

“Why don’t you just go back where you came from?” or “Slight yams”: “Pangs” of Regret and Unresolved Ambivalence in Joss Whedon’s California

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[1] Joss Whedon’s two longest running television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)* (1997-2003) and *Angel* (1999-2004), which together constitute the “Buffyverse,” often focus on questions about the degree to which past actions bear on one’s present moral character. Particularly in the case of reformed demons and vampires, regret for past sins weighs heavily on the present and motivates current benevolent and heroic deeds. For the ensouled vampire Angel most especially, the need to make amends for centuries of sadistic cruelty and bloodshed stamps him with his ever brooding-personality and his nearly ceaseless attempts to balance the scales—while knowing that the scales can never be fully balanced. Whedon frequently reaches centuries back into his vampire characters’ pasts to explore the relationships between their original human traits, the worst degradations of their demonic exploits, and their present strivings for redemption. California, with its own

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layered history of colonization (with all of the bloodshed, land theft, human rights violations, and breeches of tribal sovereignty it entailed, as well as the contemporary socioeconomic power imbalances that derive from this history), therefore functions as a powerful site in which to place these morally flawed and striving characters—characters who never quite escape the weight and influence of their own histories.

[2] Whedon deserves credit for using the vehicle of his enduringly popular television series to expose California's colonial history and raise questions regarding sustained responsibilities to the U.S. colonial past. This article, however, points out the ways in which *BtVS* and *Angel*, especially in the season four crossover episode of *BtVS* entitled "Pangs" (4.8),<sup>1</sup> perpetuate the notion that this history and the indigenous peoples affected by it have vanished. It argues that this erasure of contemporary American Indian peoples leaves reflective and ethically engaged people like Buffy and her Scooby Gang—and, by extension, socially conscientious fans of the show—without resources to be responsive to sustained colonial power structures in the present, and to the living indigenous peoples who continue to both suffer from and resist these structures.

**"Sunnydale: come for the food, stay for the dismemberment."**<sup>2</sup>  
**Representations of California in the Buffyverse**

[3] Whedon exposes both the fictional Sunnydale suburb (modeled on Santa Barbara) of *BtVS* and the Los Angeles setting of *Angel* as shiny facades of wealth that mask underbellies of vice and corruption. Only the demons and those humans and reformed demons who fight them see past this flimsy veneer. For instance, the *Angel* series premiere opens with a voiceover from Angel: "Los Angeles. You see it at night and it shines. Like a beacon. People are drawn to it. People and other things. They come for all sorts of reasons. My reason? No surprise there. It started with a girl" ("City

of. . .” 1.1, 00:00:00-19). Of course, Angel does not go to Los Angeles to pursue love but to flee from it (due to being unable to achieve true happiness without losing his soul in the process). Even on the level of Angel’s individual story arc, L.A. is a place to hide from the life he wants and mire himself in the lonely and dangerous work of fighting violent demons. The voiceover immediately precedes a scene set in a seedy bar where Angel feigns drunkenness in order to ensnare three vampires preparing to prey on two young women. Viewers thereby see quickly that the shiny beacon of Los Angeles draws dangerous “other things” who inhabit the dark corners of the city, where Angel himself spends most of his time “helping the helpless” in an attempt to redeem himself for past transgressions. L.A. is filled with the lost, destitute, and helpless—those who are particularly vulnerable to the demons who prowl the city’s streets at night. Likewise, Buffy comments that what she has found under the surface in Sunnydale is, for the most part, “sewers full of demons” (“Pangs” 4.8, 00:07:32-34).

[4] This representation of California itself can be interpreted as a critique of the ways in which the region has been constructed historically, through tourist propaganda, as well as through literature and film, as a space filled with sun, affluence, and ease—a characterization that relies on the erasure of a layered history of colonial violence and contemporary (racialized) socioeconomic inequality. This history of California has tended both to distort and to glorify the state’s Spanish past while submerging its indigenous roots—in the process, ignoring present-day responsibilities to California Indians (whose loss of land, federal tribal recognition, and attendant socioeconomic status have been exceptional among Native peoples in the contemporary United States<sup>3</sup>).

