In Search of the Slayer:
Audience Negotiation of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Nicole Porter

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Abstract

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In March, 1997, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* premiered on the WB network, introducing television viewers to Buffy Summers, a California cheerleader with a calling to save the world from innumerable demons and otherworldly beasts. Buffy's challenge to gender norms as a female warrior, alongside her penchant for shopping, place her firmly within the Girl Power debate. Scholars and the press alike have weighed in on the meaning of this complex series. The purpose of this study is to incorporate the voices of the audience into this discussion. Using a combination of interviews and questionnaires, I investigate how viewers negotiate the contradictions in the show and the work they do as audience members.

My participants' responses go beyond merely interpreting a television series. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* became a forum for debate and a site of community building. The series was a catalyst for debating Girl Power and feminism: intersecting, reflecting and informing feminist discourses. Furthermore, my participants described a detailed and nuanced depiction of ideal communities in the series, one they identified with and emulated in their own lives. This research indicates how a series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can extend beyond the viewing experience itself.

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Dedication

To my beloved grandmother Sylvia Molson, whose strength, humour and ongoing pursuit of knowledge are an inspiration to me. Thank you for teaching me the importance of making a meaningful contribution through life and work.

To my dearly departed Buffy-dog who provided me with my initial, if flimsy excuse for watching this fabulous series. Together we learned that even someone with a name like Buffy can kick ass.

Table of Contents

Chapter One

Introduction

As I embark on my search for the slayer, I am uneasy with the implication that there is a definitive answer, a singular slayer. If anything, this research is a reaction to all of the varied definitive answers that have been given. It is a response to every person I have spoken to and every article I have read that has attempted to tell me who Buffy Summers is and what the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*[1]) is about. This is a search for more voices. I want to add to the grey area between *BtVS*, the good feminist series and Buffy, the failed feminist and just another object of teen boy fantasy. I will examine how *BtVS* resonates in the lives of its viewers as an ambiguously feminist series, as a show about a community of outsiders and as a cult hit with a small but loyal following. This research is driven by my experience of the show as much more complex than much of the scholarly literature would suggest and, when I started this project, the complete lack of audience research in "*Buffy* Studies".

Powerful female characters dominated the mass media in unprecedented numbers through the mid to late 1990s. The Spice Girls, Xena and Buffy the Vampire Slayer were strong, independent women who took centre stage, bolstering a phenomenon commercially labelled "Girl Power." Academics and the press alike have alternately endorsed these characters as feminist role models (Wilcox, Kingwell) and derided them

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[1] *BtVS* and *Buffy* are both used as contractions for the series' title (cf. http://www.slayage.tv). To avoid confusion between *Buffy*, the television series and Buffy, the character I will primarily use *BtVS* with a few exceptions. Some fans refer to the series as *Buffy* and I have respected this choice when quoting them. I have never come across a fan referring to themselves as a *BtVS* fan, rather, always as a *Buffy* fan. I have maintained this distinction. Futhermore, the growing amount of scholarly literature on this particular television series is commonly called "*Buffy* Studies." The phrase refers to the study of the series in general, not solely the lead character. Similarly, a *Buffy* fan is not necessarily a fan of the lead character.

for their overt sexuality and commodified feminism (Riordan). Work that has acknowledged the ambiguity of *BtVS* frequently concludes that one, the good or the bad, outweighs the other (Fudge). Others state that the definitive meaning of the text remains to be seen, while restricting their analysis to their own interpretations of the series rather than considering a range of audience readings (Levine, Owen). Many of these analyses simplify *BtVS*, and they universally ignore the complexity of audiences' interactions with multi-layered texts. I would like to explore these interactions further as I ask: How do audience members negotiate the complex and conflicting messages within the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?

Audience work stretches beyond mere interpretation. The participants in this study use *BtVS* as a catalyst to discuss feminism, girl power and community. They readily choose themes and plotlines from the series to explain their position on the subject. In fact, the series resonates with them to such a degree that they form communities around it. *BtVS* depicts a variety of communities within the show, the creative team engenders a sense of community between themselves and the fans, and viewers connect with each other over their enjoyment of the series. This audience activity surpasses interpreting the meaning of the text; viewers use the series to explain themselves and create a sense of "we-ness." My findings clarify some ways in which popular culture intersects with politics and personal needs. According to Lewis, audience research is "a way of collecting evidence about common cultural meanings" (47). Through their discussion of *BtVS*, my participants reveal their political views, providing insight into how this particular series intersects with current debate and how the participants themselves define that debate.

As a regular viewer of *BtVS* since it premiered in the spring of 1997, I am familiar with the show as a site for subversive yet contradictory messages. It is, in part, my enjoyment of the series and my struggle with the contradictions within that has drawn me to this project. I believe that my personal interest in the series will enhance my research. A great deal of academic work on audiences has been conducted by researchers inspired by their own viewing interests (Ang 12). Valerie Walkerdine has discussed how a personal investment in research affects and, in some ways, enriches the results (67). As per Walkerdine's recommendation, I tried to be aware of my interest as a fan at all stages of the research. Consideration of my heightened reaction to respondents' views due to my personal investment in the series gave me further insight into the processes other viewers went through as they interpreted the text. Throughout the interviews I tried to be aware whether I was reacting as a fan or a researcher and how that subject position influenced my reaction. When I reacted as a fan, I had a better idea of what was going on with my subjects but a more difficult time maintaining a productive discussion. Where my experience differed from Walkerdine's was that the nature of my interaction with my participants related directly to my identification with them. Walkerdine's working class background informed her study of working class family dynamics, while my fandom came into play in the interaction of the discussion group; talking about the series is a typical fan activity. Rather than merely remain aware of my reactions as a fellow *Buffy* fan, I had to be conscious of when my participation in the discussion shifted from researcher (somewhat removed and observant) to fan (invested and contributing). It was a difficult balance, one that I have attempted to highlight where relevant.

<u>Introducing the Slayer</u>

Into each generation a Slayer is born.
One girl in all the world, a Chosen One.
One born with the strength and skill to fight the vampires,
to stop the spread of their evil and the swell of their numbers.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer premiered on the WB network in March 1997.[2] Buffy

Summers was introduced as a high school sophomore residing in Sunnydale, California.

This picturesque town happened to be situated over the Hell Mouth[3]; the mouth of hell, a

center of mystical convergence that attracted a multitude of otherworldly beasts seeking

to wreak havoc on the local residents and frequently instigate an apocalypse. Through

the series' seven season run, Buffy struggled to keep the hounds of hell at bay, survive

high school and have a normal life. Buffy's Watcher, Rupert Giles trained her and

helped her develop her slayer skills. She also befriended a group of fellow high school

misfits, the self-proclaimed "Scooby Gang" (or "Scoobies") who assisted her with her

slaying duties.

The mythology of the slayer, as stated above, both contextualizes the narrative

and exposes several themes in the series. It documents the contradiction suggested by the

series' title. Buffy is the one *girl* with the responsibility to save the world; she is not

male; she is not even an adult. She is a teenager who happens to be a perky, blond,

Californian cheerleader and is much stronger than she appears. She is the chosen *one*,

and slaying is a responsibility she alone must shoulder. The feeling of isolation Buffy

experiences due to this burden seems to be common among teenagers, and, in this way,

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[2] Unless otherwise noted, my description of *BtVS* is based on my knowledge and understanding of this series as a fan. After viewing every episode, most of them several times, I feel I can speak as an expert on basic plot and character descriptions. For further information about the characters and the background of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* cf. http://www.upn.com/shows/buffy. For a detailed episode guide cf. http://www.buffyworld.com.

[3] Definitions for this and other *BtVS* terminology can be found in the Glossary on page 123.

Buffy's uniqueness represents the dilemmas that many teens experience.

This was Joss Whedon's intention in creating this character and developing the television series. Tired of watching the blond girl walk down the alley and getting attacked, he thought "I would love to see a movie, in which a blond wanders into a dark alley, takes care of herself and deploys her power" (Bellafante 84). He created the character Buffy Summers to fulfill this vision. Unhappy with the film version, Joss leapt at the chance to develop the character into a series.

> After the movie, a TV production executive said 'This is a TV show.' So I thought, 'Well a TV show needs something that will sustain it, and a California girl fighting vampires, that's not enough. So I thought about high school and the horror movie, and high school as hell and about the things the girl fights as reflections of what you go through in high school. And I thought, 'Well, *that's* a TV series' (Udovitch 64).

Through the use of monsters and demons, the creators told stories of romance, illness, coming out, and racism. Typical coming of age experiences, such as falling in love for the first time or finding your footing in college, influenced the Scoobies as much as any supernatural incident. Viewing the series in syndication has highlighted the gradual development of these characters over the show's seven seasons. Story lines and themes were drawn out over several episodes or even seasons. Audiences were not appeased with quick and easy answers to the characters' dilemmas.

BtVS is one of several recent series on prime time American television that focus on female heroes. Other recent series include *Dark Angel, Relic Hunter* and *Nikita*. Like the lead characters in these series, Buffy is commodified and prone to the cult of beauty, as are many of the products within the Girl Power phenomenon. *BtVS* celebrates the power of girls and femininity, securing the series' status within this phenomenon.

I am most intrigued by the way in which *BtVS* presents girls and power, a topic of intense debate among my participants. Buffy's power was a birthright. Throughout the series Buffy discovered the depths of this innate power as she saved the world from innumerable demons and monsters and prevented an apocalypse on a semi-regular basis. The "Chosen One" was always a girl, and, as such, the series can be read as the story of every girl coming into their own power. Like many superheroes, Buffy's birthright was also her downfall. It was her role as the slayer that prevented her from having a normal life as a teenager. She had to place school, her family and her friends lower on her priority list. As a viewer, this complexity was an integral part of *BtVS*'s appeal. I uncharacteristically enjoyed watching this hero "kick demon ass" every week and identified with her struggle to balance her various obligations. My own contradictory interpretations of this heroic, yet flawed character drew me to this project.

I am also interested in how the series challenges some television conventions, including those related to gender roles and sexuality, and reinforces others. This has led me to ask several questions about the nature of the show and other audience members' interpretation of the text. What messages resonate with audience members? Do the contradictions compromise the progressive messages or do they simply add to the relevance and realism of the text? For example, does Buffy's early desire to date rather than slay vampires portray heroism as an unwanted chore, or does this add to the complexity of the character? How do such complications speak to audiences? These initial questions were based on my assumption that audiences' interpretations of *BtVS* were only relevant in a discussion and analysis of this and other, similar series. I expected to discuss their interpretations of gender politics within the series itself. I did

not account for the interplay that occurred between *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, viewer's gender politics and their lives. Not only did this project reveal some insight into *BtVS* audiences, it transformed my concept of audience work. As I will elaborate throughout this thesis, my participants did not just provide insight into their interpretations of *BtVS*, they revealed political views, allowing me to see the ways in which this series engages with feminist debate. They also showed how the series translates into community building practices in their lives. But, before discussing this further, I will review how other scholars have approached *BtVS*.

Transgression and Containment in Sunnydale

Scholarly critiques of the series began to appear in 1999, and their number has grown every year. The wealth of literature dedicated to this series is evidence of *BtVS*'s complexity and cross-disciplinary appeal. Several academic texts have been devoted to the subject, and one in particular, *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Wilcox and Lavery), spawned the online scholarly journal *Slayage* (http://www.slayage.tv). The "*Buffy* Studies" section of this journal boasts a bibliography that covers 53 topics including those typical in television studies; gender studies, cultural studies, and queer studies, as well as the unexpected; military science, media ecology, physics, Slavic studies and business ethics.

Faced with the daunting task of summarizing this expansive literature, I will cover only the material that is most relevant to the topic at hand. Since my interest in *BtVS* and this research are primarily based on the gender play within the series, I will focus on how the intricacies of this play are discussed in the scholarly literature. The material

regarding *BtVS* and community falls under this topic. A significant theme that ran through the gender-related articles was the tension between transgression and containment, highlighted in Buffy's uncertain status as a feminist icon. The debate revolves around the depiction of Buffy and the other female characters in the series in relation to a traditional concept of femininity, defined by Liesbet van Zoonen as marked by "submission, availability and compliance" (30). In a patriarchal society, this constructed gender role is situated in a subordinate position to masculinity (Connell 183). For the purpose of this discussion, I am borrowing Stallybrass and White's use of the term transgression to refer to a symbolic inversion of cultural codes (17-18), in this case, the hierarchy of the masculine and feminine and the "appropriate" behaviours in each category. This concept of transgression is hinted at in Whedon's remark about his intention with the slayer. "If I can make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who takes charge of a situation without their knowing that's what's happening, it's better than sitting down and selling them on feminism" (Bellafante 84). This apparent intention to subvert traditional femininity met with mixed reviews.

Many authors note the transgressive nature of *BtVS*'s play with gender hierarchy and the depiction of characters displaying attributes often associated with the opposite sex. Some scholars focus on the transgressive nature of Buffy's status as a female just warrior, her direct challenge to patriarchal structures, her reliance on feminine sources of power or her pacifist orientation. Others emphasize the ways in which *BtVS* characters are contained in portrayals of race and class and the commercial nature of the series. There are other forms of containment that are not necessarily negative, such as restraint

from violence, but it is the above connotations of the word that I draw on in relation to *BtVS*'s gender transgressions.

Buffy's status as a multi-dimensional female hero challenges the just warrior as a purely masculine domain. Early and Kennedy define the male "just warrior" as one who "is the responsible citizen whose willingness to shed blood for the common good entitles him to mastery over self and others" (1). *BtVS*'s strength is that, in challenging the obligatory maleness of the conventional hero, the series also questions definitions of heroism and traditional gender roles. *BtVS* offers a continuous critique of patriarchal structures. "As an open-image fantasy of female resistance to patriarchal authority, Buffy helps to problematize the essentialized status of gendered physical attributes, notably by representing Buffy as an embodied subject who takes pleasure in aggressive behavior" (Early 64). Exemplary of this position is her relation to the Watchers' Council, a mostly male organization that oversees the Slayer and her duties. Tired of being controlled by their distant hand like a good soldier, Buffy quits the council in the season three finale, appropriately titled "Graduation Day (Part 1)." Season four introduced The Initiative, a paramilitary organization that initially appears to be a larger, better funded, patriarchal version of the Scooby Gang but is later revealed to have a much more nefarious purpose. In both cases her independence and constant questioning are perceived as a threat to these organizations. Their attempts to contain her, lead to her disassociation from the Watchers' Council and the demise of The Initiative. In both situations the bureaucracy, hierarchy and blind allegiance that accompany these institutions are juxtaposed against Buffy's fight for justice. Her position as a just warrior is strengthened by the failures of the Council and Initiative. Her incorporation of supposedly inferior feminine traits into

the just warrior's arsenal, as well as her superior status within the series as the ultimate slayer[4] transgress constructed gender binaries and associations: male/female, hero/victim, strong/weak, aggressive/passive, individualism/community, rationality/emotions. These binaries are inverted, complicated and, to a certain extent, integrated. Supposedly lower forms are celebrated and the superiority of dominant forms is questioned.

Unlike her heroic male counterparts Buffy's body is more than a weapon. "Whereas in traditional texts the body is a means to an end, in Buffy the experiences of the body is the end itself, a move which works to valorize the 'feminine' realm of body" (Heinecken 131). Buffy's struggle with her inner demons (guilt, desire, etc) is as integral to her story as is the monster of the week. Part of her struggle is with how she is required to use that body. As the Chosen One, it is her calling to serve a higher purpose, one that she may not have otherwise chosen to serve. While she resents her role, she also enjoys the emotional release that fighting brings. Crosby considers Buffy's struggle with her heroism as a containment of this female warrior. "The central question revolves not around whether women and toughness can coexist, but around whether they can mix permanently without the final snap that forces the tough female hero to relinquish her toughness and heroism" (Crosby 162). Owen is concerned that Buffy's heroism is depicted as harmful to her quality of life (30). Crosby concludes that, although Buffy and her friends contain such snaps, they continue to move back and forth between the extremes, never fully renouncing their heroism (166). Although Buffy is a flawed hero, these inner-conflicts allowed the writers to develop a multi-dimensional character with whom audience members can identify. It was my experience that Buffy's personal

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[4] The point was made several times throughout the series that Buffy survived longer than any previous slayer, and her skills and ingenuity far surpassed her predecessors.

struggles made her more interesting. If we read *BtVS* as a story about coming of age and coming into one's own power, it seems natural that a young woman would struggle to figure out what this means. Many young people have obligations and responsibilities that they may feel saddled with, however, struggling with these perceived burdens does not negate their importance to the individual. On the other hand, it is the ambiguities in this struggle that make it difficult for me to accept or offer a definitive interpretation of *BtVS*. As a fan, I tend to lean towards Buffy the feminist icon for several reasons.

Firstly, Buffy's heroism transgresses gender in its depiction of traditionally feminine forms of power, community and emotions. Rhonda V. Wilcox notes that the pattern of patriarchal succession is averted in Buffy (3). Although the *BtVS* mythology is a gender twist on this type of solo succession through death, the series continuously affirms that the community is more powerful than Buffy would be alone. Buffy's heroism is often dependent on the assistance of her friends (Ross 231). Power is not limited to any one person (Wilcox 5). In fact, other characters such as Buffy's best friend Willow, become heroes in their own right. As I will elaborate in Chapter Three, several Scoobies had unique powers and strengths that they could use to help Buffy in her slaying duties. This communal activism directly challenges the notion of the hero alone and the atypicality of the female hero (Ross 232). The series concludes with the dispersion of Buffy's powers to all potential slayers turning "her power into our power" (Levine 249). This act was referred to as "ultimate Girl Power" by several of my participants. Buffy and Willow realized that the stipulation in the slayer mythology that there is only one slayer per generation was constituted by the group of men who created the first slayer. This proviso was likely born out of their fear of the slayer's strength, and

they did not want to produce something they could not control ("Chosen"). This act of releasing the slayer power to all potential slayers officially destroys the mythology that there is only one girl with this power and reclaims the destinies of the potentials. It also solves the chief problem that Buffy had to deal with, her isolation as the Chosen One. The series ends with Buffy being part of a community of slayers.

Secondly, emotions, another traditionally feminine realm, were also a source of power for Buffy. Just as community subverted the lone warrior narrative, this celebration of emotions inverts, or at least complicates the rational/emotional hierarchy, another instance of transgression. Buffy redirects her anger into her work as a slayer. "Buffy rejects the message that anger is entirely inappropriate for nice, middle-class white girls" (Helford 22). Yet this subversion is tempered when it becomes clear that only "proper" forms of anger are productive (Helford). When Buffy dies briefly in the first season, another slayer, Kendra is called. I will address the racial implications of Kendra's depiction in the series in a moment. What is important here is that Kendra's disregard for emotions hampered her skills as a slayer and led to her death, indicating the importance of a developed emotional life. Faith, the slayer called in Kendra's place, revelled in her anger, apparently so much so, that it led to her descent into villainy. Although *BtVS* made some progress with its representation of the driving power of anger, it was definitely contained. In other words, *BtVS*'s transgressions are never complete. They are partial and open, leaving room for multiple, and possibly contradictory interpretations. In my view, the celebration of emotional power is such an important step in acknowledging "feminine" strengths, and it is such a prominent theme throughout the series, that moments of containment, such as in the representation of Faith, are less integral to the

show. Throughout the series I was much more aware of her uncommon sources of power than these moments of containment.

