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“JUST A GIRL”: THE COMMUNITY-CENTERED
CULT TELEVISION HEROINE, 1995-2007

by

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A DISSERTATION

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Under the Supervision of Professor Kwakiutl L. Dreher

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“JUST A GIRL”: THE COMMUNITY-CENTERED
CULT TELEVISION HEROINE, 1995-2007

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University of Nebraska, 2010

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Found in the most recent group of cult heroines on television, community-centered cult heroines share two key characteristics. The first is their youth and the related coming-of-age narratives that result. The second is their emphasis on communal heroic action that challenges traditional understandings of the hero and previous constructions of the cult heroine on television. Through close readings of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Firefly*, *Dark Angel*, and *Veronica Mars*, this project engages feminist theories of community and heroism alongside critical approaches to genre and narrative technique, identity performance theory, and visual media critique to explore the community-centered cult heroine and her rewriting of previous heroic archetypes. While much scholarship has examined the ways in which cult heroines of the late twentieth century revise Western heroic archetypes, this dissertation provides necessary expansion of this conversation with a consideration of how the heroine's youth and ties to her community influence and shape her heroic identity. The first chapter explores *Xena: Warrior Princess*' use of an intergenerational mentorship model of activism and the series' redefinition of community through a rejection of a heteronormative paradigm. The second chapter examines *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s use of interdependent metaphor and coming-of-age narratives, leading to the creation of a

global activist community. The third chapter compares the cult heroines of *Firefly* and *Dark Angel*, positing a symbiotic model of heroism in which the community functions like a family. The fourth chapter investigates the detective noir series *Veronica Mars* and how it presents a collaborative/ally model of heroism. Together, these visions of communal action offer several models for feminist approaches to activism.

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INTRODUCTION

I am eight years old, and it is the late 1980s. Outside rain beats ruthlessly on the windows; inside I announce, not for the first time, my boredom. In exasperation my mother finally suggests, “Why don’t you read a book?” I walk down the long hall into the cool, dry storeroom of our basement where a box of hand-me-down books is tucked away. I forage for a book that will keep my interest, and decide on a detective mystery. I burrow back against the rocking chair and begin to read about a clever girl sleuth in search of an old clock. The book’s heroine is adventurous and feisty. I like her immediately. She finds the clock but not before she escapes danger brought by scheming and jealous relatives. The clock restores an inheritance that has been unjustly stolen from deserving heirs. The girl detective’s work brings order to her community and does what conventional authorities cannot. Although my eight-year-old mind does not have the words to name her such, in Nancy Drew I find my first feminist icon.

Fast forward fourteen years to 2001. One night in early November while channel surfing, I stumble upon an episode of the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. My curiosity piqued by advertisements for a special musical episode, I become more comfortable on my sofa. I am captivated by the genre-blending fantasy/horror/fairy-tale/musical mystery of a refined, zoot-suited demon who has come to town. This demon has the power to make everyone sing and dance at odd hours and in the strangest of places. As his victims dance, they reveal their deepest secrets; sometimes these revelations are accompanied by a passion so great, the dancer literally burns up and is

consumed by it. As I watch the heroine and her friends uncover the villain's identity and motives, I am drawn in by this community made up of individuals who clearly are invested in communal togetherness, but who are also torn apart by their own fears and insecurities. Yet, when stakes are highest, they come together and "beat the bad guy" ("Once More With Feeling"). By the time the episode ends on an ensemble song asking, "Where do we go from here?" I, too, want to know where this group is going and where they have come from. I seek out old and new episodes of *Buffy*, quickly finding a figure vastly different from Nancy Drew and yet strikingly similar in her skills and abilities that enable her to bring order to her community. Subsequently, I revisit television series I had previously ignored and seek out new ones featuring similar heroines: I discover the genetically-engineered teenage protagonist of *Dark Angel*, the traumatized girl/weapon of *Firefly*, and the sassy girl detective star of *Veronica Mars*, before eventually meeting the woman warrior that created space for this group of heroic figures to emerge at the turn of the century—the title character of *Xena: Warrior Princess*. All of these confident, strong, and fearless heroines join my internal gallery of feminist role models.

For the purposes of this study, I compare five television series which offer complex and differing models of the contemporary cult television heroine. The earliest heroine of this grouping is the titular character of *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001). *Xena* is set in ancient Greece, "a land in turmoil [that] cried out for a hero." The hyper-athletic Xena (Lucy Lawless) attained her position as a "warrior princess" fighting first against and then alongside corrupt warlords of the ancient world. In the pilot, Xena attempts to escape this legacy of violence and return to a "normal" life. However, she

meets the young woman who will become first her protégé and eventually her successor—as well as her domestic partner—Gabrielle (Renée O’Connor), and Xena finds she cannot stand idly by while Gabrielle and other young women are sold into slavery (“Sins of the Past”). Her interference in the slavers’ plans marks a new use for her skills and violent abilities. Throughout the course of the series, Xena and Gabrielle combat social injustice, protecting those who cannot protect themselves. They also struggle with and reject social expectations attached to their gender—especially standards of femininity and expectations of heteronormativity—eventually providing new visions of female community and strength.

Following *Xena* is a series that vies with the warrior princess for the title of most influential cult television heroine narrative of this generation of television shows: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). While *Xena* features adult women, *Buffy* is a contemporary coming-of-age story about the titular teenage girl (Sarah Michelle Gellar) who is granted superhuman strengths and abilities so that she may be a mystical warrior destined “to stand alone against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness.” The oft-cited central metaphor of *Buffy* is that “high school is hell,” which is a feeling made literal by the fact that Buffy’s high school sits on an actual doorway to hell. Following Buffy’s graduation, the series continues the coming-of-age theme through storylines about leaving home for college, becoming financially self-supporting, and other milestones of young adulthood. Although the mythology of the Slayer implies that Buffy is destined to fight alone as the only Slayer, this heroine rejects that expectation

and surrounds herself with a community of friends who aid her, eventually even including other Slayers.

While *Buffy* and *Xena* both enjoyed extensive runs of original programming as well as substantial life in syndication during and after their original airings, most cult television heroines from the start of the twenty-first century are not quite as prolific. The other series examined herein ran between one and three seasons, but were fairly successful during their time on air or achieved great popularity through DVD sales following their cancellation. As such, they offer significant and valuable insights into the constructions of the cult television heroine figure and its implications for American culture. One example is found in James Cameron's *Dark Angel* (2000-2002), which is most-widely remembered as the vehicle that launched actress Jessica Alba's career. *Dark Angel's* heroine is Max (Alba), a genetically-engineered girl created to be the perfect soldier and weapon. Max lives in a future, post-apocalyptic Seattle in 2019, having escaped as a child from the government program that created her. Because of the information-based apocalypse, which destroyed electronic banking information rather than physical land or people, Max lives in a world characterized by severe poverty and "big-brother" governmental observation and control. During the course of the series, Max evolves from a teenager looking for direction and family into a heroic figure who utilizes her genetic gifts to oppose corrupt social structures, eventually creating a new community that bridges the gap between genetically-engineered individuals and "ordinary" humans.

In contrast to other cult heroine shows, Joss Whedon's *Firefly* (2002) features an ensemble cast and the series as a whole does not center primarily on the troubled young

girl, River (Summer Glau), who becomes the series' cult heroine. Instead, the groundwork for River's rise to heroine status is laid in the series' thirteen episodes and then development in the show's sequel feature film *Serenity* (2005). Although River was not genetically-engineered like Max was, her government subjected her to psychological and physiological experiments as a girl. The purpose of these experiments was to reshape her into a weapon wielded by the government, but they left her severely emotionally traumatized and barely able to function. River's struggle to regain agency over her body and learn to control her abilities is at the center of her storyline during *Firefly* and is the focus of *Serenity*. Also like Max, River lives in a troubled vision of the future, set sometime in the twenty-sixth century, where humanity lives on several planets and travels by spaceship. River's journey from object of government control to subject with her own agency is aided by the community of outlaws she finds following her escape.

The final series in this study features a girl who also contrasts with the traditional image of a cult television heroine. Many times when one thinks of a cult heroine, one pictures a (young) woman clad in leather who utilizes a deadly array of martial arts-like maneuvers: Xena, Buffy, and Max all embody this image at different times. The titular character of *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007), however, is a different kind of cult heroine. Like Buffy, Veronica (Kristen Bell) is a teen living in early twenty-first century America in a small southern California town. However, unlike Buffy, whose world is filled with vampires, demons, and other literal monsters, Veronica lives in a supernatural/fantasy-free world. Instead, the monsters she faces are ones created by discrepancies in wealth, gender, racial/ethnic identity, and other forms of social differentiation, and Veronica's

weapons are her wits and detective skills rather than fighting ability or enhanced physical strength. Veronica lives in a world in which violence occurs daily, especially violence against women, as demonstrated through the murder of her seventeen-year-old best friend and Veronica's rape. The series is characterized by Veronica's reactions to her history of being victimized and her quest to find justice for her murdered friend. As she challenges social inequalities and power disparities, Veronica forms a network of allies, and she leads their collaboration in advocating for all community members.

Two key characteristics define this group of cult television heroines and are the foundation for my critical consideration of them: *their young age* and *their emphasis on community*. Xena is the only character of the group to be a grown woman; the others are adolescents, teenagers whose growth into their powers coincides with their maturation into adulthood. Even then, Xena's companion Gabrielle is a teenager and experiences many of the same milestones as Buffy, River, Max, and Veronica, eventually inheriting Xena's warrior role upon the older woman's death. That these cult heroine narratives are constructed in the *bildungsroman* tradition is significant. In *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century*, Esther Kleinbord Labovitz defines this literary tradition as concerned with "the development of character from early adolescence to young adulthood, the period when the person works out questions of identity, career, and marriage" and argues that, as such, the *bildungsroman* "is a highly suggestive genre for studying formation of character" (2). Each of the girls/young women negotiates growth into adulthood alongside growth into her heroic role.

The television shows in this study are conscious of their heroines' initial positioning as girls, as evidenced by the fact that the shows make self-conscious reference to their protagonists' age and use identical phrasing to do so. Buffy is called "just a girl" by an army officer attempting to dismiss her ability to challenge his power hegemony in one episode and by a young man she rescues from vampires who is stunned at her abilities in another ("The Yoko Factor," "The Gift"). River is termed "just a girl" by a government official who doesn't understand why so many resources are being poured into the search for her after her escape (*Serenity*). Veronica is told in disbelief that she is "just a girl" when she offers to help a female classmate ("I Know What You'll Do Next Summer"). With Max, the term is similarly used to express surprise in her abilities but also, astonishingly, to counter underestimation of the heroine's ability ("Fuhgeddaboutit," "Freak Nation"). In the latter instance, when one of Max's opponents is taunted for not being able to defeat Max on his own, he replies that she's "more than just a girl." Only on *Xena* is this phrase not used, although Gabrielle's transition from youthful innocence to experienced warrior—her maturation out of girlhood—is the subject of multiple plot points and other characters often underestimate her abilities, reinforcing the same idea. This consistent categorization of heroines as *just girls* across all the shows is significant. The heroines' youth makes them a target by patriarchal social structures who wish to prevent these women from challenging them later on.

Critical interrogations of this generation of cult television heroine have failed to engage the heroines' status as girls or adolescents, instead casting them as adult women. Starting with *Xena's* premier in 1995, Francis Early writes:

The age of the tough-gal action show seems at hand, and women warriors such as Xena, the Warrior Princess... and Buffy, the Vampire Slayer have become wildly popular, especially among young North Americans. These glamorous larger-than-life yet also disarmingly recognizable *women* battle evil on a daily basis and, without much fanfare, repeatedly save the world from untold horror. (“Staking” 11, emphasis added)

Some critics like Early, Kathleen Kennedy, and Dawn Heinecken define this generation as “warrior women” and place them within the just warrior tradition in volumes such as *Athena’s Daughters: Television’s New Warrior Women* (Early and Kennedy) and *The Warrior Women of Television* (Heinecken). Others, such as Sherrie A. Inness, define them as “tough women,” aligning them with action heroes. Further parallels can be drawn to the criticism on film’s “violent women” (cult) heroines from scholars like Hillary Neroni, Martha McCaughey, Neil King, and Yvonne Tasker.¹ While descriptions such as *warrior*, *tough*, and *violent* can and do often describe the current generation of cult television heroine, *woman* largely misses the mark. Her youth is partly what affords her greater cultural currency at the end of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first. Her dedication to sharing heroic power gives her and her community the potential to reject corrupt, unjust social structures and replace them with better models. This study explores contemporary cult heroines as girls, recognizing that the heroine’s successful coming-of-age is dependent on communities in which she and all other young women have a place to belong without forgoing their agency once they become adults.

Alongside their age, these heroines' emphasis on feminist (re)visions of community is the fundamental element of social critique the current generation of cult television heroines offers, and it is the central critical lens through which I examine the television shows in this study. Each of these heroines is reliant on community for heroic efficacy and each uses her relationship with her community to rewrite heroic traditions. While feminist scholars and critics agree that there is no one, all-encompassing definition or superior model of community, they are much more in agreement about the potential positive impacts of communal power. bell hooks defines "feminism" as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (1). The means of exploitation and oppression—such as sexism and racism—are insidiously interwoven throughout society's power structures and institutions. As a result, those who would challenge inequalities find they have more power when they join forces in opposing the flawed power structures upon which patriarchal society is built. In other words, as Penny A. Weiss explains, "communities are essential to [achieving] sexual [and other forms of] equality" (3). More so than that, "communities are essential to feminist survival" (15) because the greatest threat to dominant power structures are those individuals, communities, and political ideologies that would oppose their domination and refute subjugation. Indeed, "there are cracks in patriarchy, and women's communities have lived in those spaces, have pushed back the borders, and have even done the hammering and chiseling to create and widen them" (11). The cult television heroines of the most recent generation are aware of these cracks. They are also cognizant of continued backlash against female empowerment—backlash that seeks to fill in and seal up the cracks, reasserting patriarchal dominance by

targeting girls before they become women, hopefully (from the patriarchal viewpoint) preventing these girls from growing up to join the feminist fight. As a result, these girl heroines must not only combat patriarchal attempts to silence them, they must continually rewrite their and society-at-large's visions of heroism and (feminist) community, finding new ways to circumvent the restrictions dominant power structures attempt to impose upon them.

Although defining "community" explicitly is a problematic endeavor, Robin L. Teske and Mary Ann Tétreault make clear the transformative power of community:

A community is that network of relations in which we exercise both our individual and collective powers... community is a source of identity that is shared with others. It exists beyond the boundaries of the individual organism as opposed to that part of identity that belongs to the person alone and disappears when the organism dies. (12)

The key aspects of this definition are that *community is larger than any one individual* and that *the collective power of community extends beyond the individual*, even an individual as powerful or central to the community as the heroine. Although the heroine leads, protects, and even creates the community, if she is truly community-centered, she also builds the community in such a way that it can continue to exist and oppose dominant power structures in her absence. In doing so, the heroine creates a type of institutional memory, a legacy, that empowers the community to battle inequalities outside of the heroine's actions and prepares the community to survive and fight once she matures out of the community (or if she dies). While this may sound dismal, it is the only

path to true social change. Change that is reliant on the presence of one individual to maintain its impact is not authentic; only through an alteration to the foundational constructions and conceptualizations of social discourse can genuine change be effected. Only through sustained community-based and supported activism can such alterations be achieved and maintained.

In cult narratives, community-centered heroines do often battle a named, embodied villain who stands in for social evils. As Meredith Powers notes, however, “injustice and victimization are inherent to the female experience in the evolution of a patriarchal culture” (5), meaning that the defeat of one foe embodying the forces and social structures that victimize girls/women and members of other disenfranchised social locations does not completely destroy the underlying, flawed social constructions of (non)privilege. This inherent quality is made clear by *Buffy*’s final villain—an incorporeal entity known as “the First” who claims to be the source of all evil. The First’s lack of physical body means that Buffy can only directly engage the byproducts of its influence—super-strong proto-vampires that represent the insidious reach and strength of patriarchal cultures. Buffy’s victory over the First is dependant on the heroine’s recognition that instead of battling the malevolent force directly, she must cut off the First’s ability to influence the world—she must change the system in which she lives. She rewrites the mythology of the Slayer power that dictates only one girl may have such power at any given time. She shares her power with girls everywhere, thereby destroying the hold patriarchal culture has on them (“Chosen”).

As *Buffy* demonstrates, the heroine only truly succeeds when she facilitates resistance to social problems on a larger scale. Sara Crosby astutely argues that heroines “must act for a community they can shape and be shaped by in empowering ways. Otherwise they just flicker on the margins of society without access to political power” (175). Access to political power is the necessary component for the community to truly grow and overcome the villain all heroes and heroines battle: inequalities that arise from corrupt social structures. Only through a power exchange and nurturance, through authentic community membership, can the heroine truly be heroic. Weiss observes that community affiliations “have often served not only to maintain [girls/women], but under certain conditions, to provide them with the material, emotional, and intellectual resources to challenge their conditions” (9). By providing new models for girls/women who succeed at knowing themselves and fighting the inequalities that surround them, contemporary cult television heroines provide a new story for viewers to tell about who today’s young women—and the men they form communities with and around—can be.

That so many of these cult heroines inhabit fantastical worlds is not coincidence. For many girls and women, the dream of overcoming dominant power structures must first start as a dream, a fantasy, because they are so far removed from power. Luckily, fantasy worlds provide exemplary spaces in which to play out narratives about how equality might be achieved. Further, fantastical settings are partially what enables these girl heroines to attain “cult” status, a necessary component for the longevity and spread of these heroines’ message of resistance to patriarchal forces. Genres such as science fiction, fantasy, and detective stories most often serve as “a site for allegorical description

of social injustices displaced in time and/or place from the reader's own society, but still clearly recognizable as a critique of that society" (Cranny-Francis 9) in ways that traditional drama or comedy often does not. Genre narratives in literature, film, and television often inspire intense, dedicated fan followings in readers/viewers, a feature which earns such narratives "cult" status. Christine Jarvis explains this draw: "The addictive popularity of genre fiction ... [is due] to its creation of narratives in which individuals experience the fictional resolution of fears and anxieties that remain unresolvable [*sic*] in reality" (258). Because of the complexities of the narrative worlds in which the "unresolvable" anxieties are played out and even resolved, many cult film and televisual worlds demand that viewers invest a considerable amount of time and attention to fully understand the complexities, histories, and inter-/meta-textual references at work in a given narrative world. While cult narratives may achieve renown, success, and longevity, such as Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* franchise, George Lucas' *Star Wars* saga, and J. J. Abrams' *Lost*, the term *cult*, also often incorporates a fanbase devoted to a film or television program that has not reached blockbuster status. Indeed, *Firefly* is a prime example of this. Its tremendous post-airing success, as demonstrated through DVD sales, led to the production of its sequel feature film *Serenity*.

Anne Cranny-Francis warns that one must be careful when constructing a heroine within a cult framework, as the heroine's narrative:

may also be reappropriated by the discourses against which it is written *if* the writers are not aware of the ideological significance of generic conventions... So, for example, attempts to construct a female hero based

on simple substitution fail badly. A female hero who is as blood-thirsty (i.e. brave) and manipulative (i.e. clever) as her male counterpart does nothing to redefine that characterization and the ideology it naturalizes; she may even reinforce it by lending it a new legitimacy. (9)

Cranny-Francis' warning is a valid one and identifies the source of problematic aspects of cult television heroines who precede the current generation. Indeed, "genres work by convention and those conventions are social constructs; they operate by social assent, not individual choice... These conventions are themselves subject to social pressures and social mediation" (17). While this is true, I would also argue that alterations to conventions are not just an effect of social change, but can also *cause* such change by revising the conventions themselves through popular demand. Such is the case with the girl heroine, who consistently grapples with and rejects/rewrites models of (female) heroism that seek to constrain her, creating more space for social change within and outside of the narrative. As Cranny-Francis asserts, the "most viable" strategy for challenging genre conventions that are conservative or anti-feminist "is the self-conscious use of narrative, even narratives, intersecting with an equally self-conscious use of other genre conventions, to 'make visible' the socially and politically conservative discourses coded into traditional genre conventions" (19). Repeatedly, this generation of cult television heroine narratives does just that.

In *Dark Angel*, for example, the man who protested that Max is "more than just a girl," also calls her "a threat to everything we've worked for through the generations" in the next breath ("Freak Nation"). He is a member of a eugenics cult, seeking to breed the

perfect human, and Max's resistance to his philosophies and attempts to manipulate her make her a threat—not just to him, but to the generations who have come before him in attempting to create a power hegemony through creating “perfect” beings. The threat Max poses to his vision of the world is the threat she poses to patriarchal society as a whole—a society that would control and manipulate her body for its own ends, denying her agency. Likewise, River terms the social-political agendas of patriarchal culture “meddling” in a dream sequence that begins *Serenity*. In it, she is a young girl in elementary school and the teacher is explaining a past war using standard colonial discourse. When River challenges the teacher's and her society's characterization of the conflict, the teacher smiles kindly and says, “We're not telling people what to think. We're just trying to show them how,” before brutally jamming a pencil into the girl's forehead—indeed, showing River “how” to think by demonstrating the consequences of thinking independently from dominant discourse. The violent dream act, which transitions into River's real-time experiences as the subject of cruel medical experiments, makes clear that her society does more than “meddle.” Like viewers' society, it destroys and remakes those who threaten its hegemony.

I argue that this youthful generation of cult television heroines is one in which the young heroine forms and works within communities to challenge the existing unjust/corrupt/patriarchal social order and to work toward a more just society that values *all* citizens. These young women often do “save the day” or even “save the world,” but they do so because they need to create a community and world in which they can continue to live and mature. Without such a community, they cannot grow into

adulthood; the patriarchal structures they oppose will quash their maturation or force them to participate in more masculine heroic traditions in which female figures so often serve only as impetus—as object—for the male hero. Without community to support them and their heroic growth, society will suppress or erase these women’s transgressive, disruptive potential. Like Snow White or Sleeping Beauty of fairy tale, these young women will be “put to sleep” until they can be docile adults, disempowered and molded to ignore or refuse their own agency.

In order to understand how *Xena*, *Buffy*, *Dark Angel*, *Firefly*, and *Veronica Mars* construct their young cult heroines as *community-centered* and why this depiction is significant, we must look back at the history of the cult heroine. Heroic figures can be traced as far back as there are stories about the human condition, and undoubtedly such narratives predate recorded history. Female heroes do appear in this historical record, although they are much fewer and further between. The most often-remembered heroines are historical figures whose narratives have transformed into mythic proportions and include women like Boudicca, a Celtic warrior queen (circa 60 C.E.) and the young Joan of Arc, a medieval teen with visions who led an army in God’s name. As Early argues, such women “have not been permitted to form a tradition of their own except as temporary warrior transgressors... [because they] have been viewed as inherently disruptive to the patriarchal social order; their stories often have been denigrated in or erased from the historical record” (“The Female” 56). In the twentieth century, changes in technology facilitated the spread and popularity of female hero images and narratives. Inness cites a uniquely American tradition of “tough women,” identifying nineteenth-

century frontier women such as Annie Oakley and Calamity Jane as predecessors, and tracing a lineage through others like Rosie the Riveter and Wonder Woman (“Introduction” 2). Although both of the latter originated in World War II America, Wonder Woman lives on, in her original comic book form; in a 1970s television show; in various, more current renderings in animated television and video games; and in a forthcoming feature film (currently slated for release in 2011). With the advent of film and television in the twentieth century, as well as subsequent technologies for distribution of audio-visual media, popular narratives about strong, heroic women were made available to the public. Popular culture’s greedy consumption of these figures illuminates the desire for such heroines and for the challenges to the social order they represent. The technology-aided availability explains Inness’ assertion that “strong women characters have always existed in American mythology. What has changed are the sheer numbers” (“Introduction” 3).

Like the historical transgressive warriors and tough female figures who precede them, the community-centered cult television heroines’ genesis traces back to traditional (masculine) heroic forms like those permeating Western literature and identified by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In Campbell’s monomyth, the (male) hero undertakes a quest with three major steps: *separation*, *initiation*, and *return*. In *separation*, the hero “ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder” (23). In *initiation*, “fabulous forces are encountered and a decisive victory is won” by the hero (23). Finally, in *return*, “the hero comes back [home] from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (23).

While such boons can include wisdom that alters his home community for the better, historically they have not included the radical revision of dominant power structures that the most recent generation of cult heroines pursues. In this archetypal heroic journey, the hero is the primary figure, and although he is aided by others, he does not form community with them. Instead, he uses their aid to achieve his victory and return to his home community. That return and reintegration signifies the ultimate success of his heroism. The cult television heroines in this study cannot escape the prevalence of the monomyth or how it defines the hero, and they often undertake Campbell's hero's journey, reenacting the monomyth in both episodic stories and their narratives' overall trajectories.

The common monomyth-based theme throughout the characterizations of these cult television heroines is that these are all stories about young women, if not girls, who find themselves in positions of extraordinary power. That power serves to *separate* them from the life they had previously lived, from their *home*. Instead of necessarily undertaking a literal journey into a distant, fantastical setting, each heroine learns how her power functions and about the "darker" aspects of her own world—Buffy learns of vampires, demons, and magic, for example, while River and Max learn the depths of their respective governments' corruption. As each young woman learns to navigate these new worlds that exist simultaneous to her original *home* and negotiates how to wield her power, she enters *initiation*. She struggles with the tension between her call to heroics and a "normal" life—a struggle that has long characterized cult (super)heroes, especially in American popular culture. Thus ensues an identity crisis as each "chosen" woman has

to learn to negotiate how she sees herself and how her community sees her; how she performs her heroism in relation to both entrenched expectations of the (masculine) heroic and her own visions of heroic action; and how to maintain and nourish a subject agency while simultaneously being the leader and warrior the community needs. As a result, what is constructed is a new feminist model for heroic young women, that of the community-centered cult television heroine.

The monomyth is perhaps the most obvious in *Xena* when the warrior princess is introduced to viewers in the pilot episode as someone seeking to return home. At that point she has not been transformed by her journey sufficiently for such a return to be possible and her home community rebuffs her. For Xena and the others, though, the victory that truly marks them ready for *return* is gaining the wisdom to see that instead of returning to their previous community and its attendant limiting discourses and expectations, they must form new community structures. In doing so, they revise the ending to the monomyth and the traditional (male) heroic journey. This revision is important because it signifies a revision of the social structures that make up the idea of *home* necessary for successful *return*. In other words, Xena must create new forms of community in order to create space in which she and other cult heroines can truly belong. Her attempt to abandon her armor and weapons in the series pilot before returning to her home village shows her understanding that a return home also means a return to the life she led before *separation* from that home. A *return* to that previous way of existing, however, would rob her of the heroic power, strength, and agency she gained on her journey. Unwilling to abandon those gains, she can only share her boons by building a

new community structure. The same is true for the other heroines: Buffy ultimately rejects her status as sole Slayer (sole community protector), sharing her power with girls around the world. Max forges a new community that bridges a family born of genetic experiments and shared captivity with the “ordinary” humans who welcome her into their community after she escapes from government control. River learns to use the powers her government forced on her without losing control over her body, a lesson she can only gain and enact within a new community that accepts her as she is, not for what she can offer in trade or services. Regardless of how many times her social institutions fail her, Veronica keeps challenging ineffectual legal and political social structures, working with friends, allies, and acquaintances to squeeze out corruption and create space for a new community-supporting version of the established social structures. Since a traditional *return* would necessitate these heroines leave behind their heroic role and the gains it offers them and other disenfranchised individuals in their societies, they instead create new space, new *home*, turning Campbell’s circular diagram (wherein the hero ends up where he started) into a linear path of growth and maturation. Because these cult heroines are constructed as girls maturing into women, their heroic journey must also allow for such maturation.