[5] The rich framing that a California setting might offer for a show concerned with questions of historical atrocities and contemporary efforts to achieve a long-deferred justice goes unutilized, unfortunately, due to the near erasure of indigenous

California and the contemporary concerns of California Indians from the Buffyverse. Ultimately, Whedon's critique of the marketing of California as a site of affluence, well-being, and aesthetic pleasure—a thread that runs throughout the Buffyverse—is undercut by Whedon's perpetuation of the Myth of the Vanishing Indian,<sup>4</sup> his related denial of accountability to the region's first peoples (California Indians), and his distortions of American Indian history. Although other critics have commented on the absence of contemporary American Indians in the one *BtVS* episode that directly addresses the legacies of U.S. colonization, "Pangs," they have not fully detailed the extent to which this omission—more than any other decision pertaining to the writing or direction of the episode—subverts whatever aim Joss Whedon or episode writer Jane Espenson may have had to prompt viewers to think critically about U.S. colonial history and their responsibilities to that history. Moreover, while others have commented on certain historical distortions present in the Buffyverse's representations of American Indians, they have not adequately addressed the implications of such distortions for American Indians today. "Pangs," of all *BtVS* or *Angel* episodes, most directly confronts California's history and what that history means for living people who fight evil and injustice, but because this history is distorted and, in the end, presented as having no present implications beyond uncomfortable pangs of guilt or regret, viewers are likely to do little more than shrug, or even perhaps feel a sense of catharsis for having given forty-four minutes of attention to the brutalities of colonization.<sup>5</sup>

**"His penis got diseases from a Chumash tribe!"<sup>6</sup>  
Cultural Genocide and the Logic of Revenge**

[6] The history of Spanish missionization, and the attendant disease, mortality, and losses of land and sociopolitical power that California Indians experienced, rupture their way into

contemporary Sunnydale when a Chumash warrior named Hus returns to exact revenge on behalf of his people—by inflicting on others the very ills his people suffered.<sup>7</sup> His return is catalyzed by the groundbreaking for a new, expanded, U.C. Sunnydale Cultural Partnership Center. Xander, who had taken a job as a construction worker, begins digging after the ribbon cutting ceremony, and, in the process, inadvertently exposes the ruins of the old Sunnydale Mission, which had been lost in an 1812 earthquake. As Willow later explains, “Everyone assumed the Mission was leveled but instead they just build over it” (“Pangs” 4.8, 00:07:16-20). Xander becomes Hus’s first victim when he contracts smallpox, syphilis, and malaria—diseases that the Chumash had been exposed to by Spanish missionaries.

[7] As its curator, Professor Gerhardt, explains, the Cultural Partnership Center’s intended purpose is to “make our culture stronger” through the “contributions of all cultures” (00:03:52-04:16). In her speech, she also claims that “it’s appropriate that the ground-breaking . . . is taking place so soon before Thanksgiving. Because that’s what the Melting Pot is about.” Hearing this, Willow, who is in the audience with Buffy and Anya, characterizes Professor Gerhardt’s remarks as “a load of horse hooey,” explaining that “Thanksgiving isn’t about blending cultures, it’s about one culture wiping out another.” Indeed, despite its benevolent connotations, the metaphor of a multicultural society as a melting pot itself has been justly criticized because it implies that differences between cultural groups should be blurred or erased in order to promote a common national identity. In actual practice, this has meant that other cultural groups are expected to give up their own identities in order to conform to the norms of Anglo-American identity.<sup>8</sup>

[8] It becomes clear that American Indians will not figure into the partnership that Professor Gerhardt and her new cultural center promote. Although early Chumash weapons are featured in a display case at the old center, living Chumash are not present to

engage in an active partnership or to offer opportunities to potentially correct the historically exploitative relationship between anthropologists and American Indians. The only named American Indian character in an episode ostensibly dedicated to addressing the wrongs of colonization and of the Thanksgiving holiday cannot be integrated into modern Sunnydale (even though reformed and ancient vampires and demons are) because he, in his own words, is the embodiment of vengeance. “I am vengeance,” he tells Buffy, “I am my people’s cry. They call for Hus [referring to himself], for the avenging spirit, to carve out justice” (00:21:46-22:15). Unlike Anya, a reformed vengeance demon and Xander’s girlfriend, or even Spike (who, though effectively neutered at the time of this episode, is still evil), there is no place for Hus at the Thanksgiving table at “Fort Giles,” as Willow dubs Giles’s home. Ultimately, the show argues, there is nothing to be done but kill him and, by extension, nothing more to be done in response to the colonial injustices raised in the episode. Although “Pangs” rightly casts suspicion on the ideal of the melting pot, at the same time it trades in another damaging fiction—namely, that Native peoples simply have gone and thus are not contemporary contributors to U.S. culture. Hus only exists as the spirit of an extinct people. “You slaughtered my people,” Hus says before narrowly escaping Buffy, “Now you kill their spirit.”

