

## *Slayage* Conference 9 Report

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### Day 1 of presentations: 22 July 2022

#### Featured Speaker Renee St. Louis: “Ruin, Reflection, Redemption: Unpacking the Television Career of Marti Noxon”

Working with the varieties of meanings packed into the terms “ruin,” “reflection,” and “redemption,” Renee St. Louis chronicled key elements of Noxon’s career since she “ruined” the last two seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). St. Louis highlighted Noxon’s strengths in capturing the complexity of emotion, embodiment, and relationships—strengths evident in her work on *The Girlfriends’ Guide to Divorce* (2014-2018), *Dietland* (2018), *Unreal* (2015-2018), and *Sharp Objects* (2018). St. Louis noted further how Noxon’s use of reflection in both characterological and televisual-aesthetic decisions provides viewers, scholars, and members of our organization much food for thought.

For example, as scholars we have more power than we tend to think in reflecting on the television industry and its players in ways that can feed back to the industry itself. And drawing also on the 2022 documentary *Split at the Root*, which was Noxon’s own response to a moral-perceptual lapse on her part, St. Louis invited our organization to draw lessons from Noxon’s portrayals of going on from chaos and ruin, noting that redemption is difficult, cyclical, and inconsistent—but in spite of that, that ruin is “never the end of the story.”

#### SESSION 1: “First vampires, now witches”<sup>1</sup>: History, Power Analysis, and Feminist Imagery

The first session at this year’s *Slayage* Conference focused on the themes of entrapment and female power. Zelda Mars Engeler-Young opened the session with a paper contemplating the ramifications of found family and the relationships between witchcraft and kinship in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Engeler-Young explored the episodes “Witch” (1.3), “Gingerbread” (3.11), “Hush” (4.10), and “Family” (5.6), arguing that in *Buffy*, family, especially found family, can be read as a modern queer fairy-tale. The found family can be transcendent, but like all power, familial power can become a space of harm and oppression, best articulated through the character of Tara who escapes the misogynistic oppression of her biological family but is then mistreated and often misunderstood by her chosen queer family. Following this thread of systems of oppression, Yasmin Yonekura’s paper opened the conversation further by investigating

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<sup>1</sup> “The Witch,” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1.3)

conservative powers of subjugation in the Season 3 episode “Gingerbread.” According to Yonekura, this episode is a poignant critique of power systems argued via a fairy-tale arc that utilizes the power of symbols and archetypes, especially that of the witch. The witch as figure has always been disruptive of male power dynamics and the patriarchy and as such needs to be punished to maintain order. In “The Witch,” the fear that motivates such witch hunts is on clear display, revealing how some institutions of civil society (e.g. school, family) intended to nurture development can become places of oppression responsible for the harming of marginalized groups. The final paper of the session by Rhonda Wilcox neatly tied together the three papers by exploring the thresholds of female imagery in *Buffy* and *Grimm*. By underlining the importance of visual imagery as a storytelling element within audio-visual mediums, Wilcox discussed the Gothic and folkloric symbols of self-division: the window and the mirror. Traditionally these thresholds serve as either doorways to fantastic, spiritual realms or as signifiers of enclosure, entrapment, and domestic abuse depending on the context within which these symbols are articulated. It is the shattering of these thresholds and their patriarchal expectations that the three panelists’ papers discussed in diverse and thought-provoking ways.

## SESSION 2: “More powerful than evil”<sup>2</sup>: Leadership amongst Trauma

Session 2 of the *Slayage 9* conference featured three scholars, Louise Child, Heather Porter, and Richard Albright. Louise Child, a religious studies scholar from Cardiff, Wales, presented “Demons, Rituals, and Thrall: Magic Power, and Authority in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*” with the “aim [...] to use perspectives offered by anthropology and history of religion to examine in more detail both ritual and tradition in the series.” She argues that ritual is an important part of *Buffy*. Through these rituals, a “complex cosmology” emerges. Both vampires and the Scooby gang negotiate this cosmology through the acquisition of “arcane knowledge” and, specifically, spell casting. Ultimately, the Initiative is not successful in its mission because they do not engage with the “arcane knowledge” that defines the supernatural in Sunnydale. Importantly, the “complex cosmology” of *Buffy* is not reminiscent of any single form of witchcraft, but there are features from both popular culture and the kinds of witchcraft being explored by anthropologists that emerge throughout the series.

Heather Porter presented the latest in her examination of the “mad scientist” character, titled “The Broken Scientist in a Cardigan: Examining the Effects of Trauma on the Intelligence of Leopold Fitz and Walter Bishop.” Interestingly, Porter uses a qualitative approach to this theme by applying Sternberg’s Theory of Successful Intelligence. Represented by a triangle, successful intelligence emerges in three forms: analytical, practical, and creative. Porter uses this matrix to look at the effects of trauma on intelligence in two of these “mad scientist” figures, Leopold Fitz of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*

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<sup>2</sup> “Bring on the Night,” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (7.10)

(2013-2020) and Walter Bishop of *Fringe* (2008-2013). Initially, both scientists show a higher marker for analytical intelligence. However, Walter Bishop's character shows a gradual increase in both practical and creative intelligence throughout *Fringe*. Porter notes that when the audience first encounters Walter Bishop, he is already post-trauma. Contrastingly, audiences experience Leopold Fitz both pre and post-trauma. Pre-trauma, Fitz's intelligence markers show a high propensity for analytical intelligence, which is to be expected with characters of this type. However, in season two, Leopold Fitz's analytical intelligence starts to be matched by his practical intelligence. Yet his analytical and practical intelligences are less than half of what they were before his brain injury. Throughout season two of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, Fitz's incidences of successful intelligence become more frequent until they culminate in a miraculous recovery. Contrastingly, Walter Bishop never appears to get back to the man alluded to previous to the show's start or seen in flashbacks.