Given the masculine nature of the monomyth, it is no accident that the first generation of cult television heroines arose in the 1970s. Aside from changing availability and affordability of television technologies, shifting social conditions in the last few decades of the twentieth century engendered narratives featuring heroic women as social gender role standards changed. The “second wave” of American feminism (the

first being the suffrage movement and generally recognized as occurring 1848-1920) began in the late 1960s. This was a period of dramatic and significant cultural change including rapidly changing gender roles and challenges to prescriptions for sexual and gendered behavior; the introduction of the birth control pill which liberated women sexually; and the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, a revolutionary book that identified the "problem with no name":

The problem [that] lay buried, unspoken for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—"Is this all?" (15)

As this opening paragraph and definition suggests, Friedan's book explored the idea that a woman whose only role is support for others, as housewife and mother, might remain personally unfulfilled. The generation of women of whom Friedan speaks is a generation that came of age in the 1950s, another historical period of backlash to women's advances that raised girls into one, limited definition of femininity/womanhood. Friedan's book also fueled a revolution in American culture by starting the Women's Liberation movement of the 1970s. The approximate decade that followed *The Feminine Mystique's* publication witnessed countless different philosophies and responses to how women

could/should be empowered and made equal in society, as well as legislation such as Title IX and affirmative action policies, which regulated equal access to public education and athletics, employment opportunities, and other public community resources. The history of women's liberation overlaps with the Civil Rights movement and the beginning of the Gay and Lesbian Liberation movement in the United States, as well as the controversy over America's military involvement in Vietnam. These changes to socially-constructed identity and power structures were reflected in television and film, especially through the popularity of visual narratives featuring strong, heroic women. Television in the 1970s birthed *Charlie's Angels* (1976-1981), *The Bionic Woman* (1976-1978), and, of course, *Wonder Woman* (1975-1979), among others. As Jennifer S. Clark explains, these figures were significant in the 70s because they "promote[d] America by championing its democratic inclusion of all people including, but not limited to, women" (438). Further, *Wonder Woman* and other heroines "demonstrate their abilities to compete in male-dominated occupations. They also express, as both superwomen and career women, a belief in women's public sphere rights and sisterly solidarity with other women" (438). Whitney Womack identifies similar characteristics that drew her to *Charlie's Angels* as a child: "images of female intelligence, strength, female solidarity, and community" (152). Because Womack's mother "who was in graduate school and involved in the women's liberation causes at the time, was working to instill in [Womack] many of the same feminist principles represented in the show, especially women's right to equality in school and the workplace" (152), Womack saw in the *Angels* heroic role models. She identifies the ways in which the series challenged patriarchal infrastructure that

disempowered women. In one episode, for example, the series “confronts head-on what would have been one of the LAPD’s justifications for keeping women cops out of the field [a backstory the Angels all share]—their vulnerability to rape—and shows how Sabrina, with the help of Kelly, effectively handles” the threat of rape (156).

However, like any first generation of activists, these cult heroines are also subject to a fair amount of criticism. Julie D. O’Reilly traces Wonder Woman’s origins back to her 1941 debut in comics and compares her to Superman (the first superheroic figure in American comics). From this contrast, she concludes that Wonder Woman’s “legacy is one of deference, or at the least, limited agency” (274), while Inness characterizes Charlie’s Angels as “doing little to challenge or question gender stereotypes” (“Introduction” 14). Sharon Ross asserts that shows like *The Bionic Woman* and *Wonder Woman* construct “strong female heroes... as isolated from other women socially” (234-235). Likewise, Richard J. Alapack characterizes Wonder Woman as one who “defends the Established Order with staunch, fearless commitment” (996). Writing about heroic women on shows like *Charlie’s Angels*, *Wonder Woman*, and *The Bionic Woman*, Alapack also asserts that “the consumer-visual culture of the late 1970s exhibits a flexible, plasticized, and technologically modified body, a lifestyle accessory to be stylized, sculpted, and shaped” (995). Ross agrees that these shows’ construction of the female heroic body was limiting. She writes: “In order for a female lead character to demonstrate even momentary control over story events, she had to be curtailed through punishment or demonstrations of excessive sexuality. For instance,... [characters like] Charlie’s Angels... have been noted more for their bodies than their actions” (235). In

fact, both popular press writings and critical scholarship on *Charlie's Angels* most often characterize the show as “jiggle TV,” a term that foregrounds the Angels’ physicality and sexualization, privileging it over the feminist gains made by the series’ depiction of strong female cult heroines.

Previous generations of cult television heroines did have an interest in community, of course. After all, their work combated injustice and served the greater good of community protection. However, these women were always set apart from their community, unable to achieve or not interested in a full integration/participation therein. Like the iconic identity duality that characterizes male cult heroes like Clark Kent/Superman and Bruce Wayne/Batman, heroines like Diana Prince/Wonder Woman and *Charlie's Angels* lived two separate lives—their heroic lives and their “normal” lives. When the community was in danger, these women would appear to save the day. After their heroic actions, however, Wonder Woman and the Angels returned to their other, “civilian” lives, keeping the two identities securely separated and limiting the women’s “normal” identities’ potential to challenge dominant power structures in their everyday lived experiences. Although the Angels did have something of a workplace community, “work[ing] closely [together] and watch[ing] one another’s backs, especially during their undercover missions” (Womack 152), they formed no larger community in which their secret and normal identities could co-exist (or at least viewers did not see such communal affiliation). In contrast, while Buffy and Max may initially attempt to maintain a “secret identity,” they soon find such a pretense more of a hindrance than a help in executing their heroic duties. They integrate into communities whose members are aware of their

ability to effect social change, if not the exact nature of their powers. Xena's, Veronica's, and River's abilities are never purposefully hidden from their communities, and they seek out, integrate into, and/or form new communities that support girls'/women's agency. In doing so, they offer new, powerful models for viewers' understanding of how heroic agency intersects with a community-centered ethos and how these young cult television heroines might rewrite the heroic monomyth to create new space that nurtures girls' growth and development into mature women.

Cult heroines like *Charlie's Angels* and *Wonder Woman* were unable to breach the monomyth's confines because they were separate from the community, appearing in times of danger and leaving once the crisis had been averted. This characterization stems from an aspect of second wave feminism subject to major criticism—that the movement tended to be divisive in its construction of community. Many women who could dedicate time to feminist activism were women of some privilege; they tended to be white, heterosexual, and middle class. As a result, these traits also came to characterize the feminist movement as a whole. Although the late 60s and 70s were home to many social reform movements in America, focusing on points of social division like gender, race, sexuality, and mental or physical (dis)ability, the unfortunate reality is that many groups' commitment to the aspect of social inequality in which they were the largest stakeholders caused the groups to compete with other equal rights movements for primacy. Rather than finding allies among others interested in the same basic principles, individual groups—feminists among them—tended to value their own primary interest as the most important. For example, writer and activist Audre Lorde, a black lesbian feminist who

came of age in the 1970s, laments her experiences with being forced to choose between different aspects of her identity in order to join others in communal political advocacy. Her feminist friends wanted her to focus her activist efforts on gender, placing her racial identity and sexuality second (if not outright denying the “secondary” identity, in the case of her sexual orientation). Simultaneously, Civil Rights groups asked Lorde to privilege her energies in favor of racial inequalities over concerns of gender. And lesbian advocates that she associated with wanted her to keep her focus on issues of sexuality at the expense of the other prominent aspects of her identity. Second wave feminism’s construction of community was flawed in a number of ways, and the construction of 70s cult heroines as having segregated heroic and non-heroic identities reflects these failings. Nonetheless, this movement was a necessary step in the evolution of understanding social (in)justice that prepared the way for the eventual rise of the community-centered cult heroine of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Similarly important is the fact that the significant strides toward gender equity made by second wave feminists also led to a cultural backlash against the idea of feminism and the feminist movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This backlash partially accounts for the absence of cult heroine figures on television during that time. Strong female characters were featured on television, but they existed outside of the fantastical settings of genre television and were therefore more subject to the restrictions “real” American women faced during this time—just as the women consuming popular culture were being limited in their ability to change social structures, so too were their small screen counterparts. With fantastical elements denied to them, women on television

during this time were also denied the ability to partake in the monomyth. This prevented them from either subverting or reinforcing it. Women in business discovered the glass ceiling, but heroic women were not even afforded that opportunity; they could not bump their heads on or burst through a ceiling in a building they were not permitted to enter. Women on television were simply excluded from contributing to constructions of cult heroism, mirroring shifting cultural attitudes representative of the fear that feminism's gains had been too great and that women's advancement posed too big a threat to the comfort enjoyed by those who traditional patriarchal structures privileged.

As Susan Faludi details in her groundbreaking book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, during the 1980s, many believed that the gains of the feminist movement had empowered women too much, and, as such, the movement and women who benefited from it posed a threat to "traditional" American values. This perceived threat to "America" was really a threat to the established power structures and privilege enjoyed by a small portion of the population, who were most often white, heterosexual, middle-class or wealthy, and male. Although cult heroines were absent on television during the backlash period, some notable cult heroines did emerge on film during this era and finished preparing the way for the community-centered cult heroine. Such figures include Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Alien* (1979), Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), and even the titular characters in *Thelma & Louise* (1991, Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon). Although Thelma and Louise did not engage supernatural or fantastical elements, their heroic journey did lead to the understanding that they could never return *home* without giving up gains in self-

awareness and agency—a realization that led them to commit suicide rather than be reshaped into supporters of the social structure that disempowered them. Characters like alien-fighting astronaut Ellen Ripley and evil-robot-combating Sarah Connor physically prefigure the rise of the current generation of cult television heroine, but women like *Thelma and Louise* are the cautionary tale that anticipates a generation of heroic girls who refuse the submission/death binary, demanding instead to be given space to grow.

Thelma & Louise serves as a model narrative to represent the cultural conflict over Women's Liberation following the second wave. As such, it is instructive in illuminating why cult heroines of this younger generation are so young and why they must forge new communities to replace the old. Second wave feminism's gains were made by women—adult females who knew their minds and would not back down. Patriarchy learned its lesson from these women's resistance to its demands: *adult women* are dangerous. *Thelma and Louise* found empowerment in rejecting sexual assault, objectification, and degradation. They refused to conform to social expectations based on their gender or class status. Even though they chose death in the end, they died triumphant, refusing to be constrained any longer by patriarchal expectations. As such, these characters offered an example for female viewers who were equally disempowered. In his study of popular media and fan responses to *Thelma & Louise*, Bernie Cook provides several examples of the divergent, polarized response to the film's anti-patriarchal message (“Something’s”), summarized as: “Extracinematically, *Thelma & Louise* has been used as a statement of female empowerment and self-assertion and also as a warning of the perceived dangers of female access to violence” (Cook, “I Can” 1).

The oppositional nature of these responses makes clear that women recognizing and opposing dominant patriarchal structures and discourses are both attractive to some viewers and threatening to others.

The dangerous potential of adult women to resist patriarchy's rule led society to turn its attention to girls who were not yet women, girls who might be shaped and molded into model citizens. Current debates over whether or not feminist ideology is still needed in twenty-first century America make clear the success of these patriarchal efforts. Attempts to create "Stepford" girls who toe the patriarchal line play out in the current cult heroine television shows. River and Max come under government control as children. River is barely an adolescent at fourteen when she is tricked into attending a special school where she is experimented upon and psychologically trained—a metaphor for the ways that education can be twisted to disempower girls. Likewise, Max is born into captivity and raised to be a "good" soldier—a "good" girl—exercising no agency outside that afforded her to complete a specific mission objective to which she is assigned. In *Buffy*, too, patriarchal society's recognition of the dangerous potential of women is made clear. On her eighteenth birthday—that which marks her transition into adulthood—Buffy is subjected to a "test" by the Watchers' Council, a hyper-patriarchal group that appoints itself to guide, train, and control the always-female Slayer and her powers ("Helpless"). Buffy is neither asked for nor gives consent for the test that is imposed on every Slayer as she approaches adulthood. She is chemically stripped of her superpowers and locked in with a psychotic vampire. If she cannot slay him, she will die. The show makes clear that her death is the Council's preferred outcome, for the next Slayer will be

younger and easier to control than the headstrong Buffy. The common element in all these shows from *Xena* to *Veronica Mars* is clear: patriarchal society seeks to prevent girls from growing into independent women who can mentor other girls to resist the social constraints imposed upon them. Indeed, as teenagers negotiate their maturation and identity, they are often easily molded, shifting between one persona and the next. At the same time, however, teenage girls are perhaps the least malleable of any age female. The idealism and determined energy that fuels youth is almost a supernatural attribute in its own right, driving young women to forge ahead with their plans, heedless of what others tell them is impossible.

This youth-driven determination to effect justice through substantive change is also reflective of changing understandings of the role of feminism and feminist action in American culture at the end of the twentieth century. In part because of the strong backlash against feminism in the 1980s, many young women of the 1990s felt a disconnect between previous incarnations of feminism (or what distorted media images told them feminism was) and their lived experiences, causing them to “express feminist ideas without labeling them as such” (Aronson 573) in an effort to separate themselves from caricatured ideas of feminists. Such distorted images of feminists are ironically summed up by *Buffy* actress Sarah Michelle Gellar as “women that don’t shave their legs” (qtd. in Levine 171). Undoubtedly, Gellar’s comment is also intended to encompass harsher depictions which portray 70s feminists as “man-haters” and “big, ugly dykes” to borrow a “tired” stereotype from feminist writer Jessica Valenti (23, 24). Because 1990s girls/young women often had not experienced outrageous acts of sex-based

discrimination—thanks largely to the work of the previous generation—many post-second wave girls/women have come to view “feminism” as an outdated concept. So called “postfeminism” is “often characterized by a belief that the goals of the feminist movement of the 1970s have been accomplished, and thus that there is no need to continue a fight that has already been won” (Levine 170).

This perception has impacted the construction of the current generation of cult television heroines. Early and Kennedy explain that “the woman warrior of the 1990s emerged as a reaction to the perceived limits of 1970s feminism and 1980s conservatism” (5). They argue that this representation of a new cult heroine “[is] a young, hip, and alluring portrayal of female autonomy that offers an implicit contrast to and critique of the second-wave feminist generation that came of age in the 1960s and 1970s” (3). These contrasts illuminate the change in societal understandings of feminism and feminist power. They also make clear why so many of these heroines battle social inequalities without actually using the term “feminist.” These heroines’ recognition of the need for new community structures, however, belies their distance from the term itself. Clearly they have learned the lessons of earlier generations of feminists and recognize the need to build strong new communities of allies dedicated to opposing patriarchal social order that disenfranchise not only women and girls, but also racial and ethnic minorities, as well as queer and poor individuals. While the cult heroines themselves are fairly uniformly constructed as white, heterosexualized young women,² they are surrounded by and support community members from all social locations—race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and wellness/(dis)ability.

Further, today's young Americans inhabit a cultural landscape where examples of social injustices are rife, even if they do not directly impact the average American media consumer. Examples range from genocides like those in Rwanda or Serbia in the 1990s; to the generations of children forced to be soldiers in Sudan; to the still unsolved cases of hundreds of young women and girls abducted and brutally murdered in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico starting in the mid-1990s; to Middle East "honor" killings of women by their families for stepping out of line and "disgracing" the family name through real or imagined expressions of sexuality (ranging from extra- or pre-marital affairs to being the victim of rape). These global examples, however, are often downplayed or ignored by American media, falsely suggesting a lack of importance for atrocities committed elsewhere. While few young people today have a direct means of combating such atrocities, the community-centered cult heroine also reflects a growing awareness of America's position in a global community and a desire for a means through which to oppose and stop such injustices.

Ultimately, the community-centered cult television heroines offers a transgressive vision by making community a necessary component for true heroic efficacy. This generation of cult heroines is indebted to the doors opened to them by previous cult heroines like Wonder Woman and Charlie's Angels—women who made clear that being heroic was not just a boys' club, but who were also limited by how transgressive that simple message was at the time. Like any second generation, though, the community-centered cult heroine is not just following in "big sister's" footsteps. She is taking the heroic authority afforded her by the previous generation's gains and making it her own.

For these heroines, as for most feminists, “it is not enough to form homogenous communal enclaves that merely protect ‘our own’ members at the expense of outsiders and that disregard the wider world of political oppression” (Weiss and Friedman xiii). Instead, girls and women like Xena, Gabrielle, Buffy, River, Max, and Veronica are rewriting what it means to be a cult heroine, defining their actions in terms of their youth, cultural location, relationship to feminism, and recognition of the dual necessity of community membership and nurturance of the community’s power for heroism.

The current generation of cult television heroine is comprised of girls who patriarchal society would disempower by sending them to sleep until they reach adulthood like modern day Snow Whites or Sleeping Beauties, leeching out their agency and faith in themselves and their ability to change the world. Instead, however, like the girl detective who so captured my imagination as a child that rainy evening, Buffy and the others offer a model of heroic female adolescence in which young women are suspicious of crones giving away apples and resist the idea that they are destined to prick their fingers on spindles. These cult heroines demand they be given space to grow, and they mobilize their communities to help carve out that space.

Notes

¹ Both Inness and Tasker have authored volumes that situate “girls” in the primary title in reference to later twentieth-century cult heroines (Inness: *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* and Tasker: *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema*). However, the subtitles/content of their volumes make clear that they are using the word “girl” ironically, to combat its application to women as a diminutive term. Inness’ and Tasker’s books are not literally about adolescents or girls; instead, they focus on adult women.

² This limited racial/gendered construction of the community-centered cult heroine is problematic, as several scholars have noted when writing on these same

television series. However, given the other ways in which the series are socially progressive and challenge dominant power structures related to modes of social location other than gender (albeit to lesser degrees), I argue that the heroines' limited racial/beauty construction is more a function of social expectations for visual media in current American culture. Sadly, shows featuring more prominent female cult heroic figures of color, for example, simply did not fare well, suggesting that they could not find a market. See note #3 in Chapter 3 for more information and examples.

CHAPTER ONE

“That’s What She... Said”: Lesbian (Sub)text and the Rejection
of a Heteronormative Community Paradigm in *Xena: Warrior Princess*

“The two of you made me realize something deep down about myself that I guess I always knew but just didn’t dare admit,” a woman confesses to Xena (Lucy Lawless) and Gabrielle (Renée O’Connor), the two main characters and cult television heroines of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, at the end of the mid-series episode “The Play’s the Thing.” The woman, Minya (Alison Wall), is a recurring character, who Xena and Gabrielle previously helped gain the self-confidence necessary to exercise her agency. During this episode, Gabrielle writes and directs a play that chronicles Xena’s adventures, and she casts Minya in a role—another transformative experience for Minya. In a nod to one of the television series’ major themes, Gabrielle intends her play to teach its audience the power of love and elevate that emotion above anger, hate, and vengeance. The playwright conveys that message by focusing on the closeness of Xena and Gabrielle’s relationship. After the production, Minya approaches Xena and Gabrielle, and in her awareness of the close-knit partnership between the warrior princess and her companion, Minya shares her self-revelation. As Minya speaks, she slowly rubs a hand down her torso drawing the viewer’s attention toward her groin. The scene, then, is contextualized in terms of sexuality.

“Yes,” Minya confesses, “I’m a...” Here her pause builds suspense for her non/diegetic audience before she declares, “thespian.” Xena’s surprised response of “oh,”

echoes viewers' assumption that Minya's declaration would reveal sexual orientation rather than occupation. Gabrielle and Xena congratulate Minya on her self-discovery and, as they walk away, Gabrielle inquires skeptically, "That's what she said, right, deep down she's a thespian?" Xena replies, "Yeah, that's what she [pause] said." Xena's reply/pause clearly indicates that Minya's "defining" moment can be understood in more than the literal sense; also, "thespian" can be perceived as a stand-in for an identification of sexuality. Further, Minya's word play emphasizes *performance* in expressions of gender and sexuality, as well as how a woman's performance allows her to subvert societal constructions of femininity and (hetero)sexuality. This is one moment of many wherein *Xena: Warrior Princess* draws on the emphasis of community to engage questions of lesbian subtext during its six-season run from 1995-2001.

Xena is the first of a new generation of television cult series featuring strong, active female heroes in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The title character, Xena, is a strong woman warrior who travels around the ancient worlds of Greece, Rome, Egypt, Norway, and China fighting injustices. Her travels are a search for redemption from a violent past as a warlord, and she undertakes this heroic task as a revision of Campbell's heroic monomyth. In the series' pilot episode, Xena attempts to return to her hometown after her time as a warlord. Her community rejects her, which spurs her heroic journey ("Sins of the Past"). By the end of the series, however, Xena realizes that she cannot return home as she once desired because doing so would require her to give up the skills which allowed her to succeed as a warrior—the same skills that enable her to stand up to patriarchal oppressions. Instead, she creates a new home by forming a new community

that does not expect her to conform to heteronormative standards. The creation of this new community is the revision of the monomyth. Joining Xena is Gabrielle, a peasant girl who dreams of becoming a bard. Gabrielle and Xena first meet when the warrior intervenes and prevents the teen from being sold into slavery. Gabrielle is immediately impressed by Xena's resistance to society's limited expectations for women, and she follows Xena, begging to be allowed to join the older woman—a narrative set-up that foregrounds future queer readings of the two. For six seasons, Gabrielle, under Xena's tutelage, grows into a warrior in her own right. While Xena is the title character—the heroine—*Xena* is also the story of Gabrielle's coming-of-age into the heroic role, a cultural narrative that creates space for the girl heroines who follow *Xena*: Buffy, River, Max, and Veronica Mars. Xena and Gabrielle are joined at various times by other reoccurring characters—both friend and foe—and plot lines borrow shamelessly from history, (mostly Western) myth, literature, and late twentieth-century American popular culture. In the process, *Xena* often evokes a camp aesthetic to facilitate the blending of these disparate elements. Camp functions as a self-conscious critique of character archetypes, genre positioning, narrative tropes, and production choices that might otherwise impede the show's ability to present social commentary.

Consumers of late twentieth-century popular culture will also likely be familiar with *Xena: Warrior Princess*' lesbian (sub)text, by reputation if nothing else. For most fans and critics, the question of lesbianism in *Xena* is not whether a (sub)text exists; rather the question is whether the (sub)text is actually “sub” and not outright text. The lesbian themes become more obvious as the series progresses, and the show consciously

plays up these themes in several episodes besides “The Play’s the Thing.” Xena and Gabrielle, however, never officially “come out.” Each woman repeatedly flirts with the possibility of heterosexual encounters and romantic partnerships throughout the course of the series, leaving some space, however minimal, for a platonic reading of Xena and Gabrielle’s relationship. As Joanne Morreale observes, “Xena and Gabrielle’s ambiguous sexuality is a constant subject of speculation both in the press and among [fans]” (79).¹ This debate foregrounds the series’ central and most important feminist premise: the necessary rejection of a heteronormative paradigm. This rejection is even more significant for *Xena* as one of the earliest community-centered cult television heroine shows because the common characteristic of such heroines is their rewriting and re-envisioning of community outside of traditional patriarchal constructs.

Critical discussions of gender performance in *Xena* are most often framed in terms of the lesbian (sub)text of the series, seemingly in response to the show’s lack of clear definition of Xena and Gabrielle’s sexuality. Of those scholars who concentrate on the topic of sexuality, most read Xena and Gabrielle through the lens of queer theory, as lesbians or bisexual women in a same-sex relationship, a fact which leads some to bemoan the series’ choice to leave the women unidentified as such. For example, Robin Silverman argues that while *Xena* offers many scenes subverting heteronormative culture, the series has an “unrelenting insistence upon heterosexual affirmation and resolution” (34). She cites the series’ ultimate refusal to name Xena and Gabrielle as lovers as the source of this affirmation of heterosexuality, regardless of the fact that “no other TV show or film comes to mind that has played the sexual ambiguity card so ruthlessly—so

opportunistically—as *Xena* [*sic*] has” (34). Silverman maintains that *Xena*’s use of this ambiguity “consistently function[s] to instill a sense of sexual impossibility in the viewer rather than possibility” (34). Others, myself included, read the show’s ambiguity as opening more doors than it closes, instead presenting a broader range of possibilities than a dichotomous binary between traditional heterosexuality and lesbianism. The choice to construct female sexuality/identity as ambiguous rather than fixed into one definition is a necessary component of *Xena*’s repudiation of heteronormative culture because it allows girls and women limitless possibilities rather than only one means of resistance.

Similarly, Sherrie A. Inness, also writing in the late 1990s,² asserts that “rather than interpret this obfuscation as a failure, we need to recognize that [it] allows the program to play with lesbian iconography more explicitly than perhaps any mainstream television show other than *Ellen*” (*Tough Girls* 170). Elyce Rae Helford, in her extensive treatment of the butch/femme dynamic in *Xena*, extends Inness’ observation. She suggests, “the development and fate of the sitcom *Ellen* [cancelled shortly after the title character openly identified as lesbian] offers perhaps the most relevant explanation for the popularity of [*Xena*’s] ‘subtextual’ approach to LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] representation” (140). Helford expands the argument, and claims that a queer reading of *Xena* and Gabrielle’s relationship is a necessary component for successful evaluation of *Xena*’s “challenges to heteronormativity” (142).

Indeed, these challenges to traditional family and social structures that privilege heterosexuality overlap heavily with the main characters’ (ambiguous) sexuality. I agree with Inness’ claim that “*Xena* is the first program aimed at a mass audience to show a

superhero whose sexual orientation remains ambiguous, calling into question the notion that a superhero must be heterosexual” (*Tough Girls* 170). Herein I offer a reading of *Xena*’s depictions of lesbian (sub)text and heteronormativity in relation to *Xena*’s community-centered heroism because *Xena*’s foundational challenge to patriarchal authority is the creation of non-heteronormative models of community. Although the series regularly injects heterosexual roadblocks that prevent a full onscreen realization of a lesbian relationship, the consistent rejection of heteronormativity in *Xena*’s world receives little if any critique. A critical exploration of the importance of this refutation—both for the show and for the space it allows *Xena* to create for future community-centered cult television heroines—remains largely ignored. This chapter seeks to expand the scope of critical conversation about *Xena* in relation to its depiction and ultimate rejection of heteronormative social structures as a means of forming a new *home* for cult heroines.

Aside from the criticism that explores sexuality in *Xena*, much of the critical engagement with the series focuses on the ways it conforms to and/or subverts ancient-world heroic paradigms, including the (Western) (male) warrior, and *Xena*’s messianic themes. Alison Futrell suggests that *Xena* reworks traditional hero archetypes by “drawing also on ‘American’ conceptualizations of the hero’s task... stress[ing] atonement and redemption, relying on the selflessness of the hero rather more than is typical for Graeco-Roman mythology” (13). In two separate critiques, Kathleen Kennedy connects *Xena* to Christian martyr tradition (“*Xena on the Cross*”) and situates her within a series-created “multicultural tradition of warrior women such as Egypto-Celtic M’lila;

Akemi, a Japanese girl who kills her father; Lao Ma, a Chinese concubine [and founder of Taoist philosophy in *Xena*]; and Cyane, an Amazon queen” (“Love Is...” 41).

Similarly, Sharon Ross argues:

[*Xena* provides a] new [vision] of heroism by inflecting the concept of toughness with the notion of flexibility. While traditional heroes of the past have been made tough via their individualism and their ability to confront obstacles by themselves, women [like *Xena*] grow as heroes because of their female friends. (231)

Fe/male friendships facilitate the creation of community, and this creation is central to the community-centered cult television heroine because it normalizes cross-gender friendships and same-sex romantic pairings. In doing so, *Xena* offers a model of community that moves away from heteronormative standards which position men and women in romantic opposition and often place women in competition with one another for male attention. Another common, albeit minimally recognized, thread throughout analyses of *Xena*'s heroism is the emphasis on her roles within various groups and communities. My analysis seeks to illustrate how *Xena* is the progenitor of a new group of cult heroines, the community-centered heroine that receives widespread currency in popular culture through the medium of genre television in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Xena makes clear the centrality of community from the very beginning. The show's pilot episode, “Sins of the Past,” introduces several key themes: *Xena* and Gabrielle's close friendship and sisterhood, *Xena*'s redemptive drive, and the fundamental value and desirability of community created through association, shared

goals, and family ties. In this episode, Xena returns to her home village of Amphipolis, seeking forgiveness and redemption from her mother and community members for her past sins. Although Xena's history as a warlord is developed in great depth over the course of the series, viewers are introduced to Xena the warlord/warrior at the episode's beginning when Xena rides on horseback into the blackened ruins of a village. As present-day Xena surveys the destruction, the scene is intercut with flashbacks of Xena ferociously fighting while the town burns around her. The gleeful smile on past-Xena's face makes clear her enjoyment of her participation in violence. In the present, a young boy emerges from one of the decimated structures and asks if Xena has food to spare. When she rebukes him that "food's scarce everywhere," and asks where his parents are, his reply offers viewers insight into how to interpret the flashback scene. He says, "They were killed by Xena, the Warrior Princess. She came down out of the sky in a chariot, throwing thunderbolts and breathing fire" ("Sins of the Past"). The little boy's answer opens for viewers the myth that surrounds Xena at the series' beginning. The stories cast her as a larger-than-life figure, descending from the heavens as a powerful cosmic force, who brings not abundance and joy to her community, but danger and destruction. The boy's characterization of Xena causes the woman to grimace and look ill. Although she does not reply, she tosses a bundle at his feet and quickly rides off. The camera lingers on the boy unwrapping a bundle of bread and cheese. The ungracious means of giving this gift, the violence-lusting Xena in flashback, and the subsequent scene where Xena buries her armor and weapons tell viewers that Xena is haunted by her violent past. She begins her attempts to rectify it by giving up food to the child. She quickly finds such escape

impossible, though, when another warlord's troops pass by with a group of young female hostages. The leader prepares to whip one of them—a young woman Xena and viewers will soon learn is named Gabrielle—for daring to stand up to him. Xena steps in to defend Gabrielle and the others, demonstrating a communal affiliation to the other women, a theme that will be repeated throughout the series. Although Xena rescues the women, and Gabrielle finds a role model in the older woman's heroics, the (notably male) leaders of Gabrielle's village are unwilling to welcome Xena into their community. Instead, she is quickly asked to leave because the villagers "know [her] reputation" and "don't want any trouble." Xena's ejection from this community foreshadows the rebuff she will receive in her hometown of Amphipolis later in the episode from both the townsfolk and her mother, Cyrene (Darien Takle).

