

**Reconsidering Girl-on-Girl:
Reading Transgressive Lesbianism on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

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[1] Most of mainstream television's representations of lesbianism function as a spectacle of the patriarchal male gaze. Tropes such as the "hot lesbian" and "girl-on-girl" titillation are often used to attract heterosexual male viewing audiences as well as to provide general thrills for a broad audience (Jenkins). Willow and Tara's long term lesbian relationship on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Seasons Four through Six confronts this trope by both rejecting stereotypes and (hetero)normalizing the lesbian representation. Their long term relationship negotiates studio censorship and audience expectations while also adhering to gendered tropes of lesbianism. In other words, Willow and Tara may not always function as "hot lesbians" but they do often function as traditionally feminine and attractive characters. Willow and Tara's representation can also be read transgressively. From varying subject positions viewers have the ability to decode potential lesbian tropes which may appear less explicit to the heterosexual/non-queer viewer. Mainstream as well as subversive tropes work to code Willow and Tara as transgressive characters, yet normativity persists as well.

[2] Throughout the arc of the relationship Willow/Tara showcase varying degrees of implicit and explicit queerness. Queerness as it will be used in this articulation specifies both non-normative sexualities as well as how these identities become narratively transgressive. Their budding relationship and exploration of magical powers together is rife with lesbian subtext. In various scenes Willow and Tara exhibit vulnerability and coded eroticism which blurs the line of what is subtext and what is text i. e. the emotional intimacy and sexual desire. When read against the grain, Willow/Tara's subjectivity reinforces the possibility for a transgressive, queer spectatorship. This discussion must be supplemented by what is problematic. Can popular images of lesbians exist beyond their sexualized stereotypes? At different intersections Willow and Tara's relationship adheres to and transgresses these boundaries. This paper seeks to explore how the Willow/Tara relationship can provide viewers a transgressive experience as well as remain within the boundaries of normative representation. While acknowledging the adherences to hegemonic norms of representation there remains a space to examine Willow and Tara's radical potential. Lesbian representation offers nuanced understandings of non-normative identities and sexualities. The Willow/Tara relationship offers visibility and resists dominant stereotyping and tokenization. This visibility contributes to an archive of lesbian sexuality and gives diverse representations of queer characters new television potential.

[3] This paper will focus specifically on the Willow/Tara relationship, as implicit and explicit, in order to narrow the theoretical approach and articulation. This is in an effort to thoughtfully examine Willow/Tara's radical representation as well as their adherence to hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality. Their relationship can and must walk this line in order to provide dynamic representation and the opportunity of critical engagement for the active viewer.

[4] This paper will use Mary Anne Doane's "Film and the masquerade: theorizing the female spectator" and Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" for the basis of its discussion. Female spectatorship and gaze theory provide a resistant critical lens with which to examine women as spectators and objects on screen. Representations of lesbianism complicate these theories further by positioning female desire for other females as the object of the gaze. Using these texts this paper seeks to examine the moments of subtextual resistance to stereotypical forms of lesbianism on *Buffy* as well as articulate the female spectator's position.

[5] In addition to Doane and Mulvey this paper will use Sue Jackson and Tamsyn Gilberston's study, "Hot Lesbians': Young People's Talk About Representations of Lesbianism" in order to give quantitative context to the viewer's experience of lesbianism on television. Their study questioned high school students about images of lesbianism in popular culture. "Hot Lesbians" provides viewer reactions and first-person accounts. Tricia Jenkins' "Potential Lesbians At Two O'clock": The Heterosexualization Of Lesbianism In The Recent Teen Film" examines the tropes of lesbianism in popular media, finding that they are often represented in ways most lucrative to television studios. In addition, Em McAven comments in "I Think I'm Kinda Gay': Willow Rosenberg and the Absent/Present Bisexual in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" on scholarship's pervasive lack of bisexuality studies. Examining Willow's unique subject position, McAven articulates the characters' subversive and unanchored sexual identity. Willow's sexuality exists fluidly and ephemerally on *Buffy*. This fluidity disrupts fixed notions of sexual identity, although McAven argues that Willow's coded bisexuality is signified by her personal instability and social anxiety. Though this paper will not directly address *Buffy*'s representations of bisexuality, McAven offers significant insights on the popular delegitimization of TV's queer characters. Jackey Stacey's "Desperately Seeking Difference" confronts what is lacking in Mulvey's text, namely the position of the female spectator. Stacey discusses the reductive dualisms of sexual desire in the works of Mulvey and Doane alike, finding binaries such as masculine/feminine and hetero/homosexual become theoretically convoluted and less applicable to non-heterosexual male spectators. While Doane and Mulvey serve as the theoretical framework for this paper, secondary sources aid in the discussion of the myriad representations of lesbians on television.

