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“There’s nothing wrong with my body”: Xander as a Study in Defining Capability of the Disabled Body in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

[1] The world of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) is comprised of a diverse host of supernatural characters—vampires, werewolves, demons, ghosts, witches—and many more things that go bump in the night. While these otherworldly creatures seem to inhabit a human world, humans are the minority in the series. Most humans are forgettable victims, classmates, or Sunnydale citizens used to maintain a sense of what the general audience might consider normal human reality. Many of the core characters on the show have human origins, but are characterized as supernatural because, as a handful of critics have noted, their powers are derived from a connection to the supernatural. Human characters prove supernatural through their knowledge and study of the supernatural, their use of supernatural powers, or their supernatural heritage (Camron 2-3). Human characters without any of these connections to supernatural agency are a rarity in the show. Xander Harris stands alone as a purely human main character.



[2] In terms of functionality, one might wonder why an ordinary human maintains a spot in a core cast of characters in a supernatural narrative. Several critics have asserted that Xander’s role as human is to represent us as the audience. For example, J. Michael Richardson and J. Douglas Rabb surmise that “[i]f Xander is Everyman, then we are all quite capable of saving the world as well as ourselves” (89). While Richardson and Rabb reference and celebrate a powerful moment in Xander’s character development, the way the Scoobies treat Xander in the early seasons indicates that his friends were not always as confident in human capability to subdue evil. Over the course of the series, Xander’s position in the show evolves in relation to how the other characters, and Xander himself, understand him as purely human in contrast to the rest of their supernatural selves. Specifically, Xander’s ability to contribute to the group dynamic and prove an effectual force in the fight against evil is continuously called into question because he is *only* human.

[3] This debate over whether or not Xander is capable as a human to fight evil reveals two closely linked binary oppositions manifested in the show: ability/disability and capability/incapability. While Mary Ellen Iatropoulos begins her discussion of Xander as a person with disabilities after his partial blinding in “Dirty Girls” (7.18), I propose that Xander be read as a metaphoric disabled person who, over the course of the entire series, learns to recognize and accept his disabilities and, finally, value his contributions to the group. I will begin by addressing the Scoobies’ baseline treatment of Xander and discuss several instances throughout series in which the other characters commit what can be interpreted as

"handicapism," which Julie Smart, author of *Disability, Society, and the Individual*, defines as "the assumptions and practices that promote the unequal treatment of people because of apparent or assumed physical, mental, or behavioral differences" (144). Episodes such as "The Zeppo" (3.13), "The Yoko Factor" (4.20), and "The Replacement" (5.3) particularly illustrate how the other Scoobies exclude Xander from activities for his own safety and maintain lowered expectations for him in terms of what he can contribute to the group. In later seasons, however, Xander establishes positive methods for dealing with his disabled body and he realizes that his own capabilities, while not supernatural, are just as valuable as his cohorts'. As Xander's journey to cope with his disability progresses, his friends eventually recognize and value his unique contributions as a member of the Scooby Gang. Finally, reading Xander as a disabled body allows us to reflect on the privilege of the able-bodied in this supernatural narrative and recognize that coming to terms with disability, even if the results are positive, is not without its struggles.

[4] The way to understand the metaphor of Xander as one on the marked end of the binary opposition of disability/ability is through N. Kagendo Mutua's discussion of "the human being [as] a text" (106). Mutua asserts "that depending on the cultural context in which the person is placed, they can be ascribed ability or disability. . . . The same body, therefore, placed in a different cultural context could become "enabled" or "dis-abled" based on the social and cultural construction of ability and/or disability within that cultural context" (Mutua 106). Therefore, while Xander meets the socially constructed requirements for an "average," "able-bodied" man outside of the narrative, within the narrative his body and level of capability makes him less than average when compared to the majority of supernatural characters that fight the forces of evil.

[5] In the early seasons, Xander is well aware that his friends quite often deem him unfit to fight supernatural enemies and, therefore, marginalize him because he lacks supernatural abilities. Lorna Jowett succinctly sums up that his "anxieties throughout *Buffy* have concerned his inability to contribute to the group with a special talent [(superpower)]" (12). The starkest example of Xander's marginalization by the other characters in the show occurs in "The Zeppo" (3.13). Jowett also describes Xander as not being "physically up to fighting evil, and though keen, he is most often knocked out or incapacitated" (10). He is true to form in his capacity to get knocked out in the first fight of the episode and emerges from a pile of rubbish off to the side once the fight is over. Even though Xander's entrance into the scene is quite comical, this is also his first appearance of the episode. The audience is not directed towards the anomaly of his absence from the fight until the rest of the gang notices he is gone. Willow asks if he is okay and Xander replies, "Tip top. Really. If anyone sees my spine lying around, just try not to step on it" ("The Zeppo" 3.15). Buffy lovingly chides him for putting himself at risk, saying, "Xander, one of these days you're gonna get yourself hurt," and Faith chimes in with "Or killed" ("The Zeppo" 3.15). Finally, Buffy suggests that, because of "the pain and the death, maybe you shouldn't be leaping into the fray like that.

Maybe you should be fray-adjacent" ("The Zeppo" 3.15). Jowett remarks "[m]uch of Xander's appeal in early seasons was based on the fact that he is very conscious of being 'less than a man'" (10), but the recognition of him being less than a man comes from Faith, not him, in this instance. Xander quickly challenges Buffy's desire to keep him out of "the fray" with an assertion of his usefulness and capabilities: "Excuse me: who, at the crucial moment, distracted the lead demon by allowing her to pummel him about the head?" ("The Zeppo" 3.15). While Xander's act of distraction may not have been offensive or without pain, he sees his role as one who contributes, not one who continually fulfills the role of the danger-prone Daphne in this Scooby Gang.