Richard S. Albright, from Central PA's Community College, presented his research titled, "*The Ant and the Elephant vs. The Slayer: Lessons in Leadership.*" Inspired by the management fable *The Ant and the Elephant: Leadership for the Self* (2004), Albright posits that "The leadership lessons that Buffy learns and imparts are not only still relevant, but more progressive than those from a number of management books still on bestseller lists." While Albright looks at several leadership incidents throughout the series, he specifically focuses on Buffy's successes and failures in season seven. Despite a disastrous attempt to mount an attack on Caleb and the fallout from that choice, Buffy manages to save the world through a radical reinterpretation of the uses of the scythe. That is, by sharing power.

### **SESSION 3: "Thoughts and reactions ... that I couldn't understand"<sup>3</sup>: Explaining and Analyzing**

The third panel session at this year's *Slayage* Conference orbited around the greater theme of suffering, and the ways it is expressed, read, and analyzed. Jamison K. Warren's paper on the "Hauntology of Atonement in *Angel*" read *Angel*'s storyline and character arc as a map for the unending road to redemption. Warren argued that narratives of redemption and atonement are inherently ideological, based on a system of ideas and ideals that shape the structures of morality. The formulas within this ideological system function much like the logical use of math described in Madeline Munsterbjorn's paper, " 'She just did the math': Programming and Purposes in *Firefly* and *Serenity*," about *Firefly* heroine River Tam. Like the ensouled vampire *Angel*, River is simultaneously "monster, damsel, and action hero(ine)", living as the ultimate insider and the ultimate outsider, a status that makes her existence one laden with liminality. If atonement and meaning-making are the arc of *Angel*, River's character arc in *Firefly*, *Serenity*, and the subsequent comics, emphasizes how love is as necessary as math and

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<sup>3</sup> "The Body," *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (5.16)

physics to succeed in space. The first two papers examined the mind and the soul, with Angel's quest for redemption experienced in the soul and River's liminality primarily within the mind. Jessica Hautsch's presentation completed the mind/body/soul triad by investigating the importance of the physical body. Hautsch's presentation, "Reading 'The Body(s)'" utilized a phenomenological reading of the embodied emotional experience in the season 5 *Buffy* episode "The Body." This episode, oriented around Joyce's death, challenges the audience to sense into the characters' bodies on the screen, subsequently experiencing Buffy's world through our (the audience's) bodies by the heightened awareness of sound, color, and movement throughout the episode. When joined together, the three presentations presented a compelling mind/body/soul analysis of suffering, its role, its purpose, and its experiences.

#### SESSION 4: "Other schools of thought"<sup>4</sup>: Race, Diversity, and Drawing Inferences

In "South of the Border: *Firefly*'s Crypto-Mexicans and the Function of Genre," Agnes Curry and Joe Velazquez argued that in its genre mashup, *Firefly* surreptitiously imports from the Western genre two stereotypical depictions of Mexicans and loads them into the characters of Jayne and Inara. These stock types are freighted with symbolic weight, signifying ideas about the "state of nature" and "grace" respectively. Thus the changes in relationship that Jayne and Inara bear to Mal and the rest of the crew in the story highlight how *Firefly/Serenity* is not so much a Western as an anti-Western a desperately utopian gesture whose narrative and conceptual satisfactions are borrowed, again surreptitiously, from the worldview of the earlier Western genre.

In "The Slaying Double Standard: The Prevalence of Structural Monster Bigotry," James Rocha and Mona Rocha critiqued two reductionist tendencies in philosophical accounts of bigotry. An individualistic approach argues that institutional, structural, and systemic bigotries are ultimately unreal while a structuralist/institutionalist approach absolves individuals of responsibility for their bigoted actions. These problems lead to a need for better concepts and literary depictions that illustrate transitions between individual and social blame. The Rochas argued that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* supplies a helpful illustration in Buffy's unquestioning systemic bigotry in favor of humans and against monsters including those, like Clem, who are harmless. Some moments in Buffy's narrative show how it is often wrong to blame a person for absorbing their society's biases. But other moments show how Buffy holds to her bigotry after experiences that should complicate her worldview and thus illustrate how people move from blamelessness into personal culpability.

In "Buffy Goes BOOM!: Everything We Ever Wanted?" Elizabeth Rambo examined the BOOM! Studios comic reboot of the Buffyverse. Using cover art and panels, Rambo described how Boom! creators worked hard to establish their credibility as fans and make homage to the *original Buffy* television series. At the same time, they responded

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<sup>4</sup> "The Message," *Firefly* (1.12)

to concerns raised since the initial series' run by rewriting key aspects of the Scooby gang and their high school milieu. Willow, for example, is self-confident and openly gay. Angel is not a love interest. Instead, Buffy, whose preferred pronoun is now 'they,' is dating a resituated and age-appropriate Robin Wood. Do these and other changes work? Rambo argued that overall, they do, and that Boom! Studios has offered a well-done addition to the Buffy-Multi-Verse.