When Xena first arrives at her mother's tavern, she dismounts her horse and pauses briefly before moving toward the tavern. What is significant about the pause is that she uses this time to grip the hilt of her sword before releasing it and then moving forward. Prior to walking into this tense situation, she draws comfort from her weapon and the power it represents, even though she expressed discomfort at memories of violence in the earlier scene, raising questions about how removed from that lifestyle she really is or if she can completely abandon it. Inside the tavern, the sword again plays a key role in establishing power dynamics. As Xena walks into the room, various off-screen patrons react to her presence with questions like, "Is that Xena?" before the tavern falls silent. The villagers stare at Xena, waiting for her to make a move. Cyrene enters the room and stops short upon seeing her daughter. Xena greets her, "Mother," and Cyrene

quickly draws Xena's sword from its scabbard. Cyrene then holds it upright between them, the business end pointed at Xena's face. Although viewers know that Xena is capable of defending herself against such a threat—after all, she saved Gabrielle and the other women without the aid of either weapon or armor—she stands silently, waiting for her mother's judgment. Cyrene pulls the blade back and says, "Weapons are not welcome in my tavern," before setting it aside on another table, figuratively disempowering Xena by divesting her of her "phallus" and "mannish" ways. This symbolic disempowerment is compounded by Cyrene's rejection of Xena, both as a mother and as a voice representing the community, when Cyrene continues, "neither are you."

Cyrene's refusal of Xena raises an interesting, gendered question. Xena's divestment of her masculine weapon suggests that the conflict between Xena's female sex and masculine behavior is at the heart of the rebuff. Notably, however, Draco (Jay Laga'aia), a past lover and the episode's primary villain, warns Xena that she will not be welcomed back home with open arms—advice he offers based on his own experience attempting to go home. This is important for two reasons: it establishes that gender-power dynamics on *Xena* are (sometimes) more complicated than a simple adherence to completely traditional standards which reward masculine power and punish its female equivalent, and it aligns Xena's heterosexual past with her violent, warmongering past. Throughout the series, Xena's rejection of heteronormativity is paired with a rejection of her patriarchal warrior past.

Xena explains to her mother and the townsfolk that she knows Draco is marching on the village with plans to destroy it. She pleads with the villagers to mount a defense:

“If we act now, we stand a good chance of stopping him.” Her first-person plural “we” places herself alongside the villagers as part of their community. The others refuse her with shouted responses, however, that separate her from the community, such as, “You’ll not take our sons,” and “Not this time, Xena!” Cyrene’s explanation of the village member’s refusal reinforces Xena’s exclusion from the community: “We all remember what happened the last time you talked like that... We would rather die before accepting help from you again... Go away, Xena. This is not your town anymore. We are not your people. I am not your mother.” Later episodes reveal that Xena was once a regular, if determined, young woman who, when her village was attacked by outsiders, organized the young men of the village to fight back—a resistance that cost a great many lives and gave her a taste for the kind of power afforded to the leader of an army. The villagers’ negative reaction to Xena is about the loss of life then, but it is also about the fact that following that fight, Xena embraced violent power and left the community to terrorize others. She became the mighty and feared “warrior princess” who was “forged in the heat of battle,” as the series’ opening credits tell viewers each episode. She reveled in violence and commanded respect through terror and warmongering, and the villagers fear that her return will ultimately place them at the end of her sword, used and abused by a tyrannical powermonger. The villagers’ fear is understandable as they do not know she has had a change of heart and priorities. Her mother’s words seal her expulsion from the community. Likewise, Xena’s reaction later in the episode shows the desolation she feels as one without community, as she is prepared to allow the villagers to stone her when they mistakenly believe she commands Draco’s invading forces—a rumor he spreads to

keep Xena separated from her community. By extension, this reaction also establishes her yearning for a community; she desires to belong so much that if the only way she can atone is through death, she will allow the community to kill her. Only through Gabrielle's intervention is the stoning halted and Xena saved, a prelude to the heroic community and non-heteronormative family Xena and Gabrielle will eventually establish.

The townsfolk ask Draco for a meeting; they offer "a few wagons of loot" and the promise of future supplies to Draco's army if he will leave them unharmed. Draco counters with a demand for Xena in exchange for the village's safety. Xena challenges Draco to a fight and rejects his previous offer to renew their romantic partnership. "You choose the weapons," she says, "I'll choose the conditions." The fight takes place on scaffolding that runs across the hall above the villagers' heads, and the "the first one to touch the ground dies." As they fight, the same off-screen voices that had derided Xena in the tavern now cheer her on. The scaffolding falls apart, and Draco walks on the heads and shoulders of the watching villagers. The community, surprisingly, aligns itself with Xena. One voice calls out, "Come on, Xena, walk on me. You can have my shoulders," and another adds, "I'll help you, Xena." Xena accepts their offers and moves to fight Draco. The camera shows the villagers on whom Draco stands grimacing in pain, indicating the weight of his tyrannical leadership. In contrast, those who support Xena invite her to stand on them, to be supported by the community as she fights to protect it. The villagers Xena stands on display far less discomfort with the weight of her heroism in this moment. The contrast suggests that through this action Xena will achieve the redemption and community acceptance she seeks.

When Xena eventually defeats Draco, she offers him mercy in exchange for an oath to leave the village alone. He agrees and departs. Her leniency is another sign of her changed attitudes; where she would have once joyfully claimed his death as her prize, she now seeks a solution that minimizes violence. Still standing between the villagers and Draco, Xena watches him leave, but her triumph is short lived. The village leader comes up behind her and says, “You can take the loot wagons, of course.” Her facial expression makes clear her disappointment that his offer is a thinly-veiled request for her to leave even after she has defeated Draco and rid the community of the menace. Regardless of her heroic actions, the community wants no part of her; they would rather “pay” her with the loot wagons and see her on her way than accept her back into the community and be indebted to her. The only ground she has gained with the community is moving from being the target of a mob attack to an invitation to leave. She replies with a lie: “I don’t want anything.” While she does not desire the community’s material goods, she clearly is disappointed that her community does not reinstate her as one of its own.

Xena’s past choices to embrace the role of army leader and eventually to become a warlord herself align her in the villager’s minds with Draco and men like him—dictators who take and maintain power through violence and fear, who do not value individuals or communities for anything other than what they can offer. These figures are all too common in *Xena*, and while both male and female characters fulfill these roles (although males do so far more often), such figures are always constructed as masculine and aligned with patriarchal, masculine-privileging values. In contrast, although Amphipolis’ leader is a man, the community clearly has no problem with men or women

taking on leadership roles. The community as a whole once followed a woman—Xena—into battle to defend itself; a woman in the community’s angry mob throws the first stone at Xena; and when random villagers off-screen voice the community’s perspective in this episode, the voice is as likely to be female as male. Further, Cyrene speaks for the town when she rejects Xena early in the narrative—just as her forgiveness of Xena following the fight with Draco presages the town’s eventual forgiveness. The community recognizes that it is stronger by abandoning more traditionally patriarchal power structures that men like Draco represent. As such, they turn Xena away after inviting her to stand on them because they cannot yet trust that she has truly forsaken her old ways. This is a lesson Xena takes to heart and one which defines her and guides her development as a community-centered cult heroine throughout the course of the series.

Xena’s understanding of this lesson is reinforced by the episode’s concluding scene in which Xena agrees to let Gabrielle travel with her. As the two walk off toward adventure together, Xena cautions Gabrielle: “You know where I’m headed, there’ll be trouble.” Gabrielle acknowledges the warning and when Xena questions why, then, the younger woman would want to accompany her, Gabrielle’s answer displays her faith in Xena and herself to create a community together: “That’s what friends do. They stand by each other when there’s trouble.” “All right,” Xena agrees, then pauses for a moment before adding, “friend.” Xena’s chosen form of address here establishes her acceptance of Gabrielle’s friendship. Moreover, on the heels of the conflict with the Amphipolis community and forgiveness by her mother, Xena’s acknowledgement of shared community with Gabrielle establishes a new model for the warrior princess; unlike her

previous worldview that privileged a patriarchal, top-down power structure, Xena's new life will be focused around friendship and community, as well as Xena's efforts to redefine the ways in which community might function. Not all scholars agree, however, that Xena's status as a community-centered heroine is sustained throughout the show's run. For example, Sara Crosby argues that the advances toward feminist community made in *Xena* are ultimately undone by Xena's death in the series' finale. As such, Crosby suggests that *Xena's* contribution to ideas of feminist community ultimately fail. Likewise, Mary Magoulick contends Xena is "less concerned with building or celebrating a [new] world than with surviving in a hostile one" (745). Magoulick's argument challenges scholarship's celebration of Xena and others as feminist models. This challenge hinges on the interpretation of *Xena* as nothing but a reworking of older heroic models wherein the heroic figure fights against an unjust (and often violent) world and is inevitably harmed by that injustice (and violence). Magoulick favors the creation of an entirely new conceptualization of feminist hero, rather than the model of *Xena*, which she claims, "offer[s] glimpses of hopeful female heroism, but... frustrates those hopes as well, ultimately projecting realism rather than optimism" (753).

In contrast to this approach—and in addition to the discussions of heroic traditions—scholars such as Morreale, Helene A. Shugart, and Catherine Egly Waggoner have explored the intersections of feminist themes, camp aesthetics, and the tension between sexuality, gender identity, and power in *Xena*. Pamela Robertson, in *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*, traces the use of camp as an adjective of aesthetics to 1909, when it defined exaggeration and affectation of

manner. By 1920, however, Robertson notes that camp's meaning "connoted homosexual or lesbian" in theater vernacular, and that this connotation achieved popular acceptance by 1945 (3). Since the middle of the twentieth century, then, camp's aesthetics of exaggerated artifice have been intertwined with challenges to heteronormative gender roles and conceptions of sexuality. As such, it seems an obvious match for *Xena* to embrace camp, as the show's challenges to traditional constructions of femininity, heroism, and patriarchal culture are omnipresent. While some viewers are tempted to dismiss *Xena*'s camp aesthetic as "silly," Robertson accurately observes that "the very outrageousness and flamboyance of camp's preferred representations [are] its most powerful tools for a critique" (6). The scholars who have situated *Xena* within the camp tradition rightfully do so because of the show's use of this aesthetic in a feminist manner, even when they argue that the series falls short of exploding all forms of filmic reinforcement of heteronormativity. For example, Morreale suggests that the show highlights feminist storylines, even though its production choices sometimes reinforce the heterosexual male gaze: "[*Xena*'s] traditional shooting style, from the point of view of the male voyeur" makes *Xena* "available for male pleasure, if not in terms of the story, where she is often in control of the look and her point of view carries the narrative, but in terms of discourse, where she is still made into an object of desire for the male viewer" (81). In contrast, Frances Tomaczyk asserts *Xena* does offer a transgression of gender norms, a result of the specific choice to utilize conventions of the horror genre in some episodes: "assuming characteristics of other figures of social and sexual anxiety, such as the monster and the vampire, *Xena* scorches across rigid gender and sexual binary

oppositions.” Indeed, discussions of gender roles, gender performance, and representations of sexuality most often center on *Xena*’s disruption of the male/female binary through the appropriation of both masculine and feminine traits by the title character.

Several scholars have noted *Xena*’s combined gender characteristics, both in her appearance (costuming, make-up, etc.) and in her status as warrior. “Although she is a warrior dressed in Roman-like armor,” remarks Magoulick, “there is a suggestion of laciness in the armor’s feminine decoration around her breasts. Her arm plates seem like bracelets as much as protection, and her short skirt and low cut bodice show off plenty of remarkably soft and glowing skin” (744). In fact, both Magoulick and Morreale suggest that the very title “warrior princess” embodies this blending of gender-specific identity: “‘Warrior’ suggests her masculine side, but even though *Xena* is a mature woman, older and wiser than her sidekick Gabrielle, she is referred to as a ‘princess.’ This diminution from queen to princess... defines her as stereotypically, even excessively feminine” (Morreale 80). Magoulick likewise points out that “princess is a diminutive, less powerful, less threatening, and very feminine kind of female leader as opposed to ‘queen,’ the title one might expect for someone of *Xena*’s stature, accomplishments, and position in the world” (744). Indeed, even *Xena*’s choice in weaponry represents a blending of traditional masculinity and femininity, as she uses both “the masculine sword (phallic) and the feminine chakram, a circular blade that hangs on her belt” (733). Notably, Gabrielle’s inheritance of *Xena*’s warrior role upon the older woman’s death is

marked by Gabrielle's successful use of the female-aligned chakram, a mystical weapon that, up to that point, only Xena has successfully wielded ("A Friend in Need II").

Ultimately, *Xena's* reliance on a camp aesthetic and cross-gender conceptualizations of individual identity facilitate the show's commitment to challenging viewers' understanding of the possible constructions of the female warrior/cult heroine. Supporting this commitment, the choice to present sexuality in *Xena* as ambiguous is one of the most common, consistent means of challenging heteronormativity and all that it implies for the cult heroine. As demonstrated in Minya's "confession" in "The Play's the Thing," *Xena* repeatedly teases viewers with an (ultimately unvoiced) answer to the question of Xena and Gabrielle's sexuality. While some scenes, like the one detailed at the beginning of this chapter, come at the question sideways, others bluntly address it. In the episode "You Are There," for example, a modern-day style television news magazine correspondent is compiling an investigative report on Xena.³ He point-blank asks Xena if she and Gabrielle are lovers; Xena's first response is one of anger since she believes the practice of her sexuality is her business. At Gabrielle's insistence, she agrees to answer with full disclosure. Viewers are left disappointed, however, when the reporter's camera batteries die just as Xena leans forward and says conspiratorially, "It's like this...Technically..." leaving the answer to the reporter's question unheard. The construction of this moment—integrating *Xena's* ancient world setting with modern-day sensibilities that allow one to ask such a question outright—highlight the series' choice to not assign a specific sexual label to its main characters. This is especially true, given the insertion of modern-day filmmaking equipment into the ancient setting. As an apparatus,

the camera is the ultimate voyeur, and *Xena*'s choice to deny the reporter's camera's gaze reinforces the series' choice to deny the show's viewers the same information. None of Xena or Gabrielle's contemporaries question the nature of their relationship, deemphasizing the necessity of labeling it in a manner that separates it from other, similar relationships (ie: two adults who are life partners).⁴ While the show's choice to not label Xena and Gabrielle's sexuality left many viewers frustrated, it ultimately reinforced the fact that any woman—regardless of sexual identity—can achieve the kind of agency and power Xena and Gabrielle wield through the rejection of a heteronormative paradigm.

Despite the unanswered question of sexual orientation, the series does offer a clear, if not explicit, definition of the nature of Xena and Gabrielle's relationship; in the later years of the series the two women refer to one another as *partner* and *soulmate*. *Partner* can function as an ambiguous term, meaning anything from a business relationship to domestic partnership—although it gained significant cultural connotation associating it with committed gay and lesbian couples during *Xena*'s run. *Soulmate*, on the other hand, has undeniably romantic overtones and characterizes Xena and Gabrielle's commitment to one another as such. The fourth season episode "The Ides of March" combines both spoken and action-based reinforcement of the strength of Xena and Gabrielle's bond. The two women have been condemned to death by crucifixion in ancient Rome—a fate Xena experienced a prophetic vision about previously and therefore feels extreme guilt for not having prevented. In fact, Xena would have been executed alone had Gabrielle not knowingly engaged in a futile attempt to save her friend. When Xena expresses her regret over Gabrielle sharing her fate, Gabrielle argues

that the action was her choice and is one she does not regret. As they die, Xena declares, “Gabrielle, you were the best thing in my life,” to which Gabrielle replies simply, “I love you, Xena.” Although professions of love between the two women are common on the series, Gabrielle’s choice of phrase here is both a verbal affirmation of their relationship and an explanation of her actions; because of her love for and commitment to Xena, Gabrielle has to make every effort to save her. This idea reinforces the loyalty that binds the two women together within a heroic community, and it further suggests the enduring strength and longevity of such communities. Xena and Gabrielle are joined for life, and the show suggests that the bonds between community members who work together in opposition to patriarchal social structures can be as deep and lasting.

Other scenes of facing death together abound in the series, and most serve as similar examples of verbal and action-based affirmations of commitment, with Xena and Gabrielle trading off expressions of that commitment. In “One Against an Army,” for example, Xena and Gabrielle endeavor to stop or at least hinder the advance of an army marching on Athens. However, Gabrielle is shot with a poisoned arrow by the army’s advance scouting party. Xena must choose between holding position to provide Athens more time to prepare for the assault (thus limiting war casualties) and abandoning the mission in favor of transporting Gabrielle to a healer who can save the younger woman’s life. Xena realizes she cannot do both and initially chooses Gabrielle over the greater good, saying, “I’m done paying for my past mistakes. My responsibility now is you,” demonstrating a desire to protect and defend her chosen partner at all costs. However, Gabrielle knows that such a choice—which privileges her over Xena’s redemptive

quest—will ultimately destroy Xena by forcing her to abandon her principles. The scene is heavily shadowed, with the room’s sole light source—flickering firelight—highlighting Gabrielle’s flush, sweat-covered face and dampened hair as her body fights the poison killing her. In her weakened state, she cannot match Xena’s strength or ability to act for both of them. If Xena chooses to save Gabrielle, Gabrielle cannot physically stop her. The unbalanced power dynamic due to Gabrielle’s illness is further demonstrated by Xena’s position at first standing over and then sitting up next to Gabrielle’s bed on the ground.

Yet Gabrielle wins the argument not through physical strength, but through calling on her and Xena’s commitment to one another and their shared heroic community, softly saying, “A long time ago, I accepted the consequences of our life together, that it might one day come to this.” Helford argues that this scene begs for a queer reading, pointing to the ways in which Gabrielle “wastes away from an AIDS-suggestive poisoning” (145), a disease inextricably linked in American consciousness to gay culture (albeit more often to gay men than lesbians). Gabrielle begs Xena to uphold the values of their shared life by taking a stand against the approaching army. Xena clearly views Gabrielle’s final plea as a dying request, and agrees to uphold their commitment in the only way left to her—by honoring that request. As she fights off tears, the warrior pledges, “If this is to be our destiny, let’s see it out together. Even in death, Gabrielle, I will never leave you” (“One Against an Army”). The camera pans from showing Gabrielle’s perspective looking up at Xena’s face down Xena’s arm to her hand, where it lifts and joins with Gabrielle’s, intertwining the two women’s fingers as they reaffirm

their commitment to an intertwined fate. This image echoes a story Gabrielle told in the second episode of the series, about two lovers turned into intertwined trees, wrapped up in one other for all time (“Chariots of War”). Overall, the series is rife with moments characterized by either vocal or action-based affirmations of love and commitment, and often such moments imitate or allude to other, similar scenes in the series, creating an evolving, interwoven rhetoric of commitment. While such scenes, as well as the preponderance of them in the series, work to elevate the lesbian subtext to the level of literal text, they also remind viewers of Xena and Gabrielle’s consistent rejection of a heteronormative paradigm in which their greatest commitment in life would be to a male partner or counterpart, as a function of traditional, patriarchal society.

Xena and Gabrielle do not just construct or understand their relationship as one of two equal partners; they create their own family unit in defiance of the male/female nuclear family that the ancient world (and many modern viewers) see as the norm. Although Xena’s mother does forgive her in “Sins of the Past,” Xena’s estrangement from the community prior to that makes clear to her that she cannot reconcile her search for redemption and her warrior ways (even in the service of helping others) with a traditional nuclear family model. The fifth season birth of Xena’s daughter—and her visible presence in Xena’s body prior to her birth—create opportunities for the series to establish the main characters’ dismissal of a traditional family model. In the episode “Lyre, Lyre, Hearts on Fire,” Xena’s mother, Cyrene, expresses her concern about Xena’s plan to raise the child without a male partner. Xena’s response challenges Cyrene’s assumption that a male partner is necessary for a woman to form a family,

saying... “I have a family. I’ve got Gabrielle. I’ve got Joxer [a male friend who often travels with Xena and Gabrielle].” She continues, “and, as much as it pains me to say it,” referencing Cyrene’s continued (heterosexual) match-making efforts in the episode despite Xena’s clearly expressed wish that her mother stop, “I’ve got you. This child’s life will be filled with more than enough love.” When Cyrene rebuts Xena’s assurances by arguing, “Still, it doesn’t replace a father,” Xena nearly screams in frustration: “For crying out loud, what century are you living in?” Given the episode’s musical-style construction, wherein characters’ dialogic exchanges are interspersed with them breaking into song, viewers are delightfully surprised when Xena continues her argument by singing the opening lines to “Sisters are Doing it For Themselves,” a late twentieth-century feminist anthem first released in 1985 as a duet between British group Eurythmics and America’s “Queen of Soul,” Aretha Franklin. The song’s lyrics assert female agency, echoing defining traits of Xena’s character and the message she has been attempting to convey to her mother: her lack of need (or desire) for a male partner. Moreover, the songs demands that viewers recognize Xena’s position here as a larger critique of patriarchal values and a celebration of a woman’s ability to be a single mother, or a mother with a female partner, if she so chooses.

Cyrene, for certain, is a concerned mother, and this concern is important to note given that Cyrene raised Xena and her brothers without a husband. Viewers know that the reason Cyrene was a single parent is because she killed her husband to prevent him from killing Xena (as opposed to one of her brothers) in a sacrifice to the gods when Xena was a child (“The Furies”). Although Xena does not learn about her mother’s actions until

adulthood (but prior to the conversation in “Lyre, Lyre, Hearts on Fire”), the choice Cyrene made to sacrifice heteronormativity in protection of another female gives readers significant clues about the values with which Xena was raised. That Xena later took up a sword and led her brothers and other villagers in defense of their home further demonstrates that Xena’s refutation of heteronormativity and traditional gender roles can be traced to the example of the non-traditional family in which she was raised, an example she intends to pass on to her own child. Also, it highlights how Cyrene’s success as a single mother is a legacy that unwittingly has been passed down to her own daughter. Although Cyrene’s motivation for attempting to break the cycle of single motherhood is undoubtedly fueled by love and concern for her daughter, Xena recognizes that she cannot acquiesce to Cyrene’s attempts at matchmaking because a husband does not necessarily a true family or community make. As Xena explains, she has Gabrielle and Joxer to help her; she will not be a truly single mother. Indeed, Gabrielle quickly takes on the second parental role in subsequent episodes. By declining her mother’s help in finding a male partner, Xena is reaffirming that a heteronormative, nuclear family is not the only model which will offer Xena success as a mother and/or alleviate the kinds of hardships Cyrene faced as a single parent.

The choices Xena makes during her fifth season (and second) pregnancy are not the first time she rejects a nuclear family model in favor of her own vision of a just (often woman-centered) community. Indeed, her consistent denunciation of a heteronormative paradigm is a firmly established tenet of the series from the beginning. In the second episode, “Chariots of War,” Xena is offered the option to give up fighting and assume

ready-made wife/motherhood to a widower and his children. Although the offer is tempting, following on the heels of her expulsion from her home community in the first episode, Xena refuses this domestic space in favor of the warrior lifestyle that allows her to protect that family and others. The choice between family/domesticity and the life of a warrior is foreshadowed in the episode's opening when Xena scoffs at Gabrielle's aforementioned story of lovers turned into trees. Whereas Gabrielle's tale privileges companionship and partnership over solitary individuality, Xena argues that the "strongest trees stand alone." Gabrielle responds that even someone like Xena who initially draws strength from self-reliance and individuation (a traditionally masculine approach to leadership and power) can find strength from community integration and reliance (traditionally feminine characteristics). This proves to be one of the series' major conceits; Xena repeatedly credits Gabrielle in later years for teaching her how to live a more fulfilled life of companionship and love.

Notably, Kathleen Kennedy suggests in "Love Is the Battlefield" that Xena's history also includes past love affairs with other women, specifically Lao Ma and Akemi, women with whom Xena shares unusually strong bonds and for whom Xena make significant sacrifices (47). For Lao Ma, Xena avenges the other woman's death even though she has given up vengeance as a motive for violence and knows the act taints her redemption ("The Debt" and "The Debt II"). For Akemi, Xena allows herself to be killed and further prevents Gabrielle from mystically resuscitating her so that the suffering of innocents Xena caused in the past may be alleviated ("A Friend in Need I" and "A Friend in Need II"). While the show is ambiguous about the possible sexual nature of Xena's

relationship with these women, it is evident that each one marked major turning points in Xena's life, both upon first meeting and upon Xena's later encounter with their legacies. Significantly, Xena's connections to these past women threaten her relationship with Gabrielle in ways Xena's heterosexual romantic history never does. These threats suggest that Xena's past positive experiences with female-centered community have influenced her as much as her negative experiences with patriarchal social structures.

Xena's choice to create a non-traditional family with Gabrielle stays constant even when the acceptance of the nuclear family would offer her advantages in protecting those for whom she cares. Numerous flashbacks illustrate that Xena's past (heterosexual) love life is littered with relationships of high passion and disastrous endings. For example, soldiers led by Xena murder the man who fathered her first child ("Orphan of War" and "Past Imperfect") and the Roman General Julius Caesar orders Xena crucified ("Destiny"). Once she establishes a partnership and community with Gabrielle, however, Xena's loyalties lie with the other woman.

One particular past heterosexual love affair that has an ongoing resonance in the series is Xena's involvement with Ares (Kevin Smith), the Greek god of war. Given that Xena's time by Ares' side was at the height of her "evil" period, this past relationship constantly reminds Xena of the sins for which her current work atones. However, Ares remains infatuated with Xena, or the violence and pain Xena caused during her time as his consort, and in the later seasons he repeatedly offers her aid in times of extreme duress in exchange for her return to his side—as a wife who will bear him a child. Although Ares' feelings toward Xena are complicated and occasionally selfless, he

ultimately desires her companionship in a traditional heteronormative model in which Xena would take the subservient role. In “Eternal Bonds,” Ares initially offers her marriage but not before he causes Xena to experience an erotic dream starring the two of them. Every interaction thereafter in the episode is characterized by Xena fighting the memory of that physical pleasure in contrast to what she knows to be Ares’ true, selfish nature. The fact that offers of aid only come when Xena faces the greatest threats to herself or members of her community/family highlights Ares’ intention that their union fulfill older, patriarchal models of marriage and family whereby the male protects the family from danger. Xena recognizes his intention, and she is tempted only by the memory of physical pleasure, not a desire to return to the patriarchal social structure she once shared with him and that underwrites his offer.

Ares fails to realize from the time he learns of Xena’s second pregnancy that he is unable to entice or coerce her into marriage. His initial reaction upon seeing the obviously pregnant Xena in “Seeds of Faith,” is to smirk and say, “I wish I’d known you were looking for a father.” Xena attempts to derail his interest in her sex life and the inevitable conversation about the child’s conception by replying shortly, “I’m not.” Ares is not deterred, however. “Oh? Well, someone clearly got the job.” Xena again reinforces her choice for a non-traditional family structure by agreeing, “Yeah, Gabrielle.” The camera switches at this point to Gabrielle rather than moving immediately back to Ares; significantly, Gabrielle’s reaction is a smirk, designed to convey triumph over the man who believes himself in competition with her for a place as Xena’s chosen companion. His rejoinder suggests his desire to see the two women engaged in sexual activity. This

common male fantasy that positions lesbian sexuality for the male heterosexual gaze rather than recognizing its legitimacy as a form of female desire reinforces Ares' alignment with traditional patriarchal culture. Ares' apparent nonchalant reaction to Xena's claiming of Gabrielle as second parent for her child suggests that Xena's comment is in line with his perception of her character. Even though he desires to possess or conquer Xena through a re-establishment of their past relationship, Xena's refusal of a heteronormative lifestyle is so ingrained and consistent a character trait for her that he is not surprised. In fact, his offers of assistance come at times strategically chosen to coerce Xena into accepting because he knows she will never join him of her own free will.

While the choice to reject a heteronormative, nuclear family is evident in Xena's actions, Gabrielle's engagements with the possibility of a heteronormative life demonstrate the series' emphasis on this rebuff. In the series' pilot, "Sins of the Past," Gabrielle first desires to become Xena's traveling companion because of her dissatisfaction with the life of domesticity planned for her by her community. She is betrothed to a fiancé Gabrielle deems "controlling," "dull," and "stupid." When Gabrielle meets her ex-fiancé again in the second season, his respect for her independence rekindles their romantic connection. Gabrielle agrees to marry him and give up her life of adventure alongside Xena and return to a traditional domestic life ("Return of Callisto"). However, the series' dismissal of heteronormativity cannot allow Gabrielle to discard such a major tenet of the show; Gabrielle is widowed the day after her marriage, and her place partnered with Xena is restored. This quick destruction of Gabrielle's heterosexual lifestyle reinforces the series' investment in Xena and Gabrielle's partnership. Although

each woman occasionally shows romantic or sexual interest in other men during the series, each ultimately returns to the other, reinforcing the community they have created together and valuing it over a more traditional family model.