[6] As a way of disassociating himself from the view that he is unfit to fight in battle, Xander sarcastically compares himself with a comic book sidekick who also struggles to keep his place on the front lines of the hero's adventures. As the group is leaving the caves after their battle, Giles pulls Xander aside and remarks, "Xander, I do think it best if you keep to the rear of the battle in future. For your own sake" ("The Zeppo" 3.15). To which Xander replies, "But gee, Mr. White, if Clark and Lois get all the big stories I'll never be a real reporter" ("The Zeppo" 3.15), thereby aligning himself with Jimmy Olsen, junior reporter and photojournalist of the *Daily Planet* who idolizes Lois and Clark and frequently receives the role of a sidekick to Superman. The fact that Xander recognizes himself as the Jimmy Olsen of the group also means that he is identifying with what David Kociemba calls the extraordinary ordinary archetype. David Kociemba discusses Xander's connection to this archetype in "Why Xander Matters: The Extraordinary Ordinary in *Buffy the Vampire*" and defines the figure as the one who

take[s] care of the superhero's psychological, emotional, and practical needs, with culturally prominent examples being Alfred the Butler, Aunt May, and Mary Jane Watson. This character type can sometimes rise to the level of sidekick, squire or guide, as with Robin the Boy Wonder, Rupert Giles, or Lois Lane, although their limited power often results in their capture by various villains. (81)

However, Kociemba elevates Xander to the role of Emerson's comic hero rather than permanently situating him in the sidekick role. I agree that Xander has heroic moments; however, Buffy maintains the role of and functions as the hero in this fantasy narrative. As the hero, Buffy has the authority to determine who has access to her Slayer adventures. Xander remains a sidekick because he defaults to Buffy's leadership and quite often begrudgingly accepts her decisions to keep him on the sidelines when things get dangerous. It is this stigma of frequent capture and duty of manning the sidelines because they are not fit to fight that allows us to realize a connection between the extraordinary ordinary figures, in this case Xander, to people with disabilities.

[7] If Xander is the sidekick and person with disabilities, then the hero, Buffy, and her supernatural cohorts represent the able-bodied majority who determine normalcy and measure capability of the disabled in

the *Buffyverse*. Smart notes that as the standard of evaluation, “the determination of normalcy . . . depend[s] upon the combination of three elements: (1) the characteristic(s) to be judged, (2) the environment in which the characteristic(s) appear, and (3) the individual(s) who are making the judgment” (Smart 4). She also reminds us that “[d]efining power is the authority to determine who or what is normal” (Smart 4). While we might recognize superhuman abilities as deviant from the norm in our reality or potentially higher ranking on the scale of qualities if they plausibly existed, for the purposes of the *Buffyverse*, however, the “average” human becomes a lesser entity in the realm of the supernatural. Measuring ability on a supernatural scale puts biologically “average” or “normal” humans at a severe disadvantage. Humans, like Xander, are often seen as non-threatening to supernatural evil and frequently marked as more of a hindrance than an aid to the agents of supernatural good in a fight. Because the supernatural people are quite literally the ones with power(s), those without power(s) are marked as more vulnerable and less capable. For this reason, “The Zeppo” is a crucial episode in Xander’s character development because his value as a sidekick is overtly called into question due to his lack of supernatural powers, which forces Xander to confront how disabling his human body is in the Slayer’s supernatural world.

[8] In reality, Xander is a strong and capable man. He is just not superhuman. His friends are imbued with supernatural powers and recognize the fragility of just being a normal human in a supernatural fight. Any questions Xander has about why he is being pushed away from the fight when he “is not lacking in bravery or willingness to place himself in harm’s way” (Camron 4) is quickly squashed by Cordelia’s dose of harsh reality: “It must be really hard when all your friends have, like, superpowers. Slayer, werewolf, witches, vampires – and you’re, like, this little nothing. You must feel like . . . like Jimmy Olsen” (“The Zeppo” 3.15). Although Cordelia’s desire to wound Xander in this moment stems from their recent break up, she is a character that unabashedly speaks the truth when others remain silent and tactful. Xander defensively replies, “I happen to be an integral part of the group and I happen to have a lot to offer” (“The Zeppo” 3.15). Cordelia fires back with another barb: “Integral part of the group. Xander. You’re the useless part of the group. You’re the Zeppo” (“The Zeppo” 3.15). Though this exchange visibly wounds Xander’s pride, Cordelia’s statements become a point of irony within the episode. By the end of the episode, Xander is the most important member of the group because he stops zombies from blowing up the school, which enables the supernatural agents to prevent the impending apocalypse from taking place in the school library.

[9] The way Xander is treated throughout most of this episode directly connects to his friends committing the sin of role entrapment and to how Xander seeks to rebel against that entrapment throughout the episode. Smart defines role entrapment as occurring “when the group in power, in this case PWODs [people without disabilities], defines those roles that minority individuals can and cannot assume” (188). People with disabilities often accept the roles that they are given and the ones who “attempt to assume roles that are not endorsed by the majority” are often met with

negative responses because PWODs “often feel that they have provided many benefits to PWDs (charity, special services, etc.) and consider these attempts to escape role entrapment to be [a] lack of gratitude” (Smart 188). In the eyes of the Scoobies, Xander’s role is to be safe. As long as he stays out of harm’s way, he is allowed to do certain helpful tasks, such as participate in research, drive (2.4, 3.13, 4.18, 4.22, 5.11, 6.3, 7.21), deliver clothes (4.20), food (3.13, 4.5, 4.11, 4.18), and weaponry (2.14 and 3.22). In “The Zeppo,” Xander’s role as gatherer of food is remarked on by other characters, but none so harshly as Cordelia when she sees him buying donuts for the gang: “Ooh, some evil going on? It must be big for them to entrust you with this daredevil mission” (“The Zeppo” 3.18). By interpreting Xander’s buying donuts as a sign that the Scoobies are battling a new evil, Cordelia suggests that this is a familiar role for him. As an audience, we don’t often get to see the Scoobies go through their usual research routine, which is generally understood to take at least several hours, if not days, but is a relatively brief presentation when it comes to screen time. Xander does help with research; however, because the other characters identify his regularly assumed role as gatherer of food, their implicit assessment of Xander marks him as being incapable of making important contributions that allow the Slayer to defeat an enemy. While Xander resents his role as provider of sustenance, his role as caregiver is vitally important to the group in later seasons. It is Xander’s adventure in “The Zeppo” which allows him to recognize that he is capable of tackling obstacles on his own and, more importantly, that he can protect and take care of his friends, even if they think he is capable of little more than providing donuts.