[6] Mary Ann Doane, author of “Film and the masquerade: theorizing the female spectator” articulates the positions of the male and female spectator in relation to the desired image. Doane relies on the notion that the spectator must hold a distance from the desired object on screen i.e. the objectified woman. According to Doane males can enact this distance because they inherently embody a sexual difference from the woman. The male’s distance is formulated, as Doane writes, “as a spatial distance in the male’s relation to his body [which] rapidly becomes a temporal distance in the service of knowledge” (Doane 251). Doane uses Freudian analysis to formulate that this “knowledge” is the understanding of sexual difference. She articulates that when a girl sees a penis for the first time she immediately feels she is without it and “wants to have it” (Doane 251). Doane articulates the male and female experience through gendered socialization. Thus difference occurs from the boy’s first confrontation with female genitalia. As articulated by Freud, the boy shows “irresolution and lack of interest; he sees nothing or disowns what he has seen” (Doane 251). The boy then is prompted to reread the observed lack-of-penis-female genitalia by fearing the threat of castration. Here, “it is the distance between the look and the threat” that the boy can understand his sexual difference to the girl (Doane 251). Doane articulates that equipped with the capability to revise and ponder earlier events and ideas, the male is apparently able to bestow meaning onto objects not linked to immediacy of experience. Doane posits that it is this distance which allows for the fetishism of the female form. The female however must enact a “transvestite viewing experience” in order to escape the closeness of examining the female objectified image. It is important to note that the contemporary use of “transvestite” is negatively associated. Working from a specific historical moment Doane uses the term to bring attention to a viewing experience of masquerade. The term “transvestite” is used to explain the dual positioning of the female spectator. Doane finds a ubiquity of the described “closeness” in feminist theory. Closeness is made moot by the female’s ability to enact the viewing position of feminine or masculine. This enables the female’s transvestite viewing position (Doane 252). The female is therefore equipped to enact the masquerade of femininity as well as of masculinity. According to Doane the performance of femininity provides the distance the female must possess in order to consume her own image.

[7] Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” also uses Freudian psychoanalysis to discuss the inherently patriarchal gaze of spectator upon the desired female object. Mulvey examines the male spectator and “status quo” of the patriarchy within which popular media is produced. The pleasure in looking, termed *scopophilia* by Freud, yields objectification and a “controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 60). Women function as the desired objects and heterosexual male viewers do the watching. The moving image fulfills this pleasure in looking. According to Freud this pleasure originates from the child’s curiosity with genitalia and bodily function as well as the “presence/absence of the penis” i. e. the male’s castration anxiety (Mulvey 60). This curiosity forms the male gaze. The voyeuristic pleasure is two-fold. There is the inherent scopophilic tendency and there is identification with the image on screen. Herein resides a tension between sexual desire and identification developed through the male

viewer's narcissism. Mulvey states that the look can be pleasurable but "its point of reference continually returns to the traumatic moment of its birth: the castration complex" (Mulvey 62). In essence, the male spectator's fascination spawns from this fear. The image of the female establishes the paradox of the male gaze. She is both the object of desire and source of anxiety. Mulvey articulates that cinema, in seeking to reproduce life realistically using the photographic image, projects female objectification using the male gaze. The woman on screen represents the sexual difference which informs, as Mulvey writes, the "symbolic order and the law of the father" (Mulvey 65). Though Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure" uses gaze theory to discuss cinematic representations of women, the male gaze operates beyond said medium. The dualistic objectification/identification manifests in television and still image representations of women. The active/passive mechanism is ubiquitous throughout popular media, including on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. It is salient to note that both Doane and Mulvey use essentialist definitions of gender. Their conceptions rely on inherent attributes such as physical anatomy and predisposition. As used in this paper their articulations are interpreted to comment on the ways in which men and women are differently socialized. In addition, this paper questions and complicates the usefulness of Doane and Mulvey's theories.