**“That’s why she doesn’t do Thanksgiving, or Columbus Day.**

**You know, destruction of the indigenous peoples.”<sup>9</sup>**

**Tradition and Moral Reflection**

[9] Notably, before Hus arrives in Sunnydale, “Pangs” already is haunted by U.S. colonial history and questions regarding contemporary citizens’ responsibilities to that history. However, prefacing Hus’s appearance with a conversation between Buffy and Willow about the ethics of celebrating Thanksgiving when it commemorates, in Willow’s words, “the destruction of the

indigenous peoples” (00:04:42-45), signals to viewers that the focus of the episode is not on justice for American Indians. Rather, the focus is on how members of today’s dominant culture can come to terms with their own colonial history. Buffy concedes Willow’s argument but nonetheless presses for the merits of having a nice dinner with loved ones. At this point in the show Buffy has lost Angel, is adjusting to an often lonely and alienating life away at college, and is not able to celebrate Thanksgiving at home with her mom. A Thanksgiving celebration at Giles’s flat, Buffy later decides, is an opportunity to recreate a tradition that made her feel safe and loved. Her ability to continue preparing for the dinner without thinking about the historical event the holiday ostensibly celebrates becomes impossible, however, upon Hus’s arrival.

[10] As Buffy and her friends confront Hus, their conversations about how or if they should fight him are inflected with these larger questions of responsibilities to the nation’s colonial past. Dominic Alessio helpfully suggests a potential connection between Buffy’s desire to recover the security of childhood through this holiday tradition and the questions concerning coloniality that “Pangs” ultimately engages. Referring to Buffy’s comment that the smell of turkey makes her feel like a child again, but that “everything is different now,” and citing A.L. Kirby’s “The Invented Indian and the Euro-American,” Alessio writes: “Although probably referring to the period in her life before she became The Slayer and uncovered a world of vampires, demons, and other monsters, Buffy might also be remarking about ‘the loss of innocence experienced by Euro-American culture as a whole following the reassessment of their role in the colonisation of America’” (736).

[11] Hus’s arrival denies Buffy and Willow an easy resolution to their ambivalence over whether and how to celebrate Thanksgiving—specifically, Willow had agreed to “slight yams,” which would have satisfied Buffy’s need to have something familiar

and comforting to look forward to, even if it is a “sham with yams” (00:08:23-42). Hus also widens the episode’s central dilemma from the ethics of Thanksgiving to the ethics of colonization more generally. While Buffy and her friend Willow lament killing this warrior/demon, due to the suffering the Chumash experienced, other members of Buffy’s crew (namely Giles and Xander) agree with the vampire Spike’s Darwinian view of history.<sup>10</sup> In exasperation after hearing Buffy and Willow’s hand-wringing discussion, Spike declares,

You won! All right? You came in and you killed them and you took their land. That’s what conquering nations do! That’s what Caesar did, he’s not going around saying “I came, I conquered, I felt really bad about it!” The history of the world is not about people making friends. You had better weapons, you massacred them, end of story! (00:33:56-34:15)

On this view the spoils of war rightly go to the victors, and the suffering of the losers is not to be regretted. Ultimately Buffy, and later even Willow, concur that the warrior/demon must be killed, regardless of how well justified his grievances are, because he is exacting his people’s revenge on the “innocent.” Thus, in the Buffyverse, only when it comes to the historical and vestigial traumas of indigenous peoples, would it appear that the past has decidedly passed—that those who live on indigenous lands and benefit from them and their resources are not, and *cannot* be, answerable to history.

**“This isn't a Western, Buffy! We're not at Fort . . . Giles.”<sup>11</sup>**

### **Viewing “Pangs” as a Western: Subverting and Reinforcing American Indian Stereotypes**

[12] Other critics have situated “Pangs” in relation to the Western as a means of evaluating the degree to which it subverts or perpetuates American Indian stereotypes that accompanied the rise



of U.S. cinema. Alessio, for instance, suggests that “Pangs” can be viewed as “an actual homage to the Western genre,” noting that Buffy is wearing a black Stetson hat at the beginning of the episode and comparing the Scooby Gang riding stolen bicycles on their way to help Buffy and Giles fight Hus and his warriors to “the cavalry riding triumphantly and gloriously into the fray” (737). A further convention of the Western that Whedon and Espenson adapt is the offering of Americanizing pedagogical moments—a convention they turn somewhat on its head by offering mini history lessons (voiced by Willow) that challenge dominant U.S. narratives and expose colonial violence. However, the subversive work such moments might achieve, and the accountability they might demand from a mainstream audience, is undermined by the episode’s insistence that there is nothing to be done to correct such historical transgressions.