[10] Throughout Season 4, Xander takes on an array of menial jobs such as bartender (“Beer Bad” 4.5), construction worker and former hot dog vendor (“Pangs” 4.8), pizza delivery boy (“Doomed” 4.11), ice cream delivery man (“Where the Wild Things Are” 4.18); and we learn that he was fired from Starbucks and a phone-sex line (“The Yoko Factor” 4.20). Even his high school aptitude test suggests his most likely career would be a prison guard (“What’s My Line?: Part 1” 2.9). While such working class jobs might be seen as “average” in our reality, these occupations are deemed lesser in the superhero world when compared to the Witch, Watcher, or Vampire Slayer. Furthermore, if we view these occupations through the lens of disability studies, we can see Xander’s occupations as another aspect of role entrapment known as occupational role entrapment. Smart notes that “the nickname for role entrapment for PWDs, especially those with mental retardation, is “The Four F’s”” (188). She defines “The Four ‘F’s’ [as] food, filth, flowers, and folding. Food is work in fast food restaurants, filth is janitorial and housekeeping work, flowers refer to yard maintenance and landscaping, and folding refers to work in laundry facilities” (Smart 188). Therefore, Xander’s menial jobs associate him with a stigma that he is not capable of performing tasks that require higher mental faculties. Because of this stigma, the other Scoobies do not look to Xander for wisdom and counsel, which results in the marginalization of his input in the problem-solving process for defeating the monster of the week or the big bad of the

season. It is not until Xander becomes a more stable, confident, empowered figure, in Season 5, that he begins to be treated as the seer that he is.

[11] Because Xander is marked as the less intelligent member of the gang, when he points to the solution for a problem it often gets ignored, by both the gang and the audience. This pattern of behavior is best witnessed in "Earshot" (3.18) when Xander provides the answer that will save the lives of his fellow students. In the episode, Buffy gains an aspect of the demon she killed and is able to hear the thoughts of those around her. Eventually, she hears the thoughts of some menacing voice stating, "This time tomorrow, I'll kill you all!" and, shortly after, Buffy collapses from the overwhelming frenzy of foreign thoughts in her head ("Earshot" 3.18). She wakes up and tells the group what she heard and Xander immediately offers, "See I've been saying for years that lunch lady's gonna do all us in with that Mulligan stew . . . I mean what the hell's a mulligan?" ("Earshot" 3.18). While this is a funny hypothesis, which he is chided for, Xander is right about the source of the threat. In "Understanding the Espensode," David Kociemba states "[t]he fact that it was done as a joke was especially nice since audiences tend to dismiss jokes anyway" (30). While this connection may have been a clever maneuver on the writers' part, this is also a moment in which both the characters and the audiences marginalize Xander because of his associations with humor. At the end of the episode, Xander walks into the kitchen of the cafeteria and finds the lunch lady pouring rat poison in what we can only assume is some type of stew. He rushes out into the cafeteria and knocks over people's trays, yelling "It's rat poison! Rat poison! Step away from the spoons" ("Earshot" 3.18). The lunch lady chases Xander with a meat cleaver; Buffy saves him and subdues the lunch lady. Xander has saved the students and Buffy has saved Xander. In this instance, Xander has the solution to the problem at hand, but gets dismissed because he is not considered the most intellectually astute member of the group. That is what Willow and Giles are for, after all. While Xander's intellect is not supported by a formal, knowledge-based education, his ability to assess situations quickly and offer insightful solutions is indicative of an intellectual affinity for structural and mechanical operations, either in battle situations, carpentry, or arriving at unique solutions to problems. Because of Xander's stigma as one without book smarts, he must struggle a little more than other members of the group to be taken seriously.

[12] This brings us back to our intrepid person with disabilities trying to gain a foothold in the world of the people without disabilities in "The Zeppo" (3.13). Because Buffy and Giles place Xander on the sidelines at the beginning of the episode, we see Xander trying to rejoin what we would usually consider the main plot of the episode, Buffy and her friends fighting evil. He tries to reinsert himself into the apocalyptic plot in four separate interactions. Each time Xander offers his help, it is declined and he is relegated to the sidelines. Angel tells him, "No. It's best you stay out of harm's way" ("The Zeppo" 3.13). Giles distractedly responds while packing his magical items, "Hmm? Oh, no. Thank you. Uh, probably best if you, you stay out of trouble. We may all be called upon to fight when it happens"

("The Zeppo" 3.13). "All" in this case means everyone except Xander. Because Xander has been left out of the loop on the impending apocalypse, he can only reply, "When what happens, exactly?" ("The Zeppo" 3.13). The third time Xander tries to break back into the other plot and figure out what is going on occurs when he sees Willow leaving the Magic Box. Xander gains no information from the encounter and Willow leaves him with a wistful embrace. Though Xander is eager to help his friends, he expresses his frustration with their consistent effort to exclude him: "Y'know, it's not like I haven't helped before. Y'know, I've done some quality violence for those people. Do they even think about that?" ("The Zeppo" 3.13). By pushing him to the sidelines, where they think he will be safe, his friends have inadvertently pushed Xander into the path of danger.