[8] The aforementioned analyses are also disrupted by Stacey's discussion in "Desperately Seeking Difference" of the "oppressive dichotomies" of psychoanalysis. Stacey asserts that psychoanalysis relies on binaries of masculinity/femininity and activity/passivity to determine female spectatorship and objectification versus male spectatorship. Stacey reveals the limitations of these bifurcated analyses, writing that "the insistence upon a gendered dualism of sexual desire maps homosexuality onto an assumed antithesis of masculinity and femininity" and suggests that "we need to separate gender identification from sexuality" (Stacey 455). Stacey finds that identification and desire can work together between female spectators and desired women, complicating Doane and Mulvey's assumed heterosexual gaze. As will be demonstrated below, like Stacey, the Willow/Tara relationship interrogates Doane and Mulvey's bifurcations and offers the audience the possibility of a transgressive reading.

[9] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Seasons Four through Six offer one of American television's first long term lesbian relationships. Willow Rosenberg meets Tara Maclay at a college Wicca meeting. Their shared interest in magical power prompts their first interactions in the Season Four episode, "Hush" (B4010). Their first interactions include a couple meaningful glances shared across a circle of ten or twelve Wicca group members (who are more interested in club bureaucracy than real magic). Later in "Hush" Willow and Tara must unite magically to block a doorway with a large filing cabinet. Their hands meet which supercharges their spell. The filing cabinet zips across the room and slams into the doorway and prevents oncoming demons. Their unity works to move the cabinet thus magical chemistry and intimacy is implied. "Hush" offers implicit female desire which confronts Mulvey's discussion of the active/passive dynamic. Two women desire each other. Willow and Tara must work collectively to achieve

their magical goal. Their pleasure and success is achieved without the qualification or aid of a male. Visual prominence is given to Willow and Tara's hands meeting. A close-up shot reveals Tara's hand inching towards Willow's. Mulvey writes that close-ups of a woman's fragmented body creates "the quality of a cut-out or icon, rather than verisimilitude, to the screen" (Mulvey 63). In other words, traditional cinema fragments the female form and removes it from the film's operating time and space. The fragmented body becomes a fetishized object. Willow/Tara's initial handholding confronts this trope of female objectification. Their hands are presented in close-up, perhaps implicitly erotically, although their connection serves a narrative function. Their combined efforts expedite the magical blocking of the door from the approaching demons. Unlike Mulvey's explanation of the fantastical close-ups of women's arms, legs, and torsos which disrupt narrative flow, Willow/Tara's close-up handholding is contingent to their success. The close-up does slow the action of the scene, perhaps in reference to cinematic tropes of female fragmentation, yet the physical connection of Willow and Tara is necessary to their magical success. The implicitness of Willow and Tara's initial desire resists the explicitness of their fetishization.

[10] Another example of subtle desire is found in a scene in the Season Four episode "Who are You?" (B4016), in which Willow and Tara must again join forces to perform a spell. Willow and Tara meet in Tara's room to perform an incantation. The mise-en-scene is warmly lit with incandescent lamps and twinkly Christmas lights. The space is filled with reds and soft, yellowy-whites. Again Willow and Tara's clutched hands are framed in a tight close-up. In addition to heavy breathing, the camera pans slowly around the two women in medium shot. Aided by the lighting and set design, the scene implies sensuality although Willow and Tara's interactions resist 'girl-on-girl' desire. In their study, Jackson and Gilbertson find that "the heterosexual audience is generally aware that displays of 'lesbian' sex are acts of performance, that the actors portraying them are (often) 'really' heterosexuals" (Jackson, Gilbertson 201). In the aforementioned scene lesbian desire is implied but not explicitly produced therefore confronting the performativity and artifice of TV-constructed lesbianism. Alyson Hannigan who plays Willow and Amber Benson as Tara do not identify as lesbians and their characters' queerness is not explicit at this moment in the series. Willow and Tara's implicit sensuality denies the viewer an overt identification with their sexual identities. Thus the straight male viewer is also denied overt identification with girl-on-girl desire. Willow and Tara's implicit intimacy and lesbian potentiality must be read against the grain. In contrast to the aforementioned scene Jackson and Gilbertson cite the 2003 MTV Music Awards Madonna/Britney Spears and Madonna/Christina Aguilera kiss as a controversial moment of performative hetero/homo-flexibility. Displays of performative lesbian activity have, according to Jackson and Gilbertson, a "lengthy history as a source of titillation for heterosexual men" (Jackson, Gilbert 202). Because there is public knowledge and understanding of Madonna/Britney/Christina's heterosexuality, the girl-on-girl-on-girl interaction aligns itself with a discourse of hetero-normative desirability. Willow and Tara resist this titillation by alluding to