In addition to the choices both Xena and Gabrielle make that highlight their repudiation of a heteronormative paradigm, the construction and evolution of their roles as warriors demonstrate the denunciation of this paradigm. Initially, Gabrielle is unable to defend herself and Xena is positioned as the protector, the masculine role to Gabrielle's feminine helplessness. Indeed, Xena desires to prevent Gabrielle from becoming a warrior, an attitude motivated by Xena's still evolving ethos of heroism and violence, one which demands at the series' beginning that Xena's atonement be a solitary (masculine) quest. However, the series does not allow Gabrielle to remain a defenseless "damsel" in constant need of Xena's protection. While Xena insists that the younger woman only act and employ violence defensively, Gabrielle begins the training that will eventually lead her to inherit Xena's role as warrior heroine in the series' finale "A Friend in Need" (parts I and II). Gabrielle's evolution to the point where she is a warrior equal to Xena explodes the initial protector/protected (masculine/feminine) dynamic of their relationship. Also, of course, the transformation of Gabrielle from innocent maiden to experienced warrior evokes a sexual connotation for Xena and Gabrielle's relationship. Gabrielle's transformation metaphorically parallels an older, more worldly woman guiding a naïve younger woman to sexual maturity through a lesbian relationship.

One of the less obvious ways that *Xena* rejects a heteronormative paradigm is through the series' emphasis on Xena, Gabrielle, and other women's triumph over and

escape from the threat of sexual violence. The concept of heterosexual romantic pairings does not inherently promote sexual violence against women, of course. The legal and social history of marriage in Western culture, nevertheless, provides ample justifications for rape and other forms of gendered violence, especially within traditional family structures where husbands/fathers were granted authority over the women within their household.⁵ This history of the assumption that male privilege includes sexual access to women is evident throughout *Xena*. A representative example of this scenario is found in the opening scenes of “The Prodigal.” Xena and Gabrielle travel along a seemingly deserted road. Gabrielle is playing an upbeat melody on a flute and skipping as she plays, while Xena walks beside her, smiling indulgently at the other woman’s joy. They turn a corner and encounter a blocked path; several large stones prevent them from moving forward. At the same time all background music ceases, leaving only silence as the diegetic audio backdrop to Xena and Gabrielle’s dialogue. Then, a strange male voice calls out into the silence, “There’s another one,” and sinister, deeply-pitched music begins to play as a group of men step out of hiding behind the women, blocking Xena and Gabrielle’s path of egress. The men laugh meanly and their leader says, “I have a proposition for you, ladies.” The men push a wagon filled with sharpened logs (phallus) with ends pointed at the women. “Think about being skewered against the stone, a la carte, or giving us what we want,” says the leader. Next to the cart, one of the other men confidently crosses his arms across his chest, leers at the women, and chuckles to himself in satisfaction at his leader’s pun. The leader’s eyes slowly move down the women’s bodies. His next words make clear that this is not a “mugging” for pure monetary profit:

“And I do mean everything.” Of course, Xena and Gabrielle refuse to bow to the threats, and employ their own fighting abilities to escape the situation.

Xena's response to such threats is always the triumph of Xena or other women over the male assailants. The series, too, more overtly displays its commitment to feminist ideals and the rejection of male privilege through the visual rhetoric of the crude, tongue-in-cheek “kick them in the balls” motif of the series' early years. Every time Xena or Gabrielle confront an opponent who would perpetrate sexual violence against them or other women, the camera shows viewers the same sequence of closely-framed images: first, Xena's foot (or Gabrielle's staff as in the case of the above discussed scene in “The Prodigal”) connect with a male groin, and second, the man's face contorts in pain. This repeated production choice creates a visual rhetoric so clear that by the second season, when Xena battles a mystically-superpowered centaur, the camera only need show her kicking her legs upward, followed by the centaur's contorted face (“Orphan of War”). By this point, the visual rhetoric of Xena's actions is so firmly established that the camera skips the zoom-in shot where Xena's foot connects with the offender's body and viewers still immediately understand the warrior princess' actions and the gendered dynamic they imply.⁶

While *Xena*'s feminist themes are often displayed by pitting men and women in opposition, the series' rejection of a heteronormative paradigm is not in opposition to men; rather it is a refutation of the narrow definition of masculinity that heteronormativity most often demands, a masculinity which requires dominance and control over women. Ultimately, the series' dismissal of heteronormativity is not only

about female empowerment, but also aimed at freeing men from the constraints of a narrowly-defined masculinity demanded by a patriarchal, heteronormative paradigm. One of Xena and Gabrielle's most consistent traveling companions is Joxer (Ted Raimi), a man who initially joins them because of his unrequited love for Gabrielle. After the camaraderie he experiences with the women, however, the family that Xena and Gabrielle creates informs his reason for staying. Joxer is far from twentieth-century visions of idealized heroic masculinity, examples of which range from John Wayne to Harrison Ford. Instead, he is lean, clumsy, and inept, "physically awkward and vaguely burlesque" (Shugart and Waggoner 74), but he is an earnest and loyal part of the family. Joxer's name reinforces the multiple archetypes his character draws from and satirizes. His name is a pun on the modern popular culture figure of the "jock," a late twentieth-century complement to the action hero. Joxer's clear distance in terms of physicality from either the filmic action hero or the super-athlete/jock suggests that his personality is equally distant and that, for all his physical shortcomings, his heart, loyalty, and psyche truly define him. As a man in *Xena's* extreme patriarchal, heterosexist world, Joxer can be heroic only through radical repudiation of traditional masculinity that is privileged by the corrupted social order. At the same time, "his name is a play on Joker" (Morreale 80), evoking the historical court jester figure who was charged with pointing out a monarch's foibles through comedy. While Joxer does not illuminate Xena or Gabrielle's failures, he does illuminate the fallacy of patriarchal narratives which assume masculine heroic superiority. In this way, his presence is a complement to the women's in critiquing heteronormative narrative archetypes.

While Joxer is often a source of comic relief that can be read as originating in a construction of an emasculated male, the contrasts between Joxer and his two brothers (all played by actor Ted Raimi) demonstrate alternative constructions of masculinity, however limited at first when breaking away from a heteronormative and traditionally understood masculinity. In the episode “The King of Assassins,” Joxer’s twin brother Jet is introduced. Although they share a physique, Jet is everything Joxer is not: strong, competent, smooth, dangerous, and professionally successful—as an assassin. His name, of course, also evokes the Jets gang of *Westside Story*. In that musical, the Jets clash with rival gang the Sharks, specifically over each gang’s ethnic composition. The Sharks are second-generation, American-born Puerto Rican immigrants, while the Jets are Caucasian and consider only themselves to be “true” Americans. Jet and Joxer’s comparison is no different except that the question of authentic ethnicity/nationality is swapped for that of authentic masculinity. As Joxer explains, “My father’s a warlord, my mother’s a warlord’s wife, my whole family’s like that... My whole life’s been ‘Jet stole some horses,’ ‘Jet torched a village,’ ‘Jet killed the neighbors.’ My parents were so proud... I’m the black sheep of the family.” It is apparent that Joxer’s family embraces the conventions of masculinity that privilege violence and the use of strength and power to gain advantage over others. Jet’s “successful” performance of masculinity is tied up in his professional success as a hired killer. Joxer is a kind and compassionate male who dreams of being a warrior-protector of others rather than a warrior who uses strength for personal gain. By his community’s standards, however, Joxer cannot be successful in the

same way as Jet. His family's understanding of masculinity rests on physical prowess and crime; Joxer is well aware of his "failure" to comport himself in this manner.

At the other end of the spectrum is Jace, Joxer's other brother, who is introduced in "Lyre, Lyre, Hearts on Fire." Jace is a musical performer who arrives in Melodia, Greece to participate in a "battle of the bands." He is surrounded by muscular male back-up singers clad only in boots and skimpy, clingy, shiny gold shorts. Jace's own white and gold sequined outfit with layered lacy sleeves and ascot, prominent codpiece, and large plume of feathers to accent the back collar, evokes the famous musical performer Liberace's many flamboyant costumes. Further, Jace's introductory song is "Dancing in the Moonlight," a hit from the early 1970s, a decade that overlaps with the height of Liberace's career. Although Liberace publicly identified himself as heterosexual, public debate and scandals surrounding his purported homosexuality characterize *Xena's* writers' cultural consciousness about the performer's identity. The piano virtuoso, then, is an appropriate intertextual allusion for Jace's character. His sexuality is never defined explicitly, but he embodies nearly every stereotype of flamboyant male homosexuality in dress, vocal inflections, and body language. One character, Draco—who notably, as a warlord, has the most to gain by maintaining the heteronormative paradigm that privileges his social position—alludes to Jace's presumed sexuality and effeminate qualities as negative, calling Jace a "lily-livered panty-twist." No other character, aside from Joxer, however, expresses anything but support for Jace. Jace's gender performance is the extreme opposite of Jet's, and yet of the three brothers, the one who overtly rejects

heteronormative expectations of masculinity is the most comfortable with himself and his gender identity.

Unfortunately, Joxer has trouble seeing Jace's level of self-confidence as a positive quality, even when others point it out. This initial inability to *see* his other brother outside of social definitions of male identity, suggests that Joxer is still growing from his association with Xena and Gabrielle's community-centered valuation of the individual outside of prescribed social conventions. At the beginning of the episode, Xena says, "Joxer likes to think that he knows who he is, but all he really knows is who he wants to be"; and who Joxer wants to be is a successful warrior. As such, he has not yet completely divorced his understanding of successful male warriorhood from traditional constructions of the image that are hyper-masculinized and heterosexual. His perception of idealized masculinity still exists in conflict with the image presented by his identical, yet completely different, brother.

His perceptions begin to change, though, when a sexy Amazon warrior who has been flirting with Joxer expresses her admiration of Jace. She says, "Look at him, he's so uninhibited. Now that is the sign of a secure man." Her comment challenges Joxer's narrowly-defined understanding of masculinity, and while it is clear that he initially agrees with her assessment in part because he is attracted to her, this exchange prompts him to apologize to his brother later in the show. The apology marks a shift in their relationship. Joxer expresses regret over his past behavior toward his brother and promises future acceptance of Jace's lifestyle choices. The contrast of Joxer's slow growth toward accepting alternative (non-hypermasculinized) expressions of masculinity

and his easy acceptance of Xena and Gabrielle's non-heteronormative lifestyle demonstrates the increased options offered women rather than men in breaking away from heteronormative culture. Whereas Xena and Gabrielle can perform a hybrid male/female gender—as is more easily true for women than men even today—the heteronormative culture in which *Xena* is set provides very little space for men to entertain new visions of masculinity. Joxer's life experiences, however, continually ask him to reshape his perceptions, and ultimately he does reconcile the discrepancies between his and his brothers' divergent performances of masculinity.

Aside from the spectrum of masculinity offered by the contrast between Joxer and his brothers, *Xena*'s commitment to challenging the narrow definitions of gender within a heteronormative paradigm is showcased in the episode “Here She Comes... Miss Amphipolis.” As the title suggests, the episode features a beauty pageant, albeit one Xena enters as an undercover contestant. Xena initially characterizes the other contestants as “underdressed, over-developed bimbos,” and Gabrielle terms the pageant concept “a feeble excuse for men to exploit and degrade women,” continuing, “you know how I feel about... women being victimized by meat markets.” However, Xena and Gabrielle agree to help when they learn that someone is attempting to sabotage the competition as a means of inciting war.

Interestingly, the contestants are mostly as ambivalent about their role in the pageant as Xena and Gabrielle are disgusted by the idea. One hopes to win because the leader of her region promised her village would receive extra food if she did, whereas another desires to win because she sees victory as her ticket away from the hard, war-

filled life she has known. Each motive, updated for modern contexts, is a sorrowfully familiar rationale for disadvantaged women to engage in entertainment spectacle because so few other choices are afforded them. In critiquing the beauty pageant model, *Xena* critiques itself as entertainment spectacle. However, unlike the pageant where winning/conforming to an ideal is a means of achieving something else, viewers who model themselves on Xena and/or Gabrielle receive “training” in a community-centered ethos that values the individual members of a community, as well as the group itself. While *Xena* may seem at first glance like campy spectacle designed to showcase women performing high kicks in short skirts, the series in fact offers significantly more complex, socially-provocative messages. The artifice of *Xena* is truly artificial, a point which the episode drives home through the beauty contest scenario.

Alongside these women and Xena is the contest’s ultimate winner, the aptly-named transgender character Miss Artiphys (pronounced “artifice”). Miss Artiphys (portrayed by LGBT rights and AIDS activist and transgender performer Karen Dior) offers so successful a performance of femininity that she wins in spite of the fact that she is biologically a man. As she explains, the pageant “is a chance to use a part of me most people usually laugh at—or worse. A part I usually have to hide. Only here that part works for me, you see?” As Michelle Kellaway observes, “the entrance of Miss Artiphys, a transgender contestant who only Xena is able to recognize as someone who is similarly ‘undercover,’ makes hypervisible the gender excess that is written on the characters’ bodies throughout the series.” Although Xena learns Miss Artiphys’ secret early in the contest, she reinforces the series’ rejection of a heteronormative paradigm, even within a

setting that ostensibly should reinforce traditional gender constructions, by simply wishing Miss Artiphys luck, saying “May the best person win.” Although the contest is truly a contest of a very narrow definition of femininity, Xena recognizes that one’s biological sex has nothing to do with one’s ability to perform a specific construction of the female gender. In fact, Xena’s own performance as a beauty contestant transforms the usually serious and no-nonsense warrior, through the disguise of a blonde wig and “simpering voice and hyper-feminine gestures” (Morreale 84), into the ideal contestant.⁷ While the addition of the wig helps disguise Xena’s physical identity, her change in behavior is even more effective at masking her true identity. Xena’s “masquerade,” like Miss Artiphys’, “allows Xena to subvert female stereotypes by highlighting their constructed nature” (81).

The episode’s layered engagement with the idea of femininity—and, by extension, all forms of gender—as an artificial construction is illustrated in the ensemble song and dance the contestants practice. While the emcee sings “a woman’s a natural thing,” the pageant participants attempt to move across the stage, but their costumes are so elaborate that they end up tripping over one another or ripping their clothing by moving too quickly or using too large of gestures—highlighting that this performance of femininity is anything but natural and demonstrating “the absurdity of the women’s status as spectacle” (86). When Xena uncovers the identity of the contest sponsor who threatened to incite war, Miss Amphipolis (Xena) withdraws from the contest right before the results are announced. Her example encourages the other finalists, except Miss Artiphys, to withdraw also. That the only character actively invested in performing

femininity wins—regardless of the circumstances—is only appropriate because this is really a contest of one’s ability to perform an artificial persona. As a last nod to the series’ rejection of a heteronormative paradigm, Miss Artiphys, bedecked in crown and sash, pulls Xena on stage with her, and dips the warrior princess before kissing her, once again exploding the heteronormative paradigm through the image of two female figures—one of which viewers know to be male—engaging in an iconic image of heterosexual romance.

While the series’ overall depiction of Xena and Gabrielle as committed to one another—as de-facto lesbians, regardless of the series’ ultimate refusal to specifically name them as such—is significant in that it offered an image not generally visible on American television at that time, and certainly not for a series’ major protagonists, it is also significant to the cult heroine genre specifically. The cult heroine has a long history of a being created as visual spectacle for/representative of male heterosexual fantasy. Although lesbian sexuality is often fetishized for male heterosexual fantasy consumption, *Xena* clearly overturns this positioning through the lack of overt, sexualized physical interaction between Xena and Gabrielle and through the series’ emphasis on the spiritual bond and commitment the two women share. Yet, the series’ frequent representations of vocal and physical affection, in combination with thinly veiled double entendres and lesbian (sub)text negate the possibility of reading Xena and Gabrielle within the “archetype of the ‘sexless lesbian’ destined to die alone” (Silverman 33). Further, *Xena*’s not quite acknowledged lesbianism paves the way for *Buffy*’s Willow to share two different openly recognized and valued lesbian relationships (Willow comes out during

the spring 2000 television season; *Xena* runs from 1995-2001). Likewise, in *Dark Angel* (2001-2002), Max's best friend, Original Cindy, is openly lesbian, a fact which is notable for its status as uniformly accepted by other characters in the series. *Dark Angel's* Original Cindy is also a fan of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, a nod to the work done by the earlier series in creating space for lesbian characters to exist in cult television shows and in the communities of other cult television heroines.

Ultimately, *Xena's* engagement with representations of lesbian sexuality is only one component of the show's larger repudiation of a heteronormative paradigm, which includes a renunciation of a conventional nuclear family structure and emphasis on exploding traditional constructions of gender and gender roles for both women and men. While this rejection forms one of the show's major conceits and its primary engagement with feminist themes, it is also a necessary component of the series' power to carve out space in the cultural landscape for future cult television heroines. *Xena: Warrior Princess* occupies a unique position as the first iconic cult television heroine in the current generation, and in doing so, the series broke new ground and helped establish an archetypal outline for the community-centered cult television heroine at the transition into the twenty-first century. Like any major figure that heralds in a new generation of thought or iconography, *Xena*—the series and the character—straddles the gap between older paradigms and the yet-undefined patterns newer models will embody. *Xena* is the “older sister” of other contemporary cult heroines, heavily influenced by the generation before, but not quite as fully situated within a completely new conceptualization. Gabrielle's eventual inheritance of *Xena's* heroic role reinforces the show's position as a

bridge between generations. While the descendents of *Xena*—including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Firefly*, *Dark Angel*, and *Veronica Mars*—do not as overtly reject heteronormative values, their ability to create new visions of community-centered heroism are due in part to the model of *Xena: Warrior Princess* and the many ways *Xena* and Gabrielle explode previous conceptions of the cult heroine and her connection to heteronormativity.

Notes

¹ Morreale's article was published in 1998, during *Xena*'s third season. Further, Morreale references no episodes later than "Here She Comes...Miss Amphipolis," an episode situated halfway through the second season. This context is important in understanding how much of the *Xena* text was available at the time of Morreale's writing. During later seasons, discussions of the series centered less on speculation as the lesbian themes became more overt.

² Like Morreale's article, the timing of Inness' text is significant in contextualizing her situating of *Xena* in relation to other, contemporary images of women on television, especially other nonheterosexual women, as well as recognizing how much of *Xena*'s text was then available. Inness' book was first published in 1998 (mid-way through *Xena*'s fourth season), and before other images of lesbians in cult television shows featuring community-centered heroines were available.

³ The presence of such a reporter and the video camera technology that facilitates his reporting in ancient Norway remains an unquestioned aspect of the episode, as this is but one example of *Xena* fusing twentieth-century elements and attitudes into the ancient world.

⁴ In fact, at times other characters' comments reveal an assumption of a sexual relationship between *Xena* and Gabrielle. In "A Day in the Life," where *Xena* and Gabrielle initially meet Minya, the other woman is jealous of her boyfriend's infatuation with *Xena*. Gabrielle, frustrated over *Xena*'s earlier use of her frying pan as a weapon (which resulted in damage to the pan), trades *Xena*'s whip to Minya for a new pan. When *Xena* attempts to retrieve her weapon, Minya exclaims: "No! It belongs to me! You don't get that concept very well, do you? The whip is mine. The frying pan's yours. Hower [the boyfriend] is mine. She's [Gabrielle is] yours."

⁵ For example, it has only been within the last forty years that the United States and other western nations have removed marital status-based exclusions from rape laws. In other words, prior to this change, most legal systems granted husbands unrestricted sexual access to their wives; women forced into sexual activities against their will by their husbands had no legal recourse because such an action was not considered rape. For

more information on changes in rape law since the 1970s, see Cassia Spohn and Julie Horney's *Rape Law Reform: A Grassroots Revolution and Its Impact*.

⁶ While one might question the species displacement of the villain in this episode in relation to Otherness (science fiction and fantasy are genres known for using the alien, fantastical, or monstrous to stand in for society's racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, class, etc. Others), the episode's mythology and plot development temper such readings and make the villain representative of all men rather than one subset of Other men: the super-centaur is a human man turned into a centaur mid-episode by a mystical artifact he sought as a means to power, and the man-turned-centaur is played by a white actor, even though the series regularly uses actors of a wide-variety of visible ethnicities. The choice to use a white actor here instead of an actor of color helps concentrate the message along gender lines rather than introducing questions of race or ethnicity.

⁷ That Xena's character, Miss Amphipolis, is originally slated to win the contest only further demonstrates the artificial nature of Xena's performance of femininity. It is also commentary on the problematic and artificial nature of judging others on the basis of their gender performance under the guise of evaluating "beauty" or the naturalness of one's femininity (or masculinity).

CHAPTER TWO

From “We Survived” to “We Changed the World”:

The Interdependence of Metaphor and Coming-of-Age Moments
for Community Development in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

There’s nothing like the end of the world to bring people together.

—Sunnydale High Principal Robin Wood, “Get It Done”

In the second half of the two-part pilot episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar), the teenage vampire slayer, is stopped by her mother, Joyce (Kristine Sutherland), as she tries to leave their house in order to prevent a sacrifice planned by vampires. The sacrifice will result in an apocalyptic-level destruction in her town of Sunnydale, California. Buffy and her mother moved to Sunnydale for a fresh start after school officials expelled Buffy for burning down her old school’s gymnasium (she was fighting vampires at the time, although her mother and school officials do not know that). Joyce, a single mother, is understandably concerned as she watches her daughter prepare to leave the house late at night—a pattern of behavior she recognizes from the days leading up to Buffy’s previous arson. Joyce does not know about Buffy’s calling as a superheroine who is destined to fight evil; instead she worries that a repetition of Buffy’s previous nocturnal activities will lead to similar problems and, in her mind, inexplicable acts of vandalism in their new town. Like a typical mother of a teenager, she grounds Buffy, and when the teen protests that her errand is “really, really

important,” Joyce sighs and replies, “I know. If you don’t go out, it’ll be the end of the world. Everything is life and death when you’re a sixteen-year-old girl” (“The Harvest”). Of course, Joyce’s speech is hyperbole because she is not speaking of a literal end of the world but of the feeling of urgency teenagers experience and express in relation to their lives. Buffy and viewers, however, know that if Buffy is prevented from acting, it very well may be the literal end of the world. This scene illustrates one of the most recognized and lauded aspects of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: the overlay of metaphoric and literal meaning within the text to achieve greater narrative impact. This technique is a practice often utilized by episodic television in the genres of fantasy, horror, and science fiction. As several critics have argued, though, *Buffy* stands out among other television series that utilize this narrative strategy because of its highly-developed, sophisticated construction of the intersections of literal and metaphoric meaning. The complexity and intricacy of this “metaphor-made-literal” technique is especially significant when considering the development of a community-centered ethos for both the titular heroine, Buffy, and her community of friends.

Aside from serving as something of a mission statement for the show’s commitment to the metaphor-made-literal narrative style, Joyce’s assessment of Buffy’s angst also highlights one of *Buffy*’s other key narrative practices: the use of metaphor in relation to apocalyptic scenarios. Buffy and her friends face—and prevent—the literal end of the world on several occasions over the course of seven years. Riley (Marc Blucas), one of Buffy’s romantic partners, remarks after learning about her history as the Slayer, “When I saw you stop the world from, you know, ending, I just assumed that was

a big week for you. Turns out I suddenly find myself needing to know the plural of ‘apocalypse’” (“A New Man”). Riley’s remark, coming as it does mid-way through the series, serves as an in-joke for regular viewers—the event he refers to was a “minor” apocalypse by the series’ standards—and highlights his astonishment at the role Buffy plays in and with her community. While his comment is directed at Buffy, her regular community of friends always helps Buffy to avert the semi-regular apocalyptic threats. Riley is a soldier stationed in Sunnydale to fight demons, and his training has not prepared him for the Slayer’s “unorthodox” method to fighting monsters, demons, and vampires. Riley understands that Buffy’s community-centered approach runs counter to the masculine conventions he has been taught.

The overarching issues of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) are working out teenage angst in high school and navigating the tricky waters of the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. These years are filled literally with life-changing experiences that range from “earth shattering” romantic breakups, to negotiating membership in high school cliques, to managing grades and coursework. In *Buffy*, however, these high school realities are exaggerated by metaphor since apocalyptic storylines and plots of vampires preying on the town’s citizens run parallel to teenage life in high school. The continual overlap of metaphor and reality in *Buffy* forces Buffy and her friends to save the world week-by-week in order to survive. If they can fight off the metaphoric apocalypse, they can survive their adolescent years. However, *Buffy*’s complex, multi-layered narrative offers more than that simple correlation between end-of-the-world scenarios and coming-of-age benchmarks. Among the many other themes of

the series is the value placed on community. The emphasis on communal action to save the world prevails, rather than a sole focus on the necessity of simply saving the world. While the latter is obviously important, Buffy can only succeed through a reliance on community, in particular those young adults who regularly aid her. Much has been made in scholarship of *Buffy*'s representation of and commitment to a communal heroic ethos. Similarly, the functions of metaphor have received significant attention. My intent in this chapter is to add another dimension to these conversations by illustrating how intertwined world-saving and coming-of-age metaphors are with the development and growth of a community-centered ethos for this teenage cult television heroine and her friends.

As mentioned, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a show about growing up as a teenager, a stage in life during which individuals challenge authority, power, and leadership. *Buffy* is also, as the title suggests, a show about vampires and a girl named Buffy who fights them. The series starts in the sophomore year with Buffy and her cohorts, Willow (Alyson Hannigan), a young woman interested in the study of magic, and Xander (Nicholas Brendon), an ordinary young man. While they face the same challenges as other teenagers, Sunnydale High School is also situated on a "hellmouth," a literal gateway to hell and a center of mystical energy—a location that grounds the series in its most noted metaphor: high school is hell. As Holly Chandler explains, "The staple metaphor for the show is the interdimensional portal—or Hellmouth—that lies under Buffy's high school. By portraying high school as a literal hell, the show uses the fantasy genre to express emotional realities" (par. 3). While Willow and Xander are "normal" teenagers at the series' beginning, Buffy joins the student body as a teenager with special

abilities bestowed upon her by some unspecified mystical force. She has prophetic dreams and supernatural strength. As the show's oft-repeated mythology explains, "she is the slayer... one girl in all the world" who will "*stand alone* against the vampires, demons, and the forces of darkness" ("Welcome to the Hellmouth," emphasis added). This description of Buffy plays on Western mythology, and is the antithesis of community, as it advertises a heroic figure working alone to save the day. However, the series consistently undermines the construction of the hero(ine) as solitary and makes clear that Western mythology is invoked so that its efficacy can be disproved and destabilized. In the process, this mythos is rewritten in a more community-centered, feminist way. Together with Giles (Anthony Stewart Head), a mentor trained in the supernatural, Buffy, Willow and Xander work to protect the unsuspecting population of Sunnydale from various forms of evil. As the series progresses, Buffy's immediate circle of friends expands, and they, along with the student body, experience various coming-of-age milestones, such as negotiating long-term romantic relationships; going to college; losing a parent through death; discovering physical limitations; managing secrets and social authority; learning to use restraint when using weapons that give one the power to kill; and facilitating the introduction of others to their community-centered heroic ethos.¹

Of all the cult television shows featuring strong women in a heroic role, *Buffy* has generated the most prolific scholarly conversation, including an academic association dedicated to the study of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and other texts by *Buffy*'s creator and auteur, Joss Whedon. Within this breadth of scholarship, many critics have explored the two major themes I intend to engage here: the show's use of metaphor and emphasis on

community. However, the ways in which the two are inextricably intertwined has yet to receive the critical consideration it deserves.

One of the more attractive, compelling qualities of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (and the other series discussed in this study) is that it blends multiple genres to create new and surprising effects. However, *Buffy*'s engagement with metaphor draws heavily on the aspect of its foundation in the horror genre. As Tracy Little explains, "The use of metaphor in the horror genre is by no means a new one... Indeed, stories of vampires have long stood as metaphors for the social drain of work and age, while the werewolf has represented the metaphor of the beast within, and the zombie can signify the fear of losing one's mental faculties" (284). When applied to *Buffy*'s high school setting, the application of metaphor as a narrative technique resonates even more clearly, as Christine Jarvis observes: "Horror enables young people to work through anxieties about finding a place in society, managing sexual relationships and replacing the older generation, by turning these anxieties into monstrous dangers encountered in the stories" (258). The use of metaphor in classic science fiction/horror texts, like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (where Dr. Frankenstein's monstrous creature serves a metaphor for fears about industrialization and advances in science in early nineteenth-century Britain) (Little 284), illustrates how in "classic horror genre [stories] the metaphors are often moving in only one direction" (285). In other words, such metaphors are limited by working on only one level of meaning. However, Little argues, "the way that metaphor is utilized in [*Buffy*] takes on a new and more postmodern twist" (285), functioning multidirectionally to discuss concepts and topics that straight-forward language is unprepared for or incapable

of addressing by “creat[ing] layered dimensions of understanding through which the speaker and the listener can communicate better and... [reach] a level of emotional or philosophical understanding” that would be impossible with plain, direct language (283). Because of this multilayered, multidirectional approach to and employment of metaphor, Whedon and his writing team offer,

a show where the characters’ worst horrors are not just the monster they are fighting but the grim reality of such ultimate high-school horrors as parent-teacher night, not having a date for the prom, being made fun of in class, and not getting a spot on the cheerleading team.

