actually, we've talked a lot about Whedon's role in this and not wanting to lose the works. I don't want to lose the performances either. We mustn't forget that television is not just the writing, it's preserved in that object. And a significant part of the object is the performances and those wonderful actors.. Where would we be without Charisma Carpenter and Sarah Michelle Gellar and Alyson Hannigan in those fantastic roles that they brought to life, that they made real, that they embodied? So yeah. Giles!

Alia: I know.

Steve: Yeah, those performances are to be treasured.

Alia: Also, what James had said earlier about the other people who worked on these things. And a lot of them have gone on to create other great things that we love. And so we also would lose that if we completely dismiss it. We lose the great work that they've done on those other things too.

Ananya: Well, and you mentioned *Supernatural* earlier. I think this whole concept of *Buffy* Plus studies is all about that. All these other texts that were launched after *Buffy*.

Steve: I have to say at the 2016 *Slayage* conference, my entire paper was actually on *Supernatural* [chuckle].

Linda: Higher transformation of *Doctor Who*'s companion swing from Rose onward after the influence of *Buffy*.

Steve: Exactly. Yeah.

[Editorial note: While this conversation went on to a very casual discussion of horror as a genre and the watchability of *Cabin in the Woods*, this really ends the discussion of how we as scholars and fans might be navigating the *Buffy+* genre and its study going forward. Certainly this discussion features only four scholars and their viewpoints, but those scholars represent a variety of disciplines, global regions (in the US, the mountainous South, New York City, the West Coast, and Steve in the UK), racial/ethnic identity, gender, and other demographics. While it only represents these particular scholars, it does also cut across a certain cross section of *Buffy+* and popular culture scholarship. While this discussion definitely is not meant to be a last word on these issues and debates, it does mean to offer some kind of traction forward, thoughtfully, consciously, and productively.]

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