intimacy without performing it explicitly. In addition, their romance fuels narrative fulfillment (with the casting of spells) thus their sensuality is not fetishized.

[11] Throughout Season Four Willow and Tara's relationship becomes more explicit. For example in the episode "New Moon Rising," (B4019) Willow and Tara discuss adopting a cat together while holding hands. Tara tells Willow she wants her dorm room to be "Willow-friendly" (B4019). Although Willow/Tara begin to exhibit signs of physical and emotional intimacy, Willow's lesbian identity is not yet explicit. McAven reads this ambiguity as a sign of Willow's bisexuality. It is clear from the narrative that Willow desires both men and women (Xander, Oz, Tara, Kennedy) although her proclamation of "Hello, gay now" in the episode, "Triangle" in the fifth season suggests that she aligns herself with lesbian identity politics (B5011). McAven goes on to articulate that Willow's coded bisexuality earlier in the series suggests an instability to her identity. Willow is represented as "incomplete" (McAven 4). According to McAven, the moments when Willow's bisexuality—the instability of a fixed identity—becomes most clear is when she embodies sexual deviance. McAven writes that Willow's deviance "is visually coded through such devices as 'bad' Willow's black lipstick and leather" (McAven 4). When Willow exhibits this outward evilness, her queerness—including apparent bisexuality and leather-kink aesthetic—becomes most obvious. In the Season Three episode "The Wish" (B3009), Willow is fantastically turned into a vampire. Vamp-Willow's coded non-heterosexuality is problematically represented as destructive and excessive. Her sexually ambiguous deviance in "The Wish" foreshadows future deviant transgressions in Season Six that will be discussed later in this paper. Here Willow's sexual ambiguity means deviance and delegitimization.

[12] Doane writes, "there is always a certain excessiveness, a difficulty associated with women who appropriate the gaze, who insist upon looking" (Doane 254). Women who are presented as bearers of a gaze are often desexualized and demonized in mainstream Hollywood films. The appropriated gaze becomes "an excessive and dangerous desire" (Doane 255). Tara and Willow enact a certain gaze upon each other. Following the logic of Doane's articulation, their homosexual female gaze initially resists this dangerous desire and non-sexual representation. As previously mentioned, Willow and Tara's growing implicit relationship confronts the deviant tropes of female spectatorship and scopophilic pleasure. As the Willow/Tara relationship progresses this dynamic changes.

[13] The revelation of Willow and Tara's explicit relationship marks the beginning of its coded "excessiveness." (Doane 255). A major plot line in Season Six involves Tara's murder and Willow's subsequent enraged reaction. Throughout Season Six Willow becomes increasingly dependent on her magical powers. In the episode "Tabula Rasa" (B6008) Willow suggests to Tara that she erase Buffy's memory of her death. Willow remarks, "I know a spell that will make her forget she was ever in heaven" to which Tara reply's "God, what is wrong with you?!"

(B6008). Willow's excessive use of magic threatens her relationship with Tara. She becomes a destructive force. In Ryan's "It's Complicated... because of Tara: Identity Politics, and the Straight White Male Author of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," the author cites "The Kitten" message board (a website devoted to the Willow/Tara relationship arc) with its definition of the "dead lesbian cliché" as:

"a version of the basic 'dead/evil minority cliché' in which minority characters are introduced into a storyline in order to be killed or play the villain.... [that] all lesbians and, specifically lesbian couples, can never find happiness and always meet tragic ends. One of the most repeated scenarios is that one lesbian dies horribly and her lover goes crazy, killing others or herself.... (The Kitten, the Witches, and the Bad Wardrobe).