Thus the metaphor is made literal—high school really is hell—but that is not the worst thing about high school for Buffy and her friends... While fighting demons and the forces of evil is by no means easy for Buffy and her friends, it is by no means the toughest problem that they have to deal with. In this sense the metaphor has the ability to say the unsayable, thus haunting us with the idea that the metaphor and the reality may not really be that far apart. (286)

In the constant choice to use not just metaphor but the multilayered metaphor-made-literal trope in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Whedon and his creative team produce a fantastical southern California town where “the metaphors are sometimes more real than the reality” (293). To recognize the role metaphor plays in *Buffy* is to shed light on how integral metaphor is throughout the series and the interconnectedness of the metaphor-

made-literal technique (most often via end-of-the-world plot points) with coming-of-age scenarios—both of which require community to negotiate successfully in *Buffy*.

In addition to the explication of *Buffy*'s use of metaphor, much of the criticism to date concentrates on the show's emphasis on a community ethos and how that concept functions as a feminist trope through the rejection of traditional power structures aligned with patriarchal social models and privilege. As Rhonda V. Wilcox and Gregory Stevenson, among others, explain, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s mythology is set up specifically to allow Buffy and friends to reject dominant power structures and form alternate heroic models. Wilcox observes that "Buffy is one of a long line of single champions, leaders of the fight against evil. Like the king in a patriarchal succession, each Slayer is born to the position and assumes it only on the death of the preceding Slayer" ("Who Died" 4). Likewise, Stevenson observes,

Slayer tradition holds that 'She *alone* will stand against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness'... Only the Slayer has the power, only the Slayer bears the ultimate responsibility for holding back the onslaught of demonic powers. It is a reoccurring refrain, and Buffy is constantly reminded and reminding herself of her aloneness" (139, emphasis Stevenson's).

Buffy does struggle with whether to understand her heroism as individual power or derived from communal structures; this struggle highlights the tension between traditional ideas of heroism and the strength Buffy finds in her community. Repeatedly, though, the show upholds the value of community action over individual heroism. The

Slayer mythology's emphasis on aloneness is augmented by how the Watchers' Council—the group that trained Giles in his role as guide to the Slayer—tells Buffy she should understand her heroic potential. It is in their interest to keep her isolated and reliant on their pale imitation of community, in order to control her power. Buffy inherently understands the limitations such a setup forces upon her and the idea of the solitary hero clashes with her desire to integrate her “normal” and heroic selves so she may fully belong to the community in which she lives. The pull of these two forces creates a “constant tug-of-war” (145) in which Buffy must engage, but community is consistently shown to be the preferred value. This community-centered ethos is necessary for success on several occasions. Not only is community demonstrably preferable; also, even though “Slayer tradition dictates that the Slayer fight alone... virtually every time Buffy ignores her community and does just that, the results are disastrous” (146).² The negative outcomes that occur as a result of Buffy's decisions to turn her back on the community reinforce the necessity of that community for heroic action.

That is not to say that Buffy never participates in heroic maneuvers representative of older, solitary heroic models. Jana Riess compares Buffy as a heroic figure to the hero of the Western film genre in her volume wherein she explores *Buffy* as a source of spiritual guidance. Riess argues, “the highest ideal is one of teamwork and collaboration, not lonely grit” (54); however, “for all the attention lavished on friendship and cooperation in *Buffy*, the series also retains a place for a certain rugged individualism” (57). Riess also warns that, “taken too far, however, self-reliance at the expense of friendship can be suicide in [*Buffy*], where loners simply don't last” (59). For *Buffy* to

truly offer thoughtful and fully developed criticism of various heroic models and espouse one model's supremacy, the show and its characters must grapple with and try out various models, identifying the strengths and flaws of each. Or, as Wilcox explains, "from the start, the series counterbalances the idea of the lonely hero with the presentation of a community of friends" ("Who Died" 4), the latter critically situated as feminist when Wilcox defines it as "a more typically female method of operation" (4).

In addition to subverting patriarchal constructions of the lone individual hero, *Buffy* subverts social expectations through its very premise and rewriting of the Slayer mythos to create a new role for the woman at the center of the mythology. In doing so, the show offers a parallel subversion of traditional patriarchal social structures and values. As Zoe-Jane Playdon observes, at first glance, Buffy appears to be,

another degrading sexploitation of the patriarchy, a woman who is objectified as a function—"the Slayer"—and controlled to serve ends which are not her own. She is a constructed woman... constructed within the terms of the series as a means for a male elite, the [Watchers'] Council, to get their dangerous work done. (157)

The reality of the television narrative, however, is quite different, Playdon argues: "Buffy herself is implicitly transgressive... and thus she provides an immediate political challenge to the order of life in Sunnydale. This political challenge is extended by the community formed by herself and her friends, which... is based on a participative model rather than a hierarchical one" (174). Playdon's use of "participative" and "hierarchical" here could be exchanged easily for "feminist" and "patriarchal," respectively. As

Playdon's essay on *Buffy* examines the series in a postfeminist context (one tenet of which is often a rejection or avoidance of older feminist "buzz" words such as "patriarchy" and even "feminism"), she uses language designed to fit within the cultural climate of postfeminist conversation, even as she reinforces the point other scholars have made about *Buffy*'s emphasis on community functioning as feminist critique.

Ultimately, regardless of the terms used to describe *Buffy*'s treatment of a community-centered ethos, the structures of community and which models are rewarded through success are tied up in questions of power, as the seventh season makes abundantly clear in its repeated use of the phrase "It's about power" by various characters, both good and evil. Kevin K. Durand explains that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,

presents viewers with two conceptions of power.... The first power, the one that is sought after by the good guys and bad guys alike, is the power to overcome obstacles, to coerce others to do one's bidding, or to destroy a power bent on evil. In all of these cases, the power is a straightforwardly patriarchal one. It is characterized by a top-down command structure, by one leader being in charge while the others follow, with a highly individualized system of personal power.... The second type is fundamentally different... [it] is shared power, and its goal is the empowerment of all. (45)

More than simply offering competing models of power, Durand argues that the series consciously and specifically "presents a radical repudiation of one [type of power] in favor of the other" and that the latter "poses both a critique and a threat to the previous

easy, dominant view” (45). In doing so, *Buffy* makes clear that the treatment of power and the choosing of the model that empowers all community members rather than concentrating power in a single ruler/hero or small group that excludes larger portions of a society is necessary and only achievable through a community-centered heroic ethos and a heroic figure who likewise recognizes and supports the distribution and sharing of power.

While *Buffy* routinely subverts older models of power distribution that contribute to social inequities, the show also models community-centered, feminist ethos in other, lateral ways. Specifically, Susan Payne-Mulliken and Valerie Renegar explore the ways that women support and empower one another in *Buffy* by examining sisterhood models for female friendship. Sharon Ross analyzes specifically how Willow, as Buffy’s primary female friend, helps Buffy develop heroically. In contrast, when Willow pursues her own power outside the support structure of her community, the power turns grotesque and leads Willow to attempt to destroy the world, positioning her in opposition to the community. Also, Mary Alice Money and Lorna Jowett offer critical analysis on the support of the larger community and how it provides space for formerly-evil demon characters to grow, change, and find redemption through their (re)humanization or the casting-off of their demon traits (either literal or metaphorical). Their liberation from demon ways makes possible their full and complete integration into Buffy’s heroic community. In fact, Stevenson contends that, for demon characters whose association with Buffy’s community has positive, transformative effects, “the redemptive power of community derives not simply from an association with others but from the community’s

ethic” (145), reinforcing that a group must share a community-centered ethos to provide space for redemption in *Buffy*. While both of these approaches to considering the functions and impacts of community are valuable, for the purposes of this chapter and the larger volume, I focus here on community in a larger (cross-gender) sense and explore the primary relationship between the cult television heroine and her community in moments of apocalyptic crisis (metaphor) and (literal) coming-of-age transformation.

Overall, the metaphor-made-literal technique, especially in relation to coming-of-age moments, and the emphasis on community in *Buffy* each have received significant critical attention. What has not yet been explored in depth is the interconnectedness of these two elements of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I contend that they are so interwoven, they rely on one another to achieve the greatest narrative impact; in order to understand this impact, we must acknowledge and examine how they function together *and* how each functions individually. The series’ emphasis on community ethos both during moments of battling evil to save the world and during coming-of-age narratives are not simply parallel in the story, nor do they occur simultaneously only for purposes of narrative structure. Rather, they are positioned in a paradoxical, “chicken-and-egg” relationship. Community is generated by the threat of apocalypse, and that same community is necessary to save the world. Without the threat, the means of averting disaster would not be present, but Buffy and her friends would also not grow in ways necessary for political and social agency that is the metaphor-made-literal heroism of the real world. Both community and world-saving must occur in order for *Buffy* and her friends to successfully journey toward and then traverse into adulthood. In turn, their successful

negotiation of these obstacles allows for the series' concluding message: all members of society may be empowered and take on leadership roles, first for survival of difficult moments, and second, in order to change society for the better. All of these elements are intertwined and interconnected.

Buffy demonstrates the interconnectedness of metaphor and its community-centered heroic ethos throughout the series in episodic narratives and season-long story arcs. As A. Susan Owen explains, from the show's beginning,

Buffy's relationship with [her friends] establishes narrative momentum toward collectivity... Most problems and challenges are evaluated and solved through cooperation and shared responsibility. The constructed social conflicts and competing desires between and among characters underscore the necessity of social cooperation and tolerance. (27)

The series further reinforces this interconnectedness through the larger narrative arcs which require a community-centered approach to world-saving as a necessary component of the characters' ability to meet and overcome possible impediments to their continued growth and survival. For the purposes of this chapter, I will concentrate on the resolution of two larger story arcs found at the end of the third and seventh seasons.

These two examples illustrate the advancement of the characters' journey from adolescence to adulthood and are tied more closely to prominent coming-of-age milestones and the community-centered cult heroine's ultimate political efficacy in her own world. When the community faces a threat from an outside evil, its success occurs only through a plan based in a community-centered ethos. The cult heroine leads the

community in these moments, but neither she nor the community members succeed alone. Instead, their shared allegiance to the community encourages them to rely on one another. This theme of allegiance is highlighted in the third and seventh season concluding episodes, “Graduation Day” (Parts One and Two) and “Chosen.”

At the end of the third season, Buffy and her friends graduate from high school. The important coming-of-age benchmark and the apocalyptic battle in which Buffy leads her classmates reveal how community and metaphor-made-literal narrative structures in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are intertwined. As Little explains, “for many high-school seniors the prospect of leaving the familiar high school setting, of leaving their friends, of moving away to college or into the workforce seems like the end of the world. At Sunnydale High it is, or at least would have been, if the Mayor had had his way” (293). Sunnydale High’s graduation ceremony corresponds with Sunnydale’s Mayor’s plan to achieve greater power by transforming himself from a human man into a giant snake-demon of incredible power and destruction. His transformation is scheduled to occur during the high school graduation ceremony attended by all students in the graduating class, their families, and other prominent town citizens. As a changeling, the Mayor produces a metaphor-made-literal about politicians who betray their constituents and assume authority beyond that granted them by their office. Further, his transformation into a snake evokes the serpent’s traditional personification as representing the source of all evil—Satan, an allusion to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, as well as the wide range of Western literary texts that have retold this story, such as John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Snakes, of course, are also a popular animal

corollary for modern-day politicians because of the easy comparison between snakes' slippery, sliding movements and politicians' indirect maneuvering and manipulation of government and society. Similarly, snakes' primary means of attack—venomous bites that harm a small section of the body but eventually poison the whole—are analogues to the damage politicians can do to the whole social body by attacking, ignoring, or sacrificing one small portion rather than representing all voters. Snake bites can be defensive; however, most often a snake bites in preparation for swallowing its prey whole, utterly devouring it the way a corrupt politician can completely devastate a society. Buffy and her friends learn of the Mayor's intentions and begin to plan strategies to fight him. His gigantic size as a snake, however, or the metaphoric size of his political and social power, means that Buffy and her immediate community of friends cannot defeat him by themselves. Or if they can defeat him, they realize that doing so will not be without the cost of significant "civilian" casualties.

To combat the size of the threat, Buffy and her friends mobilize their classmates into an army. This strategy is significant because, even though Buffy and her friends are a powerful clique, they are aware of the necessity and potency of working with the larger communal group to fight a threat of this size. Although many Sunnydale High students may not know all the specifics of the supernatural world, they collectively know enough to recognize "that Sunnydale High isn't really like other high schools. A lot of weird stuff happens here" ("The Prom") and that Buffy's impact on the larger school community has been significant. In fact, just prior to graduation, Buffy's classmates acknowledge her talents with a newly-created award: "Class Protector" ("The Prom"). This moment is

especially poignant for Jonathan (Danny Strong), the student presenting the award. Jonathan is one of Buffy's classmates who had planned to kill himself out of loneliness and despair, a state of mind caused by feelings of ostracization in an earlier episode ("Earshot"). Buffy stopped him by assuring him that such feelings are a universal teenage experience; that the students who seem to have everything are just as insecure as the non-popular ones. Up to this moment, Buffy felt that the majority of the student body perceived her largely as a social outcast in spite of her community-centered ethos. She is surprised, therefore, by the recognition her classmates award her for the contributions to the community. As he presents her with the award, Jonathan comments,

whenever there was a problem or something creepy happened, you [Buffy] seemed to show up and stop it. Most of the people here have been saved by you, or helped by you at one time or another. We're proud to say that the class of '99 has the lowest mortality rate of any graduating class in Sunnydale history.

Her work in the community nurtures trust in her classmates to the point that they will join her, Willow, and Xander in standing up to the Mayor and his vampire enforcers at the graduation ceremony ("Graduation Day, Part Two").

Buffy has forged a responsive community overall. Her smaller group of friends plays key roles in mobilizing and leading the class in the battle. The larger community of classmates, therefore, aids the smaller group as they all enact a plan that ultimately defeats the Mayor. Incidentally, this plan involves blowing up the high school building with the Mayor inside. In fact, "the act of blowing up the high school sets the stage for

the metaphor of the finality of graduation; of having no other choice but to move on to new and different paths of life” (Little 293). Not only does the destruction of the high school represent the students’ movement beyond this point in their lives—they literally no longer have a place there after the explosion. The demolition of the building also serves as the metaphoric destruction/rejection of the power that high school—both the institution and the time period of adolescence—holds and which may prevent future growth of the individual student.

Had they not been able to work together from the community-centered ethos that defines Buffy’s heroism, the Slayer and her classmates would likely not have survived. *Buffy*’s Whedon and creative staff are clearly conscious of the ways in which the metaphor of facing the Mayor and the coming-of-age moment of high school graduation are intertwined. The graduation metaphor functions on several levels in the episode. In “Graduation Day, Part One,” Buffy asks the Watchers’ Council for assistance when one of the Mayor’s subordinates poisons Angel (David Boreanaz), Buffy’s vampire ex-lover and a strong fighting ally. Buffy requests help from the Watchers’ Council via Wesley (Alexis Denisof), a Watcher sent to replace Giles earlier in the season. Giles was dismissed from his position for rejecting traditional Council power structures that positioned the Slayer as nothing more than a tool for the Watchers’ use. In essence, Giles was “punished” for endorsing Buffy’s community-centered ethic that values all community members both for their contribution to the community and as individuals instead of upholding the patriarchal authority that originally gave him his position. The

scene in which Wesley reports the Council's refusal to help Buffy is illustrative of the graduation metaphor at work.

The scene opens with Wesley walking into Angel's house, where Buffy and Giles have been tending to the sick vampire. Giles asks Wesley if he was able to reach the council and the younger man responds, "They couldn't help" ("Graduation Day, Part One"). Buffy pointedly questions the key word in his statement by asking disbelievingly, "Couldn't?" Realizing that Buffy understands Council politics better than he had hoped, Wesley admits that a more accurate phrasing is "wouldn't... [because] it's not Council policy to cure vampires... under any circumstances." Anticipating Buffy's response, he adds, "Yes, I did try to convince them." Buffy's quick command of "Try again," is met by Wesley's attempt to re-exert his authority as Watcher as he makes clear that the Council will not be persuaded. He explains, "Buffy, they're very firm. We're talking about laws that have existed longer than civilization." Buffy is not swayed by his assurance, and her facial expression conveys disbelieving anger at the Council's heartlessness as she responds, "I'm talking about watching my lover die. I don't have a clue what you're talking about, and I don't care." For Buffy, the Council's refusal to honor her commitment to her love(r) adds another layer of metaphor here, and it is this point of conflict that causes her to finally fully reject the Council. Giles, who has been standing off to the side, steps toward Buffy. Giles' movement makes clear his allegiance to Buffy and her community-centered heroic ethos—the allegiance for which the Watchers' Council fired him. He reinforces his physical positioning by assuring her, "Buffy, we'll find a cure."

In response, Wesley again attempts to exert Council influence over the Slayer, “The Council’s orders are to concentrate on—” but Buffy cuts him off by quietly questioning his word choice again: “Orders?” She pauses thoughtfully before continuing, “I don’t think I’m going to be taking any more orders.” Although her phrasing of “I don’t think” implies a lack of certainty, her tone is full of conviction, making her meaning clear as she elaborates, “Not from you. Not from them.” Wesley’s expression changes from sympathy to angered authority. He warns her, “You can’t turn your back on the Council.” He attempts here to maintain her allegiance to the patriarchal “community” of the Watchers’ Council, but he fails to understand that their missive to Buffy to do their bidding means that it is a community to which she can never truly belong; she can only be used by them. Buffy, however, refuses to accept his treatment of her as a spoiled child. She responds, instead, as an adult capable of making her own decisions, “They’re in England. I don’t think they can tell which way my back is facing.” Wesley knows he is losing ground and he imperiously directs Giles to “talk to her.” Giles looks at Wesley, then walks a few feet closer to Buffy as he replies, “I have nothing to say right now.” Giles’ movement takes him the last few steps to Buffy’s side and the three are no longer positioned as separate points in a triangular formation, but as two positions opposite each other.

In fact, when he reaches her side, Giles does not stand beside Buffy; rather, he takes a seat on an end table next to her. This move positions Giles not only as her ally but as a mentor who will follow the lead of the one he has mentored. Buffy says to Wesley, “Go back to your Council and tell them, until the next Slayer comes along, they can close

up shop. I'm not working for them anymore." When Wesley protests angrily, "This is mutiny!" Buffy pauses then responds with a calm assurance, "I like to think of it as graduation." Buffy has rejected the authority of the Watchers' Council and its non-community-centered ethos. Wesley gazes on Buffy for a moment, and Buffy dismisses him by turning to face Giles and speak to the other man. This move excludes Wesley both physically and vocally from the conversation. Jessica Prata Miller explains the significance of this exchange: "While the Council sees only a shift in power, Buffy sees the situation in terms of her growth as a Slayer and as a young woman. Rejecting the Council is part of a long process of gaining moral maturity" (47). For Buffy, the commitment to her own heroic ethos and the choice to reject older models that compromise her own moral center is one moment of metaphor-made-literal graduation. The show's writers make the interrelated nature of Buffy's maturation and her rejection of the Council clear by having Buffy verbally equate her rejection of the Council with the upcoming high school graduation ceremony and the episode's title.

The Mayor's commencement speech also captures the layered meaning of graduation. Although his rhetoric sounds like standard commencement fare on the surface, it works dually to reveal his own plans for graduating out of his human form/limitations and foreshadow Buffy and her community's graduation from adolescence into adulthood. In an interview on the third season DVDs, series creator and episode director Joss Whedon comments that the speech was his "favorite thing to shoot" in the episode because it was "a great opportunity to take the villain and say something that you actually mean. He actually speaks about what the show has been about... about

change, about moving on... we see so much going on during that speech and then, you know, all hell [breaks loose]" ("Interview). The ceremony begins as usual, with students taking their seats before the podium to the traditional graduation march. Principal Snyder (Armin Shimerman), who has consistently attempted to control rather than nurture Buffy and the other students, begins his introduction of the Mayor by glaring down at the student body from the stage, saying, "This is a time of celebration," before admonishing them, "so sit still and be quiet" ("Graduation Day, Part Two"). Eyeing one student, he adds sternly, "Spit out that gum!" The incongruity of celebration with the call for peace and stillness reinforces the upcoming conflict of the battle—the defining metaphor-made-literal moment for surviving the transition from adolescence into adulthood. The students must rebel against Snyder's and the Mayor's authority and exert the agency necessary for their literal survival against the demonic, metaphorically learning to stand on their own as adults in the world.

When the Mayor (Harry Groener) begins his speech, the students' position on the edge of transition is reinforced. The Mayor takes the podium and, in a serious, yet faux-fatherly manner says: "Well. What a day this is." He turns his attention to the section of the students where Buffy sits and his voice takes on a serious edge. Though he gazes at the leader of the community who would oppose him, he believes that he has gained the upper hand, and a sudden shift to a menacing vocal inflection as he looks at Buffy makes clear his confidence: "Special day." Unwilling to betray his hand to the audience at large too early, though, the Mayor affects a more friendly tone to explain, "Today is our centennial, the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of Sunnydale. And I know

what that means to all you kids. Not a darn thing.” Here, he chuckles and smiles, playing the indulgent father persona he loves to affect, before continuing. As he speaks his next line, the camera pans over Xander and his on-again-off-again love interest Cordelia (Charisma Carpenter) on one side of the student body and then Willow and Buffy on the other, all four of them sitting tensely, waiting for the Mayor to begin his ascension because he is mystically invulnerable to physical harm until he transforms. “Because today something much more important happens,” the Mayor says, “Today you all graduate from high school. Today all the pain, all the work, all the excitement is finally over.” Of course, on the surface, his words suggest the student body is on the brink of moving on to bigger and better things; he really means all *his* pain, work, and excitement building to his ascension is over because he plans to succeed in transforming, and the students’ hard work to get to graduation is over because he plans to end their lives by eating them to ensure he has the requisite energy to complete his transformation.

The Mayor ostensibly explains the importance of Sunnydale’s history and its cultural significance for the high school graduation. Buffy, her friends, and viewers alike, however, know the centennial is important because it dictates the timing of the Mayor’s ascension, reinforcing the layered meaning of his speech. Because the students can see through his rhetoric, they are truly ready to stand on their own. Moreover, though, his on-going vocalizations allow Willow and Buffy to recognize the depths of the threat he poses in another, metaphoric way. As he assumes the paternal role, he says, “You know what, kids...” and Buffy comments to Willow in horrified realization, “Oh my God. He’s going to do the entire speech!” Unless delivered by a celebrity, a commencement speech

is something to be endured in order to make graduation official; it is the last hoop to jump through on the road to adulthood. Willow voices her agitation, “Man, just ascend already,” and Buffy vocalizes his true nature as revealed by the choice to speak longer: “Evil!” On the one hand, Buffy’s realization that the Mayor intends to give his *entire* speech before his transformation highlights the angst, if not boredom, felt by the graduating class having to endure the commencement speech; the ceremony’s climax cannot come quickly enough. On the other hand, Buffy’s comment reinforces the depths of the Mayor’s ruse: he can bore students “to death” with his speech and distract them.

The Mayor keeps speaking, and, in the background, viewers hear him reassuring the students that they have “a place in Sunnydale’s history.” Here the audio track cuts to re-prioritizing his voice as the camera shifts to a long shot from behind the students, positioning the Mayor standing over the student body, an image that evokes the forthcoming change. His voice turns menacing, “whether you like it or not.” The Mayor continues his speech for a few more moments before defining the day’s significance again in a multilayered way that emphasizes the multiple metaphors-made-literal at work: “Today is about change. Graduation doesn’t just mean your circumstances change, it means you do.” While the speech again demands that viewers recognize all the changes Buffy and friends have gone through—i.e., the loss of virginity, the power to hurt or even kill others, the end of troubled romantic relationships—it also speaks to the Mayor’s intention to change physically. His focus on his own upcoming transformation rather than the students’ coming-of-age moments that he is ostensibly talking about is emphasized by his next words, “You ascend... to a higher level. Nothing will ever be the same.” While

“nothing will ever be the same” for students as they leave high school and move out into the world, the Mayor’s true meaning here, of course, is that *he* will never be the same after his transformation; nor will Sunnydale be the same after he eats the population and destroys the city.

Another layer to the Mayor’s speech is its threatening nature in light of the metaphor of his transformation. For the student body, he might as well be cautioning them that the world is not their oyster as high school graduates so often believe. Instead, the Mayor’s speech serves as a cautionary warning to the students. The world beyond high school, the world of adulthood—so often jokingly called the “real” world by students—is not ready to welcome them with open arms. Instead, like the soon-to-be snake-Mayor, the speech suggests that the “real” world is a predatory beast waiting to strike, waiting to open its maw and swallow the students whole, destroying their dreams and aspirations. Only through communal effort can they combat this threat. They have to form a community strong enough to protect themselves and their families from being destroyed by the “real” world. To reinforce the chilling message of the Mayor’s speech, the sunshine in which the Mayor had been standing fades as the solar eclipse that is “standard fare” for the demonic ascension ceremony begins, casting the Mayor in shadow, as he repeats, “Nothing.” The darkness that overtakes him serves to mark the beginning of his transformation, as well as to signify his positioning on the side of evil in this moment of conflict.

The Mayor’s transformation starts and he begins to seize up in spasms of pain. While the other adults sitting behind him on the stage, like Principal Snyder, look

confused and worried by the eclipse and the Mayor's apparent pain, Buffy and Willow understand that the moment for battle is at hand. Each reaches up and removes her mortarboard, preparing to fight. While the girls' action here has strategic value for physical combat, it is the same action students often take in celebration at the end of the graduation ceremony: removing the regalia headpiece and tossing it in the air. Whereas regular students remove their mortarboards as a sign that they have completed the ceremony, Buffy's and Willow's removal of their mortarboards signifies their and the other students' true graduation is to be found in the forthcoming battle. They are not celebrating as though they have not a care in the world; instead they are preparing to defy the "real" world and the monsters waiting therein to devour them.

The Mayor transforms, and the other adults begin to scream in fear. They flee the stage tripping over chairs and each other in their terror. In contrast, the students, although many look afraid, do not run; instead, they stand from their seats and prepare to do battle. While the larger community of Sunnydale would be better and safer if all generations regularly participated in the fight against evil, such behavior here would be incongruent with the show's central theme of maturation, and participation by parents and interested parties outside of the graduating student body would undermine the metaphor. Graduation is a moment of transformation for the *students*; if they are truly prepared to go out and face adult life, they must prove it by being the "adults" in this situation—by standing and fighting for their survival, their community, and one another. The camera pans across the determined students, and Buffy commands "Now!" As a group, the students open their graduation robes, revealing the weaponry they have concealed

underneath. Most now stand holding crossbows, axes, maces, swords, spear guns, or other weaponry. The Mayor's new demon-snake body is exceedingly phallic, and all of the students' weaponry is symbolically phallic, too. Their weaponry challenges the patriarchal Mayor's presumed power hegemony. Buffy cries out, "Flame units!" and students positioned on either side of the front row take aim, shooting fire from flame-throwers at the demon Mayor. Buffy then nods to Xander, whom she had previously charged with coordinating the majority of the student offensive, asking him to draw on memories of military training he magically received in a previous episode ("Halloween"). Xander calls out, "First wave!" and the coordinated student resistance to the Mayor begins ("Graduation Day, Part Two"). The synchronized attack on the Mayor shows that the students truly are ready to graduate—they stand prepared for whatever the "real" world has to throw at them and know that they can survive if they work together. Further, this moment sets up Buffy and her friends' shift in later seasons to moving from simple survival to community organization that can effect change in the world outside of Sunnydale.

The only adult outside Buffy's community who stands up to the Mayor is, interestingly, Principal Snyder. His resistance is surprising because he has acted as a sycophantic toady to the Mayor in previous episodes, but his admonishment here—"You're on my campus buddy! And when I say I want quiet, I want..."—appears to redeem him somewhat. However, that he controls others through prescribed patterns of behavior leads to failure because this standard means of exerting authority is inherently patriarchal. In a symbolic measuring contest, the Mayor will win because his social

authority as town leader—as represented by his new seventy-foot snake body—far exceeds that of the high school principal. The Mayor eats Snyder, as Buffy and Xander look on in horror. Snyder's death here is a function of the inefficacy of his approach to nurturing adolescents into adults. Because he *demand*s a power structure that requires others to fall in line with his orders or else, he cannot survive. Instead, survival only comes through the community that nurtures each individual's contributions and allows them to work together to oppose the Mayor's tyranny. As Whedon explains, the students' united stand is self-consciously significant: "the idea of the whole school coming together was thematically a big part of the arc of that [the third] season. It's like Buffy had always been a loner, [Buffy and her immediate group of friends had] always been outside. The idea [is] that all the kids, [had been separate] and now they're all going to band together, they're all going to fight together" ("Interview")—only through a community-centered ethos do the community and the cult heroine survive.

The students' resistance enables Buffy to taunt the Mayor so that he will chase her as she runs into the school and through its halls, trapping the larger demon inside with the explosives she and the other students have prepared. Significantly, the layered meaning of the scene extends into her taunts, which she finishes by addressing the Mayor by his first name, or rather a form of it. As his name is Richard, her choice to end her mocking comments by addressing the Mayor as "Dick" functions on three levels. It is a reference to the late U.S. President Richard "Tricky Dick" Nixon, a 1970s cultural poster child for corrupt politicians; a crude insult; and a challenge to the authority the Mayor assumes over Buffy. Social conventions dictate that students address authority figures like

teachers and politicians by title and surname; often the shift to addressing such figures by first name signifies a shift in the younger person's position from student to adult, to peer. Here, of course, Buffy has taken the liberty of using the more familiar, if not scatological, form of address to show her contempt for the Mayor. Her address to him demonstrates her cognizance of her maturation, her graduation.