Thirdly, just as Buffy's sources of power are atypical of the just warrior, so is her non-violent approach to protecting the residents of Sunnydale. While there are many violent encounters throughout the series, it is arguable that "a subtle pacifist-oriented sensibility has been woven into the ongoing Buffy narrative; in a fairly consistent manner, the Chosen One and her surrogate family, Giles and the Slayerettes, evince a tendency to eschew killing when possible to solve problems non-violently" (Early 61). Buffy refuses to kill humans, preferring instead to subdue them when they posed imminent danger. Many non-threatening demons are left to roam free in Sunnydale's underworld. Buffy and the Scooby Gang aggressively attack threatening non-human beings, but only after doing their research and fully understanding the threat they faced. Words are another non-violent weapon regularly deployed in Sunnydale. Fudge compares the pithy remarks and slicing commentary in *BtVS* to the first lesson in women's self-defence courses, a loud voice is powerful (21). Words can express and diffuse Buffy's anger. This is also a form of attack at which the physically weaker members of the Scooby Gang could exceed, providing characters lacking in supernatural strength a way to fight back so they can all participate in, and contribute to this battle.

While the literature I have discussed so far focuses on how *BtVS* differs from typical media representations of women, there are other areas in which the series maintains the status quo, namely in the representation of race and class (Ono; Ross). In these depictions, *BtVS*'s subversive potential is contained. People of colour rarely play a major role in the plotlines (Edwards). Ono criticizes the racialization of villains as

"Others" who must be eliminated. Buffy and her friends may have been social misfits at Sunnydale High, but other characters are contained in ways that suggest there is a limit to the acceptable "otherness" within this marginalized group, placing limitations on who is allowed to be a part of this community. Anyone falling outside of this range must be assimilated or banished. Levine critiques the limited exploration of identity as it relates to class and race. Although Buffy frequently struggles with her multiple-identity as slayer/teenager, the series naturalizes her whiteness and class. "Multiply-positioned identity is no longer a site of multiple oppressions or multiple empowerments; instead, it is a matter of individual choice" (Levine 230). This is highlighted in the depiction of Kendra and Faith.

Despite Kendra's stricter work ethic and extensive training, she was relentlessly ridiculed by Buffy. According to Edwards, Kendra's story is an updated version of an old narrative, the tragic mulatta's quest for legitimacy.

> She leaves home on a quest to fulfill what she believes to be her destiny, only to be rejected as an unwelcome 'other.' Although she is ultimately accepted by Buffy, the acceptance is on Buffy's terms; Kendra is assimilated. When she returns to Sunnydale to help Buffy again, Kendra pays for her assimilation with her life. (Edwards 91).

In ignoring Kendra's ethnic otherness, *BtVS* denies the racism Kendra faces, even from The Scooby Gang.

Faith's working class background is likewise not addressed, but commented upon through plot developments. As previously mentioned, Faith's inability, or lack of desire to control her anger leads to her exclusion from The Scooby Gang and her descent into Sunnydale's underworld (Helford). The link between Faith's isolation, anger and

background are not problematized, instead her journey from working class loner to sadistic villain is presented as a logical progression.

In both instances, these characters are depicted as outsiders who cannot integrate smoothly into the Scooby Gang. Other characters who do become part of this evolving group of friends may be marginalized in various supernatural ways, but they are all Caucasian and middle-class. The series denies the implications of Faith's class and Kendra's race by not directly addressing them. It also ties their differences to their failure as slayers, normalizing Buffy's white middle-class status as a requirement for successful slaying. Their foibles serve to highlight Buffy's abilities and goodness. While this warrior may be a woman, she must also be of the "proper" background.

The last moment of containment that I will address is what Owen calls the "uncritical embrace of American capital culture" (30). Buffy Summers' love of shopping and ahead-of-the-moment fashion sense are highlighted in the series. The destruction of a favourite piece of clothing has fuelled her anger at assailants on a number of occasions. We must also consider the vast range of merchandise based on the show; there are comic books, short fictional novels, companion books, a clothing line based on styles that appear in the show, lollipops and stickers to name a few. Graham questions the transgressive potential of a character that is so marketable, a series whose cult appeal is "the calculated product of marketing strategy" (par. 2[5]). Can it be transgressive when it is so carefully contained? This is a question that I have not been able to definitively answer for myself, but I do explore it further in Chapter Two.

While this discussion so far has been divided into primarily transgression or primarily containment, the debate over Buffy's transgression or containment is most

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[5] All internet based articles are from scholarly online journals.

contentious in discussions about her appearance. Fudge explains that "Buffy's unreconstructed, over-the-top girliness in the end compromises her feminist potential…in the end it's too earnest – too necessary – to be self-parody" (58). Fudge's article was published fairly early in the series, and her interpretation may have changed as the series and the character evolved. Yet, Susan Owen, whose article covers the same seasons of the series, claims that the troubling aspects of Buffy's appearance are less significant than the presentation of a female body "signifying toughness, resilience, strength and confidence" (25). Crosby describes Buffy's earlier, more revealing outfits within the context of the show.

> Buffy's wardrobe seems less a sop to the heterosexual male
> gaze and more an indicator of her personal development as
> a woman getting comfortable in her body. This movement
> becomes especially clear in later seasons as the adult Buffy
> wears more mature, comfortable, and concealing clothes,
> the inverse of the trend in *Xena* and *Dark Angel* (161).

Furthermore, she is not "sliced and diced" or physically segmented by the camera (Crosby 161) and "she talks back, she looks back, and she can take a blow as well as she can land one" (Owen, 25). Buffy's frequently seen bra-straps in earlier seasons can be read as an indication of the work that goes into Buffy's appearance (Levine 238). Yet, according to Heinecken's interpretation of a season two episode, female attractiveness remains a key component of female identity (110). While I agree that Buffy's appearance is integral to the series, I also concur with Levine that it is often deliberately staged as a performance, and indicated as such in the episodes. I will return to this contentious issue in a discussion of Girlie Feminism in Chapter Two.

Vint suggests that the discussion of Buffy as a sex symbol is actually a conflation of Buffy Summers in the primary text of the series and Sarah Michelle Gellar in

secondary texts, such as magazines that promote the series. Her analysis indicates that Buffy's sexualization is closely linked to her power and agency in the series while these are divided in secondary texts (Vint par. 8). Viewers may interpret the series' main character through representations within and out of the primary text; the series consistently presents Buffy as a powerful subject, and not a sexualized object.

As a desiring, sexual teenage girl, Buffy definitely transgresses representational norms. "On one hand, Buffy expresses the reality of female desire and equates it to her superpower, yet it also, for the first six seasons at least, has depicted her sexual desires as destructive and linked to darkness" (Heinecken 112). Contradictions are not necessarily containment. I agree with Heinecken when she states, "Buffy's paradoxical representation of its protagonist's sexuality strikes me as an extremely 'realistic' representation of how women experience their bodies on a daily basis" (121). This is another case where containment creates a complexity that makes the character more intriguing.

In summary, a running theme through this literature review is the lack of definitive answers. I have incorporated the literature that I think is most relevant to the discussion that will follow, but I have had difficulty taking a stand; my interpretation of the literature and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* changed regularly. My oscillation was due in part to my dual role as researcher/fan. As I attempted to decipher what this all means, I noticed that I have a specific idea of what the series is about and what it means for me, and I often worked to fit my analysis to this concept. When I tried to remain aware of this, the researcher would conclude with a "maybe" and the fan pulled that back to the invested interpretation. This was part of the impetus to turn to *BtVS* audiences and see

how they negotiate these moments of transgression and containment. By considering multiple invested interpretations I hoped to include mine in concert with these others, providing a better basis of data for analysis. My investment is one among many. Sherryl Vint's discussion of "my Buffy" will help explicate the process that I, along with other fans, struggle with in our interpretations of *BtVS*.

My Buffy

Vint's concept of "My Buffy" draws on Fiske's producerly texts. According to Fiske, "[a] producerly text does not prescribe either a set of meanings or a set of reading relations for the viewer: instead it delegates the production of meaning to the viewer-producer" (*Moments* 63).[6] Vint employs these concepts as she explores the ways in which Buffy Summers and Sarah Michelle Gellar, the actress who plays the heroine, are represented and conflated in the primary text and secondary texts, highlighting the possibilities of multiple readings and audience negotiation.

Vint states,

> Buffy fans have an established record of refusing to accept any reading as more valid than their own; therefore, the question – who is the 'real' Buffy? – is simply answered, in a way. For each individual fan, the real Buffy is 'my Buffy,' the representations that best fits my desires about who the character should be (par. 21).

Each discussion of Buffy and *BtVS* is filtered through the speaker's concept of "my Buffy"; who she is and what the show is about. This was clearly evident in the language of my respondents. There were a number of contradictory positions regarding who Buffy Summers is, but each participant put forth her or his version as the definitive answer.

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[6] This is an appropriation of Barthes writerly texts. Barthes defines writerly texts as those in which the reader is "no longer the consumer, but the producer of the text" (4).

Respondents claimed the obviousness of "their Buffys," believing them to be the only available character interpretation. A brief review of the literature on audience research will help to contextualize Vint's concept of "my Buffy" and how it comes into play in the discussion by my participants.

Audiences in Action

The field of audience research was arguably reinvigorated by Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model. Hall describes the process of communication "in terms of a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments – production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction" (128). This emphasis on a continuous process of meaning making was a marked difference from previous conceptualizations that focussed on the linear model of sender/message/receiver. Hall's model took into account notions of embedded ideology and hegemonic negotiation throughout the process.

According to Hall, producers embed media texts with messages reflecting the dominant ideology, by which he means "there exists a pattern of 'preferred readings'; and these have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted on them and have themselves become institutionalized" (Hall 134). Viewers interpret the message from one of three positions; the dominant hegemonic position, an oppositional position or a negotiated position (Hall 136-8). Those who interpret the text from the dominant hegemonic position operate within the preferred system of meanings, and their reading of the text is identical to the producers' intent. Those working from an oppositional code interpret the message using a completely different frame of reference. Viewers

interpreting the text from a negotiated position rely primarily on the dominant codes, giving them legitimacy, but their interpretations reflect their varied social differences as well.

This model becomes complicated in the case of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. As I will explain at greater length in Chapter Three, Joss Whedon participated in fan discussions in online message boards and incorporated some of the fans' comments into the series; the lines between encoder and decoder were blurred. While I wish to retain the significance of Hall's model of meaning as process, I suggest that the people involved play multiple roles along the way, such as Whedon and *Buffy* fans who participate in moments of encoding *and* decoding.

Others have noted that Hall's encoding/decoding model is not without its problems. Hall developed a closed system of communication where a clearly identifiable meaning is encoded in a given message. Fiske takes issue with this, suggesting that texts contain gaps and contradictions that allow viewers to interpret differently. These are a product of semiotic excess, "there is always too much meaning on television to be controllable by the dominant ideology. There are always traces of competing or resisting discourses available for alternative readings" (Fiske, *Television Culture* 91). These explanations of ideological openness, semiotic excess and textual gaps help explicate Vint's concept of "my Buffy." As Vint indicates, audience members are offered multiple representations of Buffy Summers and Sarah Michelle Gellar, from which they can construct their concept of the slayer. Buffy can be read as a no-nonsense crime fighter who is always the subject, rather than the object, of her experience, or she can be conflated with images of Sarah Michelle Gellar as a sexy young starlet on the cover of

Rolling Stone magazine. According to Fiske, these different readings are based on the social position of the viewer; the power struggle in a given society is then reflected in the struggle to make meaning of these media texts (*Polysemy* 392). This is similar to Hall's conception of the audience, but it includes a more varied view of individual audience members. Fiske argues that most viewers fall into Hall's negotiated position. "The majority of viewers, however, are probably situated not in positions of conformity or opposition to the dominant ideology, but in ones that conform to it in some ways, but not others; they accept the dominant ideology in general, but modify or inflect it to meet the needs of their specific situation" (Fiske, *Television Culture* 64). My participants demonstrate this position when they criticize Buffy's appearance, dismissing her as too skinny and unattractive, but often appreciating her fashion sense. They wholly reject Buffy as a beauty ideal, but they continued to work within the framework of female hero and girlie fashions.

Fiske takes this process of partial acceptance, partial rejection further, suggesting that this negotiation is a way for viewers to find pleasure by exerting control through their interpretation, or intentional misinterpretation of the text. This negotiation of meaning is a form of play that "may not in itself be resistive or subversive, but the control or empowerment that it entails produces a self-esteem in the subordinate that at least makes resistance or subversion possible" (Fiske, *Television Culture* 232). David Morley and Celeste Michelle Condit offer critiques of Fiske, taking up this point of resistive readings.

Morley accuses Fiske of generalizing from a very specific instance, offering the exception as the rule. Morley prefers to reinstate the power of the text. "The power of

viewers to reinterpret meanings is hardly equivalent to the discursive power of centralized media institutions to construct the texts that the viewer then interprets, and to imagine otherwise is simply foolish" (16). Audience members are restricted to working with the scripts and signs available in the text, those intentionally and unintentionally inscribed by the producers. Although viewers can focus on certain meanings over others and interpret them in a variety of ways, they cannot write new scripts into the show. Viewers only have control over their interpretation of the text, while the producers reinforce their intended message through their construction of the text and in framing the work in TV listing descriptions and publicity for the show. In other words, audience activity should not be confused with power. In the case of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Joss Whedon's feminist approach to the series may challenge traditional notions of femininity but he is also interested in making a commercially viable product (Graham par. 17). The subversive nature of the text is contained, to a certain extent, by Whedon's intention to produce a marketable product. Although Whedon presents a female warrior, he maintains a narrow definition of beauty, one that goes hand in hand with the beauty industry, and holds that as a primary concern with young women. In not addressing the multiple levels of oppression that Kendra and Faith may have experienced, Whedon's version of Buffy inadvertently reinforces the individualistic notion that success relies on the choices one makes, regardless of circumstance. Denying systemic oppression confirms that successful people are successful by choice.

Condit's work challenges Fiske's assumption that oppositional audience work is pleasurable. She makes a distinction between polysemy and polyvalence. "Polyvalence occurs when audience members share understandings of the denotations of a text but

disagree about the valuation of those denotations to such a degree that they produce notably different interpretations" (Condit 106). It is the distinction between a message actually saying a number of things and a singular message being interpreted differently. In the latter case, it takes a varying amount of work to interpret these messages differently. This differentiation came into play in my research when viewers interpreted specific events in very different ways. The series finale, for example, was read as both an affirmation of and a challenge to Girl Power. This is further explored in Chapter Two. Condit challenges Fiske's assumption that audience members find pleasure in resistant readings, instead suggesting that this work makes the experience that much less pleasurable (Condit 109). Resistant readings were immaterial to my respondents who seemed to find pleasure in "getting" *BtVS*, rather than reclaiming the series or asserting control over it. In fact, their emphasis was on knowing the intentions of the creative team and explaining how that played out in the series.

Fiske is not alone in his emphasis on audience resistance. Radway's work on women who read romance novels illustrates the complexity of resistant readings. Radway does give much thought to the resistant aspects of the Smithton women's readings of their novels. She then concludes that, although these women claim that reading these romances is oppositional and that the novels have positively changed their self-perception, the conservative discourse of the texts reaffirms the patriarchal culture that they are trying to oppose and reinforces the conditions that have left them emotionally needy in the first place (Radway *Reading* 216-17). Perhaps *BtVS* is a case of the postmodern television text. Unlike the romance novels read by the Smithton women, there is no clear thing to resist and it is useless to analyze it on these terms.

Charlotte Brunsdon rails against people like Fiske who try to reclaim the text on behalf of audiences. This criticism is mostly levelled at feminist media studies that seek to explain the popularity with women of texts that appear sexist (van Zoonen 106). Brunsdon argues that we move from bad text to good audience, and we need to reinstate the text as an object of study and judgement (125). I agree that interpretation should not replace consideration of the text, but in cases where there is no clear, single ideological perspective put forth by the text, this argument becomes irrelevant. Dismissing and reclaiming texts both require an inherent singular ideological position. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is more complex than that, overtly presenting subversive material while downplaying that which maintains the status quo. Buffy's transgressive status as female warrior exists alongside the series' problematic representations of race and class. It may be more useful to focus on the interplay between text and audience, rather than prioritizing one or the other; how audience members use the series to discuss other things, consider the various points of identification and how this translates into their social practices. As I will explain in the next section, one way to approach this investigation is through an analysis of fan talk. First, a brief description of academic fandom and Henry Jenkins' study of *Beauty and the Beast* fans will demonstrate what I mean by a series influencing social practices.

Academic fandom studies focus on the unique activities of fans. This work tends to focus primarily on cultural production such as slash fiction[7], filk songs[8], websites, etc

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[7] [0]The term "slash" refers to "K/S", the original term for this type of fiction (Penley 137). It is the slash between "K(irk)" and "S(pock)" that serves as a code to indicate the homosexual pornographic content.

[8] Filk songs are written by fans designed for informal sing-alongs at conferences and smaller meetings. For more on this cf. Henry Jenkins, "'Strangers No More We Sing': Filking and the Social Construction of the Science Fiction Fan Community." The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media. Ed. Lisa A. Lewis. London: Routledge, 1992: 208-236.

(Green et al.; Jenkins, *Textual*; Smith). This is understandable considering that Jenkins' initial definition of fandom includes fan culture's "particular tradition of cultural production" as a key component of these fan activities (*Textual* 2). There is also a segment of fandom studies that explores the empowering aspects of fandom, namely having control over the text and recreating it (Harris, *Sociology*). While these studies are important sites of research, they do not capture the phenomenon I wish to investigate. How do fans feel connected to each other? How do they experience this television show and their participation in it as a community? How is their fandom incorporated into their daily lives? Work on both interpretive communities and fandom has focused on power relations and power struggles within and between these communities, but, in doing so, they present a limited view of community practices (Clerc; Robinson; Zweerink and Gatson). These examples fail to capture the connection the fans make with other fans and the daily experience of fandom.

An important exception is Jenkins' discussion of fans of the television series *Beauty and the Beast,* a series with a passionate and active fan base (*Textual* 76-7). Throughout the run of the show, they organized letter campaigns encouraging the network to continue airing the series despite low ratings. The show was cancelled in the U.S. before all of the episodes were aired. The final episodes did appear in French on a Québec television station. Fans in the U.S. acquired video tapes from fans in Québec and played the final episodes for their local *Beauty and the Beast* fan clubs. As Jenkins describes it, none of the participants were fluent in French, yet they worked together in an effort to understand the conclusion of their beloved series. They were encouraged to "shout out" words or phrases that they understood. They tried to interpret the story based

on what they knew of previous plotlines and character traits. Several fans found descriptions of the final episodes on the internet and gave a running commentary as the plot unfolded.

This example demonstrates the richness of the connection among fans as they watch the show. For fan communities to thrive, this connection and support is likely of greater importance to the fans than their struggles and reinterpretations. At least this is what was expressed by my informants. I intend to build on Jenkins' fandom work as I investigate how *Buffy* fans construct community.

The Method

Discussion groups were the primary source for my investigation into how regular viewers interpret the messages in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Hammersly and Atkinson recommend group interviews for the more casual setting they engender (144). This is based on the idea that people will be less intimidated by the interview setting if they are with other people and the pressure to talk is not on any one person. Theoretically, the less stressful setting encourages participants to share more than they would in an individual interview.

The comfortable setting is not the only advantage to holding discussion groups. Silverman recommends reclaiming the importance of talk as a site of analysis. "Although talk is sometimes seen as trivial ('merely' talk), it has increasingly become recognised as the primary medium through which social interaction takes place" (115). We cannot directly access how people are interpreting media texts, but through listening and analysing their talk we can get some idea of what is going on. As Justin Lewis writes,

"[b]ecause arguments between people can be heard, recorded and transcribed, they allow researchers a glimpse inside people's heads" (43). I found that I had gained some insight into these viewers' thought processes as I listened to, and later read their words as they tried to explain and defend their interpretations. Their talk was much more informative than the responses in the questionnaires. Group members explained their positions, and when they were not understood, others asked them to clarify. Their justifications provide insight that brief questions and answers do not.