[13] In the latter half of "The Zeppo," Xander gets his chance to prove his worth to the group and demonstrate the value of human capability, even if the gang is unaware of his contribution. Xander's marginalized position then becomes the central plot of the episode and Buffy's story falls into the background ("The Zeppo" 3.13). According to [Marc Camron](#), Xander gains agency in this episode because he manages to reclaim a piece of stereotypical masculinity he was missing by having sex with the wild, would-be rogue Slayer, Faith (6-7). While he does go through a rite of passage in this episode, Xander has also established himself as a willing soldier in prior episodes; he has just never been presented with a scenario in which the Slayer was not there, ready to lead the charge into battle and defeat the bad guys for him. He has become so conditioned to this pattern of relying on the supernatural ability of his friends to combat evil that he seeks out Buffy's help to deal with the problem. He interrupts a dramatic exchange between Buffy and Angel with very comedic timing and [a lot of embarrassment](#): "Hey. I've got this, um . . . There's this, uh . . ." ("The Zeppo" 3.13). A tearful Buffy and pensive Angel stare back at him blankly and Xander comes to the conclusion that "It's probably a bad time" and leaves. However, he quickly comes back, recalling Willow's earlier quick exit and return, to ask "Can I help?" ("The Zeppo" 3.13). They just shake their heads no. This is the last time Xander tries to break into Buffy's plot and is relegated to his own story. Until this episode, in fact, there have been few episodes in which the Slayer has been made powerless and/or wasn't the focus of the plot for the episode.

[14] Because Buffy and the other Scoobies are battling the Sisterhood of Jhe, Xander cannot defer to the Slayer and must dispatch the zombies on his own. The anxiety Xander feels and exhibits when he realizes he is flying solo on this one can be attributed to his conditioning of relying on those with supernatural abilities around him and thinking of himself as incapable of handling these kinds of situations on his own. He manages to incapacitate all of the zombies except for Jack and has a verbal game of chicken to see who has less to lose if the school gets blown up (Camron 7-8). Jack breaks first and disarms the bomb, making Xander the savior of his friends and by extension, the world (see Stevenson 99-103, Wilcox Ch. 8). Clearly, Jack has more to lose if he were to be blown up because he would remain alive/undead, but in tiny pieces. Xander, on the other hand, would

just be dead. However, Xander's ability to stare down a supernatural enemy and make Jack reflect on his own zombie mortality makes Xander the winner of this game of chicken. Not only is Xander physically challenging an enemy with his sight, but also using his insights to peer into Jack's fears. In this scene, Xander comes into his own when he recognizes he is capable of fighting and defeating evil without supernatural abilities. In other words, his human body and mind are quite capable. This a key moment in the series because, for the first time, Xander and the audience realize that he is capable of much greater things than his friends give him credit for. While this event does not solidify Xander's sense of self, it is a step that shapes Xander's ability to see potential in himself and others. For, it is his clear sense of his own capability that empowers Xander in this episode and throughout the series, not a recapturing of traditional masculinity as Camron suggests.

[15] Though the superhumans of *Buffy* seek to marginalize Xander for his own safety, he has a well-documented history of doing his part to help Buffy and even saves the world a few times. Prior to Xander's sideline adventure in "The Zeppo," he helped to save the world in season one by reviving Buffy with CPR, something Angel was not capable of doing despite his physically superior supernatural abilities. By saving Buffy from dying, Xander provided her with the ability to defeat the Master and avert the first apocalypse of the series ("Prophecy Girl" 1.12). Another instance in which Xander's human abilities rise to the challenge when the supernatural agents are incapacitated occurs when Xander is magically transformed into a fully trained soldier (a stereotypical position of human capability and strength), while Buffy becomes ineffectual as the Slayer due to her transformation into a girl from 1775 (a stereotypical damsel in distress) ("Halloween" 2.6). Giles is ultimately the one who saves the day by breaking Ethan Rayne's costume spell; however, Xander is put in one of his most active fighting roles as a soldier. Along with Angel, Xander protects Buffy and Cordelia from harm until Buffy can regain her identity after the spell is broken ("Halloween" 2.6). Jowett overlooks his abilities in this episode when she describes "his high point in fight scenes" as being "the slow-motion slap-fight with Vamp Harmony in "The Initiative"" (10). Even though he is under a spell, he is not transformed into a supernatural creature, unlike Willow, who becomes a ghost. Though gaining the training and knowledge of a soldier enhances his abilities, his contributions remain in the field of human capability. However, his magical transformation into a capable soldier also marks him as a more valuable member of the group when he can recall his training. The two most prominent instances in which Xander's magically gifted soldier knowledge and training prove beneficial for the Slayer are: (1) when he gains access to a rocket launcher so Buffy can slay the Judge ("Innocence" 2.14) and (2) when he gathers military grade weaponry to defeat the Mayor and serves as a commander of the student army during Graduation Day battle ("Graduation Day: Part 2" 3.22). While Xander's military knowledge earns him a pivotal role in the Scooby Gang, when he starts to lose that magically gifted knowledge, he begins to lose his position

as an active contributor to the group, which becomes a source of great anxiety for him in Season 4.

[16] After high school, the members of Scooby Gang grow apart from one another because their lives have all gone in different directions. We see the consequences of the gang's separation in "The Yoko Factor" (4.20) when Spike recognizes how distanced the group has become and uses the circumstances to his advantage. Spike gets his turn with each Scooby member and magnifies each individual's own insecurities within the group in order to turn them against one another in the hopes that the Slayer's friends will abandon her. Spike prods the sensitive spot in Xander's psyche, the one that has always nagged at him. When Xander and Anya deliver clothes to Spike for his, unbeknownst to the Scoobies, fake mission to infiltrate the Initiative, Xander makes it very clear that he does not care about the risk Spike is taking for them, to which Spike replies, "Attitude. See how far that'll take you in boot camp. Say, I hope you get one of those toughs-as-nails drill sergeants who's only hard on the men because he's trying to keep them alive when the bullets start flying. I love that stuff" ("The Yoko Factor" 4.20). Xander, as well as Anya, is shocked at such a notion and defiantly states he has no plans to join the army. Xander asks Spike whom he heard this from and Spike's response sends Xander off on a rant about all he has done for his friends (again):

SPIKE. Oh, your girlie-mates were talking. Something about, uh, being all you can be.