### SESSION 5: "You find someone to carry you"<sup>5</sup>: Carrying Us a Little Further through Comparative Analysis

Session five featured K. Brenna Wardell, Cynthia Masson, and Michael Torregrossa. In "Working on My (Evil) Laugh: The Theatricality of Wickedness in *Buffy+*," Brenna Wardell posits that Dr. Horrible, from *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, is a representation of the complexity that often accompanies villains within *Buffy+* texts. More specifically, she looked at the theatricality of villainy in *Buffy+*. She argued that the "excessive nature" of these villains' performances of evil both enhances and destabilizes this sense of villainy. Ultimately, this complicates viewer readings. She pushed this further by suggesting that seemingly "ordinary" villains in *Buffy+* use their outwardly innocuous nature as a part of their character's performance, such as Mayor Wilkins from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. She stated, "In representing these transgressive characters, their creators often begin by acknowledging their charismatic nefarious natures and resulting appeal to viewers thus granting them a certain power. At the same time, in foregrounding their narcissism and over-the-top performances of wickedness, these creators simultaneously undermine these characters' powers while interrogating viewers for our fascination with them."

This year's winner of the Mr. Pointy award, titled "Unboxing the Reliquary: 'The Message' of *Firefly*", saw Cynthia Masson using her background in medievalism to define Mal and Zoe's old army buddy, Tracy Smith, as a kind of reliquary. Masson then discussed the implications this has on the concept of faith in *Firefly*. She stated, "What then is Tracy's power as both relic and reliquary? I posit that he represents a faith-adjacent point of convergence, or conversion, for Mal and, to a lesser extent, Zoe." She further argued that the act of killing Tracy, a fellow Browncoat, results in a symbolic transition, one that results in Mal's letting go of his former religious beliefs in favor of a new kind of faith in his chosen family. Amid the soaring strings of Greg Edmonson's "The Funeral," Masson closed her piece by saying, "When the relic is unboxed, exposed, you must make your choice. If you can't run, you crawl, "The Message" repeatedly tells us. But *Serenity* teaches us that if you have the strength, you walk forward even if the path poses a challenge. You respect your chosen family and acknowledge the traumas."

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<sup>5</sup> "The Message," *Firefly* (1.12)

Lastly, this panel closed with Michael A. Torregrossa's piece, "A Sunnydale Slayer in King Arthur's Court?": Buffy and Her Influence on Arthurian Fiction." He argued that there is a known influence of both the Arthurian and Camelot legends on the Buffyverse. He moved past the immediate connections, referencing the way Buffy acquired the mythical scythe, relating the character Whistler, a half-demon, to that of Merlin. He noted, "Now knowing that Arthur's sword is linked to the scythe as well suggests that Whistler and Arthur had much to do in the service of the balance of the forces." He then went on to look at *Knights of the Living Dead*, a comic written by Ron Wolfe and illustrated by Dustin Higgins. He argued that the character of Queen Guinevere is similar to Buffy, as she is the only one that takes action when Lancelot shows up to her execution having already been turned into a zombie.

### **SESSION 6: ROUNDTABLE: Aesthetic Strategies in Representing Trauma**

While some theorists consign trauma to the void of the undepictable, televisual artists employ a range of recognizable strategies for attempting to convey characters' experiences of trauma and its aftereffects. In this roundtable, Alyson R. Buckman, Catherine Pugh, and Renee St. Louis provided dozens of examples as used in such works as Jordan Peeles' *Get Out* (2017) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s "The Body" (5.16). They drew session attendees' attention to specific shot sequences commonly used to represent trauma, such as sequences that cut between distanced or blurry shots alternating with extreme or intrusive close-ups, or that employ off-kilter framing or lighting. They noted how spatial positioning of people and objects can convey characters' experience. Likewise, music, ambient sound, sound bridges, and silences pay roles. Buckman, Pugh, and St. Louis noted the importance of actors' decisions about facial expressions or bodily positioning. The discussion ranged further into some of the pitfalls in using trauma in character development for example, how a trauma-filled narrative can be lazy, uncritically gendered, or reductive. Most importantly, when representational strategies become rigidly codified, this can do more harm than good.

### **SESSION 7: "The dark does have its bright side"<sup>6</sup>: Moving Past Boundaries with Buffy+**

In her work on Marti Noxon's feminism, Tamy Burnett delved into Marti Noxon's work depicting the subtleties of human emotion and viewers' desires by focusing on key "break-up" episodes written by Noxon for *BtVS* and *Girlfriends' Guide to Divorce*. Noting that Noxon wrote about 15% of the *BtVS* episodes but that this percentage comprised some of the most painful moments of the series, Burnett demonstrated how one of Noxon's resolutely feminist moves is to portray women's full complexity, including their capacity to make bad decisions.

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<sup>6</sup> "Season of the Hexenbiest," *Grimm* (2.12)

In “Gazing into the Abyss: Heroes and Monsters in *Grimm*,” Angela Tenga used Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s seven theses about monsters to show how, in its positioning of the story’s hero, the NBC series *Grimm* (2011-2017) complicates ideas about the relationship between humanity and monstrosity. Tenga showed how *Grimm*’s narrative arc offers lessons for acceptance of otherness and liminality. Noting further that *Grimm* (co-created by David Greenwalt and Jim Kouf) is not an exception in making these important narrative moves, Tenga invited her listeners to consider the implications of the crossover between monster and hero for our own scholarly discourses.