My first concern was identifying who I wanted to include in my study. I knew that I was interested in avid viewers of the series. These are the people who watched regularly over a period of time and could knowledgably discuss the characters, storylines and themes. These people generally refer to themselves as "fans" but I would like to make a distinction between academic fandom and casually identified fandom. As I mentioned, academic fandom is often defined within academic work in relation to cultural production. The people involved with my study may or may not produce these types of texts, but that is secondary. I was interested in people who talked about the series but did not necessarily create cultural products based on their enjoyment of it. This is what I mean by "casually identified fandom."

I conducted two discussion groups in the months following *BtVS*'s series finale (Appendix III). I recruited participants through the "snowballing" technique. This entailed me contacting friends and acquaintances and relying on their social networks to locate potential participants. My friend, Lana[9] recruited three sisters, Jean, Sheila and Anne for the first discussion group. These four women are in their late-20s and early-30s. Amanda contacted me after a friend of hers told her about my project. She gathered

[9] All names are pseudonyms.

two friends of hers to participate in the second discussion group. Amanda, Sue and Jessica are in their early-20s. This small sample is not intended to be representative of *Buffy* fans. Rather, it is an attempt to begin adding the voices of *Buffy* fans to the discussion about *BtVS* through the detailed accounts provided in these sessions.

The discussion groups were influenced by methodologies used by Dawn Currie in her exploration of adolescent girls and teen magazines, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis' study of *The Cosby Show* audience members and E. Graham McKinley's work on *Beverly Hills 90210* viewers. Currie contends that group discussions can be less intimidating than individual interviews, and stresses that it is important to create a comfortable setting in which the participants can openly discuss their views (109). With this in mind, I recruited groups of individuals who know each other and would normally talk about television with each other. In such a setting, a conversational dynamic has previously been established, there exists a level of intimacy available among friends that is illusive with strangers, and the subjects are less likely to rely on the interviewer to set up a dynamic and lead the interview (Jhally and Lewis 89-90). I found the group settings to be helpful in a number of ways. The rapport was already established among these group members, so I did not feel like I had to get them to interact with each other. The friendly atmosphere and joking patter of each group made it an enjoyable experience for all involved. They freely questioned each other and referenced other responses throughout the course of the session. Since they had discussed *BtVS* before, at times one member would remind another of a story they should relate and they told stories about each other. With familiar groups, it was also easy to stray off topic, but, if anything, that is indicative of the comfort level.

I began each session by playing an entire episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as both the McKinley and the Jhally and Lewis studies began their group sessions this way. Playing an episode gives the participants a common point of reference for their discussions. There were two other procedures I appropriated from these authors. McKinley made an audio recording while the group watched the episode (3). She found it helpful to hear how participants reacted at the moment of their viewing. Jhally and Lewis directed participants to reconstruct the story in that specific episode to highlight the elements that were important to viewers (Lewis 114). I used both of these techniques. I played a tape of "What's My Line? (Part 2)," the episode in which Kendra is introduced. I chose this particular episode from season two for a few reasons. The feeling of the series changed over the years. It began as a light, funny series, and became much heavier as the seasons went on. I wanted to remind viewers who may not have recently viewed old episodes of the earlier *BtVS* so we could talk about the changes. I also reasoned that *Buffy* fans would enjoy watching an old episode, one they had not seen in a while, and that this would stimulate talk. Finally, this particular episode also included a couple of the themes that I wanted to address. This was successful, but not in the ways I had intended.

The group members did not speak much during the viewing; in fact, each group was almost silent throughout the episode and, except for the casual comments from time to time, there was no discussion. I let the commercials run instead of fast forwarding them to give the participants a chance to discuss what was happening without leading the conversation. There was some talk about the show in general. For example, the participants placed it within the overall plotline of the series. There was also completely

unrelated talk, but this was not very enlightening. However, the episode was essential in another way and the sessions did benefit from this viewing, engendering casual conversation among the group members. Everyone settled in, focussed on the show and was ready to discuss *BtVS*. Their descriptions of the episode were not very helpful, but they referred to it to explain their points later in the conversation. Using the old episode did not trigger as much nostalgia as I had predicted. Most of the participants had seen it fairly recently on DVD. Those who had not did express appreciation for it. Lana remarked that she forgot how funny the show was, which was the original reason she was drawn to *BtVS*. The participants agreed that it was a good episode choice to start off the discussion groups, which helped my credibility as a *Buffy* fan.

After we discussed the episode itself, I asked a few general questions about the series. For example, I asked them to tell me about their introduction to the series, why they continued to watch and which plotlines and characters appealed to them (Appendix I). This provided participants with the opportunity to discuss the themes of primary importance to them. As the interview progressed, the questions became more specific to the themes I wished to tackle such as power and community. I attempted to address key elements and themes in more than one way in a series of questions and follow up questions, once again borrowing from McKinley.

Each group reacted differently to each of these sets of questions. The first group responded enthusiastically to the general questions, revealing great insight into the series. As the questions became more specific, they had less to say. The general questions evoked numerous examples but little insightful commentary from the second group. They became more insightful as the questions became more specific. They may have

needed more guidance in order to express their views of the series, or they may have felt more comfortable with me as the interview progressed. Both sets of questions were important to each discussion group.

Currie believes that individual follow-up interviews provide researchers with the opportunity to go over the tapes from the group sessions and follow up on any themes they wish to delve into further or pick up on anything they may have missed (104). During her research with teenagers, Currie found that a few of the girls silenced themselves on some issues to avoid disagreements with the other members of the group (105). Follow up interviews provide respondents with the opportunity to say things they wished they had said in the focus groups or anything they think of between the group and individual sessions. I did not feel the need to ask further questions in follow up interviews, but I did contact each participant and asked if they had anything further to add. Each woman told me that she would be happy to participate further if I had any specific questions but that they could not think of anything they felt they did not get a chance to say in the discussion group.

This type of research does present certain problems in relation to researcher and respondent bias. Participants may offer responses that they think they are expected to give, and researchers may interpret answers according to their previous opinions. As previously mentioned, I tried to diffuse this problem to a certain extent by initially conducting group interviews. I found that this intersected with my identity "balancing act" between being both a researcher and a *Buffy* fan. The participants knew that I was a fan of the series. As participants arrived at each event, there was some discussion about my fandom. I tried to maintain my distance as a researcher, at times holding myself back

from responding as a fellow *Buffy* fan. There was an incident where participants took this to mean that I disagreed with them. I then tried to make it clear that I was just leaving them room to talk; that I was interested in their voices, not mine. There were moments when I got caught up in the conversation. I temporarily took off my researcher coat and was firmly seated in my fandom outfit. This likely occurred with the first group because one of the subjects was a friend with whom I had previously discussed the series. When I realized this was happening, I pulled myself back into researcher mode. Both groups were more responsive when I was in this researcher mode.

These methodologies raise ethical concerns of consent and privacy. I followed the guidelines set out by Concordia University's Human Research Ethics Committee. I interviewed women aged 18 and over to avoid the need for parental consent. I hoped that this would also remove the potential age based power dynamic between researcher and participants. I provided consent forms to be filled out prior to the group interview. These forms informed the subjects that the interviews, and any demographic information I collected, will be used for academic purposes only. In signing these forms, the subjects agreed that what they say during the interviews may be published or presented at conferences for the purposes stated above. The subjects are identified by pseudonyms in the research so as to ensure their privacy.

After I told friends and acquaintances about my project and that I was looking for participants, the number of responses was overwhelming. Most *Buffy* fans I was in contact with wanted to participate. I also received reports from friends who discussed my project in passing with their friends who watched *BtVS* and were interested in being a part of the study. I would have liked to conduct in-depth interviews with everyone who

expressed interest, but I was working with certain time and geographic restraints. Due to this overwhelming response, I decided to include a questionnaire as a second part of the study. I sent this questionnaire out to forty people. Within twenty four hours I received a dozen responses, some of which were sent through third and fourth parties. I found that the internet opens up the "snowballing" technique and makes it that much more effective as a tool in contacting participants. I received 27 questionnaires, completed by men and women from age 14 to 60 (Appendix III). Most of the respondents were women in their 20s and early 30s.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts in an attempt to emulate the style of questions in the focus groups (Appendix II). The first part contained six general questions about the series. These provided the respondents with the opportunity to focus on the parts of the program that resonated with them without focussing on my agenda. The second part focussed on questions of power within the series. These questions were still fairly open-ended. One only has to examine the range of responses to these questions to see how differently they were interpreted.

Once I collected the data I was faced with the difficult matter of interpretation. I turned to Ien Ang and Jackie Stacey's work on the television series *Dallas* and Hollywood films respectively. They analyzed the letters as texts, allowing the viewers' voices to be incorporated into the study while acknowledging that there is more to their experiences than they intentionally revealed in these letters. Stacey's way of looking at their words helped provide me with a method of integrating the words of my participants with the literature and my arguments, but I was still at a loss as to how to think about, and

analyze their words. It was Silverman's work on audience response that was most helpful in interpreting my participants' responses.

Silverman points out that "we need not hear interview responses simply as true or false *reports* on reality. Instead, we can treat such responses as *displays* of perspectives and moral forms" (Original emphasis) (109). His phrase "moral forms" suggests a discussion of morals and ethics that is not relevant to my use of Silverman, but I would like to emphasize the "perspectives" of which he speaks. In their responses, my participants not only reveal their perspectives on *BtVS*, but their views on other issues that come into play. For example, earlier in this chapter, I mentioned that my respondents use *BtVS* to debate feminism. They did not directly state their view on the matter; they talked about the series and, in doing so, their positions became clear. The meanings that viewers insert into the gaps discussed by Fiske, or the signifiers they pick out from the semiotic excess are indicative of their views on issues external to the series. Through their selection of signifiers, viewers position themselves within a larger debate. In this way, discussions about *BtVS* became talk about significant issues affecting these viewers. I did not intend to search for a collective truth about how audiences read *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I compared the different perspectives relayed by participants and by those who have written about the series. Two areas that my participants were particularly vocal about were the notion of Girl Power and communities.

Chapter Two explores *BtVS* in relationship to the phenomenon known as Girl Power, as this topic sparked intense debate among both interviewees and questionnaire respondents. Drawing from both Silverman and Lewis, I demonstrate the ways in which a discussion about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reveals participants' perspectives and, in

doing so, how the series connects with the current cultural moment. Through a dialogue about the Girl Power phenomenon and *BtVS*, fans contend with both corporate and empowering interpretations of Girl Power. This chapter reveals how my participants call on common tropes about feminism to discuss this issue and introduce new perspectives.

Chapter Three examines of the ways in which *Buffy* fans constitute community around the series and judge the community in the series. I engage with Anthony S. Cohen's symbolic communities, Henry Jenkins fandom studies and Jackie Stacey's concept of extra-cinematic identification to examine the feeling of connectedness among *BtVS* viewers. I consider how the identificatory practices of these fans lead to the recreation of the community bonds within the Scooby Gang and the role that the creators played in this process.

Throughout this thesis, I will consider the ambiguous nature of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and reflect on the varied ways it speaks to audiences. In doing so, I hope to gain a better understanding of audiences' affinity for the series and the ways in which they have incorporated it into their lives.

Chapter Two

Wrestling with Girl Power: *Buffy*'s Feminist Dialogue

Buffy and her younger sister Dawn patrol the Sunnydale cemetery at night as a new vampire rises from his grave.[10]

Buffy: It's about power. Who's got it. Who knows how to use it. So...

Tosses a stake to Dawn.

Buffy: Who's got the power, Dawn?

Dawn: (sighs) Well, I've got the stake.

Buffy: The stake is not the power.

Dawn: But he's new. He doesn't know his strength. H-he might not know all those fancy martial arts skills they inevitably seem to pick up.

Buffy: Who's got the power?

Dawn: He does.

Buffy: Never forget it. Doesn't matter how well prepped you are or how well armed you are. You're a little girl.

Dawn: Woman.

Buffy: Little woman.

Dawn: I'm taller than you.

Buffy: He's a vampire, OK? Demon. Preternaturally strong. Skilled with powers no human could possibly ever—

Vampire: Excuse me. I think I'm stuck.

Buffy: You're stuck?

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[10] Dialogue from the episode entitled "Lessons." Transcript from http://www.buffyworld.com.

Vampire: My foot's caught on a root or something, and... I don't even know how I got down there. If you girls could just give me a hand...

Dawn: Hm. So, he's got the power?

Buffy: Zip it.

Vampire: I really appreciate it. It's just it's so dark, and I don't even know what I'm doing here.

Buffy picks him up by his suit collar and puts him down standing on his feet.

Vampire: Whoa. Ooh. Thanks. That was a help. Unfortunately it was the last—

Buffy grabs him by the throat. His voice turns scratchy.

Vampire: —thing you'll ever do.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer stimulates numerous questions: Who has power? What does it mean to be powerful? Where does power come from? What makes one powerful? The dialogue above directly addresses the juxtaposition indicated in the series' title; how can a petite, Californian teenager with a name like Buffy have such a powerful role as that of a vampire slayer? Emblematic of the series' engagement with the politics of power, and, in typical *BtVS* style, this dialogue directly contradicts how the action plays out in the scene. Buffy explains that the vampire holds the power while she assists him and, later in the scene, kills him with ease. Depending on how the viewers read the action and dialogue, it can be a frank, direct exposure of patriarchy indicating that although "he" has the power, he can still be dispatched, it can demonstrate a young woman's ability to overpower her male aggressor or it can highlight Buffy's unique status as a female warrior, perpetuating the myth of female powerlessness for those who

are not slayers. The questions this scene poses intersect with current feminist debates and deliberations over Girl Power.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer provides a forum to discuss these issues. Without intending to, my participants argued point and counter-point about a number of topics, but none as passionately as their debate over Girl Power. When they defined who Buffy was and what the show was about, they went beyond a discussion of the series and drew on larger, contentious themes, engaging in a dialogue about what power means and how it can be exercised. Their responses exposed the far reaching implications of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in feminist discourse and the rich possibilities of audience research, illustrating Lewis' contention that audience research is "a way of collecting evidence about common cultural meanings" (47). In displaying their perspectives, as per Silverman's model, my participants convey current understandings of feminist politics, and how these reflect on, or are reflected in, recent images of powerful women. My participants' discussion of *BtVS* allows us to examine the current discourse surrounding feminism and consider the limitations and potential of popularized versions of feminism, such as Girl Power.

In this chapter I will explore how my participants traversed discussions of Girlie feminism and postfeminism as well as the varied connotations of Girl Power. I will begin with a review the roots of Girl Power in Riot Grrl, considering the ways in which my participants define and engage with these two phenomena. This is followed by an examination of my participants' discussion of Girl Power's commodification, as I look at the implications of its incorporation into the mainstream. I will then reflect on the role of Girlie feminism in this debate, as I draw out some potential limitations of both Girlie

feminism and Girl Power. Finally, I will explore how these discussions intersect with postfeminism, illustrating some of the difficulties from a feminist perspective in the Girl Power phenomenon. Throughout this chapter, I will highlight how my participants placed *BtVS* within this debate.

The Girl Power Question

> Connie: Girl power is just an updated phrase for feminism, which is all right with me since I consider myself a feminist but recognize that the term seems hopelessly outdated. The phrase girl power makes me sad since it means there's still a need to emphasize that girls have power, and do not exist simply as vessels through which men are created. The series' creators seemed to think that girl power meant that Buffy would fight vampires dressed in halter tops and boots with ridiculously high heels. The fact that Faith was not as girly and also did not have the same ability to lead as Buffy seemed somehow to emphasize that a part of Buffy's power came from her femininity, which Faith seemed to lack. I thought that was crap, and thought that Faith put it best when she said in one of the last episodes 'at least we're both hot.' That was what girl power seemed to come down to in the series – physical power, the ability to kick ass, makes you more, not less, attractive. I liked that message.

Connie's drifting definition from feminism to femininity highlights the contradictions wrapped up in the phrase "Girl Power". This response is particularly interesting because she touches on several distinct aspects of the phenomenon and seems to harmonize them. For Connie, this phrase relates to a political movement, the current status of girls in our culture, the connection between power and scantily clad young women, and physical power. She also provides commentary on feminism, asserting that it is an outdated term before lamenting its failure to fully achieve an intuitive connection between girls and

power. She states that Girl Power is represented in the show in contradictory ways, distinguishing Buffy's femininity and her brute strength as disparate categories, without fully explaining how the series made the shift from one to the other. Although Connie's argument contains gaps, she covers the numerous stances in the contentious debate over the Girl Power phenomenon incorporating connotations of its feminist potential and superficiality.

In academic debate, the phrase "Girl Power" is used to refer to both a market trend and a social transformation or structure of beliefs (Roberts 217). The latter use of this term invokes an image of strength and agency by a group of people who have previously been ignored, marginalized or dismissed.[11] This interpretation is evident in Geissler's definition of the term: "Girl Power! is an empowerment that comes from within, the power of women and girls to break traditional molds and become whom they want to be, feminine but strong, free yet in control" (Geissler 324). I will refer to this version of Girl Power as "political" to reflect its potential to empower girls and women. I will then refer to the commercialized version as "commodified" Girl Power. I found that political Girl Power resonates with *BtVS* viewers, while those who identify the term by its commodified version, dismiss it as unrelated to the series. Before I delve into my participants' discussion of Girl Power, I will review the evolution of this phenomenon in order to contextualize its co-optation and implications.

Numerous scholars trace Girl Power to Riot Grrls, an underground movement originating in punk rock that expressed anger through numerous cultural products

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[11] According to Angela McRobbie, girl culture is often marginalized or completely disregarded due, in part, to location of young men and women. Most subculture activity occurs in the streets while young women tend to congregate indoors and are less visible (McRobbie 29-30).

including zines and music (Harris, *Betty Friedan's Granddaughters*; Stoller; Whelehan). These creations were often political. Riot Grrls took previously denigrated items of girlhood and reinstated meaning, similar to Girlie feminists but with more anger and attitude. By changing the "i" to an "r" in "girl", they supplanted the sugar and spice connotations of the word with an angry growl. Stoller suggests that by reclaiming the word "girl", they "celebrated the fierce, tantrum-throwing little girl as one of the last examples of socially-acceptable female aggressiveness, before girls are taught to be 'perfect little ladies' and instructed to suppress any display of anger" (45). Riot Grrls also reappropriated girlishness by wearing baby-doll dresses with combat boots and heavy makeup while behaving in an aggressive, unlady-like manner. Many Riot Grrl bands eschewed publicity (Whelehan 43); adding to their air of authenticity and ensuring that the movement remained somewhat underground.

Once filtered into the mainstream, they alternately became the inspiration (Stoller) and a source of co-optation (Harris, *Betty Friedan's Granddaughters*) for Girl Power. Both Riot Grrls and Girl Power discard old images of girlhood and replace them with the idea of strong, aggressive girls. Riot Grrls' pro-girl stance remains in Girl Power, but apparently without the anger.

My participants disagree as to whether Girl Power represents a complete dissolution of the Riot Grrls movement. Barb refers to the punk movement as the antithesis of Girl Power's current usage.

> Barb: Personally, girl power to me as it is understood popularly is not much to jump up and down about. I think it has been overused in the press in connection to Buffy and many other texts featuring young women, and therefore younger readers miss its history in punk music and its very real lineage with feminism.

Barb makes a claim for authenticity, suggesting that the potential of Girl Power can only be fulfilled in relation to its origins in punk. She does not explain how the removal of this overt connection plays out, although it can be inferred from similar arguments, such as that put forth by Jennifer Harris. In her essay "Betty Friedan's Granddaughters: Cosmo, Ginger Spice & the Inheritance of Whiteness," Harris expresses the concern that when young girls' initial encounter with this pro-girl celebration is the version presented by the corporate sector, they only get to see "fun tied to conventional definitions of femininity that is often dependent upon consumption" (201). This comment reflects Barb's concern that when Girl Power is severed from feminism, it becomes solely about purchasing a traditional notion of femininity. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, Barb's concern is realized by some of my participants' accounts, but many responded to political Girl Power, the version that maintains a connection to feminism and does not rely primarily on conventional femininity.