[13] Significantly, Rhonda Wilcox notes that, in the original draft of the script for “Pangs,” it was Hus who explained what was done to his people in the mission, but Espenson decided to have Willow voice these injustices instead (par. 11-12). This script change further strips Hus of contemporary relevance and, by extension, denies American Indians their right to speak on their own behalf. In the process, the episode misses an opportunity to have Hus articulate a rational justification for his actions and instead leaves the audience to assume he is driven only by a savage lust for vengeance. As Giles says, “Vengeance is never sated, Buffy. Hatred is a cycle. All he will do is kill” (00:29:55-30:00). On this view, the justice the (spirit of the) Chumash people cry for is irrational and unsatisfiable, and thus can only be answered with further violence. The shift from Hus to Willow as teacher further signals that “Pangs” is concerned with how non-Native people come to terms with the United States’ colonial legacy and not with how American Indians themselves experience that legacy and believe it should be redressed (in a non-slaying-inducing way).

[14] Numerous discussions of the Western genre attend to the ways it attempts to alleviate any guilt members of the dominant Euroamerican culture might feel about their appropriation of Native lands and the decimation of Native populations that arose from a combination of colonial warfare and the spread of European diseases to American Indians.<sup>12</sup> The title of the episode, “Pangs,” undoubtedly alludes (as Alessio suggests, 733) to the pangs of guilt Buffy and Willow feel about the fate of the Chumash people. Notably, because the episode refuses to acknowledge the contemporary presence of American Indians, there is no productive outlet for this guilt. For instance, the idea that land could ever be restored to Native peoples becomes a punch line in the episode, when Giles suggests, “Well, let’s give him some land, I’m sure that will clear everything right up” (00:25:36-28:26). First land restitution is presented as a logistical impossibility (when Giles earlier explains that the land “isn’t ours to give”) and then it is presented as a laughably inadequate response to the situation. Finally, Xander reminds his friends of his more pressing syphilis. When Willow reminds Xander that Hus is only doing what was done to him, Xander exclaims, “I didn’t give him syphilis!”

[15] One of the implicit messages of “Pangs” is that members of the dominant culture have no responsibility for the violence of their ancestors (presumably not even when they benefit from that violence). Despite various subversive aspects of the episode, in the last analysis the episode has the same effect as the standard Western. As Ward Churchill argues,

North American indigenous peoples have been reduced in terms of cultural identity within the popular consciousness—through a combination of movie treatments, television programming and distortive literature—to a point where the general public perceives them as extinct for all practical intents and purposes. Given that they no longer exist, that which *was* theirs—whether land and the resources on and

beneath it, or their heritage—can *now* be said, without pangs of guilt, to belong to those who displaced and ultimately supplanted them. (239)

Churchill illuminates the larger implications of media depictions of the Vanishing Indian. At issue is not an isolated entertainment experience but the powerful ways film and television have guided readers to think that American Indians are extinct and thus so are the responsibilities of U.S. citizens to them.<sup>13</sup> However, the restoration of tribal lands and the sovereign right to maintain and utilize those lands as tribes deem fit are among the major legal and political struggles American Indians, including the Chumash, face today. The Santa Ynes Chumash, for instance, have been working for decades to secure representation in various aspects of state governance and have been recognized for multiple successes in environmental sustainability—which is vital to maintaining their traditional relationships with both the land and the ocean.<sup>14</sup> Also, a recent example of their efforts to secure and expand their land base came in 2012, when after twelve years of battling with Santa Barbara County, they were successful in annexing 6.9 acres to their reservation as sovereign tribal land (“County Won’t Fight Chumash Land Annexation”).

[16] To represent land restoration as a punch line is a perpetuation of the colonial violence the episode ostensibly aims to expose and critique. Simple recognition of the continued presence of Native peoples, moreover, is foundational to their ability to assert and continue to fight for their sovereignty. Aside from a brief quip about American Indians owning casinos,<sup>15</sup> in “Pangs” there is no indication that indigenous peoples inhabit contemporary California, and certainly no suggestion that they are involved in ongoing anticolonial struggles. As Sally Emmons-Featherston rightly observes, not only are there other indigenous peoples in California today, but “the Chumash who live on the Santa Ynez Reservation in California possess their own constitution and governmental

system” and their “traditional culture, ceremonies, and language are enjoying a renaissance as younger members of the tribe embrace their ancestry” (63). When the Scoobies research Hus and attempt to understand his actions, however, they fail to consider consulting with Chumash or other tribal elders. Instead, on Angel’s suggestion, they seek out a Latino priest whose family goes back to the mission era. When they find him slain at Hus’s hands, they assume that their path to a living expert has run dry. If Whedon and Espenson had had the Scoobies reach out to living members of the Chumash tribe rather than to a representative of California’s colonial past, the conflict with Hus may have been resolved peacefully, thus offering viewers a productive model of engagement with contemporary indigenous peoples.