This self-conscious acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of metaphor and literal meaning is repeated in the closing scene of this episode. Buffy, Willow, Oz (Willow's love interest, played by Seth Green), Xander, and Cordelia are gathered around a bench outside the school in the aftermath of the graduation ceremony and battle. All are disheveled and look exhausted as they stare at the burning ruin of their high school. Oz says contemplatively, "Guys, take a moment to deal with this. We survived" ("Graduation Day, Part Two"). In response to his observation, the others look thoughtful and Buffy tiredly agrees, "It was a hell of a battle!" Seeing that his meaning has not been understood, Oz shakes his head and says, "Not the battle." Prompted by Cordelia's questioning look, he elaborates: "High School." Oz's observation illuminates the significance of survival in terms of the coming-of-age benchmark of high school graduation rather than winning the fantastical battle with the corrupt politician turned giant snake-demon. In situating their survival in these terms, Oz speaks for the writing staff, making clear the interconnected nature of the metaphor and real-life milestone in this story about high school graduation. The message is again reinforced as the group walks away and the camera pans down to the ground in front of the bench. Lying there is detritus from the fight and the blown-up school: a couple of stakes, battered textbooks

and notebooks, and a signed Sunnydale High yearbook. The camera focuses in on the latter, and the episode's closing shot is a close-up that frames the maroon cover, edged in soot. On it, three faces are raised toward a sun shining down on them from one corner. The text reads "Sunnydale High '99" across the top, with the appropriate slogan, "The future is ours!" displayed across the bottom of the yearbook's cover. Buffy's leadership and the participation of the community in the battle produces for them their future. It can be no coincidence that the cover features three students, as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is at its center the story of Buffy and her two best friends, Willow and Xander. While the immediate community picks up other members along the way, these three form the core of the community throughout the series. Even Giles, the most likely character to be recognized as a fourth core member, is separated from the students by age and position in society. The series' intertwining of coming-of-age benchmarks with the metaphor-made-literal narrative technique is centered on Buffy, Willow, and Xander as the characters who directly experience these maturation milestones.

While the "Graduation Day" episodes serve to clearly illuminate the interconnectedness between apocalyptic metaphor and coming-of-age benchmarks in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, considering this moment in concert with the end of the seventh and final season shows a progression for Buffy and her community from simple survival to effecting change in the world on a larger scale. The seventh season ends with a massive battle against an army of primordial vampires, the forces of an incorporeal entity known as the First Evil, or simply "the First." Because the First is incorporeal—it does not have a physical body to fight or kill (a metaphor for the nature of evil)—and because

of the size of its army of super-strong, extra-powerful vampires, Buffy and her community need to attack using non-traditional means. In addition, throughout the season, potential Slayers—teenage girls who have been identified magically as the next in line to inherit the Slayer power upon the death of the current Slayer—show up at Buffy’s home in Sunnydale seeking sanctuary. Human worshippers of the First have targeted them to be killed off because the First’s long-term plan is to eradicate the Slayer line by killing anyone who might inherit the power. So, in addition to the usual charge of protecting the world from the current evil threat, Buffy and her friends also find their community dramatically enlarged with girls and young women needing protection from the First’s followers, a seeming handicap as, even with training, these girls do not have the power or experience that members of Buffy’s core community possess.

The plan Buffy devises and that the community enacts again reinforces the interconnectedness of the metaphor and maturation milestones, as it “creates... space for a permanent feminist community and heroic female identity” (Crosby 176). While leading an army in battle does not appear to have the same direct correlation to coming-of-age as does high school graduation, in fact this is the last significant coming-of-age benchmark left—the ability to take one’s self out into the world and effect change. By the end of series’ finale, “Chosen,” Buffy and her community demonstrate the ability to do just that. The final battle plan is revealed to viewers in flashbacks intercut with scenes of Buffy leading her community into the Hellmouth to face the First’s forces. While Xander, Giles, and other non-supernaturally gifted members of the community take positions around the ground floor of the re-built Sunnydale High and Willow takes position on the

first floor directly above the opening to the Hellmouth, Buffy leads with the other current Slayer, Faith (Eliza Dushku), and the potential Slayers into the school's basement and the opening to the Hellmouth.³ The thousands-strong horde of vampires rushes to attack. Buffy softly says, "Willow," invoking the key player in her plan ("Chosen"). The camera shifts to Willow, whose head is bent and whose lips move as she whispers, casting a spell. Suddenly, her head lifts up, and as she speaks the camera shifts between three differently-distanced close-up shots of Willow, each getting closer until only the center of her face fills the screen, as she says, "Oh. My. Goddess." After her last word, the view shifts to her point of view of the scythe in her hands—an ancient mystical, Slayer-connected weapon Buffy acquired in an earlier episode ("Touched"). The scythe lights up with a blinding white light and sings a high, harmonized note like that made when a bell rings. The high note transitions into the uplifting, heroic music of the subsequently-shown flashback.

The musical shift pulls viewers from this scene into the flashback smoothly as Buffy begins to speak, explaining the plan to viewers for the first time. Speaking to a room full of her friends and potential Slayers, Buffy says, "So here's the part where you make a choice" ("Chosen"). Earlier, Buffy acknowledged that the potential Slayers were right to be scared because, "It's true none of you have the power that Faith and I do." In the flashback, Buffy continues, "What if you could have that power now? In every generation, one Slayer is born." Here Buffy fully rewrites the Slayer mythos that has guided the series from the beginning. Instead of continuing with the expected, "She alone will fight..." Buffy explains that one Slayer only is born "because a bunch of men who

died thousands of years ago made up that rule.” As she has so often done over the course of the series, Buffy identifies those who would control the Slayer and see her only as a weapon, aligning them with non-community centered power models. She adds, “They were powerful men,” acknowledging that such power structures permeate history and society and cannot be demolished simply by recognizing their existence. Instead, Buffy presents a counter-offer, a new power structure. “This woman,” she says, pointing to Willow, “is more powerful than all of them [the men] combined. So I say we change the rule.” Instead of overthrowing the old regime and stepping into the same structures, Buffy presents an option for a new model: “I say my power should be our power.” To reinforce the sharing of power, the camera cuts away from the flashback scene and focuses on Buffy when she says “my” and on Kennedy (Iyari Limon), one of the potential Slayers and Willow’s current love interest, who has been charged with transporting the scythe from Willow to the field of battle after the power-sharing spell is cast when Buffy says “our.” The image then cuts to shots of three of the potential Slayers near Buffy in the Hellmouth, ready for battle. As each of these four potential Slayers is shown, she stands taller and more confident, gasping in wonder as she experiences the Slayer power for the first time. These images visually support Buffy’s vision of shared power.

The scene returns to Buffy in the flashback as she explains, “Tomorrow, Willow will use the essence of the scythe to change our destiny.” As she continues her voice-over, the camera shifts between vastly different, yet heartbreakingly similar, images of girls across lines of race and class in positions of powerlessness. Buffy says “From now on, every girl in the world who might be a slayer will be a slayer. Every girl who could

have the power, will have the power....” Viewers see a pre-teen white girl stepping up to a softball plate, bat in hand but obviously unsure of herself. She bites her lip and looks around nervously. As the voice-over continues, viewers see a rapid series of images depicting girls and young women from around the world in all circumstances. We see a teenaged black girl leaning against her school locker and sighing in relief at having escaped some problematic situation. The scene quickly cuts to a tween white girl sprawled on the floor, breathing heavily as she attempts to recover from having been knocked down physically. An Asian girl stands up from her family’s dining table, foreshadowing Buffy’s next words, “[Every girl who] can stand up...,” and in the next scene, a small white female hand shoots up to arrest a larger male fist swinging down at the hand’s owner. As Buffy says, “will stand up,” a round-faced young woman standing up to her abuser rises into the scene; her facial expression makes clear her determination to no longer be a powerless victim. The image shifts to Buffy in flashback briefly, as she finishes explaining the plan. “Slayers...,” she says before the image returns to the first young girl at bat, and Buffy resumes, “every one of us.” This quick cut back to Buffy situates her—and by extension all the potential Slayers in the flashback with her—alongside these other girls and young women who will be empowered by Buffy’s plan. Further, that Buffy’s proposed empowerment crosses all lines of social location is made equally clear in these various images: the unknown girls are of different ethnicities. The girl lying on the floor is surrounded by signs of obvious wealth and the young woman who stops her abuser’s fist appears to be working class. Further, of the potential Slayers pictured, Kennedy is a lesbian and Latina, and one of the others, Rona, is black. Within

these ten different females, all lines of social stratification are crossed, clearly conveying the message that Buffy's plan to share power truly includes *all* girls and young women, regardless of race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, or other social locations, thus creating a global community.⁴

In her language, Buffy's use of the first-person plural gives the potential Slayers equal agency to that of Faith and Buffy herself. "Make your choice," she concludes, "Are you ready to be strong?" As she says these words, the young ball player lifts her gaze to the pitcher and a confident smile blooms on her face. In offering the other potential Slayers a choice, Buffy engages in the metaphor-made-literal technique herself that the show relies upon. The sharing of her power gives young women options, but does not require them to follow Buffy into battle. In empowering the others without demanding quid pro quo, Buffy makes Slayer power function in a new, community-centered way. In other words, "Buffy's shifting of the power dynamic made all potential Slayers special and chosen—metaphorically, by extension all women are revealed to have the potential for agency" (Brannon, par. 14). Whereas Buffy was not given a choice—she inherited the Slayer power and her first Watcher (before Giles) showed up and *told* her how she would use it—she here shares the power without attaching any strings to her gift. While she would, of course, like the new Slayers to join her and her friends in battle, she makes clear that the choice is theirs. By sharing the power, she also rewrites *Xena's* legacy in which the older heroine has to die for the younger heroine-in-training to be fully empowered. The flashback scene closes as the on-screen image returns to the shining, singing scythe. The power has been shared.

While the sharing of Slayer power is the biggest metaphor at work in the series' finale, like the closing scene of "Graduation Day, Part Two," Whedon and his team make clear in the final moments of "Chosen" the interconnectedness of the apocalypse-aversion metaphor with the characters' final coming-of-age benchmark. As the various characters disembark the school bus, the core group—Buffy, her sister Dawn (Michelle Trachtenberg), Willow, Xander, Faith, and Giles—approach the edge of the crater and look back at the now-destroyed place from which they came—much the way Buffy, Willow, Xander, Oz, and Cordelia gazed upon the ruined Sunnydale High at the end of "Graduation Day, Part Two." Xander says contemplatively, "We saved the world," and Willow amends his statement: "We *changed* the world" ("Chosen"). This shift in perspective from saving/surviving to changing is the key point of progression for these characters and the series as a whole. As Brannon explains, "This exchange underscores the nature of the boon that Buffy bestows... power as shared phenomenon rather than power concentrated and controlled. In this way Buffy defeats the enemy she'd fought for seven years: an isolation enforced by a patriarchal structure that feared the power which it bestowed" (Brannon, par. 1). Where Buffy and her friends' negotiation of coming-of-age milestones was once literally aimed at simple survival, adulthood mandates a move from mere existence to active participation in bettering the world. The community-centered ethos that defines Buffy and the others demands that they take what they have learned growing up and turn their world-saving efforts into world-changing efforts. It is no longer enough to simply reject corrupt or non-community-centered power structures. Instead they must present viable alternatives; *they* must be the change in the world that they have

fought so long to see. As I have previously noted, Sara Crosby observes that heroines like Buffy “must act for a community they can shape and be shaped by in empowering ways. Otherwise they just flicker on the margins of society without access to political power” (175). The growth from basic survival in the “Graduation Day” episodes to changing the world in “Chosen” demonstrates Buffy’s community’s growth into a force for political change. The “hellish” events of high school have given Buffy and her friends the blueprint for effecting real change in the world later on.

The scene—and the series—ends with Dawn, Willow, and Faith each asking Buffy what she wants to do now that she is, in Faith’s words, “not the one and only chosen anymore,” and she can “just... live like a person” (“Chosen”). Buffy does not answer; instead the scene closes on a close-up of the titular character. As she contemplates the change she and her community have effected in the world and the new possibilities it creates for her and other young women everywhere, a small, happy smile appears on Buffy’s face. Indeed, Buffy’s smile indicates her successful integration of the aspects of her identity most often in conflict: “she can now be master of two worlds, the Slayer and that of a ‘normal girl,’ because it is no longer necessary for her to die before another Slayer can be called. Her destiny is no longer foreordained” (Brannon, par. 14). The smile also offers a clearer message than any words could have about Buffy’s community-centered heroism: this ethic has allowed her to change the world and finally, fully reject the assumptions about her heroism that came with the “one girl” Slayer mythos.

Buffy and her community's successful journey to adulthood is dependant on their ability to recognize the need for and form community. Buffy's own community-centered heroic ethic grew out of this process and allowed her to not just subvert or reject the solitary tradition the original Slayer mythos called for; it allowed her to rewrite the mythology, creating a larger, global community with heroic agency to challenge patriarchal social structures and injustices throughout the world. Not only have Buffy and her friends survived the troublesome years of adolescent "hell"; they have gone on to utilize the lessons learned there to be functioning adults capable of reshaping the world into a better place. In doing so, they model true community-centered heroism wherein all individuals' agency is respected and contributions are deemed valuable, regardless of one's strengths or weaknesses. All individuals can choose to be strong, and if they rely on the support of their community, not only will they survive, they will be able to effect real, lasting change.

Notes

¹ The show's canon extends outside the scope of the television series (1997-2003). Preceding the series is a film of the same title (1992), chronicling Buffy's discovery of her status as the Slayer and the death of her first Watcher. Following the series' end, the narrative world is continued in graphic novel form, in what are commonly referred to as the "Season Eight comics" (starting March 2007). For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on the content of the television series here.

² In a note on his point about the emphasis on community and its triumph over the solitary hero model, Stevenson addresses the important, seeming exceptions to this rule: "Interesting exceptions are 'Empty Places' (7.19) and 'Touched' (7.20). Buffy's solo mission to the vineyard where she finds the scythe is a success, while the community's mission ends in total failure. The vital distinction here is that Buffy did not reject her community, rather the community rejected her. They broke the trust and they suffered for it" (Chapter 10, note 3, 268).

³ Faith's existence as a second, simultaneous Slayer represents early ways in which *Buffy* "rewrote" the Slayer mythos. Due to Buffy's death by drowning before being

resuscitated in the first season finale “Prophecy Girl,” there have been two Slayers for several years, although Faith was out of the picture for many of those years.

⁴ The transnational aspects of this community are explored in depth in the *Buffy* Season Eight comics, when Buffy and her friends lead a global Slayer community composed of figures from a broader range of ethnicities, gender performances, socio-economic classes, etc.

CHAPTER THREE

“My Turn”: Symbiotic Exchanges between Heroine
and Family-Community in *Firefly* and *Dark Angel*

One of the most lauded episodes of the critically acclaimed but short-lived television series *Firefly* (2002), “Objects in Space,” opens with a sequence in which River Tam (Summer Glau), the psychically damaged young woman who will become the show’s cult heroine, wanders around the spaceship she calls home, observing her crewmates. What makes this sequence so powerful is that in each scene, the camera shows the crew members from River’s perspective, presenting what is actually happening intercut with shots of the crew members acting out of character. At first, they appear to be exhibiting behavior signifying River’s own fears. For example, in the middle of regaling a crewmate with a story of his drunken college exploits, River’s brother Simon (Sean Maher) turns to her and says coldly, “I would be there right now,” before the image jump-cuts back to the previous scene of camaraderie and laughter. Simon’s comment refers to the privileged life he gave up to rescue his sister from the physical and psychological torture she endured at a secret government lab and suggests River perceives that he resents his sacrifice. In contrast, River sees Jayne (Adam Baldwin), the ship’s hired gun, in conversation with the pastor, Sheppard Book (Ron Glass) in the ship’s dining room. As hedonistic Jayne questions how a man could voluntarily take a vow of celibacy, he suddenly looks directly at River and confesses, “I got stupid. The money was too good.” Jayne’s “confession” reveals that River is aware of Jayne’s

betrayal during a previous episode when he attempted to hand over River and Simon to the authorities for the reward money. On the heels of the scene with Simon, Jayne's "confession" forces viewers to question whether River is manifesting her own fears or psychically hearing others' innermost thoughts (a possibility at which *Firefly* previously hinted).

While the scope of River's visions remains ambiguous, the sequence ends with River—as viewers follow her perspective—walking into the ship's cargo bay, finding the usually tidy and utilitarian metal storage area covered with fallen leaves and branches. She picks up a small, curved stick and turns it over in her hands, saying words that describe River herself as much as they describe the stick: "It's just an object. It doesn't mean what you think." The next jump-cut shows that River holds not a stick, but a loaded pistol in her hand, revealing what viewers of previous episodes already suspected—River is no more the simple but troubled girl she appears to be than the gun is a harmless stick. Instead, the scene's metaphor confirms that she is just as dangerous and deadly as the gun, and she possesses no more agency than the weapon she holds. She is, at this point, "just an object."

River's status as an object places her in an unusual position for a cult television heroine. Most cult heroines undergo a shift from a "normal" life to a heroic one, but once in the heroic position, the heroine quickly takes on the central warrior/protector role, and her right to that position is largely unchallenged; when her position as hero is questioned for purposes of dramatic conflict or narrative plot, her claim to the heroic role is quickly reasserted. River's story, however, does not follow this pattern. She is taken from the

safety of her family as an adolescent and undergoes medical experiments and psychological conditioning to shape her into a weapon. This conditioning allows the government to easily control and monitor River's body and actions, as viewers learn in *Firefly's* sequel feature film *Serenity* (2005). When her brother rescues her, River's psychological and physiological trauma stunt her growth into adulthood, let alone into the heroic role. Her post-captivity community adopts her, then responds as a healthy family would: it protects and nurtures her.

Although River's position is highly unusual among cult television heroines, she is not unique; in fact, the cult heroine Max from *Dark Angel* (2000-2002), a show that aired just prior to *Firefly*, follows a similar trajectory. Like River, Max (Jessica Alba) has been crafted into a weapon through science and psychological training/brainwashing by her government. Whereas River-as-weapon can be (de)activated by code words, which also compromise the girl's memory of her actions, Max is crafted more in the mold of a supersoldier whose autonomy is designed to extend only to achieving the objective to which she is assigned. While River has a relatively normal childhood, Max is created in a test-tube to be genetically superior and raised in a government training compound until she escapes into the larger world as a nine-year-old girl who must learn to survive and function under her own agency. Eventually, she too finds a family-community that nurtures her reclamation of agency, in time facilitating her ability to take on the heroic role. For both young women, heroic status is achieved only through the nurturance of their respective post-government-control family-communities.

Both series detail the coming-of-age journey from object to subject for their heroines, River and Max, respectively. Other cult heroines come of age as subjects with an already established understanding of the relationships between power and heroism: Buffy and Gabrielle literally grow from teen to adult, and Xena metaphorically grows, shifting from self-centered warmonger to altruistic heroine. River and Max, however, start out as objects, weapons designed for another's use; neither River nor Max have the training (nor sometimes ability) to independently control their behavior. Following their escape from government authority, however, they find themselves within communities that accept the young women and offer them a place to belong. These communities nurture River and Max and teach the women how to be heroic through example and provide space for them to grow into their agency and the heroic role. The culmination of this is a symbiotic power exchange whereby the community first nurtures the damaged and directionless heroine, and, she, in turn, later protects (and leads, in Max's case) the community that has facilitated her growth. The narratives provided by their governments, in which the girls are nothing more than weapon-objects, is the story River and Max—and their communities—rewrite. Their revision is especially transgressive because they participate in a new community-centered heroic model reliant on symbiotic exchange.

In their relationships with their abusive governments, River's and Max's abilities make them "host" creatures, and the governments' intentional, unrestrained use of the girls is parasitic and exploitative. In contrast to this model is a symbiotic relationship, in which both parties enjoy mutual benefit from the arrangement, sometimes even relying on one another for survival. For River and Max, the relationships they develop with their

family-communities after escaping the parasitic relationships they were subject to under government control are truly symbiotic. Each girl needs the supportive space of the family-community structure to recover from the government's influence and to grow into her heroic role. Likewise, the communities that take in River and Max both eventually need the aid and leadership these cult heroines provide.

Because of the experimental means through which their respective governments attempted to control River and Max, these gifted young women need the safety that a symbiotic relationship with a family-community offers in order to grow beyond the aftereffects of trauma that play out in/on their bodies. Both succeed in finding family-communities which provide them the needed space to grow and are willing to take on the partner role in the symbiotic relationship. The community protects then cultivates the future heroine because it recognizes the abuse she has suffered and is moved compassionately to aid her. Upon adopting her into the group, each community provides the heroine support and models resistance to unjust social forces; it does not groom the heroine nor prepare her to be a weapon on its behalf. In other words, their respective communities do not aid River or Max so that they may later call in a debt or make the girls into objects for their own use. Such a relationship would be parasitical in the same manner as the corrupt society's was and violate the community-centered ethos necessary for River and Max to recover from physical and psychological manipulation.

Instead, the relationship between the community and the nurtured heroine is symbiotic. The community offers support because the future heroine is in need of protection while she (re)learns to exert her own agency as an individual. In realizing the

potential of her power to combat social injustice, the future heroine begins a journey to maturation. As she uses her powers to aid her new family-community, she comes to know herself as a heroine and achieves the emotional and ethical maturity necessary to fully take on the heroic role. Both girls' heroic development follows a similar trajectory: first, escape from government control that results in the loss of original family; second, acceptance by a new family-community that models a community-centered ethos; and third, maturation of the heroine into the heroic leadership role.

What is significant about both River and Max, as the scholarly focus on their constructed bodies suggests, is that they are both manipulated and physically altered as *young girls*. River is tricked into attending a special government school for the gifted at age fourteen that turns out to be a site of experimentation and manipulation rather than learning, and Max never experiences life prior to outside management of her body, as she is literally created through genetic engineering in a test tube.¹ The two girls' governments wish to control them and manipulate their bodies into being objects managed by top-down patriarchal authority, a desire that reflects a backlash against women's rights and feminist progress made at the end of the twentieth century. Indeed, not one government official pictured in *Firefly* or *Serenity* is female, and while a female leader is introduced into the government project that created Max later in the series, her construction is largely problematized by a "monstrous mother" characterization along with her eventual death (while the male government agent who initially pursues Max is redeemed). The narratives' creation of River and Max within these circumstances, at the least, is based on patriarchy's fears about female empowerment and the threat that young women who

refuse social prescriptions on their bodies and minds presents to older social orders at the dawn of the twenty-first century. River's and Max's eventual rejection of this control, of course, represents both shows' subversion of those who would control the next generation of young women.

Indeed, viewers are constantly reminded of River's and Max's origins and past manipulation by the government as each young woman continuously struggles to control the function or form of her modulated body. These conflicts serve as a constant visual and narrative reminder to the viewing audience of the severity and depth of governmental invasion of these young women's bodies. Even on her "good" days, River is quirky, uttering nonsensical comments, displaying odd and marginally disruptive behaviors, or becoming irrationally frightened of ordinary things. For example, "The Train Job" ends with River huddled on her bed, wringing the sheets as she repeats the mantra, "Two by two, hands of blue." While this seems a nonsensical thing to say, the next scene reveals there is a method to River's "madness": the government agents searching for the fugitive girl work in teams of two and wear blue gloves. On bad days, River's post-traumatic stress manifests in dangerous ways, such as in "Ariel," when she, seemingly out of the blue, attacks Jayne with a kitchen knife and then smiles, saying matter-of-factly, "He looks better in red."² Overall, River's behavior is rarely "normal," and it testifies to her traumatized state.

Similarly, Max's past as a government experiment cannot be separated from her physical self. Her existence as a genetically perfect super-soldier, engineered through the splicing of human and feline DNA, confirms a troubling, Frankenstein-like arrogance

among the scientific minds of *Dark Angel*'s governmental authority—a theme that speaks to twenty-first century concerns about the advancement of fertility and genetic manipulation technologies. Whereas viewers join River's story shortly after her escape from government control, the opening episode of *Dark Angel* situates Max ten years following her escape; any immediate difficulties she had adjusting to the world and dealing with past trauma have been overcome. However, she cannot fully escape her origins because they are literally written on her body. Viewers are constantly reminded of this as Max bears a genetically imbedded bar code on the back of her neck. This "brand" cannot be removed, even through the application of acid to the skin. Once the skin heals, the "designer label," as Max bitinglly refers to it ("Pilot"), returns, a constant reminder of Max's status as produced commodity and government resource rather than autonomous individual—a disturbing allusion to ways in which female bodies are commodified, trafficked, and consumed in viewers' actual culture.

Scholarship about River and Max as manipulated female bodies focuses on River's non-normative mental state and Max's unique construction as a cult television heroine of blended ethnicity. In River's case, the experiments performed on her by the government have clearly left her emotionally damaged. *Firefly* offers several hints, however, that the government's interference in River's mind and body also has given her a degree of psychic ability, although the show does not specifically identify her as psychic until the above discussed "Objects in Space," one of the last episodes. The hints that River's seeming "madness" is really comprised of legitimate reactions to outside stimuli, rather than being a manifestation of female "hysteria," leads Alyson R. Buckman

to connect Hélène Cixous' feminist work on hysteria to the character. Buckman writes, "The bodies of hysterical women, Cixous argues, write *l'écriture féminine*, [and enact] what the conscious mind cannot express. So, too, for River" (45). Indeed, River's body repeatedly enacts feelings she cannot verbalize. The manifestations of River's trauma evoke conventional ideas of gender: that a female's emotional problems mark her as fragile and unable to act rationally. This "hysterical" state also makes River an exaggeration of normal adolescent girls, who are often moody and cannot always coherently express their feelings without lashing out at those who would help them. River eventually transforms into a heroic figure, however, and *Firefly's* auteur, Joss Whedon, consciously presents River initially in alignment with older stereotypes in order to later subvert them. The image of River as hysterical girl/young woman, however, raises other lines of inquiry for critics. Cyndi Headley, for example, argues that Serenity's crew's treatment of River exemplifies a positive response to mental illness/disability. For the most part, Headley asserts, the crew meets River on her terms and engages with her on a level at which she can function, although that level constantly changes and makes such engagement difficult. The crew's response to River, nevertheless, allows her to meet them where she is at any given time (except dangerous situations), rather than demanding her adherence to a preconceived idea of "sane" behavior. This environment nurtures River, allowing her to more readily heal.

In a similar manner, most scholarship on Max focuses on the element of her character that sets her apart from her cult television heroine peers—her ethnicity. While there are strong women of color on various shows featuring cult heroines, they tend to be

few and far between and relegated to supporting character roles. To date, cult television heroines positioned as the central heroic figure—other than Max—have been almost exclusively white.³ Max herself is clearly multi-racial but the character represents no specific ethnic identity. It is important to note that she adopts the surname Guevara after escaping from government control, and this choice evokes Che Guevara⁴ as a model of revolution dedicated to destroying poverty-driven social inequalities. Not all critics believe the suggestion of Max's implied Latina heritage is as culturally-forward as it appears, given the overall narrative arc of the show. Felicia J. Cruz asks, "Is it not true that [Max], the epitome of stereotypic Latin sexiness, persists in learning to become more of an individual, thereby continually deferring chances to return home with her part-automaton brethren?" (925-926). Cruz questions whether the pursuit of the ostensibly white American Dream by a Latina heroic figure is truly a multiculturally positive contribution to the cult television heroic landscape, given the (white) uniformity of ethnic identity such a pursuit implies. Cruz's core question—does Max's pursuit of generic individuality erase her ethnicity?—is a valid one, but I contend that while Max's adoption of "Guevara" as a surname arguably can be read as Latina, it is safe to regard her not as one specific ethnic identity but as multiracial, "represent[ing] and function[ing] along a continuum of race" (Fuchs 111), thus broadening her significance.

James Poniewozik notes, also, that the physical appearance actress Jessica Alba brings to the role—"wavy black hair and dulce de leche skin"—presents several possibilities for reading Max's racial or ethnic heritage. "She could be Latina, Filipina, light-skinned black or dark-skinned white," maintains Poniewozik. In Alba's words,

Max's ethnic heritage "is mixed up... just like most people in the U.S. There's no purely one race, especially here" (qtd. in Poniewozik). In fact, the show's creators made a conscious choice of multiracial identity for Max. James Cameron, executive producer and co-creator, explains: "I would say that, absolutely, race was an integral part of our casting process. We were looking for an actress who was perhaps of mixed race... We didn't want to fall into the chauvinistic mistake, that I think science fiction films have made in the past, where the superior race happens to have a certain Nordic quality" (qtd. in Fuchs 96). Cameron's observation of major film action heroines' uniform whiteness (especially in 2000 when *Dark Angel* premiered) is also applicable to the television format. While women of color now occasionally play the central heroic role in cult narratives on the big screen (Halle Berry in *Catwoman* (2004) and *X-Men* (2000, 2003, 2006) and Lucy Liu in *Charlie's Angels* (2000, 2003), for example), the model presented in *Dark Angel* of a multiracial cult *television* heroine broke new ground and has yet to be (successfully) repeated in a leading role.