Participants in my study address how *BtVS* challenges traditional concepts of femininity in a number of ways, offering girls alternatives to the commodified form of Girl Power. A significant challenge is *BtVS*'s use of anger and emotions as a source of power, reintroducing a key component of the Riot Grrls phenomenon. Jill hinted at this connection in her questionnaire response.

> Jill: Girl power to me is seeing a girl taking on the world.
> Having the strength to do some damage, but be able to
> have a soft side. It was nice to see Buffy take on the
> role, saving the world, saving many boys, but having a
> life as well.

Although Jill does not explicitly mention anger, she does discuss Buffy's "strength to do some damage" and juxtaposes this with the character's "soft side." If this is the

aggression that Stoller argues Riot Grrls reclaimed, then *BtVS* is not completely removed from these punk rock roots. In fact, there are a number of ways that Buffy Summers reflects some of the stances taken by Riot Grrls, particularly the juxtaposition of her hyper-femininity and aggression. This connection with the origins of Girl Power may have played a role in the numerous responses that referred to what I'm calling political Girl Power when participants discussed it in relation to *BtVS*. For example, this empowering version of Girl Power seems to inform Rachel's response.

> Rachel: Girl power to me is a female's ability to not rely on men or anyone else and to be able to conquer their goals themselves.

Rachel's description is common among my respondents. Most of them focussed on this definition, and claimed its legitimacy as the true definition of the term. Rachel's use of the word "conquer" suggests the aforementioned aggression. Furthermore, she touches on another recurrent theme in my participants' responses: independence. This is echoed in the responses of Valerie, Suzanne, Marissa and Dan who also propose strength and confidence as key components of Girl Power.

> Valerie: Girl Power can definitely be applied to, or drawn from, "Buffy the Vampire Slayer." It's a sense of being all you can be, using what you've been given, drawing on your strengths to spite your weaknesses...all of which can be found in Buffy and the other female characters, good or evil, on the show.

> Suzanne: The ability to know and make choices. To pursue your own interests and abilities. To live confidently, fully and without fear.

> Marissa: It definitely relates to the series. Seeing a girl who is stronger than any monster and who has to deal with some pretty heavy stuff emotionally is empowering as a girl. Doesn't mean I'll start beating people up in the street, it just breaks a stereotype... creates comfort and

confidence in girlhood.

Dan: Girl Power is everything from traditional feminism to
        Spice Girls to the Slayer. It's all about being yourself,
        being independent, and not curtailing what you need to
        be and do because of what other people will think. It's
        about using the power that we all have wisely,
        ultimately for good, but to go out to the edge, to push
        yourself and constantly grow from your experiences.
        And above all, don't be afraid.

Strength, confidence, being yourself and living up to your potential are common themes

in these responses and empowering interpretations of the phrase "Girl Power" and *BtVS*.

There is also an emphasis on personal growth. Valerie mentions "being all you can be"

and "drawing on your strengths." Suzanne uses the phrase "pursue your own interests

and abilities." Dan is the most explicit in his definition; "to push yourself and constantly

grow from your experiences." These definitions of Girl Power are based on a vision of

an innate power that individual girls can access and develop. Their emphasis is on the

process of becoming powerful or, in other words, coming into one's own power. While

these responses focus on individual power, others were overtly political in nature.

Numerous participants, such as Emily, made direct references to oppression and

gender in their definitions of Girl Power,

Emily: Girl power to me means that all those attributes that
         were supposed to keep us down as a gender can be used
         to our advantage...

Emily draws on a definition of Girl Power that intersects with feminist discourse to fight

gender oppression. According to her, Girl Power encourages young girls to take action

and to fight those things that "keep us down as a gender," much like Buffy Summers

does. Emily's interpretation of Girl Power relates to my previous comments about the

celebration of "feminine" sources of power in *BtVS*. Emotions are traditionally seen as

weak, yet Buffy draws power from her emotions. For Emily, Girl Power asserts the powerful nature of attributes such as this. It suggests that women do not have to emulate the dominant version of masculinity to be powerful, but that it is time to recognize alternative sources of strength.

Laura is more explicit than Emily when she relates Girl Power to concrete examples of gender oppression and resistance outside of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

> Laura: Girl power means independence, and opposing resisting forces to me. It doesn't really mean you're a girl, who's physically strong and can beat down opposition. Women in senate or other hard working ladies are also full of girl power. It's just a woman who doesn't let anything stand in her way because she's a woman.

Laura's statement is charged with political implications reaching beyond *BtVS* itself. She explains that her idea of Girl Power entails standing up for yourself. She then uses examples of women facing sexism in the workplace to illustrate her definition. Her explicit reference to women "in the senate" specifies a site where continued sexism exists and implicates the highest levels of government.

While Emily and Laura focus on fighting gender oppression, there were still other empowering ways in which my participants interpret Girl Power. Suzanne and Rachel define Girl Power by its source, an essentialist idea of feminine power in girls, rather than one bestowed upon them.

> Suzanne: I think (Girl Power) directly relates to the series. While not all female characters embody all of these characteristics all of the time, they strive towards it. Each female character grows throughout the series – gaining more confidence and greater understanding of their power and place in the world. The finale displays the ultimate in girl power – Buffy choosing to depart from a slayer system dominated and created by and for men, to distribute strength to all women for them to

develop their own strengths and to make the world a
better place for themselves and for those around them.

Rachel: Girl power. Here it is strength given to one woman per
generation by a group of men. Ummm. No I don't
think this is girl power. Every girl has a power to defeat
whatever life throws at us regardless of being a chosen
one or a witch or a demon. We are born with a strength
we use everyday to well, make it through the day. Girl
power to me is a female's ability to not rely on men or
anyone else and to be able to conquer their goals
themselves. A person can win a fight with someone
three times their body size and weight if they choose to
train and learn the techniques. You don't need some
spell, just skill.

Both of these women define Girl Power as a source of power, although their differing

interpretations of *BtVS* and the series finale effect how they relate it to the series. They

consider Girl Power to be an intrinsic power that girls and women can develop. Although

Rachel refers to it as a skill, this is prefaced by her assertion that it is something with

which women are born. Dan's earlier comment that "it's about using the power we all

have wisely" suggests that power is inherent in us all. Suzanne and Rachel are more

explicit than Dan when they distinguish Girl Power from power that is bestowed upon

women by men. As Buffy pointed out to the head of the Watchers' Council, Quentin

Travers, "I've had a lot of people talking at me the last few days. Everyone just lining up

to tell me how unimportant I am. And I've finally figured out why. Power. I have it.

They don't. This bothers them." ("Checkpoint"). This challenge to the Watchers' Council

was an instance where Buffy rejected the idea that power was something given to her.

Rachel suggests that this is the overriding message of *BtVS*, and Suzanne describes the

series' finale as the final reclamation of girls' power from men. These varied responses

reflect a politicized reading of Girl Power I mentioned earlier. In this instance, Girl

Power is "a celebration of self-belief, independence and female friendship, and whilst cynics muttered that it was an empty ideology – sneering that its goals were only the right to shout 'girl power' a lot – it nevertheless did seem to be empowering for young girls" (Gauntlett 218).

This was the case with at least one participant.

Suzanne: I must admit that watching Buffy inspired me to take a self-defence class and I am now looking into martial arts. Her character was an inspiration and motivated me to develop a more confident and powerful sense to myself.

Suzanne seems to be describing a variation of Jackie Stacey's concept of extra-cinematic identification. It originates from Melanie Klein's definition of introjection as "a process whereby qualities that belong to an external object are absorbed and unconsciously regarded as belonging to the self" (cited in Stacey 229). According to Stacey, this introjection is then translated to the spectator's object of fascination when she "integrate[s] an aspect of the star's image into their own identity" (231). Suzanne's description of empowerment can be interpreted as introjection, as she has integrated Buffy's confidence and powerful sense of self into her own self-concept. She then took action based on this new self-perception. While Stacey's research subjects adopted the appearance or attitude of their favoured stars, Suzanne was driven into action. In this case, Girl Power inspired assertiveness and possibly aggression reminiscent of Riot Grrls. Although Suzanne was the only informant who described feeling personally empowered by Girl Power or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the previous statements indicate the positive message that *BtVS* has for a number of participants. Yet,

this was only a portion of the respondents. There were others who defined it by what I'm calling commodified Girl Power.

Purchasing Power

The major discrepancy between political Girl Power and commodified Girl Power is the latter's consumer-orientation, an affiliation roundly rejected by Riot Grrls. Nancy referred to this aspect of the Girl Power phenomenon in her assertion that:

> Nancy: (Girl Power is) little more than a marketing tool that promotes female empowerment to those who can purchase the t-shirt with the slogan. It's both a good and bad phenomenon, in that I'd rather have that permeating popular culture than nothing at all illustrating that girls can kick ass, but it's problematic to the nines - in that only certain girls are represented as having it, or achieving it.

Nancy's statement touches on two important issues in the Girl Power debate, marketing and accessibility. I will return to the latter in moment. Many incarnations of Girl Power promote the pro-girl line to varying degrees with little to no acknowledgement of feminist agendas. This power is framed in a way that suggests girls already have full access to power and ignores or denies barriers they may face based on gender, race, class, etc. Many products that were always "girlie" have co-opted the pro-girl stance, while they continue to maintain their strict, traditional gender role socialization (Greer). For example, fashion magazines may use the language and iconography of Girl Power but they perpetuate traditional beauty norms and continue to emphasize the constant need to "improve" one's body based on an unattainable, air-brushed ideal. There is a strong commercial tie-in to Girl Power, an attempt to suggest that girls can emulate their role models through consumerism; one can buy an attitude of aggression and the right to

express oneself. Geissler explains, "[a]s a result of their efforts to capitalize on the Girl Power! promise of opportunity and self-reliance… multinational corporations have created a powerful brand of empowerment 'for sale'" (327). This emphasis on consumption suggests the possible exploitation of young women's power; a co-optation of the sensibility of a political movement and its manipulation in order to gain a greater market share. Nancy's comment refers to this inauthentic, consumer oriented version of Girl Power, feminism-for-sale if you will. While, as Nancy points out, it promotes empowerment, it becomes about who can be empowered and how. Through buying the t-shirt? This consumerist aspect of the phenomenon is reminiscent of way girls have previously been addressed by mainstream culture (McRobbie 16). The large presence of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* merchandise indicates the connection between the series and this signification of commodified Girl Power.

This consumer friendly version of Girl Power is often connected to the Spice Girls (Douglas; Riordan; Stoller). A number of participants make this connection and dismiss Girl Power outright in their interpretation of *BtVS*.

> Sherryl: Girl Power still makes me think of the Spice Girls. I
> have never associated that term with the series.

> Debbie: Girl Power to me means the Spice Girls! So it does not
> mean much.

Both Sherryl and Debbie make a direct link between the girl group and the Girl Power phenomenon. The Spice Girls are often dismissed for their lack of musical talent, their rise to fame under a Svengali and their role in inspiring young girls to dress and act provocatively, as is evident in this exchange:

> Sue: I don't like that term just because like I sort of turn it
> into an association with the Spice Girls.

Amanda: Yeah

Sue: So it just...like it...I think

Jessica: It's pre-packaged...

Others: Yeah

This initial struggle to define why they have a negative view of the Spice Girls and Girl Power demonstrates that it is an automatic association, not one that people think through. It could explain why other respondents did not expand on their negative associations with Girl Power once they connected it to the Spice Girls.

Furthermore, this association is significant because the Spice Girls' version of Girl Power is emblematic of the phenomenon's shortcomings. According to Whelehan, their "vision of 'girl power' plays on the illusion of a contemporary culture full of ready choices and opportunities for self-expression available equally to all women" (38). It normalized this level of success for individual women, ignoring the struggles against sexism that most women face.

Many media representations that depict successful women, ignore that struggle, portraying a world without sexism and laying the groundwork for claims that women have achieved equality and feminist activism is no longer necessary (Projanksy and Vande Berg 15). This normalization of exceptions and eradication of the struggle against oppression decontextualizes the systemic nature of that oppression and individualizes success and failure. Blame for those who do not achieve success is placed squarely on the shoulders of the unsuccessful (Jhally and Lewis 137-38). This Gramscian[12] hegemonic incorporation of feminist successes delegitimizes the build up of anger at the

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[12] cf. Antonio Gramsci. Selections form the Prision Notebook. Ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare & Goffrey Nowell Smith, Lawrence and Wishart. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971

continued struggles against sexism that may have otherwise become resistance, instead feeding into the "party line" of the postfeminists.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer both upholds this position and challenges it and in this way reflects some of the limitations of the concept of Girl Power, primarily in its representation of race and class and its emphasis on individualism. The lead character is traditionally pretty, skinny, white, middle class and heterosexual. She is one of the girls who Nancy refers to when she mentions that only some women have access to Girl Power. As I discussed in the introduction, Faith and Kendra serve to reinforce Buffy's whiteness and middle-class background as the standard for success as a slayer. But, as I also mentioned, Buffy explicitly confronts patriarchal structures in the form of The Watchers' Council and an underground military unit called The Initiative. Her questions and her refusal to fall in line are direct affronts to these organizations, highlighting the fact that such structures continue to dominate and must be contested.

Through the series of positions taken in these responses, we begin to see the debate surrounding the phenomenon unfold. The comments in the previous section indicate that some participants see the Girl Power phenomenon as political and relevant to real women's experiences and abilities. Suzanne finds it quite empowering, convincing her to take self-defence and martial arts classes. The comments by Barb and Nancy respond to the merchandising of Girl Power, and, while Nancy believes that this slogan is better than nothing, both women focus on what it is not, authentic empowerment. One of the differences in these interpretations is related to the source of power. Nancy's response indicates that the merchandising of Girl Power places the source of that power in the act of purchasing the t-shirt. Barb relies on the original

connection of Girl Power and Riot Grrls. Other participants focus on the innate power of girls, which, in turn, means something different to each respondent. Rachel and Suzanne define this power in terms of where it does not originate, from men. Suzanne also agrees with Dan and Valerie's emphasis on the need to develop this innate power and to grow into it. I do not want to dismiss Nancy and Barb's comments as irrelevant or misinformed. In fact, both of these women are involved in scholarly research related to this area, and are, therefore, quite familiar with the various permutations of this debate. For that reason, they elaborate on what the others are probably trying to say when they relate Girl Power to the Spice Girls.

I think it is critical to point out that, although participants call upon both versions of Girl Power, they have different reactions to the term and how it relates to *BtVS* depending on which discourse they work from. Most of the respondents adhere to the idea of Girl Power as empowerment, political Girl Power, and associate it with *BtVS*. Those drawing on a discourse of commodified Girl Power relate it to the Spice Girls and consumption and dismiss the Girl Power phenomenon as unrelated to *BtVS* and irrelevant to their lives. The discussion about the Spice Girls introduces two criticisms of Girl Power that become more pronounced when my participants' accounts intersect with Girlie feminism; individualism and disregard of the multiple barriers women continue to face.

Girlie Power

Girlie feminists seek to reclaim items that its proponents claim were rejected by Second Wave feminists as oppressive tools of a patriarchal culture. "Girlie encompasses

the tabooed symbols of women's feminine enculturation – Barbie dolls, makeup, fashion magazines, high heels – and says using makeup isn't shorthand for 'we've been duped'" (Baumgardner and Richards 136). Girlie feminism's emphasis on femininity and power, in conjunction with consumption mirrors the issues surrounding commodified Girl Power.

Although none of my participants explicitly discuss Girlie feminism, a number of them use its language or respond to it. In this way, they display the perspectives of which Silverman spoke. Although these statements reveal how these participants' ideas about feminism are integrated into their discussion of *BtVS*, my analysis of their brief comments should not be considered a reflection of the complexity of their overall perspectives.

My participants expose a tension between femininity and power that arises when representations of strong female characters unfailingly fit the traditional North American standard of beauty. This tension also surfaces when Girlies use traditional "girlie" items such as makeup and high heels. The emphasis on Buffy's love of clothes alongside her warrior gender play, place *BtVS* firmly within Girlie feminism. Lisa explains the connection further.

> Lisa: She is depicted as powerful despite her heels and sometimes skimpy clothes.

According to Lisa, Buffy can enjoy what have previously been considered the trappings of femininity without necessarily being trapped by them. Lisa's response reflects the Girlie feminist emphasis on the compatibility of femininity and power. While I do not disagree with this position, I contend that its status as a key political issue is only tenable in this specific historical/cultural moment, when feminist ideals of equality have been

introduced into the mainstream. Girlies acknowledge that feminists have made significant advances for women's rights and claim that there is no need to be as stringent about dress as there was several decades ago. They see their choice of clothing and accessories as an act of asserting agency, refusing to be defined by someone else. This acknowledgement of feminist progress is a fundamental tenet of Third Wave feminism, a controversial distinction within the feminist movement that is sometimes mistaken as interchangeable with Girlie feminism. There is an ongoing, heated debate over how to define Third Wave feminism, who is included under this title, whether or not there is a need to define a new wave and even if it indeed exists.[13] For the purpose of this thesis I define the Third Wave as an acknowledgement and celebration of Second Wave successes (Findlen xv), an attempt at wide-spread inclusion of previously marginalized voices (Heywood and Drake 3) and a strategic defiance of the feminist backlash (Siegel 52). I have included this brief description of Third Wave feminism because it faces the same criticisms as Girlie feminism, primarily related to the perceived over-emphasis on individualism. This accusation is leveled at Third Wave texts that are primarily collections of essays describing how the authors' personal stories are political, without making larger connections between or among the issues at hand in the same way that Second Wavers did (Orr 32-33). Girlie feminists face this assessment for a different reason; they emphasize personal choice in style with little consideration as to how their options came to be or how their choices fit into greater structures. A brief overview of

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[13] For more on these debates cf. Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme 20.4/21.1 (Winter/Spring 2001); Hypatia 12.3 (Summer 1997). For a detailed discussion of Third Wave feminism cf. Listen Up: Voices from the next feminist generation. Ed. Barbara Findlen. Seattle: Seal Press, 1995; Turbo Chicks: Talking Young Feminisms. Eds. Allyson Mitchell, Lisa Bryn Rundle and Lara Karaian. Toronto: Sumach Press, 2001; to be real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism. Ed. Rebecca Walker. New York: Random House Inc., 1995.

BUST magazine will help illuminate the intentions of and tensions surrounding Girlie feminism.

BUST is held up as a major force in the Third Wave and heralded for its girlieness (O'Connor; Baumgardner and Richards). The magazine's founding editors published a book entitled *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order*, proclaiming their perspective as representative of a "new" generation of feminists. As their introduction to this anthology states, "In *BUST* we've captured the voice of a brave new girl: one that is raw and real, straightforward and sarcastic, smart and silly, and liberally sprinkled with references to our own Girl Culture – that shared set of female experiences that includes Barbies and blowjobs, sexism and shoplifting, Vogue and vaginas" (Karp and Stoller xiv-xv). As *BUST* magazine has grown from a photocopied zine into a glossy magazine full of advertising, it has become much more consumer oriented. Their editorial/product content has grown into a celebration of feminism through consumption. There is little to no critical comment about this growing consumer aspect of their New Girl Order. Any potentially questionable views are dismissed, as in "I know, I know, guns are brutal instruments of the patriarchy, but this vibrator is HOTT!" (Molly, 26). The "HOTT" (with two "t"s) vibrator she refers to is shaped like a gun. Her easy dismissal of the violence against women that may be represented by this gun vibrator is shocking to me. I see this as a lack of political understanding of the implications of this comment within the discourse of violence against women.[14] This, in combination with the emphasis on consumer purchases verges on "commodified feminism," where the political edge of the

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[14] According to the Status of Women Canada report *Fact Sheet: Statistics on violence against women in Canada*, 51% of Canadian women "have been victims of at least one act of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16" (1). Furthermore, female victims of spousal violence, who account for 85% of the victims of such violence, were almost twice as likely as men "to report being threatened with a gun or a knife or had one used against them" (ibid 3).

movement is forgotten and all that remains is the attitude (Goldman et al.). As was pointed out in *Bitch* magazine, "what was edgy and challenging about what Stoller was doing in 1993, hot on the heels of the riot grrrl and queer movements, may no longer be radical in the commercialized girl-power pop climate of 2002" (Kula 59). Despite this similarity to "non-feminist" magazines, *BUST* editor Debbie Stoller maintains that she has "very political intentions. The one thing I always want to make clear is that I've done my time in the feminist academic trenches." (ibid 58). Stoller equates her feminist background with the inevitable politically progressive nature of her work, and overlooks the fact that as our culture changes, in this case the incorporation or co-optation of the pro-girl line by the mainstream, the concept of what is politically progressive evolves. While this critique is about consumption rather than the representation of the female body and the feminine, the issue is the same; lack of awareness of the context in which these representations are disseminated.