Or all *you* can be. And having a laugh. Figured you were signing up.

XANDER. All I can—Can you believe this!?! Like I'm some sort of useless lunk. It happens I'm good at a lot of things. I help out with all kinds of . . . stuff. I have skills . . . and . . . stratagems. I'm very . . . (*Looks to Anya.*) Help me out.

ANYA. He's a Viking in the sack.

SPIKE. Terrific. (*Indicates the clothes in his hands.*) You didn't have these cleaned after the last time, did you?

XANDER. This is so like them, lately. It's all about them and the college life. Well, you know what college is? It's high school only without the actual going to class. Well . . . high school was kinda like that too. But the point is, I'm out there working hard to make a living. It's nothing but a huge joke to them. Xander got fired from Starbucks. Xander got fired from that phone-sex line.

ANYA. They look down on you. ("The Yoko Factor" 4.20)

Once again, Xander is fulfilling a group-approved role; he is even enacting one of "The Four F's" in his duty to deliver clothing to both Riley and Spike in this episode, which Spike still criticizes, even though Xander adamantly states, "I'm not a clothing delivery service" ("The Yoko Factor" 4.20). Xander views this hearsay as an attempt to put him into a more "useful" role, indicating that his friends do not need him. After all, the army has the stereotypical reputation of being a place that gives purpose to people who

do not have any, turns boys into men, and provides a haven for those who are not all that bright. This scene can also be read as a commentary on how Xander felt more valued by the group when he had fresh soldier knowledge to contribute to their battle plans. If Xander went off to the army and got the training through experience, maybe he would be deemed a more valuable member of the group again. Even though Anya is not very tactful, she, like Spike, often speaks the truth where other group members hold back, and her blunt assertion that they look down on Xander is not challenged by Xander, which serves as an indication that he agrees with her. However, Spike's handiwork culminates in a huge fight between the four core characters and Xander finally calls out his friends for the way they have been treating him all year, a pattern of treatment which has persisted since Season 1.

[17] At the end of the episode, Buffy suggests that she go look for Adam in the caves, and Xander supports her decision but thinks it would be better if all the Scoobies joined in the fight. Buffy shoots Xander down immediately, saying, "You're not going, Xander. Y-you'd get hurt" ("The Yoko Factor" 4.20). Angered by Buffy's benching him once again, Xander confronts the Slayer about how she views him as being incapable because he does not have supernatural powers: "Oh. Okay. You and Willow go do the superpower thing. I'll stay behind and putt around the Batcave with crusty old Alfred here. [*Gestures to Giles*]" ("The Yoko Factor" 4.20). Buffy states she is going alone and Xander sharply retorts, "Right! Maybe we [(Xander and Willow)] can help in other ways? Want some fighting pants, Buff? I can get ya some new fighting pants!" ("The Yoko Factor" 4.20). This is the first time Xander directly vocalizes to his friends his frustration at the way he is treated. This scene can be read as his act of rebellion against the people without disabilities and their attempt to entrap him in these preapproved, safe roles. Because Xander is on such a cathartic roll, he also brings up "the army thing." Xander sees their desire to send him to the army as punishment for his consistent attempts to break out of his prescribed roles and feels his friends see him as more of a nuisance than actual help: "Right. I'm so good at it you might have to ship me off to the Army to get me out of the way! . . . And if I did join the Army, I'd be great! You know why? 'Cause they might give me a job that couldn't be done by any well-trained border collie" ("The Yoko Factor" 4.20). Buffy tries to defuse the onslaught of insults, but Xander feels her statement is another shot at his intelligence: "Stupid? So you finally have the guts to say it to my face?" ("The Yoko Factor" 4.20). Exasperated, Buffy replies, "I didn't say you were stupid! So . . . stop being an idiot and let me fix this!" ("The Yoko Factor" 4.20). Again, humor occurs at the expense of Xander's perceived lack of intelligence. Even when Buffy tells him she is not calling him stupid she still calls him an idiot and, again, she pushes him to the margins so she can fix the situation at hand.

[18] We have essentially seen Xander struggle to keep his position in the group as an active member, but "The Replacement" is the episode that sets Xander on his path to quite literally see his own potential and what he is capable of. This episode plays on the idea of the evil twin that is seeking

to destroy your life, except Xander's twin is actually living his life better than he was. Xander's magically instigated adventure begins when the demon Toth attempts to shoot Buffy with a supernatural weapon that is meant to divide her into two people: human Buffy and Slayer Buffy. Unexpectedly, Xander knocks Buffy out of the way and gets shot by the magical ball of energy, thereby splitting him into two Xanders: "it separated him into his strongest points and his weakest" ("The Replacement" 5.3). The episode is shot mostly from the perspective of the Weaker Xander, who, again on the sidelines, is watching his own life happen before his eyes. The episode begins with regular Xander hosting a kung fu movie night in his parents' basement, which he has yet to move out of. He offers his guests some food that could be warmed on the dryer and the raucous sounds of his parents coming home in a heated fight makes for a very uncomfortable evening. However, this evening spurs Xander to move out of his parents' house and he manages to find a place that Anya loves, but is a little out of his price range because his construction job is about to end. Once Xander is split in two, Stronger Xander gets a promotion to the head of the interior carpenter crew on the construction site, so he gets the new, fancy, above-ground apartment. The attractive apartment manager even flirts with him because he is so suave. Weaker Xander witnesses all of these events with horror and feels this "other" Xander must be using some type of magical manipulation to hypnotize people through a shiny silver coin that he is fiddling with during each positive encounter. After failing to gain Buffy's help because Stronger Xander has beaten him to it, he runs to the person who knows him best, Willow. It is during this scene with Willow that Xander expresses the insecurities that have been plaguing him throughout the show:

XANDER. A demon. A demon has taken my life from me, and he's living it better than I do.

WILLOW. Well, we're working on it. There has to be a way to get to Buffy to . . . unhypnotize her. I'll find a spell to snap her out of it.

XANDER. Right. Whatever.