In “‘We’ll say hello again’: *WandaVision* and the Art of Resurrection,” Lisa K. Perdigao discussed *WandaVision* (2021) in light of Freud’s work on mourning and melancholia. In so doing, she articulated how *WandaVision*’s multi-layered references to televisual history build on but subvert its source texts in comics, where death then resurrection is an expected trope. As *WandaVision* constructs a complex web of love and loss—one which warrants further critical interrogation for its reiteration of tropes about women’s grief—viewers are likewise connected by love and loss in ways warranting interrogation as well.

## Day 2

### **Keynote Speaker Rebecca Janicker: “Waiting for the Old Ones to Return”<sup>7</sup>: Genre Conventions and the Rise of TV Horror**

Keynote speaker Dr. Rebecca Janicker presented a wonderful and compelling paper challenging the expectations of genre and its approach to the supernatural by focusing on weird fiction and the consequences of its world view. Beginning with the progenitor of weird fiction, H.P. Lovecraft, Janicker introduced the genre’s “certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces,” a dread that permeates the quotidian of ordinary human life. The weird lends itself to the tantalizing and to ambiguity, with the unknown demanding to be indescribable and incomprehensible, as depicted in the remediation of the literary genre to the screen in series such as *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991; 2017) and *The X-Files* (1993-2002; 2016-2018). The seriality of television allows for a measured pace of the strange episodic experience as well as the creeping tension of an unsettling cosmic dread that permeates beyond the television screen and into the domestic space of the home. Janicker presented how this sense of otherworldly dread exists throughout the entire run of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, with a specific example being the Hellmouth Creature that emerges during the climax of “Prophecy Girl” (1.12). This tendrilled and tentacled creature echoes the monster of Lovecraft’s 1929 novella “The Dunwich Horror” because, like the Dunwich Horror, the Hellmouth Creature is a “quiescent threat, nearer to the ordinary world than assumed.” Thus,

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<sup>7</sup> “The Harvest,” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1.2)

Janicker concluded that the ever-present yet simultaneously dormant threat of the Hellmouth allows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to be read not only as a fantastic text, but also as a weird text, as a tale of the (extra)ordinary and (in)comprehensible.

### **SESSION 8: ROUNDTABLE: Can Buffy Save Disconnected Students? Re-engaging with *Buffy*<sup>+</sup>**

Lynne Edwards began this very interesting conversation by making a connection between the way many of us have used *Buffy* specifically and, to use Janet Brennan Croft's phrase, "high-stakes popular culture" in general, to remedy our own sense of disconnection as scholars and professionals to also understand the needs of disconnected students. She offered her experience using *Buffy* to engage students in a crossover theater and production course and offered some of the work and video these students produced as examples of their productivity and creativity, reimagining a key scene from "Earshot."

Cynthia Burkhead followed with a recounting of using *Buffy* in a composition course and, especially, with the findings of a survey of students' experience of watching and using the show in this way. She found, overall, that they were surprised at the inclusion of *Buffy* in the curriculum and, at least one student argued that all assigned classroom material is a hard sell (he'd rather be watching ESPN, he said). However, they saw the value both in the show as a text and in its pedagogical use in this course. They also found it compared favorably against the use of, say, environmental literature and other popular culture texts, all of which Burkhead has also used in composition courses.

The concluding discussion offered a highly practical, workshop-type conversation about teaching methods and, for example, the use of pedagogical software like Hypothesis and Perusall and about encouraging undergraduate students to submit to the journal *Watcher Junior*. There were also some rich conversation about the role and task of the teacher working to make their own pedagogy more connected and meaningful even as they strive to engage disconnected students, often using popular culture towards that end.

### **SESSION 9: "If the apocalypse comes ..."<sup>8</sup>: Liminality, Death, Spectacle**

Amanda Baker opened Session 9 with her paper "‘Religion Freaky’: Use of Secular Spirituality in Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." Focusing on the secular theatrical elements within *Buffy*, Baker read the series alongside Polish artist Tadeusz Kantor's "Theatre of Death," arguing that both contemplate what it means to be human and the quest for meaning via religious symbolism and tropes. Ultimately, Baker suggested, both *Buffy* and Kantor imply that the only finite answer to humanity is

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<sup>8</sup> "Never Kill a Boy on the First Date," *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1.5)



nothingness of being perpetually situated within the painfully liminal. Baker's emphasis of the liminal beautifully led into the session's second presentation, Catherine Pugh's "The Good Fight: The Importance of Being Doyle," wherein Pugh argued that Doyle is liminal because he fulfills the role of several archetypes in his limited time on the series *Angel* (1999-2004). Despite being part human, part demon, Doyle is arguably the "most human" of the original three members of Angel Investigations (Angel, Doyle, Cordelia) as displayed by his final and lasting gift of empathy. The theme of empathy was the underlying thread of Vitor Henrique de Souza's paper "'I May be Dead, But I'm Still Pretty': Female Death as Spectacle in Contemporary TV Shows." De Souza's paper explored the pattern (and often indifferent tone) of female death in television, from anonymous female deaths in police procedurals to strong female protagonists' deaths like those of Daenerys Targaryen in *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), Sabrina Spellman in *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020), and Buffy Summers in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Although nearly all the female deaths contribute to another character or characters' narrative, de Souza contended that *Buffy* subverts the female corpse trope because her multiple deaths contribute to her narrative, ultimately allowing her to reacquire her agency at the end of "Chosen" (7.22). At its conclusion, the ninth session was connected not only through questions of the liminal, but also the existential quandary of what it means to "be human" and the significance of empathy.