The tension between femininity and feminist politics emerges first in the reclamation of girlieness and then in the way this process plays out. Girlie accessories that were discarded as oppressive by some Second Wavers are being reclaimed by Girlies who maintain that it is possible to enjoy makeup and fashion without giving up their feminist politics. Their argument is weakened when they do not acknowledge the structures within which they make these choices and reclamations. As Leah McLaren, a self-identified girlie explains:

> Can a woman really have choice when immersed in a patriarchal culture that defines, among other things, the parameter of the question? If I choose to wear makeup and submit my body to Hair Management 101 does that mean I'm choosing or does that just mean I'm choosing to give in? If you can't beat 'em, manicure! (94).

The issue McLaren addresses comes into play when Girlies dress in ways that were previously designed to appeal to the male gaze. In order for the reclamation of girlieness to remain political, Girlies need to be aware of why they are making these particular choices, and the broader cultural issues surrounding them. Other than McLaren I have yet to come across any self-reflection by a Girlie on what shapes their fashion or lifestyle choices.

Reclamation of girlie items does not necessarily alter their meanings. "Playing on stereotypes that continue to appear as truths in larger culture may actually reinforce rather than radicalize them" (Kula, 58). Riot Grrls strategically used irony to play on stereotypes while pointing out that they were, indeed, stereotypes. Unlike Riot Grrls' juxtaposition of girlie items with a non-girlie attitude, Girlie feminists reclaim these items and images without recontextualizing them in this ironic way. When the traditional markings of femininity and the beauty ideal are maintained in girlie identities, Girlies reinforce the very structures they claim to challenge. Buffy's prom queen looks indicate that girls do not have to choose between power and femininity, but they also reinforce a stringent beauty ideal. It is difficult to find explicit descriptions of exactly what this ideal entails, but it has been characterized as "young, thin, white, and Anglo-Saxon" (Kesselman et al. 92), as including qualities suggesting passivity and as relating to the continued subordination of women (Wolf, Faludi *Backlash*). While Buffy may not reflect the passivity espoused by this ideal, her appearance is one supported by a beauty industry that requires girls to submit to rigorous beauty regimens in order to be prepared to be looked at and assessed. This was complicated with Sarah Michelle Gellar's role as a Revlon spokesmodel during her tenure as Buffy Summers. As the face of both Buffy

Summers and Revlon, Gellar became synonymous with Buffy's power as a slayer and the promotion of augmenting the self through beauty products. Thus, the roles can easily become conflated. Girl Power icons like Buffy/Sarah Michelle Gellar perpetuate a North American standard of beauty, one that is often disempowering for girls.

Nancy touches on this subject when she discusses Buffy's diminishing weight throughout the series. As the character grew up and became physically more powerful, the actress lost a noticeable amount of weight.

> Nancy: (Buffy's) physical strength and agility was pretty cool
> in the early seasons, she looked as though she could
> actually (and therefore anyone watching could also) do
> the things she was doing. As time passed, her body got
> smaller, and the kung fu fighting she did earlier just
> seemed laughable with her stick body. No musculature
> – what is that about?

This is reminiscent of Vint's discussion about the conflation of Buffy Summers and Sarah Michelle Gellar. In this case, it is not the primary and secondary texts that connect the two images; rather it is that the actress's physical image becomes that of the character. As Sarah Michelle Gellar conformed to Hollywood standards and shrunk from a normal, if thin young woman to a typical TV-land waif, the character underwent the same transformation with different implications. Buffy's physical alteration coincided with her escalating ability as a slayer, connecting this body image to increased power. In fact, as each of the female characters in the series became more powerful their appearances shifted to fit North American beauty standards. Rachel sarcastically made this connection.

> Rachel: The more powerful any character became they suddenly
> learned how to dress and wear makeup.

This is likely a direct reference to Willow's character arc from mousy nerd to sexy

lesbian witch. Willow's physical transformation coincided with her coming out and developing magic powers. In Willow's case, it wasn't necessarily the actress' weight that triggered Rachel's comments as it was the character's apparent heightened fashion sense. Unlike Sarah Michelle Gellar's weight loss, this was clearly a decision on the part of the producers and, as such, an intentional connection between physical appearance and power.

Buffy's appearance came up in both discussion groups. The second group discussed it briefly before dismissing it. These respondents thought she was too skinny, but that did not compromise their interpretation of Buffy as a powerful character. There was a brief discussion in the first group about other, similar media representations that led to a discussion of the physical appearance of slayers.

> Jean: Well because Buffy can be – I'm not saying she necessarily is, but some might perceive Buffy as sexy *and* powerful. But her power does not come from her sex appeal. She's the slayer. That's what she is. It doesn't matter if she's beautiful or not or pretty or not or has a good figure or not – she's still the slayer and so she's not defined by how she looks. How she looks is kind of like an aside. Not for the sake of the show but for the sake of the identity of who she is – her identity as a slayer.

Jean's comment indicates the importance of Buffy's identity. Using Vint's terminology, "Jean's Buffy" is derived from her "calling" as a slayer. Jean acknowledges that Buffy fits the beauty standard but that this does not define her. Jean downplays the connection between appearance and power but the series' investment in this connection became clear in the exchange immediately following her comment.

> Sheila: One of the slayer's was fat
>
> Me: Who was fat?

Sheila: Ok – well – no. You know those girls they showed at the very end.

Others: Oh yeah.

Me: One of them wasn't so pretty. She was the geek.

Lana: The one with the long hair.

Sheila: The one with the squeaky voice

Anne: Oh the geek

Others: oh yeah

Jean's remarks at the beginning of this exchange suggest that these women believe that the power and beauty of these characters can co-exist; that beauty is not a requirement for power but its presence is, in Jean's words, "an aside." The group does not falter from this claim at the end of this passage when they have difficulty thinking of a slayer who did not fit the beauty ideal. Not only do I fail to point out this oversight, I join them in trying to think of a character to prove their point. As fans who identify Buffy as a slayer first and foremost, we are invested in retaining appearance as a secondary concern. It took work to do so. Unlike Condit's characterization of this work as unpleasant (110), in this case it was part of the enjoyable patter of group interpretation. Part of the pleasure, at least for me, was coming up with a rationale and affirming "my Buffy." It also required us to overlook the implications Rachel identified: there is an implicit connection between appearances and power throughout the series. This was a case where the political was lost as we willingly/wilfully ignored the context in which this beauty standard is reinforced.

A similar decontextualization occurred when this group interpreted the use of

sexuality to sell Girl Power as ironic.

> Anne: These days there's a lot of commercials about the new Charlie's Angels movies. Right? And I can tell by even what you see in the commercials…
>
> Sheila: The girls are going like nudge nudge wink wink here's my ass.
>
> Anne: Exactly. You know, like so what? So I'm beautiful. So I can wear skimpy clothes. That's another form of power that I have as opposed to it just being a liability.

In this exchange, these women describe this display of sexuality as being used by women, instead of women being used by it. Sheila refers to "the girls" as if the actresses were in control of how they were presented without considering the structure within which these images were created. In the case of *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*, Drew Barrymore was a producer as well as one of the film's stars and likely had a say in the matter. Yet, these characters, all strong, capable women, are presented "to-be-looked-at", to use Mulvey's terminology. They dance around in ways that would be considered objectifying in any other context, but it is not interpreted as such by my participants. This emphasis on femininity and sexuality as a source of power is at the heart of Girlie feminism, but it is criticized for the individualism that arises in this prioritization of personal power and choice over context. The question becomes whether women are using their femininity in these representations, or if their femininity is being used and exploited for corporate interests; mirroring the debate around *BtVS* and Girl Power that I have outlined. Traditional images of beauty and girlieness are repackaged but they have not actually changed. They are simply, but not always successfully re-presented as powerful. It is unclear to what extent these images are recoded as such in a larger cultural context, or if they merely perpetuate traditional standards of beauty and

femininity.

Wendy relates a similar recoding of traditionally feminine characteristics as powerful.

> Wendy: If a person has girl power that means that they have power through femininity and not because they conformed to male roles. For example the Spice Girls had power because they were very popular and they wore girlie clothes and makeup and weren't afraid to show emotion. I would say that Buffy had girl power in the first few seasons of the show because she still showed her raw love for Angel and tended to use her femininity more in general, in the way she dressed and acted. In the later seasons she became more androgynous. She seemed hardened by the amount of death and hate she had to endure and had a tendency to push people away, like Riley.

According to Wendy, Buffy's power is derived from her femininity, which seems to depend on clothes, makeup and her "raw love for Angel." Wendy associates emotions with femininity, which is not troubling in itself. What is problematic is her description of how Buffy became emotionally hardened throughout the series. Becoming more traditionally masculine distanced her from Wendy's notion of Girl Power. In this brief response, Wendy defines Girl Power in terms of power derived from traditional notions of femininity without questioning the limitations this places on girls or expanding female power sources beyond the traditionally feminine realm. Her inclusion of girlie clothes and makeup as part of the Spice Girls' power reference a Girlie feminist agenda. Once again, the implications of maintaining traditional definitions of femininity are overlooked and the political potential of Girl Power and Girlie feminism are compromised.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer reflects the assumed gender equality of a generation that was raised with the benefits of Second Wave accomplishments, yet Buffy challenges

patriarchal structures and gender oppression when she faces it. Participants' comments reveal that, for them, she displays a combination of girlishness and anger associated with the Riot Grrls, albeit in a commodified form. The character and *Buffy* fans engage with both her femininity and feminism, delving into the tension that marks Girlie feminism. This reclamation of femininity as a feminist issue is predicated on the acknowledgement that feminists have made progress in their fight for women's rights. While this acknowledgement is used in Girlie feminism and Third Wave in general to celebrate feminist successes and restructure the questions being asked, postfeminists misrepresent this progress as a complete triumph over sexism. Just as some of my participants call on Girlie tropes to discuss *BtVS*, others offer postfeminist interpretations of the series.

Postfeminism: Enough with the Power Already

Some scholars use the term "postfeminism" in reference to what I have previously defined as Third Wave feminism, or they have claimed that one is part of the other (cf. Lotz). Their contention is that the term avoids the inter-generational strife of Third Wave's implicit claim that the Second Wave is over and acknowledges the incorporation of postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism into current feminist frameworks. I strongly disagree with this definition on a number of counts. "Post" suggests the end of something or a new phase in direct contention with an older one, implying that issues integral to Second Wave feminisms are no longer relevant. Even if we insist that the term has a different definition, there is a strong movement of political right-wingers, prominently covered in the media, who claim that there is no longer a need for feminism, suggesting that we are in a postfeminist state. The possible conflation of

this sense of the term with what I'm calling Third Wave is highly problematic. While both postfeminism and Third Wave feminism acknowledge the progress that Second Wave feminists have made, postfeminists turn this into a denial of continued sexism and recommend the cessation of ongoing feminist work.

As Susan Faludi writes, postfeminists generally claim that feminists have made enough progress and it is now time to relax and reconcile with men (*I'm a feminist but...* 32). This is based on the assumption that women no longer face sexism and enjoy complete equality with men. This sentiment is expressed by my participants in a couple of different ways.

> Emily: Girl power to me means that all those attributes that were supposed to keep us down as a gender can be used to our advantage, and that we can get anything we want.

While this is mostly an empowering view of Girl Power in that it focuses on the possibilities for girls rather than the limitations, it assumes that there are no boundaries to a girl's potential. Emily's final comment about getting "anything we want" falls in line with other postfeminists in that she implicitly denies the continued structural and historical barriers women face and completely ignores the multiple other barriers that affect women who are not white and middle-class. It reveals an awareness of gender politics while denying the further need for political activism. This particular response is a brief comment, and Emily may, in fact, be Third Wave, but I believe her overstatement indicates a denial of continued sexism, a sentiment that triggers proclamations of a postfeminist era.

This dismissal of feminism's relevance is a common response to feminist activism, dating back to 1919 and feminism's First Wave (Faludi, *I'm a feminist but...*

38). Those currently taking the postfeminist stance include organizations such as The Women's Freedom Network, the Independent Women's Forum (IWF) and the Network for Empowering Women (NEW) as well numerous conservative authors such as Katie Roiphe, Rene Denfeld and Christina Hoff Sommers. "They define themselves as feminists, but their dismissive-to-outright-hostile attitudes towards feminist issues – from sexual harassment to domestic violence to rape to pay equity to child care to welfare rights – locate them firmly on the antifeminist side of the ledger" (ibid 32). Unsurprisingly the media has jumped at presenting this "new postfeminism" position on panels, replacing overtly anti-feminist pundits. Faludi indicates that it is not their contrariness that is troublesome but their "reductionist, erroneous, easy opinions parading as serious and daring ideas" (ibid 37). Steve's comment hints at the implications of this postfeminist position.

> Steve: I don't believe in Girl Power as much as I believe in People Power. Just being a girl doesn't make one powerful; it's other characteristics that give one power. Also, sometimes power comes from the support of other people and not just from within. Buffy, despite being the most powerful girl in the world (well, until Willow got into magic, I guess) still often needed the help from her friends, mentors, and even enemies.

Like Emily, Steve's response dismisses the need to empower girls as a specific group. There seems to be an underlying assumption that girls already have access to power, and we should stop talking about it. Using Condit's terminology, Steve works to ignore the empowering potential of this series by downplaying girls' individual power and finding other sources of power within the show. Unlike the discussions about community that I will address in the next chapter, Steve references *BtVS*'s representation of the community as a source of power to prove that being a girl is not powerful in itself. Steve's comments

demonstrate how people can overlook the empowering aspects of the series and reject the need for such a message at all. He suggests that we should forget gender differences and focus solely on our common humanity.

This reaction was common in Lee Parpart's study of male *Buffy* fans, in which she found that most straight male viewers were "far more likely to focus on non-gender-related aspects of the show, often downplaying Buffy's status as woman warrior or reading the show's themes in generic, broadly humanistic terms" (Parpart 85). Parpart suggests that men see gender as one of several possible identifiers and that any gender transgression they identify is often read against race and class containment. I found Steve's response troubling because he not only dismisses the existence of political Girl Power, he works at offering an explanation as to why it is unnecessary. In my opinion, this is a denial of the current status of girls in our culture.

Rob offers a similar statement that seems to indicate that he feels personally threatened by the idea of Girl Power.

> Rob: The term (Girl Power) means nothing to me. I've always felt that it was a trendy term that gets thrown around a lot with no real target. I hear people use it in so many different situations that don't relate. If I had to really think about it I guess I would find it alienating like all of those terms with same idea. Why does it always have to be a 'girl' thing, or a 'black' thing, or an 'Italian' thing, or a 'Jewish' thing? Why can't it just be a 'People' thing. 'Girl Power', I guess I choose to make it meaningless.

Lana provides a way to interpret his response.

> Lana: Well it's weird – it just seems when you were saying it I was just thinking like "Boy Power". Like boy's are always into power and that's like sort of their like their place to be.

According to Lana's interpretation of Girl Power, Rob may feel defensive about a form of power that does not include him. Through distancing himself from "Jewish things," "black things" and "girl things" he appears to restrict his perspective to that of his own white, presumably Christian and male position of privilege. As a multiply privileged member of society, Rob may be unaccustomed to, and perhaps even threatened by any perceived exclusion. Rob's comments suggest that in order to compensate he denies the unique position of each of these other groups, their possible exclusion from his privileged world and their need to create a separate space. Once again, his statement seems to be based on a perceived equality that denies the continued marginalization of others.

While these are my readings of otherwise innocuous comments, some postfeminist stances are explicitly anti-feminist

> Ellen: Girl Power. Aside from Spice Girls makes me think radical feminist. I liked Buffy because there was no overly radical behaviour in the show. They balanced good and evil, strengths and weaknesses, etc between male / female roles. And between each character themselves. I can see how "girl power" can be interpreted in Buffy. But again. Not overtly, just interwoven in the very well written scripts. - Aside from season 7 which was ALL about girl power- but they countered in the last episode where it was actually two men who saved the world. Angel by bringing the Amulet and Spike for using it. And Buffy gave him the credit at the end of the show. Thus taking away the building "Ultimate Girl Power" motif that grew in the last season..

Ellen works at maintaining her position that *BtVS* was not about Girl Power to the point that, when it is undeniable in season seven, she interprets the final moments of the last episode as "salvaging" the entire season. This is another example of the work Condit describes viewers must do to situate the text into their own ideology (109). It is unclear

what Ellen means when she equates Girl Power with radical feminism. If she means to define Girl Power as exclusively female and separatist, she echoes Rob's sentiments. This is a typical postfeminist stance, trying to make amends with men for perceived Second Wave slights. Considering her description of Girl Power in *BtVS*'s seventh season, I'm not sure that this is what she means. She explains that the promotion of Girl Power in that season was countered when two men saved the world and were acknowledged as such. This seems to indicate that Ellen considers the promotion of a female source of power to fall under the heading of radical feminism. She appears to work from my definition of political Girl Power but dismisses this as radical and, furthermore, marginalizes feminist politics as extreme.

My participants grapple with this debate about who has a right to call themselves a feminist and exactly what that entails. Their oscillations parallel critiques of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. This series faces challenges to its status as a feminist series similar to those levelled at Roiphe, Denefeld and Hoff Summers. As I mentioned in the introduction, Joss Whedon has stated "[i]f I can make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who takes charge of a situation without their knowing that's what's happening, it's better than sitting down and selling them on feminism" (Bellafante 84). This is not as productive as self-identified feminist Whedon proclaims when we consider it in the context of postfeminism. Rob and Steve reveal how overt feminist action can be ignored in favour of the postfeminist claim that women have attained full equality.

While these last few comments focus on how Girl Power excludes men, Lana feels it diminishes the power of girls.

> Lana: But I don't know. The whole Girl Power thing is kinda goofy... It was almost insulting that then when you did

> something that was powerful that it was Girl Power as opposed
> to just like being…

Jean: Like I did something good.

Lana: YEAH! Exactly.

Jean: Like I worked hard. You know…

In this exchange, Lana expresses her frustration at the continued need to claim power as a girl, as it diminishes that power as *only* Girl Power and not as a celebration of the power of being a girl. Where Rob and Steve seem to feel excluded, Lana appears to feels marginalized. This is partially influenced by the marketing connotations that I discussed earlier in this chapter. If Lana equates Girl Power with commodified feminism and a girlie style without politics, this reduces girls' power to consumption. For Lana, any use of the phrase "Girl Power" is hampered by this association. She proposes that the phrase cannot escape this connection, evoking the dilemma: who has the authority to define girls' power?

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have examined the various arguments put forth by my participants in their discussion of Girl Power and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. As I have demonstrated, they traverse debates about authenticity, consumption, representation and feminism, to name a few. The series is a vehicle by which they can engage with current debate and draw from popular discourse, revealing what Silverman refers to as their moral forms and perspectives. Participants connect these perspectives to *BtVS* and use the series to develop their arguments. They demonstrate that talk about *BtVS* is not always about the show; it intersects, reflects and informs political discourse. By

reflecting on this collection of perspectives, we can see how the debate surrounding *BtVS*, Girl Power and feminism unfolds.