WILLOW. Xander, you sound a little ... you have to help me figure this out, you know.

XANDER. But I never help. I get in trouble and Buffy saves me.

WILLOW. That's not true! Sometimes we all help save you. And sometimes you're not in trouble.

XANDER. It's just ... another great humiliation. But this time it's even worse. This demon, he's, like, taking my life, and everyone's treating him . . . Everyone's treating him like a grown-up! Will, I'm starting to feel like . . .

WILLOW. Like what?

XANDER. Like he's doing everything better. He's smarter, and . . . I don't know, maybe I should just let him have it. Take my life, please.

WILLOW. Xander, no! You're just tired, and and all soggy. That's why it seems so hard, but you can't let him just take your whole existence.

XANDER: Why not? It's not like I was doing anything so great with it. When I get to the pearly gates I'm sure the guy is not gonna go, "Hey, what a kick-ass comic book collection, come on in!" ("The Replacement" 5.3)

Though Willow tries to comfort Xander in his moment of existential crisis, she does not really negate any of the things he is saying. Willow is just trying to be a good friend and *is* being nice to soften the blow of Xander's current reality. The irony of this scene is that Giles discovers that both Xanders are the real Xander.

[19] Until this information is revealed, the audience may view Stronger Xander as a suspicious, demonic double, the same way Weaker Xander views him. As an audience, we have been treated to moments of Xander's heroism, but more often we are accustomed to his ability to screw up, say silly things, and get knocked around or captured. It is just as hard for the audience to believe it could be Xander as it is for him and his friends. Before they realize Strong Xander is not a demonic imposter, Buffy and the others even comment on the difference in demeanor Strong Xander projects, saying, "[h]e seemed kind of forceful and confident" and Willow assures Buffy "That's not Xander" ("The Replacement" 5.3). The fact that his friends, members of the audience, and even Weaker Xander himself feel he is not capable of getting his life on track, moving out of his parents' basement, or even being forceful and confident stems from "the practice of lowering expectations" for the person with disabilities, which is tied to the concept of role entrapment (Smart 191). Smart states that "[b]ehaviors and attitudes that (1) do not allow the PWD to be an equal partner, (2) communicate the message that he or she is not capable, and (3) reduce the range of opportunities open to the individual are harmful" (191). Even though the lowered expectations may come from a well-intentioned place on the part of the people without disabilities, this treatment does not allow the person with disabilities to "receive helpful and honest feedback. And without honest feedback, an individual is kept in an inferior and dependent position" (191). Willow is not being helpful by trying to sugarcoat the way she and the rest of the group view Xander, despite how much they care for him as a friend. The menial errands they send him on as a way to divert him from the fray have not given Xander the confidence to handle challenges, especially supernatural ones. He is always running off for help. One could argue that Xander is better off reporting the danger to the Slayer because he normally does not stand a chance in a supernatural fight, and I would have to agree with this. However, it is Xander's immediate dependency on Buffy that is more troubling because, as in "The Zeppo," he can manage on his own sometimes (3.13).

[20] Xander's discussion with Willow gets at the real danger of lowering expectations for people with disabilities, for "[t]he individual believes that the disability . . . is the cause of his or her incompetence" (Smart 192). For Xander, being human makes him disabled in the

Buffyverse. More specifically, he works dead end jobs in his public life, is only able to perform menial tasks to help the group, feels he isn't very smart, and is not as physically capable as his super-powered friends in a fight. Xander is so disappointed with his life that he feels it should be forfeit. More times than not, Xander does not believe in himself because his friends do not believe in him. This episode is a significant dose of reality for Xander because he literally gets to meet the man he could be, thereby seeing the potential he has within him and recognizing he has been capable all along. After this episode, Xander becomes one of the most stable characters in the show while his friends start to spiral out of control. Xander arrives at a place where his experiences as a construction worker actually make him more valuable to the group as he repeatedly rebuilds the Summers's house and uses his knowledge of heavy machinery in the fight against evil a time or two.

[21] Even though Xander is able to realize his own potential and value, the gang still has trouble letting leap him into the fray. A good example of Xander's progress in his journey to become a stable, confident, capable self, while his friends still treat him as though he's made of glass, comes when the gang decides to take the fight to Glory in the Season 5 finale. At the Magic Box, the gang starts to gather their arsenal for the impending battle and this exchange takes place between Xander and Spike:

XANDER. I'm looking for something in a broad sword.

SPIKE. Don't be swinging that thing near me. [*Points at Xander.*]

XANDER. Hey! I happen to be . . .

SPIKE. . . . a glorified bricklayer.

XANDER. [*Looks around at his friends with a shocked expression on his face and then focuses back on Spike.*] I'm also a swell bowler.

ANYA. Has his own shoes.

SPIKE. The gods themselves do tremble. ("The Gift" 5.22)

The way Xander is immediately shot down for trying to take an active role in battle indicates how far he has not come in the minds of his friends over the past five years. Yes, Spike is definitely not Xander's friend, but he often tells the harsh truth when the other Scoobies try to soften the blow. As stated above, Xander looks to his friends as his lack of physical prowess in battle is thrown in his face, perhaps for support or acknowledgement that they agree with Spike. Buffy only mildly chides Spike for his inappropriate remark by saying "Shut your mouth Spike" ("The Gift" 5.22). The important thing here is that Buffy only tells Spike to shut up. She does not attempt to negate anything that Spike says, nor do Giles or Anya who are also in the scene. While his friends are silent, perhaps they feel that Xander does not need back up because he can more than adequately trade verbal barbs with Spike. Even if he is a "glorified bricklayer," as Buffy told Quentin Travers, "The boy has clocked more field time than all of you combined. He's part of the unit" ("Checkpoint" 5.12).