### SESSION 10: "Did I fall asleep?"<sup>10</sup>: Critiquing Racialized Depictions

In "'Just 'cause I know some car thieves, don't mean I am one': *Angel*'s Charles Gunn as Thug Archetype," Uzoamaka Anyiwo considered the many problems with depictions of Black masculinity on television and the relationship between vampirism as a metaphor for race and depictions of vampires as permanent Others. Then, in a layered analysis of Gunn's character and role in *Angel*, she explained how the series utilizes the common, problematic strategies for depicting Black masculinity but then highlights their problematic nature for viewers' consideration. Thus, in Anyiwo's estimation, *Angel* does much better by Gunn than we might initially assume.

Katia McClain explained in detail how problematic the depiction of the Chumash people is in the infamous "Pangs" episode of *BtVS* (4.8). After noting the extant scholarship on "Pangs," McClain considered how production pressures, including hasty research and inattentive revision, combined to systematically misrepresent the Chumash language, modes of dress, spiritual traditions and worldview. This is tragic given that resources vetted by the Chumash people are available. Using these sources, including her conversations with Maria Lopez, Deborah Sanchez, and Johnny Moreno of the Chumash tribe, McClain then noted specific misrepresentations in "Pangs" and provided correct information.

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<sup>9</sup> "Prophecy Girl", *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1.12)

<sup>10</sup> "Ghost," *Dollhouse* (1.1)

In his look at Season 7 of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, Lewis Call explained how key creative decisions by the series showrunners coalesced into nuanced depictions of character development and the series' diverse chosen family in "Alien Commies from the Future': Visualizing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Season Seven of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*" Call noted how showrunners Maurissa Tancharoen and Jed Whedon utilized time travel narrative to provide some pointed depictions of racist and sexist assumptions operative throughout the 20th century, while employing the character of Deke Shaw, a man from the future, to critique assumptions still operative today.

### **SESSION 11: Becoming Accustomed to the Impossible: Feminist Critiques**

Session 11 featured scholars Alex Ketchum and Valerie Estelle Frankel. Ketchum's research, titled "Pointed Podcast Families Raising the Stakes: *Buffering the Vampire Slayer, Angel on Top, Slayerfest 98*, and a Queer Feminist Perspective," was primarily geared at the assortment of *Buffy* podcasts available to listeners—specifically, those listed in her title. She states, "these podcasts are more than just representations of fandoms of *Buffy* and *Angel*. While they are that, they are also their own cultural product with their own set of fandoms." Furthermore, she argued that these podcasts are strengthened by relying on Queer and lesbian networks. They put Queerness at the forefront of their product in their discussions, the identities of guests and cohosts, their marketing efforts, and the design of their episodes. In her conclusion, she underscored the independent fandom generated by these podcasts and highlighted the fact that they allow *Buffy* and *Angel* fans to revisit these shows through a Queer/feminist lens.

Valerie Estelle Frankel's work, "From Proto-Steam-punk to Steam-punk Proper: *Firefly* and *The Nevers*," started by defining steampunk as both a genre and an aesthetic. Generally, they are defined by a fusion of historical elements and retro-futuristic technology that is powered by steam. Importantly, Steampunk is heavily associated with science fiction. Given the fusion of seemingly disparate elements, Frankel posited that steampunk is a "genre of possibility and optimism to the point of recasting history." Accordingly, *Firefly* is often considered a steampunk-adjacent member of the movement given its fusion of science fiction and the western. However, HBO Max's *The Nevers* (2021) falls more in line with what is generally signified by this genre. Frankel stated, "Steampunk is particularly known for revisionist history that is more feminist and minority inclusive. As such, the show primes viewers to accept modern egalitarian qualities within *The Nevers* hidden world." She positioned the steampunk themes in this show as intersectional, global, and non-exploitative.

### **Featured Speaker Jolene Richardson: "Pleather Pants and Slaying Vamps: The Art of Costume Design While Fighting the Big Bad"**

For Featured Speaker Jolene Richardson's presentation, rather than a central argument, Richardson took her audience on a journey through fashion in the early 90s

and 2000s and explained how costume designers use clothing to both build character personality and aid in the telling of their stories. Specifically, Richardson took attendees through Buffy's fashion journey, starting with the infantilized image of women in the late 90s. While in high school, Buffy's costumes are generally brightly colored, and she is often seen with candy as a prop. Later, as Buffy matures and grows, her short skirt and boot combination is replaced with trousers, and she is seen in a lot more lapels. Along the way, Richardson pointed out how Buffy's softer clothing choices and Faith's edgier looks correlate with their personalities, and she highlighted how Buffy is often styled in turtlenecks after particularly traumatic moments. Ultimately, Buffy's costuming does reflect her emotional journey, but it is also consistently invested in subverting the fate of the dumb blonde character in horror films that always seems to die first. More of Richardson's work on costuming, particularly costuming for horror, can be found on her blog and by listening to her podcast, both titled *Hanging by a Thread*.

### Day 3

#### **SESSION 12: "Not Finished Becoming"<sup>11</sup>: Seeking the Comparative**

Session 12 featured presentations from Elena Campobassi, Steve Halfyard, and Linda Jencson. Campobassi's paper was titled "Did we not put the 'grr' in 'girl?': Feminist Ethics, Gender Boundaries, and the Relationship Between Women and Nature in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." While there are plenty of studies and references to Shakespeare in *Buffy*, Campobassi argues that the character of Buffy Summers has a lot in common with some of Shakespeare's women—namely, the "personal skills, like assertiveness, drive, and the ability to stand up for themselves personally, individually, but also as part of a community." Furthermore, she argues that nature is represented as a woman in the Buffyverse. In seeing nature as both benevolent, violent, and distinctly female, the texts of the Buffyverse are trying to move us, as audience, in a better direction as opposed to one where humanity continues to dominate women/the environment.