The phrase "Girl Power" has a variety of connotations. While most of my informants respond to the empowering version of the phenomenon, there are a number of participants who reveal its limitations. The idea of gender equality has been integrated into mainstream culture, but the media's celebration of powerful women masks continued sexism and other forms of marginalization. Girl Power has been co-opted by commercial interests that have shifted its emphasis to the availability of power in consumption practices. This commodified version of Girl Power falls prey to the same criticisms as Girlie feminism. Both are tainted by individualism, exclusion, traditional images of femininity and the depoliticization of popular representations of feminism. Some participants interpret Girl Power in a way that appears to coincide with postfeminism, illustrating the fine line that exists between celebrating feminist progress and denying the existence of continued sexism. Participants' comments about *BtVS* display all of the above perspectives. These latter interpretations of the series do not necessarily compromise the empowering readings. Instead, they indicate the range of perspectives available in *BtVS* and the ways in which viewers can engage with the series.

Through my participants' discussions, a number of questions were posed. Who can call themselves a feminist? Who gets to represent Girl Power? How are people excluded from this phenomenon? While their varied responses do not lend themselves to clear cut answers, they define the range of debate and provide insight into how popular culture intersects with feminist discourse.

Chapter Three

Defining and Recreating Communities with the Buffyverse[15]

> *What can't we face if we're together?*
> *What's in this place that we can't weather?*
> *There's nothing we can't face.*[16]

One of Buffy's greatest strengths was her group of friends, the Scooby Gang. Ideal communities, such as this one, can offer a sustaining, mutually beneficial connection among individuals and a sense of belonging for those involved. These communities can be significant sources of power with potential for political action. My participants describe how this was the case with the Scoobies, their association with each other makes them individually stronger and collectively a force to be reckoned with. As this is a key point of interest for my participants, it is not surprising that they intentionally or unintentionally emulate the connection they see among the Scoobies in their everyday lives.

The Scooby Gang is a rag-tag group of misfits who help Buffy battle evil, each bringing her or his own strengths to the group. Take Rupert Giles, for example, Buffy's Watcher, mentor and friend who is well read on the subject of all things supernatural. Giles, as the Scoobies call him, keeps a vast collection of ancient texts that foretell prophecies and catalogue demons and a variety of otherworldly creatures. Willow is a brainy nerd with a knack for computer hacking who, during the course of the series, discovers her powerful magic abilities. Xander's role in the group is less obvious in the

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[15] The term "Buffyverse" is commonly used by fans to refer to the imagined universe of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, including the internal logic of the series and its character and plot developments.

[16] Lyrics to "I've Got a Theory" sung by the Scooby Gang in the episode entitled "Once More with Feeling."

heat of battle. He offers jokes to lighten the mood, emotional support to the other Scoobies and an extra body to carry out strategies. Xander also has some military and weapons knowledge that he retains from a spell that had temporarily turned him into a soldier ("Halloween"). As the core members of the Scooby Gang, Buffy, Giles, Willow and Xander became an extended family, replacing the generally absent biological family members in each of their lives. Other characters come and go throughout the show. Angel, Cordelia, Oz, Anya, Tara, Riley, Dawn and Spike are each part of the Scooby Gang for a time, but the primary connection is between these four. The Scooby Gang is a powerful and supportive community throughout the entirety of the series.

Working as part of a collective, like the Scooby Gang, is a typically feminist mode of operation (Adair and Howell 39). By emphasizing the power of the group, *BtVS* challenges the traditional hero's depiction as a lone warrior (Wilcox; Ross; Levine).[17] My participants' responses indicate that the significance of community on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* exceeds a straight-forward subversion of this lone warrior narrative; the series is a site of community building, both within and around the series. *BtVS* became a forum for viewers to identify and define ideal communities and then recreate similar allegiances in their lives. This chapter will cover three connections my participants highlight between *BtVS* and community; the depiction of communal power in the series, the activities of *Buffy* fan communities and the connections *BtVS* writers established with *Buffy* fans.

Numerous informants highlight the fact that power is derived from the various communities depicted in the show. Through their dialogue, they define and elaborate on the potential sources of power in communities; friendship and support, strength in

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[17] For a more detailed discussion of the lone warrior, consult pages 11-12 of this thesis.

numbers, shared skills and a sense of belonging. They reinforce the importance of ideal communities by juxtaposing them with the corrupt communities and the consequences of isolation depicted in *BtVS*. The most powerful communities in Sunnydale are those created by groups of people who were otherwise outsiders.

Identification with, or longing for, a sense of belonging seems to have translated to these viewers activities outside of viewing *BtVS*. These audience members connect with each other over their love for the series; creating links between strangers and providing friends with a language for discussing their lives. Although these fans did not explicitly identify themselves as part of a community in the discussion groups or questionnaires, the tests of legitimacy, rituals and storytelling that occur among *Buffy* fans are reminiscent of the creation and maintenance of symbolic communities. For a number of participants, association with other *Buffy* fans appears to be more important than their struggle with interpretation of the series.

Several informants talk about *BtVS*'s creator Joss Whedon with a sense of familiarity, and discuss the close connection that exists between the series' creative team and the fans. Although this may often be the case with science fiction fans, the creative team behind *BtVS* seems to have intentionally drawn this out by emphasizing the power of group identity in the series and actively participating in the fan community.

It is my contention that these external fan activities are promoted in, and inspired by, the depiction of community throughout the series and are, in part, a result of the creative team's attempts to connect the Scooby Gang with the community of fans. This process is fostered by fans' identification with the onscreen depictions of communities of outsiders and their desire for that sense of belonging, motivating them to recreate similar

affiliations with other *Buffy* fans. In order to illuminate this process of identification and emulation, I will begin with a review of how my participants see communities depicted in the Buffyverse.

The Power of Community in Sunnydale, CA

The literature on what I'm referring to as "ideal communities" addresses the power of chosen associations. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the communities to which we choose to belong are often based on common interests and goals, differentiating them from family associations (85). Forsey explains that this can offer us a sense of being grounded and connected (2). When we find a group that accepts us for who we are and does not expect us to change, we can begin to build durable friendships based on trust (Rousseau). These communities provide us with energy, imagination, moral certainty and courage; enabling us to choose the best course of action, claim our power and act in unity. While this can be said of the Scooby Gang, my participants offer a detailed account of the sources of power available in *BtVS* communities that I could not find in the literature on community.

The importance of community is underscored throughout the series. As such, the most common connection my informants made between *BtVS* and community is its potential as a power source. They outline the varied ways that working in a group can be potent; including communal activism, the power of friendships, strength in numbers, the potential of shared individual strengths and the empowering promise of a sense of belonging. Participants develop a nuanced, multi-layered connection between power and community.

Lisa: Buffy's power lies largely in her connection to others. She is weakest when she is disconnected from them, and they are parts of a whole evil-fighting team.

Wendy: Buffy's power (physical and overall) always came from her friends - that seemed to often be the point of the show, to show how no one has power when they are alone.

Lisa and Wendy's comments are two among many expressing the importance of the Scooby Gang in Buffy's battle against evil. Throughout the series, Buffy struggles with the tension between being an independent warrior and participating in communal activism. This is particularly apparent in season four when the Scoobies each go their separate ways after an unprecedented fight. Buffy claims that she is better off fighting alone and not having to worry about protecting the others ("The Yoko Factor"). During the next episode Buffy, Willow, Xander and Giles realize that the only way to overpower the imminent threat of human/demon hybrid, Adam, is through a spell that melds them together, calls on the power of the first vampire slayer and instils this collective power in Buffy as she battles and defeats Adam. Over the course of these two episodes, the Scoobies realize that while they accomplish very little on their own, together they are an extremely powerful unit able to take a the military industrial complex, The Initiative, and its ultimate demon/human hybrid soldier, Adam. This plotline underscores the theme that Lisa and Wendy describe; Buffy is stronger when she works in concert with her friends than she is on her own.

Matt further develops this prioritization of community action over that of the individual when he points out that Buffy's community is a significant factor in her unprecedented success as a slayer.

Matt: The idea that she was supposed to stand alone as the

slayer but instead relied on her friends and their support/power which in turn made her the most successful Slayer in history is a good lesson. Alone she can be strong but matched with her friends she is even stronger.

Matt highlights how this non-traditional approach to slaying kept Buffy alive longer than any other slayer. Spike indicates that her relationships set her apart from the previous slayers he had killed ("Fool For Love"). Buffy's connection to her friends gives her something to live for, something to fight for. As they help her in her various battles, she fights harder to protect them than she would have if she fought alone.

Valerie expands on the importance of friendship, explicitly making the connection between power and community support and love.

> Valerie: Buffy's power stemmed from mystical sources and from the « ordinary » people around her. She drew from the slayer legacy as much as from the love and support of her family and friends. Without the latter, the former would have been far less effective or meaningful.

Karen affirms Valerie's connection between this power and love.

> Karen: (Buffy) also found a lot of power through friendship and love.

Both of these women indicate that it is the combination of emotion (love) and community that is powerful. Each is generally considered feminine and denigrated as such; while in *BtVS* they are not only powerful individually, but together; the most powerful force being love within the community. Returning to the notion that *BtVS* is a metaphor for surviving high school, and, in later seasons, growing up, the transition from teenager to young adult is extremely difficult, and it is only through the support of our friends that it seems we can endure it. Buffy's friends help her overcome her demons, both literally and figuratively.

Support from Buffy's friends is an asset, but some participants focus on other ways in which communities can be powerful, such as the size of the group.

> Steve: Power & Community is often seen in the emphasis on strength in numbers, whether it's Buffy and the Scoobies, or the army of slayers in training.

> Valerie: Strength in numbers was a recurring theme; the Scoobies were stronger united than divided.

For Valerie, Steve and several others, community power was derived from sheer numbers. This in itself challenges the notion of the lone warrior (Wilcox 4). The greater number of Scooby members, the greater number of tasks they can accomplish. They can cover more ground and do more research. They can develop elaborate attack plans where individual members have different responsibilities and confront villains with a series of assaults rather than a single, straight forward encounter. Villains also have to contend with several people attacking them at once, rather than just the slayer. Power derived from the size of the community highlights the amount of work that a group of people can do, compared to a single person.

Large groups with diversified talents have a forceful cumulative impact. Valerie and Nancy acknowledge the Scooby Gang's individual skills and strengths as benefits to the community.

> Valerie: Each had his or her own «power» to bring to the group, regardless of whether it was a supernatural power. Willow, magic. Xander, loyalty & heart. Giles, wisdom. They all contributed to the slayer's work as much as she did.

> Nancy: The group of slayers were tight, backed each other up, and they played on each other's skill sets to get shit done. This is a pretty good aspect of the show.

This reinforces the interpretation that Buffy is not a lone warrior; she not only has the

emotional support of her friends, they can be helpful by sharing their own strengths and, in some cases, supernatural powers. Giles has extensive knowledge of prophecies, demons and paranormal occurrences. He can direct the group in their research on whichever villain they are facing in a particular episode and translate ancient texts written in a number of "dead" languages. Willow can apparently hack into any computer system and obtain confidential documents such as medical records, providing more accurate background checks on suspects. Xander is the resident weapons expert, identifying guns they find and breaking into the local army barracks to arm them in battle. As a carpenter in later seasons, he repairs the damage inflicted upon Buffy's house during the course of a battle. Cordelia and Anya appear to be naïve group members but they both have the uncanny ability to see the problem at hand from a completely different angle than the Scooby Gang and accurately assess the situation. Riley is backed by a well-funded military unit. Angel and Spike have the preternatural strength that accompanies vampirism. Oz has a van and can drive the Scoobies around. Each member of this community contributes something unique and integral to the group. For example, the importance of Cordelia's insight is such that she needed to be replaced with a similar character, Anya, upon her departure. Each character has their shining moments in which their contribution to the group was a key factor in the Scooby Gang's success. As Sharon Ross has written, Willow becomes a hero in her own right (232). In fact, it is Willow who releases the slayer power to all potentials[18] in the series' finale, rejecting the rule established by the men who created the first slayer that there must only be one slayer at any given time ("Chosen"). This emphasis on the collective power of individual

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[18] Potentials are potential slayers, girls who were in line to become a slayer upon the death of the current slayer. It was unclear if this meant Faith or Buffy's death.

strengths underscores the potential of bringing together individuals with a range of talents. Communities do not require members to have similar attributes; each person can contribute something unique and equally important.

Members of the Scooby Gang were not only unique, they were oddballs. The sense of belonging found in this community is exceptionally valuable to these individuals who were social outcasts in other areas of their lives. Emily indicates that the strength of the group is accentuated by their social failures.

Emily: (Buffy's) sources of power were first her own character, and second her friends. All the characters, Giles, Willow, and Xander had power but were also just as lost in the real world.

The Scoobies establish a connection and support system with each other that they can not find elsewhere. Buffy's role as high school student is complicated by her slaying duties. She had difficulty maintaining relationships with people who are not aware of her extracurricular obligations and can not understand her "quirks" such as her apparent penchant for wandering around cemeteries at night. Willow and Xander are high school geeks. Cordelia's social status plummets when the clique she dominates finds out she is dating Xander and abandons her. Anya loses her job as a vengeance demon, the supernatural powers that accompany it and, as a result, her identity and previous social network. Reflecting Rousseau's emphasis on finding comfort within a group, these outcasts find a community they were accepted in, and each member of the Scooby Gang revels in this newfound safe space where they can be themselves, oddities and all. As they become comfortable in this group and their self-esteem grows, they can stretch into their role in this community and try new endeavours. For example, Willow may not have

developed her magical powers if she did not feel she had people she could turn to for

support and advice.

The importance of community to marginalized members of society is not

restricted to the Scooby Gang. During the second discussion group, Jessica and Sue

mention the communities of villains as other allegiances of outsiders.

> Jessica: But then you have cases like Drusilla or I mean like the
> Mayor and Faith where you have like a community
> there that's as loving as Buffy and her friends but it's
> an evil relationship. Like Spike and Drusilla were in
> love.

> Sue: They sort of create these communities but then there is
> like a sort of standard community in the more literal
> sense. Things like school are supposed to be something
> normal in a community sense but it is always a huge
> problem for Buffy.

Jessica discusses the "tender side" of the villains. Although Spike and Drusilla have a

tumultuous, violent relationship it is depicted as a love that spans centuries. Sue

mentions standard communities, those in which neither Buffy's community nor the

villain communities can successfully participate. Like the Scooby Gang, these villain

communities provide opportunities for their members to try out new identities and

discover their strengths.

Both the Scooby Gang and evil communities, like Spike and Drusilla's operate

outside the traditional community of Sunnydale. Whedon et al. question the legitimacy

of what Sue calls "standard communities" in their depiction of corrupt public officials

and mindless neighbourhood mobs.

> Rachel: Most of the villains had some kind of hold over the
> higher officials where they needed them, Police,
> Government, Schools etc.

Rachel is referring to the revelation in season three that Sunnydale's mayor had, quite literally, made a deal with the devil, or at least a number of demons, in order to maintain power. A few responses refer to an episode entitled "Gingerbread," in which a supernatural being instigates a witch hunt in Sunnydale, a clear incident where a community is transformed into a tyrannical mob. These examples represent the failure of community, associations that become oppressive, corrupt and more concerned with their own maintenance than with the well-being of their members.

Godway and Finn are sceptical of the usefulness of the word "community," considering the horrors that have been committed in its name. In the case of the previously mentioned episode "Gingerbread," Buffy and Willow are nearly burned at the stake by MOO (Mothers Opposed to the Occult) in the name of the community. The mob attack is led by their mothers who believe that this act of violence will cause the unusual occurrences in Sunnydale to cease, returning the community to "normal." As Godway and Finn explain, "community itself is in danger of becoming an identity to be managed and secured: a master word, a dead idol to which the living are sacrificed in the logic of its management" (3). Sunnydale residents live in a continuous and excessive state of denial in order to remain "unaware" of the town's unusually high mortality rate and frequent, bizarre occurrences. When this denial is threatened, the well-being of the community is endangered and the residents go to extreme lengths, such as attempting to burn their daughters at the stake, to avert the perceived threat. Furthermore, the denial that Sunnydale's residents have to maintain not only prevents them from acknowledging the unusual circumstances in which they live, but it blinds them to threats from within the community. If they were less concerned with perpetuating their version of the Sunnydale

community, they may notice that they have had the same mayor since the city's inception

a century before. This corruption serves as a warning of the limitations of community

and highlights the superiority of the ideal community over the institutionalized one.

BtVS further reinforces the importance of community by juxtaposing it against the

powerlessness of isolation, highlighting the consequences of going it alone. Faith's lack

of community is identified by participants as a critical factor in her descent into villainy.

> Barb: The key difference (between Faith and Buffy) - aside
> from some lesbian chic ploys and classism on the part
> of writers - was that Faith never found the friends she
> needed to support her.

When Faith feels rejected by the Scooby gang she turns to the nearest community that

will accept her. Unfortunately it happens to be one that is headed by a corrupt mayor

whose exploitation of Faith's power leaves her in a coma at the end of the season.

Faith's story is not the first lesson about the powerlessness of isolation. It is a

theme that was addressed as early as season one.

> Karen: (*Buffy*) had a much more "issue" based plot line early
> on... one episode in the first season tackled kids who go
> unseen by their peers and eventually become invisible
> as a result...good idea, but it was done really
> badly...particularly the ending...it involved the secret
> service wisking her away to train her to kill for the
> Gov't... Come to think of it, the show deals with
> unnoticed kids ALOT...

> Laura: I liked the way they addressed the ignored people in the
> school system as well...I forget the episode name,
> number, or season...but a girl felt ignored so she
> became invisible. Most shows don't deal with teen
> issues such as feeling like no one knows who you
> are...or dejected. It's refreshing.

This fictional realization of a high school horror, feeling invisible, is one example of Joss

Whedon's use of the "high school is hell" allegory. It also reaffirms the comfort that the

Scooby Gang provides for this group of outcasts. As Karen mentions, this depiction is not an uncommon theme in the show. Whedon et al. frequently tell stories about the horrors of isolation to reinforce their emphasis on the importance of community, particularly for outsiders.

Some viewers, like Jean, identify with the Scooby Gang's status as outsiders. Her admission of being a nerd in high school clarifies the comfort she expresses in seeing these outsiders find their place within a group.

Jean: And right through it there's always this... there's this sense in *Buffy* that no matter what you do and no matter where you go – and Buffy did some pretty brutal things to her friends at times – and they always forgave her and they always came back together. And there's this one picture that they – there's the photograph that they keep showing through the seasons of the show where it's Buffy and Willow and Xander and they're like lying like this and like this (moving her body to mimic their positions in the photo) doing these contorty things and they - its clearly a photograph that's taken around this time (in reference to the episode I showed them) around season two... But they show it again in season four and they show it again in season six and it's that sense that those three are a unit. And they've got these people that come and go, boyfriends and girlfriends and add-ons and all that stuff but best friends stick together through it all... Yeah the three of them stand together through it all. And especially when you're in high school I think but going through the rest of your formative years as well, you want to believe that. You want to believe that there is this – that, you know, there's people that will be with you through it all. So there's a certain comfort in shows where you can see that...You wanna believe that you can have these connections.

Returning to Silverstone, we can see how Jean reveals her views on friendship in this response. By emphasizing the forgiveness and loyalty displayed by the Scooby Gang, she indicates that these are qualities she values in friendships. Furthermore, in this

statement, Jean expresses a longing for this unconditional bond. Although she positions that desire as something from the past, in high school, her voice reveals a continued investment in this identification with the nerds. While Jean sees herself in Willow's nerdiness, she distinguishes her own high school experience from that of the Scoobies. This is evident in her comment "You want to believe that there is this – that, you know, there's people that will be with you through it all. So there's a certain comfort in shows where you can see that..." Although she states that this type of friendship is something that "you" want, it seems like she is expressing a personal desire; differentiating the community of the Scooby Gang from her isolating high school experience as a nerd.