[22] At the final battle with Glory and her demon minions, Buffy has just lost her weapon and Glory mocks her for it: "You lost your hammer, sweet cheeks. What are you gonna hit me with now?" ("The Gift" 5.22). Immediately following Glory's dig at Buffy, a wrecking ball crashes through the wall and knocks Glory across the room. The scene cuts to Xander operating the wrecking ball and the camera tightens in on his face as he quips: "The glorified bricklayer picks up a spare" ("The Gift" 5.22). This is a positive moment of the disabled body using a tool to bring his physical capability to the average superhuman level of the *Buffyverse*. Xander's construction knowledge allows him to put Glory down long enough so that Buffy can rally and gather her weapon. Even though this is a moment of successful contribution on Xander's part, it becomes overshadowed by Buffy's ultimate sacrifice to save the world and is quickly forgotten.

[23] While Xander has struggled for his place in the group, it is precisely his place in the margins and his sense of self, gained through this struggle, which gives him the ability of *sight*. From his vantage point, Xander sees the answers to problems when others don't, he sees potential, and he sees the true nature of others when they are in doubt. Xander's change in outlook after his unusual experience in "The Replacement" can be attributed to cognitive restructuring "or how one chooses to view (or think about) the disability. A positive or good cognitive response to disability includes redefining reality rather than ignoring or denying it" (Smart 230). Smart cites Beatrice Wright's theory of cognitive restructuring as a methodology for cognitive responses to dealing with disability, which includes four phases: (1) enlargement of the scope of values, (2) subordination of the physique, (3) containment of disability effects, and (4) transformation from comparative to asset values (231). Xander often engages in the cognitive strategies of the third and fourth phases. In the containment of disability phase, "[r]ather than thinking that his or her life has no value or meaning, the individual finds meaning in other areas" (231). Xander's construction work and his relationship with Anya are ways of finding meaning for his life outside of the world of battling the forces of darkness with the Slayer. The fourth phase is defined thus: "[r]ather than comparing oneself to others who do not have disabilities or thinking only in terms of the limitations and losses of the disabilities, the individual focuses attention on his or her assets" (231). Xander's pseudo-parenting of Dawn and his constant rebuilding of the Summers's home is his way of helping when the supernatural agents cannot. Xander even boasts his carpentry skills as way of subduing Dark Willow. He brags in a joking, loving way: "You're not the only one with powers, you know. You may be a hopped-up über-witch but this carpenter can drywall you into the next century" ("Grave" 6.22). Xander's ability to restructure the way he sees himself and how he contributes to the group then allows him to see his friends as clearly as he sees himself. He maintains his role as seer throughout the show; however, it is not until the later seasons that we really see him come into his own in terms of being able to take care of others and protect his friends the way they have so vigilantly tried to protect him.

[24] The meeting between Xander and Willow on the bluff in "Grave" proves to be the best demonstration of Xander's abilities and human capability in general. Arwen Spicer notes the unique structure of Season Six, maintaining that it is "the only season in which averting the apocalypse is not intended to illustrate Buffy's heroism" (6). Spicer's assertion about the structure of Season Six also draws attention to the precedent being set by the human agent acting as the last hope of the world when all supernatural agents have failed. Buffy, Anya (now a Vengeance Demon again), and Giles try to subdue Dark Willow with force. Buffy tries hand-to-hand combat and Anya suppresses Willow's power by repeating an incantation ("Two to Go" 6.21). Giles uses borrowed magic to fight Willow and eventually binds her body with magic to make her incapable of using her dark power ("Grave" 6.22). Buffy, Anya, and Giles respond as figures of control and attempt to subdue Dark Willow in part because she has exceeded the "average" capability of the supernatural agents around her and is using that power in ways that are not condoned by her friends. Willow's fellow supernatural agents fail to stop her because they focused on suppressing her darkness and treated this darkness as if it were not a part of her. Their method of control assumes at a certain level that Willow is a victim of an outside affliction and is incapable of controlling it.

[25] As a character who has been repeatedly suppressed by his friends for his own good and who is marked by his status as below average, Xander is the only one capable of relating to Willow in this new role in which the Scoobies have placed her. Because Xander has seen Willow evolve from a mousy computer whiz to an über-witch, he has the ability to see Willow for who she is, the good and the bad, and what she is capable of. Xander reminds Willow of their history together and lets her know that he wholly accepts who she is: "First day of kindergarten you cried 'cause you broke the yellow crayon and you were too afraid to tell anyone. You've come pretty far, ending the world, not a terrific notion but the thing is, yeah. I love you. I loved crayon-breaky Willow, and I love scary veiny Willow" ("Grave" 6.22). By attributing "crayon-breaky" and "scary veiny" to Willow, he is reminding her that she is both of these Willows. Dark Willow is a manifestation of her grief, an aspect of Willow's identity that has taken control of the rest of her. Xander's identity as a person with disabilities has given him experience in overcoming aspects of himself that seem to overwhelm his entire self. He knows it is challenging to accept aspects of the self you wish you could change through sheer force of will, but it is necessary to confront these unwanted aspects in order to become a stronger person. By helping her see that she is both of these Willows, Xander creates a space for Willow to reassert control over her identity and regain agency over her actions. By enabling Willow to return her self to a state of equilibrium, Xander is indirectly responsible for saving the world. To put it in athletic terms, he gets the assist. In the reality of the show, the only one powerful enough to stop Willow would have been herself.

[26] While Xander's ability to reach Willow can be largely attributed to his connection with her as an othered figure and reminding Willow of her agency to reassert her sense of self, I would be remiss if I did not recognize

the part of their exchange in which he repeatedly states that he loves her. Gregory Stevenson (101-02) and Richardson and Rabb (86) (among others) contend that the act of love and self-sacrifice in this critical scene allude to a Christ-like figure, representing love as forgiveness for one's transgressions. However, I argue that the type of love Xander offers Willow is one rooted in healing and acceptance of the self. hooks emphasizes the fact that "unnecessary and unchosen suffering wounds us but need not scar us for life. It does mark us. What we allow the mark of our suffering to become is in our own hands" (209). In this way, Willow has allowed her grief the opportunity to scar and consume her. Xander's love and communion with Willow allows her space to regain agency over her self again. hooks states that "[m]ost of us find that space of healing communion with like-minded souls" (215) and, as seen over the course of the entire show, Xander and Willow have a bond that predates the Slayer and their adventures. In short, Xander sees her more clearly than she sees herself, accepts Willow for who she is, and helps her reassert control over her identity by reminding Willow of her agency to do so.