From the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Steve (Janet K) Halfyard presented their research "Rehearing Buffy: Wailing Women, Mean Girls, and the Problem of the Female-Heroic Trope in Music." This presentation was inspired by the unexpected scoring of Diana's heroic theme in *Wonder Woman* (2017). Halfyard started by explaining how themes in music often result in subconscious coding. In *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), Diana's theme is marked by a banshee wail that seems reminiscent of both *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s highly aggressive, or masculine, themes. Halfyard then repositioned the "heroic topic" of these three women as a "danger topic." They stated, "In representing strong, powerful, superheroic women

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<sup>11</sup> "Chosen," *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (7.22)

to be, in all cases, male, composers and directors writing and choosing this music have constructed the idea of a powerful woman as a dangerous woman in a way that their heroic male counterparts are not constructed.” Ultimately, *Buffy*’s theme played a major role in the evolution of representing women as strong, heroic figures. But there is a reason that it seems dated. If it were to be filmed today, Halfyard argued, it would likely not have a similar opening theme.

Lastly, Linda Jencson presented a piece called “Can’t a Feminist Heroine be Happy: *BtVS* vs. *Dr. Quinn*”. In it, she argued that Dr. Quinn, from *Dr. Quinn: Medicine Woman* (1993-1998), is a better example of feminism than the character of Buffy Summers. She stated, “Dr. Quinn’s feminism is more mature than Buffy’s. Her voice is clearer and more direct.” She made the case that Buffy’s unique lingo is actually more representative of a teenager with little to no power—specifically, a teenager that never expects those in positions of authority to ever hear her out. The humor that typifies “Buffyspeak” is positioned as submissive rather than a form of power or protection. Dr. Quinn, on the other hand, wields her voice even though the cultural expectations of society at that time do not allow it. Additionally, Jencson pointed out that Buffy is always on the edge of society. To be friends with Buffy Summers means accepting the role of an “outcast.” Contrastingly, though Dr. Quinn faces many challenges, she is happily married and actively participates in her community. She typifies the idea that a strong feminist does not need to be a “pariah.”

**SESSION 13: ROUNDTABLE: Does “the getting of knowledge” have to be “smelly?”<sup>12</sup> Publishing in *Slayage* and *Watcher Junior*: A Roundtable to Discuss Process and Encourage Participation**

Chair Rhonda V. Wilcox, Ananya Mukherjea, Janet Brennan Croft, Deborah Overstreet, and Brenna K. Wardell the editorial staff, excluding editorial board members, of *Slayage* and *Watcher Junior* led an informative discussion and Q&A about these two scholarly journals associated with the *Slayage* Conference and the Association for the Study of *Buffy*<sup>+</sup>. This was a wide-ranging conversation about the histories each of these editors has with the journal on which she works and of the relationship and interplay, historically, among the journal, the conference, and the scholarly association.

Panelists spoke a bit about the shift in orientation and the redoubling of the mission of inclusivity and diverse representation and considerations of power differentials as the journals, along with the conference and association, shifted from focusing on so-called “Whedon Studies” to the more expansive and accurate study of *Buffy*<sup>+</sup> texts in recent years, the close consideration of what Janet Croft has described as “high-stakes popular culture.” While the journal *Slayage* will not “police” author viewpoints, it employs careful blind peer review and editorial collaboration with prospective authors to ensure that all arguments are carefully stated and thoroughly justified, and that a diversity of

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<sup>12</sup> “I Robot—You Jane,” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1.8)

authors and perspectives are welcomed and represented in its (electronic) “pages.” Indeed, the journal editors strive to be as constructive and collaborative in the editorial and review process as possible, helping prospective authors to develop their own robust voices and arguments.

Participants also spoke about the process of blind peer review, how interested authors can make submissions, and the best ways for college teachers to encourage students doing excellent or original work in their courses to submit their own articles to *Watcher Junior*. Submission information can be found at <https://www.whedonstudies.tv/cfp-and-submission-guidelines.html>.

*Slayage* is indexed with the Modern Language Association (MLA) and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), archived through the University of Northern Alabama, and is multi-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary in its orientation. A statement about its new name and its mission can be found at < <https://www.whedonstudies.tv/slayage-the-international-journal-of-buffy.html>>.

*Slayage* is also emphasizing its identity as an international journal by publishing scholarship in translation in its recent and upcoming issues, and it has been publishing and seeks to continue publishing special topic special issues about once a year, meaning roughly every other issue. Potential special issue guest editors who would like to pitch a topic are welcome to contact the editors of the journal at [slayage.journal@gmail.com](mailto:slayage.journal@gmail.com) to discuss their ideas.