Doane's discussion of the female-appropriated gaze works in tandem with this articulation of the dead lesbian cliché. Doane posits that excessive female desire and appropriation of the gaze "mobilizes extreme efforts of containment and unveils the sadistic aspect of the narrative... death is the 'location of all impossible signs'" (Doane 255). With the absence of a male spectator the Willow/Tara relationship and subsequent death of Tara aligns itself with Doane's discussion as well as cliché.

[14] Ryan argues that attributing Tara's death in the Sixth Season episode "Seeing Red" to the dead lesbian cliché "simplifies a complex character and her lover into one-dimensional figures, ignoring the character development and growth that has made *Buffy* such a powerful show" (Ryan 5). In other words Ryan seeks to defend Tara's subjectivity— she offers more than just her queerness. Ryan posits that Tara's identity is not wholly comprised of her lesbianism and the Willow/Tara relationship should not be denied the same "history of pain and torment" awarded to the other main *Buffy* characters simply because of their marginalized status (Ryan 6). Ryan discusses the narrative reasoning behind Tara's death although her discussion seems beside the point. For example, Ryan writes that "what happens to Tara is cruel and perverse – and it's meant to be, but not because a lesbian is being punished: showdowns are supposed to be between the Slayer and her foe" (Ryan 6). Ryan's defense ignores the context beyond the text. Perhaps Warren's bullet was not meant for Tara but she still takes the hit. Warren's actions perpetuate the aforementioned cliché. Tara is still punished. In "Girl on Girl Politics: Willow/Tara and new approaches to media fandom" Tabron responds to and rejects "Seeing Red"'s logical narrative defense. She writes "to depict a lesbian's death by violence as taking place in the bedroom where she had just been making love to her lover - in, incidentally, the first lesbian love scene permitted by the network - ain't cricket" (Tabron 3). Tara's death, taking place in the bedroom, draws a direct correlation to her relationship.

[15] Thus Willow reacts with "excessive and dangerous desire" (Doane 255). The subsequent episode to Tara's death, "Villains," (B6012) shows a version of Willow completely

out of control. Her eyes glow red and her hair turns black signifying her darkness and anger. McAven describes Willow “wearing a phallic black suit, her usual red hair turned black, as are her eyes” (McAven 6). Similar to her coding in the previously discussed episode, “The Wish,” Willow exhibits deviance —again in the form of leather and masochism— which visually establishes and confirms her instability. Willow is thus introduced as sexually non-normative.

[16] In addition to the previous analyses, Willow/Tara’s representation also problematically adheres to certain tropes of normative lesbianism. These tropes make the relationship palatable to a mainstream audience. Jennifer Reed discusses mainstream lesbian television representation in “Lesbian Television Personalities: A New Queer Subject,” finding that successful lesbian television subjects “fit pretty closely into the ‘mythic norm in US society... they just-happen-to-be-lesbian’” (Reed 307). Arguably Willow and Tara “happen-to-be-lesbian” as much of their implicit relationship remains subtextual to the undiscerning viewer. There are several reasons as to why the Willow/Tara relationship is initially hidden on *Buffy*. Reed cites Terry Castle, author of “The Apparitional Lesbian” who writes:

“Western civilization has for centuries been haunted by a fear of women without men—of women indifferent or resistant to male desire. Precisely because she challenges the moral, sexual, and psychic authority of men so thoroughly, the ‘Amazon’ has always provoked anxiety and hatred” (Reed 309).