[17] Although the authors of this article would not go so far as to describe “Pangs” as an “homage” to the Western genre, as Alessio does, the episode does perpetuate some of the most damaging conventions of the Western. As Joanna Hearne observes, “omission or ‘Indian absence’ is central to the visual organization of the Western” (9). Drawing on the work of Gerald Vizenor, Hearne emphasizes the profound power media erasures and distortions have in shaping the national imaginary and thus the lived experiences of American Indians (9). Notably, however, at the same time that “Pangs” was being scripted, produced, and televised, an explosion of Native cinema was underway. For instance, in 1998, one year before “Pangs” aired, *Smoke Signals* was released (the first film entirely produced and directed by Native people to gain wide distribution). When viewed in this light, “Pangs” runs directly counter to the innovative work Native actors, writers, directors, and producers were engaged in at the time to correct and more accurately represent their experiences—and not just historically but as living members of the contemporary United States.<sup>16</sup>

**“Spike, boy, you never did learn your history.”<sup>17</sup>**

### **The Europeanization of Pre-Colonial California**

[18] Perhaps if damaging and distorted representations of American Indians, along with their conspicuous erasure, were limited to a single episode in *BtVS*, one might claim that it does not warrant such intensive scrutiny and critique. However, not only does the episode “Pangs” erase the existence of present-day Indians, but the mythology of the Buffyverse systematically overwrites the indigenous history of the Americas, thereby erasing Native Indians from the American past as well. As Rhonda Wilcox has noted, the opening scene of “Pangs,” in which Buffy confronts a vampire who, before being staked, asks her, “Why don’t you go back to where you came from?,” implicitly connects Buffy “with the colonizers and the vampire with Native Americans” (par. 6). Arguably, the recurring appearance of a weakened Spike wrapped in a blanket throughout the episode also symbolically connects vampires to American Indians who were given blankets infected with smallpox by the U.S. government. More significant for the series as a whole, though, is the origin story of the first Slayer, as told in a later episode by Dawn reading from an ancient Sumerian text discovered in the duffle bag of former Slayer Nikki Wood: “First, there was the earth . . . Then, there came the demons. After demons, there came men. Men found a girl. And the men took the girl to fight the demon—all demons” (“Get It Done” 7.15, 00:23:59-24:36). Demons, then, are represented as the aboriginal peoples of the earth—and, by extension, of the Americas. Moreover, references to pre-colonial America throughout the *BtVS* series frequently conflate its history and mythology with Europe’s, thus perpetuating the Myth of the Vanishing Indian.

[19] For example, in the Season Two episode “Becoming, Part One” (2.21), a large stone monolith discovered by construction workers just outside of Sunnydale is moved to a local museum. Not

knowing what he has, a museum worker named Doug Perren consults with Giles, who is reputed to be “the best authority on obscure relics” (00:06:30-07:18). Neither man recognizes the writing on the monolith, however, agreeing that it “predates any settlements we’ve read about”—apparently not even considering that the relic may have been American Indian in origin.<sup>18</sup> Later, Drusilla and Angelus steal the monolith and take it to their hideout, which they share with an injured Spike. Angelus then gives Spike a “lesson” about the history of the enclosed relic.

Acatlha, the demon, came forth to swallow the world. It was killed by a virtuous knight who pierced the demon’s heart before it could draw breath to perform the act. Acatlha turned to stone, as demons sometimes do, and was buried where neither man nor demon would be wont to look. Unless of course they’re putting up low rent housing. (00:23:44-24:08)

This story, together with the information Giles provides, seems to place a medieval European<sup>19</sup> knight in California prior to Spanish colonization. *BtVS* thereby marks pre-colonial America as a distinctly European, rather than American Indian, space.

[20] A second striking example of the rewriting of pre-colonial American history comes in the season four episode, “The Harsh Light of Day” (4.3). In this episode, which takes place shortly before the events of “Pangs,” Spike has returned to Sunnydale in a quest for the legendary Gem of Amarra, which is purported to make its wearer invulnerable—if its wearer happens to be vampire. Giles refers to it as “a vampire version of the Holy Grail” and explains that “There was a great deal of vampiric interest in locating the gem during, oh, the 10th century. Questing vampires combed the earth, but no one found it” (00:16:01-26). In researching the gem, Giles finds a text that “refers to the Gem of Amarra residing in ‘the valley of the sun,’” which, as Willow adds, is “Demon fancy-talk for Sunnydale” (00:27:37-42). Eventually, Spike does locate the

gem, in a tomb filled with medieval gold crosses and chalices, jewels, and other treasures. Once again *BtVS* conflates pre-colonial America with European history and mythology.