#### SESSION 14: “...to slay the dragon”<sup>13</sup>: Investigating Dark Destinies

Michael Starr presented a piece based on his recent publication *Re-Entering the Dollhouse: Essays on the Joss Whedon Series*, co-edited by Heather Porter. His presentation was titled “How does it feel to end the world?: The Dark Ecology of the *Dollhouse*.” In it, he used philosopher Timothy Morton’s theory of “dark ecology.” This concept puts humanity in an “uncanny position of radical self-knowledge” (Morton). Importantly, this theory is predicated on the realization that we ourselves are the problem. This is compounded by the idea that once humanity realizes they cannot do everything, they do nothing instead. Starr then argued that *Dollhouse* (2009-2010) is subtly critiquing anthropocentrism, which is the idea that humanity is the central, or most important, aspect of the universe. As such, *Dollhouse* audiences become increasingly aware of representations that breach the idealistic categorization of nature as a “transcendent principle.” Though we see it as something separate, the concept of nature is immediate and present. Understanding our place in the biosphere requires a perspective shift. As Starr stated, “*Dollhouse*, instead, can be read as analogous with Morton’s theorizations as to how we have completely redefined ourselves and our understanding”.

Savannah Richardson presented “The Forces of Darkness: Exploring *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Through the Works of Shirley Jackson.” In it, she looked at the crossover

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<sup>13</sup> “Not Fade Away,” *Angel* (5.22)

between Shirley Jackson's 1957 short story "The Missing Girl" and Season one, Episode eleven of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, "Out of Mind, Out of Sight." In "The Missing Girl," a young woman named Martha Alexander disappears from the Phillips Education Camp for Girls Ages Twelve to Sixteen. In "Out of Mind, Out of Sight," Sunnydale High student Marcie Ross is so unpopular she literally turns invisible. After examining the similarities in both culpability and the concept of "invisibility" in the disappearances of Marcie and Martha, Richardson concluded that Jackson's work is ultimately more concerned with the "unending end" of Martha Alexander, or, rather, the real-life disappearance of Paula Weldon in 1946. Contrastingly, in the end, Marcie is not slain but taken by the FBI to be trained with other invisible teens in the art of assassination and infiltration. In this way, "Out of Mind, Out of Sight" deploys the classic *Buffy* move of repositioning a weakness as a strength, thus disrupting the warnmärchen, or "warning tale," about missing women represented by Jackson's story.

In "The Sad Man Pain of Dr. Horrible: A Prescient View of Incel Terrorism," Molly Brayman mapped the language and identity of an involuntary celibate onto the characters in *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* (2008). Interestingly, the Involuntary Celibacy Project and the woman credited with creating this term started this online community as a way to offer support and kindness to what she configures as "late bloomers" (Baker). However, the term has since been taken and repurposed for much more malicious reasons. Brayman then broke down how incel character-mapping emerges in *Dr. Horrible*, including "Chads," which are embodied by Captain Hammer, and "Stacys," represented by Penny. Brayman's presentation concluded by acknowledging the Joss-sized elephant in the room: She pointed toward Whedon's now-infamous interview with *New York Magazine*. Ultimately, she posited that there is some disconcerting overlap between the language and characterization happening in the incel community and the way Whedon sees himself. Within the context of *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, this overlap forces the viewer to rethink Billy's character.

### SESSION 15: Bloody Throats at Midnight Mass: Analyzing Horror

The fifteenth session was opened by Meaghan Allen's presentation "“Until the Blood Stops Flowing”<sup>14</sup>: A Sanguine Reading of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," which investigated the medieval inheritance of *Buffy* through the lens of blood, arguing that the universe of *Buffy* exists because of blood its absence, its presence, its transgression of boundaries, of bodies, and of dimensions. Allen contemplated the series' relationship with and uses of blood in rituals, specifically the ritual between the Master and Luke in "The Harvest," the process of vampiric engendering or 'siring,' and the establishment of blood ties between Buffy and Dawn in Season 5. While blood is multi-faceted and labile in its many uses and abuses in *Buffy*, Elizabeth Rands focused specifically on the grand theme of forgiveness in her paper "“The Hardest Thing in this World is to Live

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<sup>14</sup> "The Gift," *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (5.22)

in It<sup>15</sup>: *Midnight Mass*, *Buffy*, and the Mercy of Forgiveness.” Rands’s paper investigated the numerous homages to *Buffy* within the work of horror director and writer Mark Flanagan, especially in his 2021 series *Midnight Mass*. Both *Buffy* and *Midnight Mass* utilize vampires and religious iconography to tell stories of forgiveness, redemption, and ultimately, love, but *Midnight Mass* expands beyond typical Christian morality and symbolism, deploying a multi-theological approach with a broader philosophy on the concept of forgiveness, as witnessed in the final scenes of the show. Such homage and perpetuation of theme was at the heart of the session’s final paper “Iterations of the Gothic in Marti Noxon’s *Fright Night* and *Sharp Objects*,” by Stephanie Graves. Although deviating from explorations of religious symbolism as seen in the first two presentations, Graves’s paper presented a thoughtful analysis of the themes of forgiveness and transgression in Marti Noxon’s oeuvre. Noxon, a long-time writer for *Buffy* and showrunner for the series’ controversial Season 6, is known for writing memorable moments of emotional honesty filled with humor. This method of paradoxical (im)balance allows the characters’ inner and outer life to continue simultaneously yet separately, with the inner life of Camille Preakness in *Sharp Objects* literally being etched/transcribed into her skin. Noxon’s repeated (but not repetitive) modes of storytelling and her thematic emphasis on transgression, decay, and regrowth, all contribute to compelling narratives of betrayal, forgiveness, and love. Thus, the three papers in the fifteenth session dynamically worked together to analyze various occurrences of transgression and the complicated ties that bind individuals to one another in the horror genre.