Buffy, airing on The WB and Fox, represents lesbianism for a broad viewing audience likely influenced by said fear. Castle’s description of misogyny and homophobia works to disempower and erase mainstream lesbian narratives. The Willow/Tara representation inherently combats societal “fear of women without men” because it gives broader visibility and subjectivity to non-heterosexual identities. This visibility is offered implicitly (with the possibility of readings against the grain) and explicitly through the arc of the series. Subjectivity is given although Reed writes that hetero-normativity —the insistence and dominance of heterosexuality in popular culture— is a structure “pliable enough to mask the lesbian presence—even when lesbian identity is made explicit” (Reed 310). In “New Moon Rising” Willow’s lesbian identity is confirmed when she comes out to Buffy. Reed asks, “what happens to the category of lesbian if it does not cause some stir in mainstream culture... does lesbianism challenge heterosexism if it is not seen as some threat to society?” (Reed 308). Willow/Tara’s relationship does threaten the heterosexual Willow/Oz reunion, although their relationship does not disrupt the working reality of the *Buffy*-verse. As previously stated, their intimate, magical union helps lead to their success in thwarting demons and villains.

[17] Willow/Tara’s visibility confronts Reed’s questions of mainstream visibility and hetero-normativity. Willow/Tara do exhibit hetero-normativity as they both adhere to traditional

standards of femininity and female *naturalness*. Willow and Tara often wear long skirts, warm colors, and faux fur trimmed jackets. Their aesthetic contrasts with Buffy who wears fashion-forward, monochromatic, sleek clothing. In addition the Wiccan faith is termed by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* as a religion whose deities “inhere in nature and that emphasize ritual observance of seasonal and life cycles.” Willow and Tara identify themselves as witches and initially align themselves with Wiccan faith. By definition their Wiccan identity brings them closer to nature. Lesbian representation seems to work with this conception of naturalness. Willow and Tara’s lesbian representation relies on this stereotype. Their Wiccan naturalness plays into gendered tropes of female softness and natural daintiness. These stereotypes exist in part to essentialist notions of womanhood.

[18] Willow and Tara’s lesbian relationship gives subjectivity to implicit and explicit queerness. Depending on the viewing audience the Willow/Tara relationship presents varying degrees of subtext. Their initial friendship and cooperation suggests emotional intimacy and subtextual transgression. Their explicit lesbianism often relies on stereotype and negative tropes. Herein lies a conundrum of representation. Willow and Tara’s implicitness allows for the greater potential of a queer reading. Glances and actions are rife with possibility. Viewers must construct the meaning of these moments for themselves. When read against the grain Willow and Tara’s pre-out-of-the-closet relationship has infinite potential. It is when their relationship becomes explicit that the characterizations of Willow and Tara adhere more to stereotype. Their fixed identities and representations leave less room for the viewer to identify. The representation becomes narrow and tokenized.

[19] How do these representations become useful to the active viewer? What is politically radical or resistant here? In many ways Willow and Tara’s representation fuels essentialized understanding of lesbianism and womanhood. Yet Willow and Tara’s representation also contributes to a burgeoning media archive of diverse, lesbian, and sexually non-normative representation. Valuing this representation as either positive or negative, subversive or explicit, remains a critical project of scholarship. In addition this process of media examination must be critiqued as well. Dana Heller posits in “Visibility and its Discontents” how discourses surrounding lesbian television representation tend to fall into stereotype:

surveying the field of lesbian representation in mainstream mass media, subcultural products, and even in scholarly writing, [scholars recognize] a pervasive tendency to devise simple progress narratives that recur generationally under the banner of “the new lesbian” or “not your mother’s lesbians” (Heller 676).

Negotiating these tropes remains a necessary part of reading and grappling with representations of lesbianism on mainstream television programs. According to Heller, these readings contribute

to “an archive-in-progress” and avoiding stereotype and essentialism is an important aspect of this project (Heller 676). Perhaps truly transgressive representation can only manifest when reading characters against the grain. Heller describes the reading of straight characters as implicitly non-normative. Heller offers that it is “for the sheer pleasure and subversive delight of seeing ourselves [queer people] as always already there on TV” (Heller 676). Through normative representation there is a possibility for subversion. Despite these claims, the Willow/Tara relationship remains an important artifact in lesbian archive-building. The implicit non-normativity, explicit lesbianism and long-term relationship offer a spectrum of viewing potential. Over the arc of their representation Willow and Tara’s visibility negotiates through the aforementioned problems and potentialities. Reflecting on *Buffy*’s lesbian representation contributes to a critical conversation and archive.

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