[21] A final example, though no doubt more could be added, of *BtVS* blurring the distinction between Europe and pre-colonial America is in the series' seventh and final season. In the episode "End of Days" (7.21), Buffy "King Arthur'd" a powerful weapon that had been embedded in a stone located in the basement of a vineyard. Giles and Willow research the weapon—the Scythe, as they call it—and discover that the vineyard had been a monastery, and before that "something older" (00:14:51-17:41). When Giles suggests it might have been Native American, Willow quickly dismisses the notion, saying, "No. I don't know. Maybe we're coming at this the wrong way. Maybe we need to research the weapon itself." Eventually they identify the Scythe as one referred to in their sources by a symbol that "appears in thousands of carvings, in Egypt and throughout the ancient world." Here the term "ancient world" clearly denotes the ancient Western world.

[22] Noting that a scythe is a symbol of death, Giles instructs Willow to find out "where these pagans buried their dead" (00:17:51-55). Later we see Buffy approaching what appears to be an ancient Egyptian tomb—but in a Sunnydale cemetery. Inside she meets a mysterious and ancient Anglo-European woman, a "Guardian" played by Christine Healy, who tells Buffy that she is one of those who, centuries ago, had put the Scythe in the rock from which Buffy pulled it out. She continues,

This [Scythe] was forged, centuries ago, by us. Halfway around the world. Forged there, it was put to use right here. Only once, to kill the last pure demon that walked upon the earth. The rest were already driven under. And then there were men here, and then there were monks,<sup>20</sup> and then there was a town, and now there is you. (00:35:36-55)

Once more *BtVS* conflates Western history and mythology with pre-colonial American history. Further, the Guardian's account of history echoes the one told by Dawn mentioned earlier, and again positions demons as the original inhabitants of America. Given that demons do not have land rights, or even the right to exist, it would seem to follow that prior occupancy is not sufficient to guarantee such rights. The mythology of the Buffyverse therefore undermines a major premise in the argument for restoring rights to American Indians.

**“The bad-guys are easily distinguished by their pointy horns or black hats.”<sup>21</sup>**

### **Complexity and Moral Ambiguity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

[23] Although “Pangs” fits within a larger narrative that not only obscures the existence of present-day American Indians but also Europeanizes the pre-colonial history of the Americas, one reason “Pangs” deserves special attention is because it is a pivotal episode in season four, and in the series as a whole. Prior to “Pangs,” the vast majority of the “Big Bads” Buffy and the Scoobies had faced were clearly evil—soulless vampires and other monsters narrowly focused on harming humans. Because Hus is motivated by legitimate grievances, however, he forces the group to grapple with moral ambiguity in a way that they never fully had before. As Buffy remarks, “The thing is, I like my evil like my men: evil. You know, straight up, black hat, tie-you-to-the-railroad-tracks, soon-my-electro-ray-will-destroy-Metropolis bad. Not all mixed up with guilt and the destruction of an indigenous culture” (00:23:06-22). A major theme that develops in season four is the tension between simple binary conceptions of good and evil and a more nuanced conception that allows for moral ambiguity. The binary view is embodied by The Initiative, a secretive government agency devoted to capturing demons and researching them for military purposes, of which



Buffy's boyfriend, Riley, is a member, and her psychology professor, Maggie Walsh, is its leader. By contrast, the Scooby Gang as a whole, and Buffy in particular, comes to embrace a more fluid and contextual understanding of good and evil.

[24] The tension between The Initiative and the Scooby Gang comes to a head when, later in Season Four, Buffy and Riley meet in a demon bar while separately hunting a creature they both believe to have killed Professor Walsh. Unable to understand why Buffy would relate to demons with anything but violence, Riley says, "You told me you were tracking the Polgara demon. I was going to help you. But now I see you're not hunting demons—you're socializing with them. . . . I thought you were supposed to be killing these guys, not buying them drinks" ("Goodbye Iowa" 4.14, 00:22:18-36). Frustrated with Riley's narrow-minded allegiance to the institutional dogma of The Initiative, Buffy responds, "Smooth, Officer Riley. They teach you those undercover moves in special forces?" Eventually The Initiative is dismantled and Riley, seeing that many of his views had been the product of indoctrination, struggles to regain a sense of self, which locates him within a more morally complex world.