In addition to critical explorations of River and Max as manipulated bodies, scholarship on *Firefly/Serenity* and *Dark Angel* has raised questions about the girls' representations of feminism—a key question given both girls' (eventual) positioning in the heroic role. Michael Marano, in "River Tam and the Weaponized Women of the Whedonverse," situates *Firefly*'s River among other cult heroines created by Joss Whedon (including Buffy) as a "weaponized woman," a motif Marano argues permeates Whedon's work and from which can be gleaned important messages about gender and feminism. As Marano explains "weaponization is partly the Patriarchal [*sic*]

appropriation of something that belongs essentially to the woman being weaponized . . . this [inner] capacity is subverted and rewritten by Patriarchal [*sic*] authority into something useful to that authority and that is lethal” (42-43). Because “the taking, developing, cultivation, and perversion of these inner capacities by Patriarchal [*sic*] authorities is a dehumanizing act” (43), for River, her “capacity as a weapon, her psychic abilities and her physical prowess . . . [make] her an object to the [government]. Stolen goods walking on two feet” (43). Marano’s argument about the trajectory of River’s character development is that she represents the pinnacle of Whedon’s weaponized woman motif,⁵ and that her shift from helpless, traumatized girl into competent warrior woman demonstrates resistance to the patriarchal structure that weaponized her. In fact, Marano argues that:

in the case of these women and their ultimate fates, it’s a specific series of choices made in specific contexts that lead them to what is often their self-determination to subvert their status as weapons/objects, to refuse to be used. In that this self-determination is other-directed, focused on the protection of immediate and domestic groups of real and substitute families, it can be thought of as the antithesis of the Patriarchal [*sic*] authority that has made objects/weapons of these woman [*sic*]. We can think of it as “Matriarchal” in that it is female-centered power—the empowerment of females independent of any external, “meddling” [patriarchal] authority. (45)

While I am not prepared to endorse Marano's claim that River's rejection of government control signifies a shift to an exclusively matriarchal authority structure, I do concur with his implied assessment that River's maturation and re-acquisition of her agency represents a feminist move. While it is dangerous to argue that a woman wielding power is subversive of traditional power structures only when she does so in defense of a domestic space or group, River's heroic journey does have feminist overtones. In this chapter, I aim to build on Marano's reading of River as weaponized woman and consider how her position in a symbiotic relationship with her family-community influences her heroic development and how a comparison with *Dark Angel's* Max offers insights into the weaponized woman trope in a broader cultural conversation outside of Joss Whedon's work.

In contrast to Marano's feminist-positive reading of *Firefly* and River, in "The Cruellest Season: Female Heroes Snapped into Sacrificial Heroines," Sara Crosby argues that *Dark Angel* presents a cult heroine who is anything but feminist. Crosby acknowledges that Max's "existence undermines patriarchy, and the series appears as if it could promote feminist and democratic goals more radically and on more levels than any previous superhero show" (157), but she ultimately argues that Max "never threatens a feminist transcendence of patriarchy. She always and inevitably chooses the patriarchal community [over a feminist one], and that 'choice' appears so natural and necessary, so genetically predetermined even, that she often seems to have no agency at all" (156). Crosby asserts that the lead male character and Max's heroic partner and love interest, Logan (Michael Weatherly), is the "real hero" (160) of the show. Crosby's criticism of

Logan's role on *Dark Angel* is dependent on her reading of him as one form of patriarchal control that Max shifts between in her "heroic journey . . . [which] consists of flights from one male authority to another" (156), thus positioning Logan alongside the government forces as someone who would use Max for his own gain rather than as a supportive community ally to Max. I disagree with Crosby's contention that Max fails to fulfill a feminist vision for a cult heroine by working exclusively for a patriarchal vision of community. While Crosby cites several key elements of the series that support her argument, she fails to account for the climax of Max's heroic journey at the end of the second season and the ways in which the family-community that Max comes to lead (a group that includes Logan) defies and rejects traditional patriarchal authority in Western culture—largely due to Max's insistence on non-violent means when possible and her inclusive community-building strategies. It is also necessary to mention that Crosby's reading of Max's family-community influences, especially Logan, equates male characters with patriarchy, ignoring the fact that while patriarchy places men in positions of power, the term describes a system of power that favors men, not *any* man per se. Power is not inherently patriarchal because it is wielded by a man, just as power is not inherently feminist when wielded by a woman. Crosby's essay, nonetheless, demands readers consider the feminist implication of Max's growth into her heroism.

A full understanding of the three step process River and Max negotiate as they journey from government-controlled object to heroic subject, from weapon to woman, requires contextualizing them within their narrative settings. Both *Firefly* and *Dark Angel* are set in dystopic, science fiction futures, and a comparison of these futures helps bring

the shows' themes to light. Further, each show draws heavily on historical allusions that ask viewers to understand River's and Max's struggles for autonomy within the larger framework of human—especially American—history. The dystopic futures of each series provide a rich cultural backdrop against which to consider the implications of the socially-manipulated female body and the roles family and community play in girls'/women's agency at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The settings—both genre setting and physical location—for *Firefly* and *Dark Angel* are strategically chosen for maximum impact and dramatization of River's and Max's struggles against patriarchal authority and their development as community-centered heroines. Both series are set in dystopic futures that also strongly evoke eras of significant change and development in American history. While the societies of other cult television heroines are troubled, infused with malevolent forces, and generally fantastic in some way (filled with warrior princesses or mystically enhanced vampire slayers, for example), the narrative worlds of *Firefly* and *Dark Angel* are hyper-dystopic, overflowing with corruption and abuse of those without social privilege. This dystopic setting, as defined by Sharon Sutherland and Sarah Swan, is “an imperfect fictional society that utilizes the perspective of the outlaw to examine the political ramifications of its social ordering” (90). As such, dystopia is a necessary component of *Firefly* and *Dark Angel* because it allows for the emergence of small communities of rebels, those whose moral compasses cannot be (re)aligned by social influence and whose resistance to and subversion of the larger, corrupt society makes the smaller community an ideal space in which to nurture a future heroic figure.

River's and Max's initial positions as objects, weapons for a dystopic government's use, illustrate the depths of dystopic corruption within their respective worlds. River lives some 500 years in the future in another solar system that the people of Earth colonized following the depletion of their home planet's resources—a troubling history for viewers who realize that the dystopic future government would “use up” River as such a resource; indeed her name aligns her with water, one natural resource that viewers' contemporary society seems intent on polluting without hesitation even though we depend on it for survival. This new solar system is filled with great social inequity. The *Core* planets, those closest to the sun, are the first colonized and have since become the most heavily populated, as well as being the seat of (dystopic) government, the *Alliance*, for humanity's new solar system. The main characters of *Firefly* make their home on a cargo spaceship named *Serenity*.⁶ *Serenity* travels most often among the *Rim* planets. The positioning of River's new home in the vastness of space is significant because the damage done to her by the government is so great, she cannot heal and nurture her agency unless she has space to do so, and the outer space setting serves as a metaphoric platform for this idea. The *Rim* planets are far removed from the center of the system and offer harsh living conditions due to war, severe poverty, and sparse populations. Feminist theory offers a parallel construction of women's social location in patriarchal, substituting “center” and “margin” for “core” and “rim,” respectively, reinforcing the social and feminist commentary implicit in *Firefly*'s narrative.

A civil war over centralized versus de-centralized government (federal versus states' rights) was waged six years prior to the series' start and exacerbated the social

divide between the Core and Rim planets. The characterization of the civil war and depictions of Rim planets in *Firefly* suggest a historical corollary to post-Civil War America in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This corollary is significant for the time period it evokes and the questions of human rights—in terms of slavery, Native American rights, and the women’s suffrage movement—that dominated that era. The analogy to postbellum America also allows *Firefly* to offer a post-colonial critique of modern America, both in terms of post-captivity/colonization individuals like River and in terms of the Rim planets and populations (although none of these were indigenous) manipulated for the Alliance’s advancement.

Similarly, Max lives in a corrupt, dystopic future, albeit one much closer to viewers’ frame of reference. Airing in 2000, the series’ timeline places nine-year-old Max’s escape from government control in 2009, suggesting that the genetic technology used to create Max and the psychological training techniques she experiences were available in the viewers’ present. The show takes place in 2019-2021 Seattle, with flashbacks detailing Max’s escape from the genetic compound. The show’s choice of Seattle as a setting is significant, as co-creator and executive producer Charles H. Eglee notes: “Seattle is the perfect city” for *Dark Angel*’s setting because “Seattle is really the city of the future” (“Seattle”). Distressing the cityscape into a post-apocalyptic world in *Dark Angel*’s vision of the future reinforces the depths of the show’s dystopic vision. The calamitous event that precipitates *Dark Angel*’s dystopic society is a terrorist electromagnetic pulse bomb. This technology destroys electronic-based equipment and erases electronic records. The result of the *Pulse* is an economic crash for the U.S. and general

lawlessness and panic in Max's world. The U.S. is transformed "from superpower to third world country overnight" ("Heat"). To control the situation, the government institutes martial law, a circumstance still in existence ten full years after the collapse of the economy. Martial law opens the door for "Big Brother" tactics such as hyper-surveillance of public areas and checkpoints in and out of cities and their various sectors. While *Dark Angel* began airing in 2000, the dystopic future it presents is disturbingly easy for later viewers to imagine in a post-9/11 America. Creative differences between the show's production team and the Fox network contributed to the show's cancellation in 2002 (Crosby 160-61). Max's subversion of draconian governmental authority, however, and the threat she represented as a genetically-engineered, multiracial (both literally and metaphorically through her status as multispecies) heroine may also have contributed to the series' cancellation during a time period when American citizens willingly ceded rights and power to the government in the name of protection.

Dark Angel is also a U.S. 1930s Depression era analogous world, as James Cameron notes ("Seattle"), in which, a few individuals and families hoard their wealth, but many people are like Max, barely scraping by and living well below the poverty level. The difference between the historical model of the Great Depression and Max's post-Pulse world is the lack of New Deal intervention to right the economy in the latter. The key manifestation of social stratification in Max's world is socio-economic class, not racial identity or gender. However, the theme of those in positions of power and privilege wastefully using human life as a natural resource is repeated and complicated by the overlay of more contemporary historical comparisons, suggesting that such abuses of a

citizenry can occur in all time periods and economic locations. At the beginning of *Dark Angel*, for example, one of Max's neighbors and co-workers dies from a debilitating illness he acquired while serving in the U.S. military; further, the only medication for treating this fatal "Balkan War Syndrome," has been replaced with a placebo due to corporate greed—a thinly-veiled critique of the mistreatment of U.S. vets with Gulf War Syndrome ("Pilot"). This allusion serves to reinforce the "it could be happening now" implications of the technologies that lead to *Dark Angel*'s future vision of the United States.

Within these dystopic contexts, it is clear that neither River nor Max will find support from the larger society for their recovery from manipulation and government (ab)use. In order to successfully negotiate their identities and (re)achieve agency, each woman must rely on the support and assistance of a small social group: a family-community that will take her in and nurture her as an individual rather than use her as a commodity. Both River and Max have an initial family—River's biological family and Max's family of "siblings," other genetically-engineered children—and it is only with the aid of this family that each girl escapes government control. However, the price of escape is separation from and loss of that initial family. Only through integrating into new family-communities do River and Max find the symbiotic relationships necessary for them to heal and (re)gain agency. Eventually, each new family-community's support allows the women to grow into the heroic role. When each then loses the key member of her original family to death, she steps into the leadership position and uses her agency to return the family-community's protection.

Each series establishes the necessity of family in the heroine's escape from government control and her subsequent loss of family as initially defined. Viewers first meet River in *Firefly*'s pilot episode "Serenity." Kaylee (Jewel Staite), the ship's mechanic, has been shot and Simon, River's brother and a doctor, refuses to treat her unless the ship's captain, Mal Reynolds (Nathan Fillion), agrees to flee from coming government forces. At this point, the crew of Serenity does not know about River, for Simon boards the ship with her in a large luggage crate. Not knowing Simon's motivation is the protection of his psychologically traumatized and damaged sister, Mal sees only a selfish man with some unidentified agenda who would trade the crew's life for his own gain. Given Simon's high-class clothing and mannerisms, it is easy for Mal to equate Simon with the same Alliance officials who mistreat individuals, viewing them as a disposable means to an end rather than as ends in their own right. Mal's history as a soldier on the losing side of the system-wide civil war means he holds the Alliance and those who share their attitudes in contempt, and he can easily believe the worst of them. Once Mal gives in to Simon's demands and Simon uses his professional skills as a doctor to treat Kaylee, Mal determines to uncover Simon's secrets; he storms into the cargo bay and forcibly opens Simon's storage container. Mal peers into the case with a perplexed look on his face, and the camera angle shifts to looking down at the interior of the case from above, showing a nude girl, River, curled in a fetal position.

Inside the silver metal case, the dry ice vapors swirl, obscuring River's small, naked body. River sits up and looks around wildly, breathing heavily and emitting high-pitched fearful yelps, unable to form words. She leans forward, gripping the edge of the

shipping container and slides over the side headfirst like a child sliding out of its mother's womb. Once free, River collapses back in on herself, leaning against the shipping container. Simon rushes to his sister to calm her. She tries to tell him what was done to her, but her treatment by the government has left her without the ability to order words into coherent sentences. Simon reassures her, "They're gone. We're safe now." His use of the plural "we" reinforces his allegiance to River. She closes the distance between them, hugging the only family left to her. Mal demands, "What the hell is this?" and Simon replies, "*This* is my sister" (emphasis added). In Mal's query, the subject of the question—"this"—is the situation. Simon's response reframes Mal's inquiry, making River the subject of his response and positioning himself as an advocate for River, a voice who viewers can trust to tell her story accurately.

Simon's subsequent explanation to the crew of River's history, as well as flashbacks in later episodes, reveals that, while they have each other, both River and Simon have lost all other family and family-community support in the course of her rescue. In "Serenity," following River's symbolic birth into the crew community in the cargo bay, Simon narrates River's story for the rest of the crew as she is not yet able to do so. Simon explains that after River began schooling at an invitation-only, government-run academy, "I got a few letters at first, and then I didn't hear for months. Finally, I got a letter that made no sense... It was a code. It just said 'They're hurting us. Get me out.'" The language of her message clearly sets up that River must rely on her family to extract her from government control—although the government is hurting "us," River cannot

form community with the others like her for protection. Instead she turns to her family, begging them to rescue the singular “me.”

Unfortunately, of her family, only Simon believes her to be in danger and/or is willing to act on her request. Flashbacks in “Safe” show loving parents and a socio-economically privileged life for River and Simon Tam growing up. Yet, when Simon decodes River’s letter and brings this evidence to their parents, his mother (Isabella Hofmann) insists cheerfully, “Your sister is fine. It’s one of her silly games. You two are always playing.” Her response dismisses Simon’s concern for River, suggesting it should be as nonexistent as the secret message Mrs. Tam sees—through ignorance or willful refusal—in River’s letters. When Simon presses his point, Mrs. Tam loses her cheerful, dismissive demeanor. She warns, “This is paranoid. It’s stress. If they heard you talking like this at the hospital, it could affect your entire future.” In exasperated disbelief, Simon demands, “Who cares about my future?” His father (William Converse-Roberts) joins the conversation, saying in a deadly serious tone, “*You* should” (emphasis added). For the remainder of the scene, Simon is silent as his parents speak; all he can do is stare at them in disbelief. His mother continues, “You’re a surgeon in one of the best hospitals in Capital City, on your way to a major position, possibly even the medical elect. You’re going to throw all that away? Everything you’ve worked for your whole life?” Simon’s silence and his parents’ uniform refusal to listen to his concerns indicate that when his mother talks about the loss of *Simon’s* position and social standing, she is also speaking of the potential loss of the Tam family’s social standing. Notably, Mr. and Mrs. Tam’s selfish fear causes them to support their older, male child, sacrificing their younger,

female child for their own security—an arrangement that replays older social models that commodified women as family property to be sold (married) off in return for family status or monetary gain.

That the Tams' concern for social standing outweighs concern for their daughter is reinforced in a flashback scene in the same episode when Mr. Tam bails Simon out of jail after the younger man is arrested for being in a forbidden zone—where he was trying to find someone to help rescue River. “This is a slippery slope, young man,” Mr. Tam warns, “you have no idea how far down you can go, and you’re not taking us with you.... I won’t come for you again.” Mr. Tam’s words push Simon to choose—he can align himself with his parents, betraying River’s faith in her family, or he can choose River and join her in exile from their parents. Simon, of course, chooses River, giving up his privileged social status, his enviable job, his access to family money, and his home to rescue her.

Just as River must rely on Simon for rescue and both lose the rest of their family because of it, Max’s escape from government control is contingent upon a family she also loses. Max is introduced to viewers as a nine-year-old girl attempting to outrun her government captors. The scene opens on a close-up of sparkling white snow before a child’s bare foot breaks the pristine image. The child, clad only in a gray hospital gown, dashes across the screen and into a wooded area, obviously running from something. Helicopters buzz overhead and search lights trace the ground as the child sprints through the snow-covered forest. Max begins to speak in voiceover using the first-person perspective to narrate the scene: “The escape was not my idea. I mean, escape to what?”

We didn't know there was anything else" ("Pilot"). Although Max uses the first-person, individual "I" to deny authorship of the escape plan, she clearly situates herself within a larger whole when indicating group knowledge through the plural "we." She continues to run, evading men searching the forest on snowmobiles.

Young Max (Geneva Locke) enters a clearing and stops running. From behind a fallen tree, first one, then several, children clad in hospital gowns like the one Max is wearing pop up in a live-action dystopic reenactment of the Disney animated children's classic *Snow White* when the exiled princess first meets the woodland creatures who will aid her. Max smiles slightly—she has found her "we"—and she quickly moves to join them, hopping over the log and kneeling down in line with the other children. They wait in silence as a helicopter prowls above, and then another child appears from the woods. She too, quickly joins the group and is greeted with hands clasped in glad greeting and smiles. One of the group, a blond boy, rises and positions himself in front of the others, directing them through military hand signals. On his command, the others begin moving off in different directions in small groups. Max's voice names him as she explains, "It was Zack who said we had to leave, so I guess he saved my life." As young Zack (Chris Lazar) gives direction to Max and another girl, Max shakes her head in disagreement and narrates, "I didn't think we should separate," making clear the value Max places on the community she shares with the other children. Zack frowns and repeats his hand-signal commands before Max and the other girl run off-screen together. Adult Max acknowledges the tactical success of Zack's plan in voice-over, lamenting, "I never got a chance to thank him."

The scene shifts to a compound that resembles a prison with its tall watchtowers, armed sniper guards and roaming searchlights. Soldiers dressed all in black mill around the outside and two move through the shot, dragging another child. This child is struggling against his captors and has a metal apparatus covering his mouth. The metal serves to muzzle the child but also resembles a pacifier, suggesting the infantilized view the adults have of these children. A middle-aged man, Lydecker (John Savage), commands the soldiers: “Find them. All of them. I want you to capture if you can. But if any of them make it to the perimeter, you are to terminate... shoot them.” Although Lydecker looks regretful at having given this order, his language and the soldiers’ treatment of the children suggest his regret is for the loss of resources the children presumably represent rather than the loss of human life. Like River, Max and the other children are a natural resource to be used by others rather than autonomous individuals in their own right.

As she flees, Max falls through ice into a lake. Viewers expect her to drown, but she peers calmly up as she hides from her pursuers. She blinks and the occasional small bubble escapes her lips, making clear that she is not dead; rather she waits patiently in the freezing water. The act of waiting beneath the water’s surface, neither drowning nor freezing, highlights Max’s superhuman abilities and clues viewers in as to why Lydecker fears the children’s escape. The cracked ice that covers her face signals that she is damaged yet not wholly broken—she will survive. The scene fades from nine-year-old Max to nineteen-year-old Max, but whereas young Max’s face conveyed patience, teenage Max’s face reflects desolation and loneliness, immediately indicating to viewers

that the escape did cost her that family-community—even before she makes such information clear verbally: “The hardest part is not knowing if any of them made it. But if I knew for sure I was the only one left, it would be worse... Still I hope that they’re out there somewhere and that they’re okay.” Her words here also foreground—as a central character trait—her longing to reunite her lost family.

The flashbacks following the opening sequence make clear that Max’s conceptualization of the other children is that of a family. They show the children training and learning together. As the children sit in a classroom, they are bombarded with projected images of military tactics and strategies interspersed with slides highlighting key terms: “Discipline,” reads one slide; “Duty,” says the next; and then “Teamwork.” Viewers see shots of Max watching these slides intercut with images of the children marching down halls, running on treadmills, and practicing martial arts—always in formation with each child part of the larger group organism. It is clear that the government program intends to create super-soldiers whose loyalty is to the government, whose conditioning with traits like teamwork and duty serve to make them more effective weapons. Indirectly, however, the training also creates the kind of family-community bond that allows Max and her siblings to defy their captors and successfully escape.

Following their escape from government control and the loss of their initial family units, both River and Max find new family-communities which take them in, nurture them, and allow them to grow into the heroic role. In River’s case, her embrace by the new community is demonstrated first by the family-community claiming her and second accepting her as she is, a status that allows her to spread her wings and try out the heroic

role before fully taking it on. When Simon is first explaining River's story to Serenity's crew, the reactions of the captain, Mal, and the interactions of the other crew members make clear that they are a family-community. Mal, still angry at Simon over withholding treatment for the wounded Kaylee in order to manipulate him, tells Simon, "You heaped a world of trouble on me and mine." His language identifies the ship's crew as a united group; an attack on one is an attack on all. Mal threatens to execute Simon by tossing him out an airlock into the vacuum of space if Kaylee does not recover. When the pilot, Wash (Alan Tudyk), asks, "Can we maybe vote on the whole murdering people issue?" Mal replies, "We don't vote on my ship because my ship is not the rutting town hall!"

Although Mal attempts to present himself here as holding all the power in the community, the crew's reactions to this declaration quickly belie Mal's proclamation. The other crew members are uncomfortable with this declaration, and several voices ring out: "This is insanity!"; "I happen to think we're a ways beyond that now, sir"; "I'm not going to sit by while there's killing here"; and "We're going to talk this through, yes?" all overlapping one another. The crew's immediate rejection of the top-down command structure shows that they are in a community in which all feel they can and should voice their opinion.

While River and Simon have not yet been accepted into this family-community, they soon will be. In "Safe," rural "hillfolk" kidnap Simon and River on an outpost moon because their community is in need of a doctor. When River demonstrates her psychic abilities and starts revealing secrets the hillfolk would rather remain hidden, they decry her as a witch and set about to burn her at the stake. As they move to light the wood,

Serenity descends from the sky, its cargo bay door open and Jayne hanging out with a sniper rifle pointed at the crowd. Mal and Serenity's first officer Zoe (Gina Torres) approach on foot and verbally disrupt the proceedings. "Sorry to interrupt," Mal says, his demeanor entirely unapologetic in contrast to his words. "Y'all got something that belongs to us, and we'd like it back." The town leader (Gary Werntz) protests, "This is a holy cleansing. You cannot think to thwart God's will," drawing on traditional religious rhetoric to justify his attempts to control River's prying psychic mind and silence her body that speaks secrets. Mal and Zoe move to stand between the townsfolk and the stake, indicating their protection of River and Simon, and Mal commands, "Cut her down." "The girl is a witch," the leader objects. "Yeah, but she's *our* witch," Mal replies, as he cocks his rifle and sights down on the leader, "So cut her the hell down" (emphasis added). Simon's medical skills are the commodity for which the rural community abducted him, and their actions suggest they are unlikely to understand or respect a philosophy that values all individuals, regardless of valuable skill set. Mal's language of ownership, then, is a strategic rhetorical choice, as is his later use of the possessive pronoun when he calls River "our witch." In this case, though, the use of the possessive pronoun is balanced against his reclamation of the negative term, reinforcing River's position as a member of Serenity's family-community and their acceptance of her, psychic abilities, mental instability, and all.

River's acceptance into Serenity's family-community also allows her to start practicing the heroic role. In "War Stories," her acceptance is demonstrated through her play with Kaylee. Next to River, Kaylee is the youngest crewmember in her early

twenties, and her cheery, naïve outlook on life makes her a fitting companion for River. In the episode's beginning, they are playing a game of keep away wherein River has taken Kaylee's apple and Kaylee is chasing River throughout the ship while the two laugh. When Kaylee finally "catches" River in the dining area, she takes back the apple and holds it aloft as a trophy, proclaiming "No power in the [uni]verse can stop me." The game is clearly one of mutual affection. Zoe and Wash look on; their indulgent smiles also indicate River's acceptance by the crew. Later in the episode, the crew has to mount an attack on a space station to rescue the captain. Everyone on board, with the exception of River, is given a job. Although they have accepted River into their community, her post-traumatic instabilities mean that she cannot be given a role in the martial assault on the space station. She and Kaylee remain on the ship, and Kaylee is charged with protecting the airlock entrance to Serenity, the last line of defense for the ship. She freezes up, frightened of shooting, and retreats into the cargo bay. River joins her and gently takes the gun from her hands. River stands and fires three times without looking; all her shots are accurate and the invading forces fall. As Kaylee looks at River in shock, the younger woman smiles triumphantly and repeats Kaylee's earlier line: "No power in the 'verse can stop me." Kaylee is disturbed by River's innocent, gleeful smile and repetition of Kaylee's earlier comment because River's response to her shooting of the enemy forces implies a lack of understanding of the violence of her actions. While River may not understand the ethical implications of taking human life, however, her actions are no different from those of anyone else in the crew. River acts in protection of her acquired family-community, although she is not yet fully cognizant of her actions.

Kaylee may not recognize it as such, but the crew's acceptance of River's non-normative mental state has given River the confidence to act in Kaylee's defense, to try on the heroic role, albeit momentarily.

Like River's acceptance into the family-community of Serenity, by the time *Dark Angel* starts, ten years following Max's escape, Max has clearly also been accepted into a surrogate community, although she still longs to find the other children who escaped and re-form that family. In 2019 Seattle, she works for a bike messenger service called Jam Pony. Max and the other employees are friends both inside and outside of work, and when one gets in trouble, the others work together to help the one in need. In the episode "C.R.E.A.M." one of the bike messengers, Sketchy (Richard Gunn), gets himself in trouble working as a courier for organized crime when he loses a package of \$15,000. Both Max and another bike messenger, Original Cindy (Valarie Rae Miller), hold a low opinion of Sketchy's choice to work for the gangsters. The two women, nonetheless, team up to help Sketchy raise the money needed to save his life, for as much as they disapprove of his actions, he is still a member of their community and is thus entitled to the support that comes with that membership. The women dress up in skimpy clothing and go to an illegal casino, playing the part of dumb girls who just got off work at a local strip club. The image they present plays into the casino owners' assumptions about the women's (lack of) intelligence and ability to strategize, while gaining the two an invitation to a private back room to play poker. The women reinforce the men's assumptions about female (lack of) intelligence through strategic comments and by

generally playing the ditz. Even though their performance of helpless, dumb, sexually-available femininity is grossly exaggerated, the men are still taken in.

The women skillfully combine their performance of dumbness with actions and language designed to draw attention to their bodies. In response, the male bouncers and club management see the women only as sex objects, and therefore incapable of exerting the kind of agency that would make them a threat to the casino. This performance creates space for Original Cindy and Max to manipulate the men and win the money Sketchy needs. At the back-room poker table, Max and Original Cindy proceed to lose a few hands while throwing out comments like Max's "I'm just remembering now. This is that really confusing game with all those different cards. Which is probably why I always end up with no clothes on" and both women giggling nearly constantly. Then, Max uses her genetically-enhanced abilities to stack the deck, winning all the money they need.

While this is not the first time viewers have seen Max use her sexuality to manipulate criminal men, Original Cindy's participation in this scene is fascinating for the community-centered ethos it shows that the women share and because of Original Cindy's clearly established sexual identity as a lesbian. Here, her performance of heterosexuality is as affected as her and Max's performances as dumb girls. By playing into the male-centered heterosexual fantasy, the two women retain the ultimate power in the room and achieve their ends, subverting the advantage the men believe they have due to their chauvinistic perspectives.

Max's acceptance into the Jam Pony community and the community-centered support ethos that allegiance brings prepares Max to take on a more overtly heroic role

when encouraged to do so by Logan. Born into a wealthy family that retained much of its power and privilege following the economic crash, Logan is an idealist who believes his position of privilege should be used to help others and effect change in his dystopian society. Max initially describes him as an “underground cyber-journalist crusader” (“Heat”), who collects proof of corruption and conspiracy then hacks into the government controlled television airwaves, exposing specific stories of corruption in short news bulletins. At first, Max is reluctant to help Logan through her enhanced abilities because she fears drawing government attention. He barter with her, trading assistance in finding the other escaped children for Max’s aid with tasks needing (enhanced) physical ability (Logan is confined to a wheelchair for much of the series due to an injury sustained in the pilot episode). Over time, however, Max comes to recognize that Logan’s commitment to social justice is a more viable prospect for opposing the injustices faced by the community in which she now resides. Instead of giving up on her former community, she moves toward forming a new family-community in which she can merge her genetically-manipulated family members with non-genetically crafted beings, offering a synthesis of the disparate communities between which she is pulled.