Jean's contradiction of identifying with the characters and distinguishing herself from them is reminiscent of Jackie Stacey's findings in her work on women and cinematic identification. Stacey describes this phenomenon as she saw it in the women she studied, "on the one hand, they value difference for taking them into a world in which their desires could potentially be fulfilled; on the other, they value similarity for enabling them to recognise qualities they already have" (128). Jean identifies with Willow's social status at Sunnydale High, and sees the character's portrayal as validation for high school geeks, while, at the same time, she desires the unconditional friendship Willow finds with the Scoobies for her nerdy high school self. Zweerink and Gatson describe a similar source of enjoyment for some fans, those who identify with the "underdogs who actually win on occasion" (241). Jean does not participate in an online Buffy community like the object of Zweerink and Gatson's study, but as I will discuss later in this chapter, her identification with these characters carries over into her conversations with her friends.

Other participants express their identification with the Scoobies in relation to a

current sense of isolation, rather than something from the past. A number of informants face criticism from their friends for enjoying *BtVS*, and they feel isolated in their fandom. Some, like Katie, revel in the exclusivity of her status as a *Buffy* fan. She appreciates *BtVS*'s cult status and that she was part of an elite group that "really understood" the show. But she expresses this in a group of friends who are also *Buffy* fans, so she is protected from that isolation. This isolation as a *Buffy* fan seems to foster identification with the Scoobies' outsider status.

These participants' collective responses draw out a well developed, nuanced depiction of these communities of outsiders. They identify and discuss numerous ways that communities can be powerful. The potential corruption they identify in *BtVS*'s standard communities reinforces that this power is only found in groups with strong connections among its membership. They also reflect on the consequences of the absence of community, underscoring the need for, and possibility of, a community of outsiders. Fans identify with the role of outsider. Taking the cue from the Scooby Gang, these participants connect to other *Buffy* fans and become a part of a community of outsiders. In forming these groups they not only emulate the powerful communities depicted in *BtVS*, they mirror the sociological establishment of communities.

Communities of Fans

BtVS is not just a forum to discuss community, but a site for building community. As Jenkins' work on *Beauty and the Beast* indicates, fan communities participate in rituals indicative of community building, yet they are not often studied as communities. Perhaps this is, in part, due to the absence of a geographic location, which is often

considered a necessary element for establishing community. Poplin argues that it is this territorial dimension that distinguishes community from other social groups (14). Scherer points out that ¾ of the world's primary communities are geographically based (119). This emphasis on the territorial nature of communities is often predicated on the assumption that people who live within close proximity of each other will work together in a mutually beneficial relationship. Jessie Bernard addresses this by differentiating 'community' from 'the community.' "'Community,' as distinguished from 'the community,' emphasizes the common-ties and social interaction components of the definition" (Bernard 4). For the purpose of my work, I am more interested in this concept of 'community' than 'the community.'

At this point, it is important to turn to Anthony Cohen's work on symbolic communities and ask how communities are constituted. As Cohen writes, "people construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity" (118). This marks a significant step away from geographically based notions of community. According to Cohen communities are based on a shared set of symbols and a sense of 'we-ness'; a consciousness of community that is constructed through differentiation from others. Once community boundaries are established, group members must work to maintain their connections with each other and their differentiation from outsiders. My participants draw community boundaries based on legitimacy of fandom and knowledge of the series, then maintain them through various rituals.

In their article "Brand Community," Muniz and O'Guinn define legitimacy as:

> a process whereby members of the community differentiate
> between true members of the community and those who are

> not, or who occupy a more marginal space. In the context
> of brands this is demonstrated by 'really knowing' the
> brand as opposed to using the brand for the 'wrong reasons'
> (Muniz and O'Guinn 419).

For my participants, legitimacy, the right to call oneself a *Buffy* fan, was largely based on

knowledge and understanding of the series.[19] Upon meeting each group and introducing

myself, we engaged in a conversation that felt like a test. They asked me questions about

my knowledge of *BtVS*, the merchandise I owned, my objects of study, etc. It felt like we

were positioning for power, but there was also a sense of excitement in their questioning.

Although they were excited to participate in a study on the object of their fandom, they

may have been concerned that I was interested in *BtVS* as a researcher, rather than as a

legitimate fan, and that I would not treat the show with the respect they think it deserves.

My status as a researcher compromised my legitimacy as a *Buffy* fan. This inquiry into

my legitimacy was most pronounced in the first group when Sheila asked me about

various storylines and made it clear that her knowledge outstripped mine on every count.

The challenge to my own fandom was odd because I am used to being the *BtVS* "expert"

in the group. When I gave the background for the episode I was about to play, Sheila

jumped in to correct me on certain points. We disagreed as to exactly where Angel was

being held captive in this episode. The confusion was understandable, Angel was held

captive in several different locations throughout his three year tenure on the series. As

the episode began, we saw that Angel was locked up at Willy's bar, my description was

accurate. Sheila stopped "correcting" my explanations.

There was a similar, if less pronounced, testing at the beginning of the second

discussion group. This had less to do with knowledge of the series, and was more about

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[19] The word "legitimacy" covers a range of meanings. For the purposes of the paper, I am relying on the
definition "[g]enuine, real: opposed to 'spurious'" ("Legitimacy" def. 1b.).

how much *BtVS* merchandise I owned. These participants spoke as experts, regularly referring to episodes by their titles, which are not indicated within the show. This information can be found online or on the back of the DVD cases. I am more familiar with the episodes by plot points. They are labelled on my VHS tapes as "Dead Mom" or "Evil Angel." In that group I felt more like an outsider. I am not sure if it was because I had an "in" with the first group, knowing Lana who knew Sheila, Anne and Jean, or if it was because I had to regularly ask the second group which episode they were talking about when they referenced a particular title.

These challenges demonstrate the work involved in establishing and maintaining community boundaries as well as the knowledge required in *Buffy* fan communities. As Cohen remarks, "[t]his consciousness of community is, then, encapsulated in perception of its boundaries, boundaries which are themselves largely constituted by people in interaction" (13). In other words, these fans were simultaneously asserting the legitimacy of their membership by displaying their knowledge of the series, while questioning my claim to *Buffy*-fandom. In the questionnaires and the interviews, there was also evidence that individuals could be dismissed as "not fans" of the series, that is, not knowledgeable enough to be considered a "real" or "genuine" fan.

Jessica drew on the concept of legitimacy when I asked her about a possible link between *BtVS* and Girl Power.

> Jessica: If the writers say they want to do a story about Buffy and they don't really know what the show's about then it's really easy to look at the show and "yeah ok vampire slayer who has super powers... feminism." It's such an easy connection to make and like that is what the show is about but, I don't know, it goes into what we've been discussing. It isn't just black and white like girl with super powers - it's like girl with

super powers who has all these problems. Who has
friends who help her or get in her way and... You know
I think that they really go beyond that in the show.

According to Jessica, someone who relates *BtVS* with Girl Power "doesn't really know

what this show is about." In other words, they do not have enough knowledge of the

series to be considered a legitimate fan. Dan's strong response in the questionnaire

reveals a similar judgement, but with a completely different interpretation.

Dan: Girl Power is everything from traditional feminism to
Spice Girls to the Slayer. It's all about being yourself,
being independent, and not curtailing what you need to
be and do because of what other people will think. It's
about using the power that we all have wisely,
ultimately for good, but to go out to the edge, to push
yourself and constantly grow from your experiences.
And above all, don't be afraid. And if one doesn't think
that all of this wasn't what *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*
was all about...then they've never really watched the
series very closely!

Here are two contradictory responses claiming to have access to "The Truth" about the

series and rejecting those who disagree as people who are unfamiliar with the show.

This, in part, relates to their differing definitions of Girl Power, but both participants do

take a strong stance on what views are legitimate for a *Buffy* fan to have. Jessica states

that anyone who connects *BtVS* and Girl Power does not "really know what the show's

about" while Dan claims that anyone who does not connect the series with this

phenomenon has "never really watched the series very closely!" Boundaries between

legitimate and illegitimate fandom are clearly drawn. While this may initially appear to

incorporate another definition of legitimacy, one that refers to a "conformable or standard

type" ("Legitimacy" def. 2b), both Dan and Jessica reference the importance of having

knowledge of the series, rather than the "correct" interpretation. Once again, this legitimacy is based on knowledge.

This disagreement over definition does not necessarily negate the sense of 'we-ness' these fans may feel. Communities are based on shared symbols but Cohen emphasizes "that the sharing of symbol is not necessarily the same as the sharing of meaning" (Cohen 16). Although Dan and Jessica disagree as to which interpretation is correct, they both reveal a boundary based on knowledge and understanding of the series. Their use of the phrases "really know" and "really watch" indicates that they dismiss people based on their concept of illegitimate fandom, people who claim to be viewers or fans but have not done their work by watching the show and becoming familiar with Joss Whedon's vision. Those with enough knowledge to justify their interpretation fall within the boundary of legitimate, or genuine, fan.

Knowledge of the series is highly valued with *Buffy* fans. The more you watch the series, the more you can enjoy it. Part of "really knowing" the show, as Jessica puts it, is catching the intra-textual references. Amanda demonstrates the amount of knowledge required to fully understand the show when she talks about introducing *BtVS* to her boyfriend.

> Amanda: He started to watch 'cause I watched. And of course he'd be like "Who's that? What's that?" Now he's seen like seasons one through four or something and well the later ones but I always feel like "Why? Why? Teaching him." But it's amazing how involved it is. I was explaining that line in "I'll never tell," in the Anya/Xander song. When she sings "His penis got diseases from the Shumash tribe." And I tried to explain that one line. It took 40 minutes.

Not only does one need to have a certain amount of knowledge to participate in the fan

community, it is required to appreciate the series in the first place. One must be appropriately literate to be a *BtVS* viewer.

This calls to mind Stanley Fish's concept of "interpretive communities." Drawing on Fish, Radway explains that members of interpretive communities have a shared basis of knowledge from which they interpret texts; they are "equally and similarly literate" (Radway, *Interpretive Communities* 53). By 'literate' she is not referring to their ability to read words, but the fact that they approach meanings from the same knowledge-base. To use Cohen's terminology, they share symbols.

According to Fish, words and their meanings are not objective. In his seminal work, *Is There a Text in this Class?* Fish states

> meanings come already calculated, not because of norms embedded in the language but because language is always perceived, from the very first, within a structure of norms. That structure, however, is not abstract and independent but social; and therefore it is not a single structure with a privileged relationship to the process of communication as it occurs in any situation but a structure that changes when one situation, with its assumed background of practices, purposes, and goals, has given way to another (318).

Groups of people must share an understanding of the normative structure of meaning. Different groups of people may have divergent structures of meaning, leading them to approach a text as a completely different object of study.

Buffy fans are an interpretive community in that they share an understanding of the show's premise, its mythology, the characters and their histories. They approach any discussion of the series with this knowledge. The absence of this knowledge marks one as an outsider, not a legitimate fan and not part of the *Buffy* fan community. They may miss intra-textual references made on the show, or they will not understand the full

meaning behind another fan's casual comment about an incident or a character on the series. This knowledge is the basis of legitimacy on which community boundaries are established. Fans reinforce these boundaries and perpetuate community through social interactions.

At this point I think it is important to return to Bernard's inclusion of social-interaction as a key component of community and ask how communities are constituted. As Cohen states, "consciousness of community is, then encapsulated in perception of its boundaries which are themselves largely constituted by people in interaction" (13). Once a community is established, it must be maintained. Consciousness of community is related to connections among people, therefore their interactions can do this maintenance work.

Such interaction among group members can take the form of rituals. James Carey describes rituals as "the sacred ceremony that draws people together in fellowship and commonality" (18). These rituals may be group activities, ceremonies, or even talk. Muniz and O'Guinn identified several rituals that were common among brand communities.[20] The first of these was the greeting ritual by which members of a community identify themselves to each other. In their study, Saab owners reported honking or flashing their lights at other Saab owners. "Such rituals may at first appear insignificant, but they function to perpetuate consciousness of kind. Every time such a greeting ritual is initiated or returned, members are validated in their understanding of community" (Muniz and O'Guinn 422). There is a ritual of sorts that occurs when *Buffy* fans first meet.

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[20] Brand communities are those based around a commercial brand such as those Muniz and O'Guinn identified; Saab, Ford Bronco, and Mac computers.

Sue and Jessica both relate their experiences of meeting other *Buffy* fans.

Sue: I would, you know, meet people who I would never know before and I could talk to them about that

Jessica: Yeah for sure. It's the same everywhere you go. If you find out someone's a *Buffy* fan it's like this immediate connection. I was on the train home... I was going to Toronto to see my parents and I had bought a *Buffy* magazine as well to read on the train which was like $10. So I was like "whatever" and I bought it anyways...and the girl sitting beside me - we were chatting – she's like "oh I used to watch that show. What's been going on lately? I haven't watched it in a couple years." And I filled her in on like the entire story line. It was kind of embarrassing but she kept prompting me with like "What happened to him?" And I'd be like "Well..." (laughter at her knowing/gossipy inflection) And it would go on and on. We talked about it for like - mostly me - talking for a good like 45 minutes.

This 'catching up' with other viewers when meeting them is not unique to these two. It has been common in my experience and described to me by other fans. It serves to both create a connection with another fan and play the knowledge/legitimacy dance.

Ritual and storytelling is also common with my participants. Sheila has a group of friends who gathered weekly to discuss the series. Jessica, Sue and Amanda get together regularly to watch the DVDs of older seasons and discuss the show. Even though these three have likely rehashed the series before, they were interested in what they each had to say in our discussion. This was not something that they had talked over and were through with. They continue to interpret, analyze and debate.

Jean mentioned a group of friends she has that do not necessarily gather for the purpose of talking about *BtVS*, but would invariably introduce the show as a topic of conversation.

Jean: I mean one of the things that has kept me watching um is – it's not that peer pressure exactly because from one standpoint you've people coming at you saying "Why do you watch that stupid show?" but a lot of my sort of circle watches *Buffy* and has watched *Buffy* – I mean I've my two sisters here watch *Buffy*, there's Julie who watches *Buffy* and a lot of my other close friends are *Buffy* fans. So we would get together for dinner and stuff and we'd be talking about life and love and all these things and then someone'd say "And there was that thing on *Buffy*" so I think there is some truth in the fact that there are a lot of references where it's not real life but it's kinda like real life. You know? So it's kinda like...when Buffy keeps falling for Angel over and over and over again even though she knows he's not the right guy. And she's off with this other vampire and whatever and it's like that when you keep falling for the bad guy and you don't know why that is but it's like *Buffy*. So there are these moments where you kind of look at it and you do think that there are similarities to the real world.

For Jean's group of friends *BtVS* provides a common reference post, a language with which they can discuss their lives. It helps them communicate how they feel or what is going on by relating that it is "like that time in *Buffy* when..." The series is used as a short hand. *BtVS* is not merely a topic of conversation, it is a way in which they can relate and discuss their lives. This is the most pronounced example of a community using *BtVS* in their lives, indicating the important role the series plays for these viewers. It eases communication among group members, allowing them to express themselves and the stories from their lives through shared symbols from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

In this ritual we see this group's identification with the characters as an important part of their connection to each other. This example is a variation of Stacey's work on extra-cinematic identification. Stacey traces how women identify with movie stars and carry that relationship into their lives through copying their styles or imitating their

behaviour. Jean and her friends, and arguably all of the *Buffy* fans I have discussed in this chapter, identify with the Scooby Gang as a community of outsiders and attempt to emulate that connection in their lives.

The community rituals discussed above are knowledge-based. Fans must be familiar with the series in order to participate in these communities. My informants are well aware of the role played by Joss Whedon and the series' writers in establishing this complex mythology. They express an affinity and respect for Whedon et al. that I have yet to see in discussions of other television series.

Joss and the Fans

My informants hint at a communal connection between themselves and *BtVS's* creators. They discuss the production of the series as if they have a close personal relationship with the creative team. It is not that they think they know *BtVS's* creator Joss Whedon, but the production team on *BtVS* was particularly active in creating connections with their fans. Joss Whedon et al. conducted many interviews online and in *BtVS* magazines, they followed fan discussion and participated in the official fan posting board, The Bronze (Larbalestier 227). While none of my informants claim to be active participants on this or any other online discussion groups, they are well aware of Whedon's participation and his self-identification as a "fanboy." This interaction with, and respect for, fans engenders a sense of connection between the fans and the series creators.

First and foremost, fans frequently refer to Joss Whedon on a first name basis.

Ellen   I wouldn't have put it past Joss to still give (Buffy)
            nightmares about (The Master).

> Dan   Growing up as a teenager and the parallelisms between
> that and the situation of the Hellmouth - sometimes that
> got a little tedious - "Okay Joss, we get the idea..." - but
> overall it was handled very well.

There is a familiarity in these comments that is usually reserved for personal acquaintances, not Hollywood producers. In fact, I have had to restrain myself from referring to Whedon as Joss throughout this thesis.

Interview subjects display further knowledge of the series' creator. Sheila's extensive knowledge of the involvement of different creative members at different times and their strengths and weaknesses informs her analysis. She mentions Whedon's intentions several times and considers what the creators were trying to do with different story lines. According to Sheila, the meaning of the text is inescapably intertwined with the writers' intentions as she had read them in *BtVS* magazines and official *BtVS* books such as *The Watchers' Guide* and *The Monster Book*.

This connection to the series' creators was much more prominent with the second group. At first I was frustrated because Amanda, Jessica and Sue did not seem to be expressing their own interpretations of the series. They always referred to an interview they read with Joss Whedon, Marti Noxon or another member of *BtVS*'s creative team, similar to these comments made at separate times in the interview.

> Sue: I read this thing with Sarah Michelle Gellar and she
> said that like Joss Whedon planned out so much. Like
> she knew she would die at the end of season five and
> there's like clues for Dawn in season three.
>
> Amanda: Apparently Tara was only supposed to be around for a
> few episodes but Joss liked her so much they kept her
> around.

It was not until after the interview that I realized what was going on. They are not simply

re-iterating information they had read elsewhere, they did their research. They use or involve the creators as authoritative sources. By participating in all of these interviews Whedon et al. created a club of people "in the know." *BtVS*'s creative team provided the fans with the tools to build a community and construct these boundaries of knowledge. The knowledge that fans work with is not only based on character and plot developments, but information in these secondary sources. Sue and Amanda demonstrate that this information becomes integral to understanding the show.

Another way that Whedon et al. distributed information was by participating in an online *Buffy* fan community. The WB's original *BtVS* website included a posting board called the Bronze, named after the local Sunnydale hangout.[21] It was an online portal where fans could post messages to each other and participate in conversations about their beloved series. They called themselves The Bronzers (http://www.betabronze.com). Although there were many fan created real-time chat rooms and unofficial *BtVS* posting boards, it was The Bronze that attracted Joss Whedon and various *BtVS* writers, directors, cast and crew members who reportedly participated in online discussions (Zweerink and Gatson). As fans discussed and interpreted the show, they could consult with its creators on their interpretations. As a result of these virtual "conversations," fans felt connected to *BtVS*'s creative team.

The writers further developed this connection with fans by making references to them in the series. Sheila and Anne mention how the creators reward the fans by sometimes incorporating them and their ideas into the series.

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[21] *BtVS* switched networks from WB to UPN between its fifth and sixth seasons. WB shut down their website before UPN could develop the new one and the online Bronze was temporarily without a home. The Bronzers started up the Beta Bronze which continues to act as the official *BtVS* online discussion group. (http://www.betabronze.com)

Sheila: You know the three, the nerds of doom – I loved watching that part because it was like that's the fans.