[25] After Season Four, many of the Big Bads Buffy and the Scoobies face are, like Hus, morally ambiguous. Notable examples include Ben, the young medical doctor who shares a body with the brain-sucking goddess Glorificus; The Trio, a group of human nerds set on taking over Sunnydale; Anya, after being left at the altar by Xander and subsequently returning to her former vocation as a vengeance demon; Willow, after absorbing dark magics in order to avenge her girlfriend Tara's death; and, of course, Spike, after he has a chip implanted in his brain rendering him unable to directly harm a human (a fact that becomes known to the Scoobies during the events of "Pangs"), and later after he earns back his soul but also becomes a puppet of the First Evil. As with Hus, the Scooby Gang is initially divided amongst themselves about how to handle each of

these “villains.” However, it is worth noting that, whereas by the end of “Pangs” the Scoobies overcome their differences and agree that Hus must be killed, in no other morally ambiguous case does the Scooby Gang reach such a neat consensus.

[26] *BtVS*’s treatment of moral complexity is significant because, as Richard Green and Wayne Yuen note, “Although the majority of people in the real world (perhaps all) never slay demons and vampires, *BtVS* nevertheless has pedagogical value. Through allegorical depictions of ethical situations, it reflects the complexity of the moral world in which we live” (275). On the one hand, “Pangs” marks a turning point in the series toward greater moral complexity. On the other hand, however, “Pangs” does not fully reflect the moral complexity of the particular issue it takes up—namely, our moral responsibility to American Indians in the light of the abuses they have suffered at the hands of their European colonizers. To that extent “Pangs” threatens to teach us the wrong lessons about our responsibilities to colonized peoples.

[27] Because the Buffyverse locates American Indians in an a-historical past, it fails to account for our duty, as a nation built on genocide and broken treaties, to the descendants of the American Indians who survived. Hence Gregory Stevenson reads the moral lesson of “Pangs” to be that

the way that one makes amends . . . is by not repeating the wrongs of the past. Any society or generation is not responsible for the crimes of its ancestors unless it repeats them. The value of cultural guilt comes from its ability to motivate a society to learn from the sins of its past. According to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the celebration of Thanksgiving should not be a celebration of historical wrongs, but an attempt to rectify them through an emphasis on community and acceptance of those different from us (Spike). (234)

Contemporary Euro-Americans committing themselves to never again massacring tribes says nothing about the present-day duty to

address the continuing effects of past cruelties toward American Indian peoples, including high rates of poverty, alcoholism, and suicide. The majority of the treaties broken with American Indian tribes remain broken, and the fact that most were broken by past generations does not negate present-day moral obligations to respect, insofar as possible, the treaties' original terms. American Indians throughout the United States continue to fight for justice from a United States government that too often fails to respect their treaty rights. In fact, as this article is being written, tribes throughout the Americas have banded together, in what perhaps is the largest American Indian demonstration in history, to protest the construction of an oil pipeline that threatens to destroy important cultural sites and contaminate water supplies of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and surrounding communities. Although it may not be possible to do full justice to American Indians or to return all the land that was illegitimately taken from them, all Americans should deeply regret this situation and recognize a duty to make *some* restitution. To treat past injustices as though they have no present-day effects frustrates any attempt to advocate for justice for the living because it claims that the victims of colonization are all dead and gone.

[28] Stevenson explicitly argues that the moral dilemma of "Pangs" is resolved, not by doing justice to American Indians, but by providing refuge to Spike. "If the problem had been that the early colonials killed and oppressed their perceived 'enemies' (the Chumash)," writes Stevenson, "here the past sin is reversed. Their enemy is not killed, but is made part of the family in a sense. On Thanksgiving Day, Buffy gives Spike a 'home'" (234). As this article has argued, however, such a move could only resolve the issues raised by Hus, if it could at all, by ignoring the existence of present-day American Indians. By transferring our responsibilities to American Indians onto other *others*, like Spike, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* participates in the ongoing colonial project of marginalizing

the voices of indigenous peoples, unjustly treating them as historical curiosities rather than as living members of our larger community.

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## Notes<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In "Pangs," Angel briefly returns to Sunnydale from Los Angeles in order to protect Buffy from an unspecified danger about which he had been forewarned.

<sup>2</sup> Xander, *BtVS* ("Beneath You" 7.2, 00:23:18-22).

<sup>3</sup> Not only were many California Indians subjected to the violence of missionization (and the land seizure, forced labor, disease transmission, corporal punishment, and rape this entailed), but also, upon California's acquisition by the United States, they were stripped of their land and denied any legal standing in the U.S. Unlike tribes elsewhere in the U.S. who, in theory if not in practice, were regarded as having land claims and whose land the government aimed to acquire through treaty session and/or military aggression, California Indians' land claims were considered void upon the state's entry into the nation (see Heizer and Rawls). Further, under the Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. governments the enslavement of California Indians was legal, although it was not called by that name. According to Rawls, "Each government required that Indians stay with their employers unless given a written permit for travel, and each government operated on the underlying premise that Indians were not slaves but would be punished for remaining 'idle'" (85).