### SESSION 16: “Shiny”<sup>16</sup> at the Con: Examining the Extrinsic

Alyson Buckman began the session with a provocative talk about when and where an actor’s appearance in a televisual text is most significant with respect to intertextuality? Referencing a 2015 panel, she spoke of *Con-Man* (2015-2017) as providing fan-service for followers of *Firefly/Serenity*. She mentioned the perception of *Con-Man* as a sort of lightweight stand-in for fans who miss *Firefly* but argued that the former text’s intentional and often tongue-in-cheek use of overlapping actors and characters from the latter contributed to the existing and developing analytical literature on intertextuality and “intra-auteurial,” as Buckman terms it, casting. *Con-Man* could not have existed without using *Firefly/Serenity* and, importantly, the complex experiences of *Firefly* fans as fundamental references. This careful attention to not just the earlier text but also to the investments of its fans meant, for example, that the Jayne-type character on *Con-Man* may have resembled the publicly outspoken personality of portrayer Adam Baldwin more than the actual character of Jayne, thus further complicating the intertextuality and its effects on the fan’s experience of the text.

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<sup>15</sup> “The Gift,” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (5.22)

<sup>16</sup> “Serenity,” *Firefly* (1.1)

Eric Benson then presented a fascinating collaborative project he has been producing with Juan Salamanca, called, “The *Firefly* and *Serenity* Experimental Timeline.” This interactive timeline relies on extensive research into what Benson called “canon texts,” scholarship, and fan writings and produced both a printed map and a dynamic spatial timeline of the *Firefly/Serenity* ’verse and its characters’ goings and doings. The timeline offers a responsive, changing record of where Mal and his crew members went and why and when they went there. Benson explained the final, printed timeline used time as the dataset and space as the visualization of the ’verse, creating a conceptual image of the space of the universe in which the characters travel. The timeline can be viewed at < <http://fireflytimeline.web.illinois.edu/>>.

Tanya Cochran closed this very rich panel on fandom studies with a presentation considering the impact of promotional materials on audience reception. She began with a Dusty Stowe article from ScreenRant that suggested that Fox, familiar with promoting its procedurals and sitcoms, had no idea how to pitch a show as complex and potentially challenging as *Dollhouse*. Cochran offered a consideration of promotional texts as paratexts that comprise a threshold which potential viewers might be enticed to walk through or may retreat from instead. Using a wonderful Q&A style, Cochran showed the audience the US and Australian televised promotional spots for *Dollhouse*’s first season and gauged our responses to the ads, elucidating the tremendous differences between the largely misleading and fairly sexexploitative US ad and the more informative Australian one, which aired some months later. Cochran argued that studying paratexts is key to understanding the psychology of who watches certain texts and why and what they seek in the texts they choose to watch.

### **SESSION 17: “All that Matters”<sup>17</sup>: Libertarianism, Restorative Justice, and Cognitive Dissonance**

In “Libertarianism in Pop Culture: Applying Libertarian Principles to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*’s Season 4,” Marcella Lins investigated whether the show’s depiction of the Sunnydale police force, mayor’s office, and the paramilitary organization The Initiative work together to articulate a coherent position in favor of Libertarian political philosophy. She determined that while the show’s depiction of state institutions as inherently incompetent and corrupt shows some Libertarian leanings, with Riley declaring at one point that he is an Anarchist, there is in fact no consistent political philosophy in Season 4. Deeper analysis shows that none of the characters in Season 4 act out of a consistent political agenda or viewpoint.

In “‘I’m ashamed of how I treated you’: Restorative Justice in Joss Whedon’s *Angel*,” Ami Comeford articulated how *Angel* episode 3.3, “That Old Gang of Mine,” can function as a primer on the Restorative Justice paradigm. Restorative Justice seeks to preserve relationships and support respect and responsibility by emphasizing the work

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<sup>17</sup> “Epiphany,” *Angel* (2.15)



of repair and reintegration of offenders into their community. Episode 3.3's humanization of Merl and other demons, along with its depiction of relational struggles between the members of the Angel team, highlights the harms humans inflict on each other. In so doing, viewers see the limitations of legalistic and retributive models of justice and the need for restorative justice.

### **CLOSING SESSION: *BUFFY*+ BOOKERS**

In this session, conferees who had published books in the subject area since the last conference discussed their experiences, offered advice, and answered questions. Those participating included Tamy Burnett, Lewis Call, Ami Comford, Valerie Estelle Frankel, Sherry Ginn, Heather Porter, Michael Starr, and Rhonda Wilcox.

ASB+ President Stephanie Graves announced that the Mr. Pointy Paper award for best presentation of the conference had been voted to Cynthea Masson for “Unboxing the Reliquary: ‘The Message’ of *Firefly*.” The attending conferees offered emphatic congratulations, and Professor Masson expressed gratitude for both the award and the continuation of the conference. According to established practice, Professor Masson has been invited to be a featured speaker at the next biennial conference. Officers and board members subsequently decided to begin a new practice of announcing the runner-up for the Mr. Pointy Paper award, who will be offered complimentary registration for the next conference. The runner-up position for this conference was voted to Professor Uzoamaka Anyiwo for “‘Just ‘cause I know some car thieves, don’t mean I am one;’ *Angel*’s Charles Gunn as Thug Archetype,” a paper that many conferees had praised.

After the formal end of the conference, conferees remained to discuss their experiences informally with many expressions of anticipation for the twentieth anniversary biennial to be held in 2024. Proposals for and/or inquiries about hosting the next biennial conference were and are invited to be sent to [slayage.conference@gmail.com](mailto:slayage.conference@gmail.com) .

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