Others: Yeah

Sheila: Not the teenage girls but like the ones who, the ones who are into this other kind of stuff. It's like all the stuff that they know – the people who watch it regularly…like know those things.

Others: Yeah

Anne: And it's neat how every once in a while they would throw something in. And you kind of wonder is this something they had planned already or was it a bone thrown out to the audience, you know the people who were asking…

Me: Like what?

Anne: Well like for example the whole thing with Buffy and Spike. There was like a big group of people I think a contingent who were wanting something like that.

Sheila: Yeah but I don't think the bigger story line was about that…I think the one episode in season four. I mean because it was…

Jean: Oh when they pretended they were, they, they thought they were married or something like that?

Anne: Oh right right right right right.

The series makes overt references to fandom and incorporates their online discussions into the show. The second half of the above discussion refers to an episode in season four where Willow casts a spell that inadvertently causes Buffy and Spike to get engaged and plan their wedding ("Something Blue"). This was one of the episodes in which *BtVS*'s writers incorporate talk from the Bronze into the series, responding to fan discussions about the sexual tension between Spike and Buffy (Larbalestier). As a "stand-alone" episode that appears to ignore the general arc of the show, it "play(s) on the

'what if' scenarios beloved of fan fiction" (Larbalestier 228). In doing so, the writers

reference fannish activity and pay respect to the interpretations and wishes of the fans.

Jessica also mentioned additions to the show that were just for fans.

Jessica: That's the thing I like about the show. It rewards you if
            you're a big fan. Like little things'll come up years
            later and you're like "Hey wait a minute. Isn't that so-
            and-so?" Like just a little one off character. I guess
            they happen to get back the same actor or whatever.

Sue   Especially Jonathon.

Others   Yeah

Jonathon was a character that appeared from time to time since the first season.

He was given special moments within the show (giving Buffy a special award as Class

Protector in "The Prom") and was a sympathetic figure playing a key role in several

episodes (as a suicidal student in "Earshot" and as a magically induced superstar in

"Superstar"). Both discussion groups had a similar reaction to Jonathon. The second

group expressed a unified sadness at Jonathon's death in season seven. The first group

exclaimed "JONATHON!" in unison when he made an appearance in the episode I

showed. At that moment I leapt directly from researcher to fan as I joined them in this

spontaneous outburst without realizing it.

This is particularly interesting considering that Jonathon is the classic fan in the

episode "Superstar." Like "Mary Sue" stories,[22] fans who write stories incorporating

themselves as key players in their favourite series, Jonathon casts a spell to create a

Sunnydale where he is the superstar of the episode's title. The opening credits were re-

edited to reflect his new reality. Props were scattered throughout the show illustrating

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[22] According to Henry Jenkins, "Mary Sue" stories "fit idealized images of the writers as young, pretty, intelligent recruits aboard the Enterprise..." (*Textual* 171)

that Jonathon became a self-help guru, the star of the film, *The Matrix*, a calendar pin-up boy, and a sports hero. He also usurped Buffy's role as Sunnydale's protector. In this episode, the writers acknowledge the fans and fan activity. It is also an episode that is best appreciated by someone with previous *BtVS* knowledge who can recognize how Jonathon has altered the Buffyverse. This, again, serves to foster a close relationship with the fan community. This particular episode was directed at "real fans," those with enough knowledge of the series to appreciate how the Buffyverse had been altered. It also presented Jonathon as the fan/outsider who desires the community offered by the Scooby Gang. Jonathon's longing for a sense of belonging mirrored fans' desires for and recreation of the Scooby Gang's community.

Conclusion

For my participants, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* became a forum to identify ideal communities and then emulate them. In the form of the Scooby Gang, Whedon et al. developed an ideal community that fans want to belong to. The Scoobies are outsiders that find others who understand them, and together they become a powerful force to be reckoned with. Viewers recognize, and identify with, this message as it is presented in the show. The writers also created a series for a select audience of people who are well versed in its mythology. Knowledge is important, because there is so much information in the show that is necessary to know in order to understand later comments and the significance of plot developments. By participating in so many interviews and discussing the show, Whedon et al. created a further well of knowledge, facilitating the boundary that is the basis of differentiation between *Buffy* fan and non-fan. The writers and

directors then encouraged and participated in public fan discussion about the series, fostering a sense of community between fans and creators.

In summary, fans identify with the outsiders and desire their community. They feel connected to Whedon and use the tools he provides them to emulate this community of outsiders, using standard practices in establishing and maintaining symbolic communities. This process from depiction to imitation is not necessarily intentional on the part of the creators, but their work and actions facilitate the process. In this way, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s relevance to its fans' lives stretches beyond the boundaries of the series itself.

Conclusion

What did I find in my search for the slayer? I began this project with questions about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s ambiguous feminist status. I enjoyed the show but was uneasy when my declarations of my fandom were met with sneers and belittling comments about Buffy's skimpy tank tops. I felt conflicted by the contradictory representations of women and power within the series. Then, when a professor asked me how other viewers negotiated the dual representation of Buffy, the hero, and Buffy the sex object, I was at a loss. I knew how I interpreted the show but I could not speak for others. Thus began my search.

Along the way I accepted that there is no singular Buffy to find. This was difficult, because I had to admit, albeit grudgingly, that "my Buffy" was not "The Buffy." Vint's concept of "my Buffy" was integral to my understanding the ambiguity of *BtVS*. Each participant has a unique concept of who the character is and what the show is about; they each have "their Buffy", just as I have mine. My participants' individual versions of Buffy/*BtVS* have as much to do with what Silverman calls "moral forms and perspectives" (*Interpreting* 115) as they do with the series. Their interpretations are largely based on what they bring to the viewing experience. The slayer is then integrated into these moral forms. The throngs of "personal Buffys" are constructed from the many representations of *BtVS*, the characters and the actors and are also informed by individual knowledge and understanding of super heroes, female television characters, sci-fi/fantasy shows etc. By sharing their insights into the series, my participants revealed something of themselves.

Part of the reason that personal versions of the series are so prevalent with *BtVS* is that the show takes Fiske's gaps and contradictions to another level. According to Fiske, the excess meanings in a media text allow viewers to interpret it in a number of ways (*Television Culture* 91). While Fiske is likely referring to inevitable, unintentional semiotic excess, *BtVS* creators promote a "Bring Your Own Subtext" theory, encouraging people to read the series any way they want to (Larbalestier 228). They provide viewers with complex representations that could support numerous, contradictory interpretations. One of the successes of the show is its presentation of multi-dimensional characters that provide material to back up any number of interpretations and spur on the use of *BtVS* in debates and relationships with others. My participants' conflicting readings of the series finale are a case in point. Ellen reads Spike and Angel's involvement in the final battle as two men saving the world, salvaging the series from the perceived radicalism of Girl Power while others, like Suzanne use the same episode as an example of girls reclaiming power from men, what she calls "the ultimate in girl power." Although each viewer has "their Buffy", they differ as to whom that is. This makes Brunsdon's call to reclaim text a near impossible task. *BtVS* is not considered a roundly disparaged text that audiences feel they must rescue in order to legitimize it like the soap operas or romance novels that Brundson claims feminist audience research tries to salvage (125). *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is complex, without a clear ideological stance and audiences are encouraged to bring their own subtext when interpreting it.

These ambiguous representations in *BtVS* also complicate Hall's encoding/ decoding model which assumes a singular ideology embedded in the text. This model is challenged further by the interaction between *BtVS*'s creative team and the fans. Whedon

et al. discussed the show in online forums, and, in doing so, provided information for fans to use in interpreting the series. In this way, the creative team is involved in the decoding process. While this can be seen as an attempt to manage interpretations, so the fans read what the writers intended, it became, in part, a forum for writers to defend plot and character development (Zweerink and Gaton). The writers also incorporated fan talk from the online forums into the series. Thus, fans became part of the encoding process, "their Buffys" influenced the writing of the series.

With this multi-layered ambiguity in the series and audience interpretations, it is impossible to give an ultimate reading as to what the series is about and who Buffy Summers is. The definitive answers I was offered in the past were part of what spurred me on to embark on this project. In *The Ideological Octopus*, Lewis comments on a reluctance to appreciate the ambiguous nature of audience interpretation. He remarks that in television audience research "it is commonality of meaning that has been assumed and ambiguity that has to be explained" (55). He recommends that we approach this work with polysemy in mind and look for commonalities among audience responses. That has been my approach throughout this thesis; look for commonalities without oversimplifying the range of experiences and interpretations. While doing so, my participants' rich, thought-provoking responses reached beyond what I had imagined I could evoke from these interviews and questionnaires.

As I mentioned, my initial interest related to the feminist content of the series, but I was astonished by the depth of my participants' debate over feminism. Although I did not think that this type of debate was beyond them, I did not expect to draw out their perspectives so easily. I was concerned that my questions "What does Girl Power mean

to you?" and "Do you think it relates to the series?" would evoke simple answers and clear agreement or disagreement. I was pleasantly surprised that their responses to these questions move away from focussing solely on the series, as they address the implications of the Girl Power phenomenon. I now understand what Janice Radway meant when she wrote that through audience research we can "understand how a cultural form functions within the larger culture" (Radway, *Identifying* 99). My participants reveal how they integrate *BtVS* into their understanding of feminist issues. Building on Silverman, if we look at their responses as a collection of moral forms we can see the debate over feminism unfold. They define Girl Power by both of its popular meanings, empowerment in popular culture and commodified slogan, but the former resonates with them while the latter is dismissed as irrelevant. Their comments elucidate the ways in which this form of empowerment can mask continued sexism and marginalization. Two simple questions about Girl Power and *BtVS* triggered such varied responses as a personal story of empowerment, implicit denials of gender inequalities, concern over the status of girls in our culture, feelings of exclusion and the marginalization of girls' power. Thus, I was provided with the opportunity to examine how *BtVS* relates to these various positions and feminisms, as well as how people talk about them.

A second unexpected outcome of this research was the extent to which community came into play in my participants' discussions and responses. At the beginning of this project my only interest in community was in how it was celebrated as a source of power in *BtVS*. I have experienced rituals of *Buffy* fan communities myself, for example, spending hours on the phone with out of town friends to analyze the latest episode when I did not know any local *Buffy* fans, but I never thought much of this

activity. This is similar to other fans I spoke to who I interpret as participating in *BtVS* communities, yet do not identify themselves as a member of one. It was not until I conducted this research and reviewed the relevant literature that I realized how *Buffy* fan communities parallel other, supposedly legitimate forms of community building. Furthermore, my participants' identificatory practices demonstrate how the concept of "my Buffy" can function in the lives of fans in relation to fan communities. According to Stacey, "[m]any forms of identification involve processes of transformation and production of new identities, combining the spectator's existing identity with her desired identity and her reading of the star's identity" (172). Unlike Stacey's subjects who identify with movie stars' personas, my participants identify with the characters in *BtVS*. Some *Buffy* fans feel isolated in their fandom, and can relate to the Scoobies' status as outsiders. They appreciate the power that the Scoobies have found in this group of friends, and perhaps they desire the comfort, support and understanding that this community seems to bring. These fans then connect with each other over their common enjoyment of *BtVS*, the very thing that gives them outsider status. In creating communities of *Buffy* fans, these groups of outsiders emulate their desired identity, "their Buffys".

A final note about "personal Buffys"; although these fans have a clear idea of "their Buffy," they are not necessarily aware that they do not share it with other fans or even that they have created it in the first place. After filling out the questionnaire, a couple of participants expressed surprise at how much they had unknowingly analyzed the series. This was similar to my experience. When I began this project, I knew I reacted to what I felt were misguided interpretations of the series by people who did not

know Buffy. Vint gave me a language to explain my reaction and better understand fans' varied readings of *BtVS*.

When I embarked on this project, I intended to explore how viewers negotiate the ambiguities of *BtVS*. I referred to it as "adding to the grey area." I found that this grey area is not just a place for interpretation, but for activity; debate, identification, imitation, and association. I found that, for my participants, *BtVS* is a site of intellectual engagement. In my search for the slayer, I discovered how each fan's perspectives come into play to create a personal version of Buffy and *BtVS*. Along the way, as I remained aware of my struggle to maintain a balance between my dual status as researcher/fan, I succeeded in finding "my Buffy."

There are several issues introduced in this research that I hope to pursue further. First, in this study, I have explored the perspectives on display in my participants' comments. I would like to find out how indicative these casual comments are of their overall political views. In what ways do their statements about *BtVS* reflect, or diverge from, participants claimed politics? Secondly, while I have begun to sketch out some of the debates and identificatory practices evoked by *BtVS*, I would like to explore these in more depth. It was not until I saw the analysis unfold that I was inspired to ask further questions of my participants. The questionnaires, in particular, provided a limited view of my participants' perspectives. Although they offered thoughtful, detailed responses, I would now like to follow up by asking them to expand on certain points or to explain what they meant when they used a specific phrase. I would also like to get feedback from all of the participants and see how they respond to my analysis of their comments. They could provide me with further insight into the processes I have discussed throughout this

thesis. Thirdly, I hope to further investigate two themes that emerged in the discussion groups and questionnaires that I have only dealt with peripherally in this paper; identification and power. My participants' discussion of each of these themes could generate separate articles. Finally, I intend to explore how Vint's concept of "my Buffy" transfers to other series. Do all avid viewers approach discussions of their favoured series with specific, yet individual ideas of what the show is about? Do the complexities that Whedon et al. intentionally instilled in *BtVS* make it more susceptible to such a wide range of interpretations and personal versions of the show? Are other series with heroic female leads likely to inspire personal versions similar to "my Buffy", due to the overt contradiction of their physical power and sexual objectification? With these questions in mind, I look forward to embarking on a search for the various permutations of "my Xena" and "my Sydney."

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Appendix I - Interview Questions

General Questions

What was that episode about?

Tell me about your introduction to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*? What brought you back for more?

What spoke to you about the series?

Which were your favourite characters? Why?

Was there a particular plotline you enjoyed most? Why?

Was there a plotline you identified with?

Themes

What are some issues you saw addressed in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?

Did you find some more prominent or important than others?

Tell me about how they dealt with that issue?

What do you think about how they dealt with it?

Power

How did you see power addressed in the series?

How did they represent females and power?

How did they represent males and power?

What did you think of Buffy's power?

What were her strengths and weaknesses?

What did she draw on as sources of her power?

Ask the same questions for: Willow, Xander, Giles, Anya, Spike, Faith

What do you think the distinction was between Buffy and Faith? What made one good and the other evil?

How do think the show dealt with: Power & Appearance / Power & Community / Power & Sex / Power & Emotion / Good Power vs. Bad Power / Power & (Fill in the blank)

How were these dealt with outside the series, if at all?

Villains

Who would you say was the most powerful villain? Why?

Who had the most power over Buffy?

What was the biggest power shift?

The biggest assertion of Buffy's power over some else?

Someone else's assertion of Buffy over power?

Community

Community was a major theme I noticed in the series for example with the Scooby Gang.

How did you see it addressed?

What do you think about how the series addressed community?

Emotions

We saw in this episode Buffy tell Kendra that emotions give her power. Later seasons Buffy became darker and dealt with depression.

Did this shift register with you before I mentioned it?

What do you think about the shift?

What do you think they were saying? What do you think about it?

Appendix II - Questionnaire

The following is part of a research project on regular viewers of the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The series has been alternately heralded and maligned by the popular media for its representation of girls as both powerful agents and sexual objects for a male gaze. I believe that it is important to add viewers' voices to this debate. I intend to explore the complex and contradictory representations in the series and find out which, if any, resonate with audience members.

These procedures are in accordance with Concordia's ethical research codes. The confidentiality of your identity will be ensured. I will use a pseudonym to conceal your identity if I use your words in my study. Feel free to email me using a pseudonym if you wish to conceal your identity from me. By filling out this questionnaire you agree that your comments can be used in any publication of the study. If you wish to verify the authenticity of this research project, please feel free to contact my research supervisor, Dr. Kim Sawchuk at the Department of Communications, Concordia University, telephone (514) 848-2557, email kim.sawchuk@sympatico.ca.

Once you've completed the questionnaire, please email it to buffylives@sympatico.ca by August 10, 2003.

Name:

Age:

Sex:

Are you interested in reading the results of this study?

Please write as much or as little as you wish on the topics you have something to say about.

General Questions

1. When did you start watching Buffy? What seasons have you seen all or part of?

2. What is it about the series that you enjoy?

3. What do you dislike?

4. Who is your favourite character(s)? Why?

5. Which character(s) do you dislike? Why?

6. What are some issues you saw addressed in the series? If there was a specific plotline you enjoyed or hated, please tell me about it.

Questions of Power

7. What did you think of Buffy's power (both her strengths and weaknesses)? What did she draw on as sources of power?

8. What did you think about the power of the other characters?

9. What did you think the difference was between Faith and Buffy? How was their relationship to power different?

10. Who would you say was the most powerful villain? Why? Who had the most power over Buffy? Who did Buffy have the most power over?

11. Did you notice any of these dealt with in the series?

       Power & Appearance
       Power & Community
       Power & Sex
       Power & Emotion
       Good Power vs. Bad Power
       Power & _____ (Fill in the blank)

11b. What did you think about how these were addressed?

12. What does Girl Power mean to you? Do you think it relates to the series? If so, how?

Appendix III – Participant Data

Discussion Group 1 – Interviewed June 24, 2003

Anne	30
Jean	28
Lana	29
Sheila	early 30s

I found this group through Lana, a childhood friend. She invited her friend Julie and three of Julie's friends, Jean, Sheila and Anne. Lana had met the others before but she did not know them well. Julie was stuck at work and couldn't make it to the discussion group.

Discussion Group 2 – Interviewed August 18, 2003

Amanda	23
Jessica	23
Sue	23

Amanda's friend told her that I was looking to interview groups of Buffy fans and gave her my contact information. Amanda then told her friend Jessica that I was doing this project, and they both contacted me. The three of use arranged to conduct the discussion group with Amanda, Jessica and Jessica's roommate Sue. We never did figure out the path through which my contact information reached Amanda's friend.

Questionnaires

Name	Age	Name	Age	Name	Age
Wendy	18	Karen	23	Connie	28
Matt	35	Sherryl	27	Valerie	32
Ben	30	Barb	33	Dan	46
Suzanne	31	Rob	28	Lisa	26
Steve	24	Emily	Unknown	Ellen	25
Laura	18	Heidi	21	Beth	53
Rachel	21	Jill	26	Rachel	29
Deb	28	Joe	26	Nancy	30
Darren	14	Ron	60	Marissa	26

*All names are pseudonyms.

Glossary of Terms

Bronze: "Sunnydale's local hangout"*; online message board named after the hangout where fans and *BtVS*'s cast and crew discuss the show.

Bronzers: People who participate in the online Bronze.

BtVS: Acronym for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, related contraction; *Buffy*

Buffy Fans: Fans of the series, not necessarily the character.

Buffy Studies: Scholarly work on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Buffyverse: the imagined universe of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, including the internal logic of the series and its character and plot developments.

Hell Mouth: the mouth of hell "on which Sunnydale sits; the center of mystical convergence."*

Initiative, the: "a government-sponsored quasi-military agency devoted to the study of vampires, demons and other nasties."*

Potentials: potential slayers, girls who are in line to become slayers but have not yet been called.

Scooby Gang: "Buffy & her slaying pals; reference to the '70s TV cartoon Scooby-Doo, also; Undead Playgroup; Slayerettes"*; Scoobies

Slayer: "a.k.a The Chosen One. The one who stands against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness."*

Watcher: "The person who trains the Slayer and prepares her for her duties."*

Watchers Council: "The organization that trains and dispatches Watchers; also keeps an eye on the Slayers and makes sure they fulfill their duties."*

* Source http://www.buffyworld.com/slanguage/index.htm