<sup>4</sup> The Myth of the Vanishing Indian (which originated with colonization and persists today) posits that contact with allegedly superior Euroamerican cultures has the inevitable consequence of American Indians' disappearance, either through extinction or assimilation.

<sup>5</sup> Kimberly Nance argues that the transformative potential that human rights literature might have for college undergraduates can be undercut by their feeling a sense of closure and catharsis due simply to having completed a book that features acts of violence and suffering (165). A similar argument can be made about television and film that exposes human rights violations.

<sup>6</sup> Anya, *BtVS* ("Once More, with Feeling" 6.7, 00:11:02-06).

<sup>7</sup> See Debrah Miranda for detailed accounts of California Indians' experiences of forced labor, forced conversion, genocide, cultural annihilation, and rape in the missions, along with the intergenerational trauma that has resulted for their descendants to this day. Within just sixty years of missionization, eighty percent of California Indians were dead (17).

<sup>8</sup> See Kallen.

<sup>9</sup> Willow, *BtVS* ("Pangs" 4.8, 00:04:39-45).

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<sup>10</sup> Stevenson argues that the “British characters Giles and Spike represent an imperialistic mindset” whereas Willow “represents an approach that promotes inclusiveness and reparations by using guilt as a club” (230). In the meantime Buffy, he argues, is the one who negotiates a resolution to the conflict between the two irreconcilable views offered by the others (231).

<sup>11</sup> Willow, *BtVS* (“Pangs” 4.8, 00:33:17-21).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Churchill and Kilpatrick.

<sup>13</sup> See Hearne (9).

<sup>14</sup> In 2014, for instance, Roberta Reyes Cordero was given an Indigenous Leadership award for two decades of work on reestablishing links between the Chumash and their “canoeing and seafaring roots, while actively pursuing ways to give tribal people a voice in marine planning in California” (“Roberta Reyes Cordero, Indigenous Leadership Awardee”).

<sup>15</sup> Responding to Hus after he shoots an arrow into a Thanksgiving decoration in Giles’s home, Buffy says, “Listen, maybe I wasn’t clear before about how terrible we all feel. ‘Cause we’re trying to help . . . Uh, you can have casinos now” (“Pangs” 4.8, 00:36:00-03).

<sup>16</sup> Speaking of George Burdeau’s (Blackfeet) 1997 film, *The Backbone of the World: The Blackfeet* and the ways Burdeau speaks back to distorted presentations of the tribes’ history and experiences, Hearne writes: “These reflexive filmmaking strategies register the power of active Native vision at all points across the arc of image production, text, and reception, to assert a Native presence and politics of seeing. Vanishing becomes visibility, absence becomes presence, when an image once symbolic of Indian finality instead elicits tribal recognition and supports discourses of contemporary political sovereignty” (5).

<sup>17</sup> Angel, *BtVS* (“Becoming, Part One” 2.21, 00:23:42-44)

<sup>18</sup> This moment in the episode appears to presuppose that there is no possibility the writing could have a more immediate origin in the Western hemisphere, when in fact indigenous tribes in the Americas (such as the Aztec and Maya) did have writing systems. Although there is a great deal of debate about how to characterize pre-Columbian American systems of visually communicating information, including whether or not to classify the Maya hieroglyphic system or the Aztec and Mixtec pictorial systems as writing (see Boone, for instance), there is enough agreement that these systems constitute a form of visual communication to make it notable that they are not given consideration. Granted, it could be argued that Giles and Doug Perren have adequate expertise to rule out an indigenous American origin for the marks on the monolith, but by not mentioning the possibility of such an origin (even if to dismiss it quickly) the broad assumptions held by most viewers that indigenous Americans had no complex systems of visual communication is left standing.

<sup>19</sup> The knight pierced Acatlha’s heart with a steel sword, so it could not have been an American Indian knight, since American Indians did not have steel weapons prior to European colonization.

<sup>20</sup> In the original script, after “then there were monks” the Guardian says, “and the first men died and were sent away.” If we read “the first men” as the indigenous peoples, this is a perfect expression of the Myth of the Vanishing Indian. Although this line is not included in the filmed episode, the basic sentiment remains.

<sup>21</sup> Giles, *BtVS* (“Lie to Me” 2.7, 00:43:58-44:02).