[27] Despite the fact that Xander's contribution to the Scooby Gang is unquestionably solidified after this moment, the real mark of his worth comes when Caleb, an evil priest and chief agent of the First, recognizes him as a threat. In an assault against Caleb, all goes terribly awry as Potentials get killed and Xander's eye is gouged out by Caleb, a wound that makes him a disabled body in our reality and the *Buffyverse*. However, this was no random assault on Xander ("Dirty Girls" 7.18). Before attacking Xander, Caleb says, "You're the one that sees everything, aren't you? Well, let's see what we can do about that" (7.18). Clinton P.E. Atchley notes that this attack was foreshadowed six episodes earlier when "[Xander] has a tender moment with Dawn" (86):

Seven years, Dawn. Working with the Slayer. Seeing my friends get more and more powerful. . . All of them. And I'm the guy who fixes the windows. . . They'll never know how tough it is, Dawnie . . . To live so near to the spotlight and never step in it. But I know. I see more than anybody realizes because nobody's watching me. I saw you last night. I see you working here today. You're not special. You're extraordinary. ("Potential" 7.12)

Xander's moving speech encapsulates the marginalization of the disabled body and, at the same time, shows how invaluable it is, even if it goes unrecognized by the supernatural agents. Dawn jokingly says, "Maybe that's your power. . . Seeing. Knowing." and he replies, "Maybe it is. Maybe I should get a cape" (7.12). This little joke about his ability to see and know being superhuman, and worthy of a cape, is extraordinary in this dynamic group of supernatural agents who are sometimes so far removed from reality that they cannot see it clearly. It is Xander's ability to see himself and others clearly that poses a real threat to Caleb and the First, because it is in the darkest of times that clarity is most needed. Any bright light for the Slayer and her army would only encourage and strengthen their resolve to defeat the First from Caleb's perspective. The loss of Xander's eye does affect his literal and figurative sight, leading him to join the mutiny against

Buffy; however, when she returns to the Summers's home, Xander is his loyal self again, ready to fight at Buffy's side.

[28] Though Xander is visually impaired, he maintains the same determination to overcome his disability and fight the forces of darkness with his friends. On the day before the epic battle against the First and its minions, Buffy pulls Xander aside to ask a favor of him that will send him away from the fight. As demonstrated, this is a common pattern for Buffy and, as usual, Xander challenges her decision to bench him from the action: "If I do this, that's it for me for this fight. I feel like you're putting me out to pasture" ("End of Days" 7.21). Buffy is confused at his analogy and Xander goes on to explain, "Well, you know, it's like, uh... when a cow gets old and loses an eye, or its ability to be milked, the farmer takes it and puts it in a different pasture so it won't have to fight with the priests. Look, I don't need you to protect me" ("End of Days" 7.21). Buffy assures Xander that she is not doing this to protect him, but rather because she needs someone she can count on. Later in the episode, it is revealed that thing she was asking Xander to do was to get Dawn out of Sunnydale so that she and Xander can have a chance to live. By asking Xander to protect Dawn, Buffy is validating his contribution as a pseudo-parent and letting him know this is the most important thing he can do for her. Before parting, Xander beseeches Buffy once more, stating, "I should be at your side. That's all I'm saying" ("End of Days" 7.21). In a simple act filled with friendship, love, and appreciation, Buffy assures him he will be: "You're my strength, Xander. You're the reason I made it this far. I trust you with my life. That's why I need you to do this for me" ("End of Days" 7.21). This moment is especially powerful because Xander, the "average" human, the metaphoric disable-bodied for almost the entire show, and now actually disable-bodied, proved to be the person who got Buffy through seven years of fighting evil. Buffy's admission demonstrates a person without disabilities validating the abilities and contributions of the disabled individual. Furthermore, this moment assures Xander that Buffy depends on him just as much as he has depended on her, and that he is not some burden that always needs protecting. The fact that the strength of the metaphoric disabled-body is what aided the supernatural champion the most speaks to the capability of all humans, "average" and disabled.

[29] As with any good fantasy show, the other worldly is always an allegory for the ordinary. In Xander's case, though he is arguably the most ordinary of all the core characters, his role as the human/metaphorically-disabled body offers a critique of the way disability is commonly treated and viewed in the real world. By taking the constructed version of the "average," capable body and placing it into the world of superhuman strength and supernatural powers, that glorified, average, human capability is marked as incapable, and even undesirable, in a supernatural world. Iatropoulos notes that "portrayals of disability in the Whedonverses are complicated, often contradictory, and very often exhibit ableism. But these depictions also reflect the complicated realities of navigating disability in society, and just as often serve to critique or undermine dominant narratives of disability" (11). Though Xander struggles through the entire

show to keep his position at the front lines when the gang faces off against the monsters, he is always there, ready to fight. Rather than solely measure ability against supernatural power, like the Watcher's Council ("Checkpoint" 5.12), Whedon and company direct audiences to the many ways people are capable through Xander's character. The show's representation of disability does not come with a magical cure, nor is the daily struggle with disability dismissed. Because we witness Xander recognize his otherness as a human/disabled body and learn to cope with his disability in positive ways as the series progresses, the show's stance of disability is one of empowerment. Specifically, it empowers the able-bodied to reconsider how they measure ability and empowers the disabled-bodied to value their own capabilities. It is Xander's struggle for equality in the group and his journey to gain a clear sense of self that affords him the ability to see others with clarity and create spaces of acceptance fueled by love. The fact that Xander ends the series at the heart of the final battle against the First, rather than on margins, demonstrates the growth of both the person with disabilities and those without disabilities ("Chosen" 7.2).

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