When Max and Zack are reunited, Max believes that her sibling will share her joy at the thought of reunion. She is quite taken aback, then, when Zack (William Gregory Lee) clearly favors the idea of separation for protection over the idea of valuing family and community (“411 on the DL”). When Max demands he share information on the other escaped children because “They’re my family!” Zack adopts the voice of patriarchal authority and coldly explains his refusal: “They’re soldiers. And so are you.

The only person you can rely on, Max, is yourself. Everything else is just a lie. It's phony sentimentality, and it will get you killed." While Zack's motivation is the safety of all, his adoption of patriarchal government rhetoric that devalues emotion separates him from Max and her community-centered drive. Zack embraces the notion of rugged individualism which is so much a part of the tenets of the American Dream and the quest for fame, while Max believes the reunion of her original family-community will make them all stronger. The conflict with Zack becomes a significant turning point for both of them. It sets Max on the path to recognizing and embracing her role as community-centered heroine. It also prompts a shift in Zack's outlook that eventually causes him to follow Max's example and sacrifice himself in support of her community-centered vision. In contrast, Max's transition into working alongside Logan to fight corruption rather than working for him is not centered in one moment. Her perception gradually shifts to seeing herself as operating heroically; with this shift comes a move away from looking to another for guidance and direction and toward exerting agency to follow her own vision of community. The exchange with Zack, however, represents a key moment in her development; by pushing her away from her original community, he destroys the idealized perception of him she held in her memories. That destruction is necessary for Max to allow another family-community to fully take the place her original one held in her heart, even though that first family-community was lost to her several years before.

The third step in the achievement of a fully symbiotic relationship between River and Max and their respective communities is the maturation of the women into the full heroic position. For both, this step is predicated on the final loss of the key figure in the

original family and a move by the heroine to fill that leadership role. For River, this maturation process is swift and sharply defined, encapsulated in one key moment in *Firefly*'s feature film sequel *Serenity*. This moment occurs when the crew of *Serenity* is under attack by space-dwelling boogiemens known as *Reavers*. Previously in the film, the crew has discovered an abandoned planet, Miranda, the site of government-sponsored human experiments gone horribly wrong—genocide that was subsequently covered up but which River psychically learned about during her time as a captive. In addition to killing millions on Miranda, the drug experiment also caused a small portion of the population to become psychotically aggressive, creating the Reavers. Prior to this discovery, no one knows the Reavers' origins, but they are widely feared for the savage brutality with which they attack Rim travelers.⁷ Upon viewing a holographic recoding that reveals the Reavers' genesis, "the secret that burned up River Tam's brain" is finally revealed (*Serenity*). River vomits, a physical expelling of the secret—and the sickness it represents—something she has internalized for far too long. Although the others are emotionally-sickened by this knowledge, River's physical illness here marks a turning point in her storyline. From this moment forward, she is no longer randomly violent; she can instead channel her training and abilities into a heroic ethos. Rhonda V. Wilcox argues that, for River, "discovering the truth about the shaping of her consciousness [allows] her to reclaim her consciousness" ("I Do Not" 161). That reclamation of consciousness is an important final step for River's full recovery of the agency she held prior to being experimented upon, something she could not have achieved without the support of her family-community on *Serenity*.

The ship and crew must travel through Reaver territory to learn about Miranda, and they are subsequently pursued by Reavers when they travel to a communications station to expose the government's actions. While the captain seeks out the communications terminal within the station, the rest of the crew attempts to hold off the Reavers' attacking forces, acknowledging that they may be sacrificing themselves in the process but agreeing that transmission of the message—exposure of the depths of the government's corruption—is worth the sacrifice. While Mal completes his task, the crew continues to display a community-centered ethos as it holds off the Reaver forces. During the fight sequence, various crew members repeatedly move to one another's aid, becoming injured due to leaving cover so they may assist their fellow family-community members. When they retreat past a set of blast doors, the doors stick while closing, leaving them exposed. Even though she has been gravely injured and is the least experienced fighter, Kaylee volunteers that she can close the doors, but only from the other side. Her offer is dismissed because such would be a suicide mission—the community lives or dies together. As the others debate their defense, Simon realizes he left his medical bag in the previous room and does not have the drugs to treat Kaylee. He stands as if to go retrieve the bag and is shot in the stomach. This moment is key, and the cinematography reinforces its importance. Simon falls backward in slow motion, his movement intercut with River's face contorting in horrified surprise. Even though he can barely talk, Simon starts giving directions about which drugs to give Kaylee, again modeling the crew's community-centered ethos that has nurtured River. Each crew member selflessly works to aid the others, even as he/she lies dying.

Realizing he will soon die, Simon calls for River, apologizing to her. The lights go out in the crew's section and they are cast into darkness; the continuing sounds of fighting become muted on the audio track, forcing viewers to see Simon's death through River's perspective—as the most important thing in the room. “I hate to leave,” he whispers regretfully, and River assures him, “You won't. You take care of me, Simon. You've always taken care of me.” She then stands, the camera capturing her rising into the frame with confidence and determination, a slip of a girl suddenly filled with power and purpose. The music swells and the lighting returns, bathing River in a warm glow. She says simply, “My turn,” before running and diving into the room full of Reavers. She throws the needed medical bag back through the opening and closes the blast doors, leaving the crew protected but locking herself in with the overwhelming Reaver force. That Simon does not end up dying is irrelevant; River's perception that he is dying is what motivates her actions. In a gruesome, blood-filled ballet, River dispatches the Reavers. In the end, while her opponents lie dead around her, River is left standing, covered in blood like a macabre phoenix born anew. Most significant about this scene is the fact that when River gains agency over her violent abilities, her chosen course of action demonstrates a community-centered motivation. She draws on the examples set before her and completes the symbiotic circle by protecting the community that protected her and that would protect other innocents like her. Following this turning point, River is able to interact with the others lucidly, a sharp contrast to her inability to gain full agency over her tortured body and mind prior to the battle.

Unlike River's journey, which culminates in the fight scene in *Serenity* described above, Max's maturation and transformation into the fully heroic role is more gradual, happening in a few key moments that are spread out over the series. The loss of the key figure in the original community—Zack—comes at the end of the first season (“...And Jesus Brought a Casserole”). Although his refusal to share Max's community-centered vision and reunite their family in “411 on the DL” pushes Max to solidifying her commitment to a family-community-driven ethos, Zack's death is necessary to fully transform Max into the community-centered heroine. In “...And Jesus Brought a Casserole,” Max has been recaptured by the government and shot in the heart; she will not survive without a transplant. The catch is that her body can only accept a transplant from another genetically-engineered person. Zack shoots himself in the head to provide Max the heart she needs, recognizing her approach to community-centered heroism is superior to his more traditional individualistic practices. Whereas his approach focused on survival of individuals at the cost of the community, Max's vision values both. Max is unconscious at the time of Zack's death, but once she learns of his sacrifice, she takes his lesson to heart. Significantly, like River, Max must lose the key figure in her original family-community, her older brother. Only by realizing that it is her turn to lead is Max fully prepared to become the community-centered cult heroine.

Max begins the second season still a prisoner of the government, but one more emotionally mature, and by the episode's end, she has destroyed the compound, freeing herself and all the other *transgenics*, as they are known, who are trapped there (“Designate This”). This act marks her first step toward becoming a leader within the

transgenic community. Notably, Max does not just facilitate her own escape, but the freedom of all individuals being trained and experimented upon in the compound. Public awareness of the transgenic population leads to fear and mob mentality—a situation that grows more tense throughout the course of the season. Max recognizes that her role in destroying the government compound had the added outcome of creating a community of Othered individuals. Max's recognition of both her contributions to the creation of this situation and her ability to serve as a community-centered heroine mark her irrevocable transformation into the heroic role; as the transgenic community once supported and protected her, she now leads it in its own support and protection.

Her full maturation into the community-centered heroic role is shown in a scene in the series' finale, "Freak Nation," when her two post-government control communities—the transgenic community and Jam Pony—collide. In the episode, a group of transgenics come under siege inside the Jam Pony offices. Although most of the other employees, who are ostensibly hostages in this situation, are initially surprised and frightened to learn about Max and a few other co-workers' status as transgenic, by the end of the siege, most of the "ordinary" employees have come to recognize that the community of transgenics Max leads is not so different from their own, in part because of Max's previous contributions to and membership within their work community. Notably, when tensions are first high, it is Original Cindy who defuses the situation by stepping between Jam Pony's manager and one of the transgenics, even though both men are larger than she is, and she does not have super strength to defuse the situation. Instead, she verbally identifies her allegiances: "What I am is a friend to Max... and the rest of

[the transgenics].” Significantly, she speaks with her back to the transgenic, showing that the threat she perceives in this situation will come from non-enhanced humans acting out of fear rather than the “monstrous” transgenics. When Normal (J.C. MacKenzie), the manager, suggests that he has no problem with the transgenics being hurt (as a means of getting himself out of the situation), Original Cindy again asserts herself as an ally to the transgenic community: “Well, I do. And I’m guessing so does anyone else here who’s down with my girl [Max].” By asserting her allegiance to Max and Max’s community, Original Cindy, a community leader in her own right among the bike messengers, helps illuminate for the others that their fears are groundless. In fact, when the transgenics escape to a more secure position, Original Cindy and Sketchy go with them and join Max’s new community (as does Logan who joined the group to aid Max during the siege). The choice of these three “ordinaries” to visibly align themselves with a community of Others under siege is a clear testament to their loyalty to the type of community-centered individual and leader Max has become through her symbiotic exchanges with various communities and heroic individuals, ranging from her transgenic siblings, especially Zack; to the Jam Pony work community; to Logan and his network of journalistic freedom fighters. As is the case with River, Max’s transformation into leader of the transgenic/ally family-community completes the symbiotic circle, allowing her to identify with and embrace the community-centered heroic role even as it teaches all community members the give-and-take necessary for a community to successfully function through symbiosis.

Drawing on the examples set by the family-communities which allow them to grow, River and Max learn to (re)claim heroic agency, using their weaponized capacities in a community-centric manner. This three step process reveals a symbiotic function between the heroic girl and her family-community that contrasts sharply with the parasitic relationship she was subject to previously when the government situated her as a body for its control and use. This trajectory of maturation occurs, in part, because of the dystopic, corrupt societies within which each girl lives—societies that discarded River’s and Max’s autonomy and individual sovereignty for their own gain—and the smaller family-communities each girl is adopted into following her escape from government control. Ultimately, the maturation and transformations of River’s and Max’s characters demonstrate a break from the common cult television heroine model; although both girls become full-fledged cult heroines, they start off much less so and only through engaging in a symbiotic relationship with their family-communities do they come to be community-centered cult heroines.

Notes

¹ In contrast, Xena is introduced to viewers as a full adult; Gabrielle is a teenager; and Buffy and Veronica Mars begin their stories aged sixteen and seventeen, respectively. All of these girls/women are significantly more adult than River or Max were when their governments first began manipulating their bodies. Moreover, Buffy’s character was initially a high school senior in the pre-series feature film that introduced the character; her age was reconceived for the purposes of the television show, but she still begins the series as an independent young woman rather than the girl that River was when she went away to the academy, just on the cusp of young womanhood.

² Jayne’s attempts to betray Simon and River for the reward money later in the episode raises questions about whether River’s attack was random or a psychically-driven, preemptive act of revenge for the betrayal Jayne was planning.

³ It is important to note that I speak here of cult heroines cast in the central heroic role on American television series that saw a measure of success. A number of series

featuring cult heroines feature other strong, heroic women of color, but they are not the central character. See *Firefly*'s Zoe (Gina Torres) or *Buffy*'s Kendra (Bianca Lawson), for example. Also, a number of less successful or non-American cult heroine-centered series attempted to present a woman of color in the central heroic role. See *She Spies*' Shane (Natashia Williams, 2002); *Cleopatra 2525*'s Helen (Gina Torres, 2002); and *Relic Hunter*'s Sydney (Tia Carrere, 1999-2002). These series' lack of mainstream success is evidenced by short runs or difficulties escaping their original Canadian market, in the case of *Relic Hunter*. Although *Firefly* had a short television run (thirteen episodes), the production of the sequel feature film *Serenity* and *Firefly*'s legendary post-broadcast cult status show it to be far more successful. The lack of success for these other shows suggests a troubling trend in terms of the marketability of a heroine constructed as racial/ethnically Other.

⁴ This connection to Che Guevara is made even more explicit when, in an early episode, Max's hero-partner Logan wears a t-shirt displaying Che Guevara's name and image, suggesting his own role as revolutionary.

⁵ Marano notes that he stands behind this claim as of 2007, when his essay was published, acknowledging the possibility for weaponized women in future Whedon projects to surpass River's example. Indeed, Whedon's Echo (Eliza Dushku), the central character/cult heroine of *Dollhouse* (2009-2010), is crafted in the same weaponized-woman motif as a biological weapon.

⁶ There are multiple uses of "Serenity" in the *Firefly* creative universe. In this manuscript, I follow standard practice in *Firefly* and *Serenity* scholarship, using Serenity (no special formatting) to refer to the ship, "Serenity" (in quotation marks) to denote to the episode of that name, and *Serenity* (italicized) to identify the feature film sequel to *Firefly*.

⁷ The implied allegory comparing the Reavers to nineteenth-century conceptualizations of American Indians has been the source of much scholarly debate. Specifically, see J. Douglas Rabb and J. Michael Richardson's "Reavers and Redskins: Creating the Frontier Savage" and Agnes B. Curry's "'We Don't Say 'Indian'': On the Paradoxical Construction of the Reavers."

CHAPTER FOUR

“Are We Working Together Now?”:

Collaborative Activism and Questions of Genre in *Veronica Mars*

The first season of *Veronica Mars* ends with Veronica and Lilly, her best friend, sunbathing in a pool on inflated lounge chairs surrounded by water lilies. In this moment, the world is beautiful and bright for these teenage girls. Soft, wistful music underscores the scene and the lighting gives it a soft glow. The two girls are happy, safe, and far removed from any possible troubles. In short, each girl enjoys a happy ending. This idyllic image, however, is bittersweet. It is a dream sequence to highlight the serenity Veronica now feels as a result of her successful investigation and ultimate identification of her best friend’s murderer (“Leave it to Beaver”). The scene is a capstone to the season’s driving narrative arc that utilizes flashbacks to prove Veronica’s insight and resourcefulness as a junior investigator in her high school community, as well as Veronica’s commitment to exposing corrupt behavior in her community-at-large.

Veronica Mars (2004-2007) stars Kristen Bell as the title character. Set in the fictional town “without a middle class” of Neptune, California, Neptune High School is a location populated with students whose “parents are either millionaires or [whose] parents work for millionaires” (“Pilot”). The series’ over-arching story centers on Veronica Mars, a high school junior and private eye, who learns investigative skills from her father, Keith Mars (Enrico Colantoni), the former County Sherriff turned Private Investigator. Veronica’s first big case involves her search for the murderer of her friend

Lilly (Amanda Seyfried), a tragedy that “was on the cover of *People* magazine, [and] made *Entertainment Tonight*.” During his investigation, Sheriff Mars suspects Lilly’s father, Jake Kane (Kyle Secor), much to the dismay of Neptune. Although Keith is right in suspecting Kane—believing his son killed his daughter in an epileptic fit, Kane tampered with evidence and even pays another man to confess to the murder—the depth of the town’s anger results in the recall of Keith Mars as County Sheriff. As a result, the Mars family loses its social status in the community. “Justice” in Neptune is often influenced by public opinion and social power, as Veronica learns over and over again throughout the show. Through flashbacks and voiceovers, viewers learn that Veronica was once the epitome of a happy, carefree, popular teenager. A series of events, however, has chipped away at her person and/or psyche: the murder of her best friend; the recall of her father from his elected position; Mrs. Mars’ addiction to alcohol, which drove her to abandon her husband and daughter; the break-up of Veronica’s first love without explanation; ostracization from the popular high school crowd; her drugging and rape at a school party; and the rude dismissal she receives from the new sheriff when she reports the assault. At the start of the series, Veronica, then, is a hardened young woman with a cynical worldview and a biting wit. Over the course of the series, Veronica uses the skills she learned from her PI father to solve mysteries and (attempt to) enact justice when traditional systems fail. By the end of the first season, Veronica’s determination and loyalty to her murdered friend lead her to uncover the identity of Lilly’s killer. The show’s creative team’s choice to close this storyline with the image of Veronica and Lilly sunbathing suggests that Veronica can rest, since, through her skills as an investigator,

she has restored the world to the order that existed prior to Lilly's death; the scene is closure and acceptance of the loss of her friend.

The closing image of "Leave It to Beaver" stands in sharp contrast to the final imagery of the third and last season. This comparison is particularly illustrative of the series' larger message about Veronica's version of community-centered heroism. By the third season finale, "The Bitch is Back," Veronica has learned some hard lessons about the realities of life: namely that solving the mystery does not always bring resolution and that justice does not always triumph. Whereas the first season ends with a fantasy dream sequence, that moment is nothing more than a dream. After her losses and victimization, Veronica can never again be the naïve girl who could think a peaceful sunny day means the world is just and life is fair. In the series' conclusion, Veronica has cast her vote in the country sheriff election; her father, Keith, is a candidate for the position, and his re-election would right Veronica's world, allowing the Mars family's life to come full-circle through the restoration of that which was lost during the investigation of Lilly's murder. Keith is the best man for the job, but political maneuverings on the part of Lilly's father crush his chances. As a software mogul who employs a large portion of the town's working class population, Jake Kane is one of Neptune's leading citizens, a social status that contributed to Keith's recall from office and which gives Kane the community authority to effectively undermine Keith's re-election hopes. In many ways, as the episode title "The Bitch is Back" suggests, the series ends where it began—with Veronica angry at injustice and committed to opposing corrupted dominant power structures. Veronica walks out of the polling location into a gray, dismal day, an image in sharp

contrast with expectations of both sunny Southern California and the idyllic, over-exposed pool-side fantasy that concluded the first season. Where that was warm, this scene is cold and dismal. That “sunny” moment offered closure and peace, but the harsh reality of this scene makes known that the good guys do not always win. Taken together, these two endings demonstrate the highs and lows in the various outcomes of Veronica’s efforts to enact justice in her community and make clear that her efforts are still needed.

Veronica’s track record is complex and muddy. She always solves mysteries; however, all too often, her efforts do not translate into justice carried out by traditional societal means *especially* when the stakes are highest. Juries acquit murderers because they are charismatic, good-looking movie stars. Dishonest men with petty agendas are elected to office instead of honest individuals who would serve the public. Outcomes of justice are rarely clear cut, and Veronica and viewers come to realize that, like viewers’ own world, Veronica’s world is itself murky. The concept of an easy and obviously delineated heroic success is as much a fantasy as the image of Veronica sunbathing with Lilly. Further, while Veronica is instrumental in uncovering the key information to solve big mysteries, she must rely on a collaborative effort to survive her moments of discovery and make her findings known.

At first blush, Veronica Mars stands apart from the other figures in this study because her world, while containing exaggerated elements, is not one set in fantasy. She does not oppose gods or goddesses, vampires, demons, or other mythical creatures. The authority figures of Veronica’s community are corrupt police officers and politicians; yet, their corrupt exploits are mundane compared to the Mayor’s transformation into a giant

snake-demon at Buffy's high school graduation or the scientific or psychological experimentation performed on River and Max. In the world of *Veronica Mars*, murder looms large as desperate people kill to protect personal secrets. Sexual violence and abuse go unchecked and white collar crime is rampant. Such offenses keep the heroine in business. Unlike Xena, Buffy, River, and Max, though, Veronica's primary weapons are her intelligence and ability to piece together evidence to expose secrets; rarely does she physically engage in violence. Veronica is small in stature like many of her cult heroine counterparts. Yet, unlike her heroic contemporaries, no mystical force has granted her extraordinary strength and power. In situations of physical violence, bigger and/or well-armed opponents quickly gain the upper hand, forcing Veronica to rely on others for her physical safety and rescue. This pattern enhances *Veronica Mars*' vision of collaborative community-centered heroism even as it undermines traditional conceptualizations of the cult heroine.

This chapter is concerned with questions of genre. Television series, films, and other visual cultures that receive cult attention are most often set within the fantasy or science fiction genres. "Cult" simply indicates a popular culture artifact with a strong fan following, and any popular text or subculture could inspire such devotion. Many sporting teams and reality television series have followings as intense and dedicated as the fanbase for *Star Trek*, for example. Within film and television, however, the term "cult" has become synonymous most often with a genre setting rooted in the extraordinary (fantasy, science fiction, horror, etc.) because genre-based narratives provide fantastical fictional worlds in which viewers' "real-life" problems can be explored and resolved via means

not available in non-fantastical settings, as Christine Jarvis explains (258). It is this connotation that challenges our understanding of *Veronica Mars* as cult, even as the show's fanbase supports such a label. Following *Veronica Mars*' second season, fans banded together to hire a plane to fly over CW offices (the network on which *Veronica Mars* aired) with a banner reading "Renew *Veronica Mars*." Similarly, after the third season, a grassroots fan campaign was waged to send Mars Bars candy bars and marshmallows to CW network offices (Veronica refers to herself as a "marshmallow" in the series' pilot). Such fan communities live on via the internet still in 2010, three years following the show's cancellation, and are centered around lobbying for a *Veronica Mars* movie. Even though *Veronica Mars* is set outside of the genres of fantasy, horror, or science fiction, Veronica is clearly a cult television heroine, as evidenced by dedicated fan efforts during and following the show's run. Rather than being a detriment, however, this liminal genre positioning allows the show to offer commentary on justice and female heroism more directly translatable and applicable to viewers' lived experiences. The complex construction of Veronica's collaborative practices to make truths public in the major story arcs directly models community-building activist strategies viewers could easily adopt without filtering them out of fantastical settings such as Xena's ancient Greece or Buffy's monster-filled Sunnydale.

However, *Veronica Mars* is not without ties to specialized genres. Specifically, *Veronica Mars* draws heavily on detective noir, as well as on vigilante traditions from the Western, teen-angst and coming-of-age narratives, and, of course, the community-centered cult television heroine genre (comparisons of *Veronica Mars* to *Buffy* are

especially abundant, for example). In fact, much of the limited critical attention that has been paid to *Veronica Mars* thus far focuses on the genre constructions of the series. For example, Amanda Ann Klein suggests, “[*Veronica Mars*]’ incessant focus on location, borders, and who lives in what zip code... places the series... firmly within the long, rich tradition of the film noir” (83). Similarly, Evelyn Vaughn calls the series “neo-noir” (36), suggesting a new, updated vision of noir traditions, and Lani Diane Rich identifies a genre-blending practice that produces “camp noir” (10), arguing that the show combines camp aesthetics’ reliance on “over-the-top storytelling with a hint of kitsch that’s not even trying for reality” (10) with traditional noir elements. Chris McCubbin offers the more complicated observation that “*Veronica Mars* blends hard-boiled detective fiction and film noir, where everything is corrupt and fundamentally hopeless, with the family drama/coming-of-age story, which is wholesome and intrinsically hopeful” (140). Regardless of what other genre-based elements one identifies within the series, the underlying common denominator is clearly noir, defined by Rich as “storytelling with a dark edge” (11) and is visually identifiable through use of dark settings that contrast corruption (“darkness”) of plot or character with bright, beautiful locations or lifestyles. Further solidifying this genre location, of course, is the fact that Veronica and her father Keith work as detectives. McCubbin notes that the genre of film noir and the hard-boiled detective figure are historically inseparable in visual media and culture.

In fact, one other defining element of noir is the need for vigilante forms of justice, a role that Veronica assumes as she recognizes that if she does not, it is likely no one else in her community will—a lesson she learns the hard way when Sheriff Lamb

sneers at her report of being raped, and one which is continually reinforced by her own experiences and the fact that her peers turn to her for help rather than other formal authority figures. This is an element of the series that leads to its eventual construction of heroism as collaborative. Kristen Kidder suggests that Veronica as noir hero is one step removed from the heroic status Veronica's sister community-centered television heroines enjoy when she asserts Veronica isn't "exactly [a] superhero" but that she and Keith Mars "are the champions of normalcy, the characters charged with restoring moral order to their undeniably corrupt environment" (126). By charging Veronica (and her father) with the responsibility of serving as the voice of justice, the show elevates Veronica from teen protagonist to cult heroine who must fill the justice-shaped hole left by ineffectual or corrupt structures of social authority. As Kidder describes it, Veronica's "style leans strongly toward a reliance on vigilante justice, the kind of work where the hero famously takes the law into his or her own hands against the perceived insufficiencies of established authority" (126). In fact, this commitment to justice by any means necessary, also helps situate Veronica within the hard-boiled detective traditions so often found in noir, while maintaining Veronica's position as a uniquely American figure. As Vaughn explains:

The American hard-boiled detective, in contrast to the British, [is] tough, poor, urban, gritty, rebellious, and adamantly independent. Basically? American. We're a country that came into existence through rebellion and guerilla fighting. A country of rugged individualism. A country where

what you can do is (allegedly) more important than who you are or how much money you have or what class you're born into. (37)

Indeed, Veronica would very much like to believe that rugged individualism and equal opportunity and access can lead anyone to achieve success. She also believes that social authority should be used to empower rather than abuse community members. All too often, though, she has witnessed the wealthy perpetrating injustice or authority figures turning a blind eye to corruption in Neptune simply because there is no one to stand in their way.

Veronica is not just any vigilante justice seeker, however. Instead, she is one whose commitment to justice stems from her own gendered victimization. Kidder explains that,

[by] defying all popular stereotypes of women in general and female detectives in particular, Veronica's vengeance is swift, exacting, and almost completely outside the established legal and judicial order—particularly when she's called upon to crack a case in which a man has harmed a woman through some form of violence or sexual coercion. (127)

Still, even more important, Veronica's drive and commitment to this justice—especially in relation to crimes like rape which so often are not reported and unresolved—leads her to a position at the center of her community:

[Veronica's] attitude toward the resolution of [her rape]—"I'm going to find out who did this to me and I'm going to make them pay"—later [becomes] her goal for every young woman at Neptune High who

approach[es] her for help. And while *Veronica Mars* is hardly a catalyst for teenage would-be delinquents, community response to her actions serves as an interesting barometer of cultural zeitgeist—even if the community in question is the fictional [and deeply flawed] Neptune, California. (127)

Veronica's drive for justice motivates her to unravel the tangled, complex chain of events that took place the night of her rape. This drive also showcases her skills and validates her actions as she pursues justice—even when such actions seem to be driven more by vengeance than justice and are ethically questionable in the strictest sense. Her actions empower others within the community to reject the wide-scale corruption that permeates Neptune and speak to Veronica's effectiveness as a community-centered cult heroine.

Although *Veronica Mars* falls outside of the most common genre conventions for cult narratives, the series' protagonist is clearly a cult heroine in the same mold as Xena, Gabrielle, Buffy, River, and Max. In fact, Samantha Bornemann comments on this assumption. She says, "Let's start with a show of hands. Who else spent the *Veronica Mars* pilot waiting for the other, supernatural shoe to drop? Wow, that many..." (185).¹ Veronica demonstrates strength in verbal play via witty quips and dialogue and breezy popular culture references, and she is poised in the face of danger. All of these elements characterize contemporary cult heroines; each marks Veronica as such. Veronica clearly is positioned as a force for justice. Her adherence to an ethical code seeks to fill the voids in power structures that neglect to defend community members such structures should protect. Unlike her fantasy genre-based contemporaries, Veronica does not desire to

overthrow the existing power structures altogether; rather she steps in when those power structures fail to fulfill their obligations to justice. Simply creating new social structures is not as feasible an act in *Veronica Mars* as it would be in a more fantastical genre setting. *Veronica Mars* recognizes this and instead empowers its heroine to revise the community-centered cult heroine conventions established by *Xena*, *Buffy*, *Firefly*, and *Dark Angel* to fit its genre location. *Veronica Mars*' monsters are not mythical or allegorical, and she does not dispatch villains with martial arts moves; yet she is clearly opposed to corruption and is a champion for those who do not have power to seek justice for themselves. She speaks for the dead in her investigation of Lilly's murder and lends voice to women who have been victimized by sexual assault and domestic violence. She also attends to the smaller problems that menace her classmates. Her position as a champion who utilizes powers of deduction in her capacity as a junior detective set her apart from the average citizen; together they make her a heroic figure.

Veronica Mars' narrative sets up scenarios for Veronica to solve smaller mysteries on a weekly basis, as well as bigger, season-long mystery storylines. This narrative structure mirrors the model of other cult television heroines whose sustained commitments to justice play out episodically week-to-week. For example, one week Veronica may discover what happened to a missing neighbor woman, while in another week she might uncover the identity of a classmate's stalker ("The Girl Next Door," "Look Who's Stalking"). Veronica excels at solving these smaller mysteries; moreover, her use of detective skills, application of deductive logic, and understanding of human nature permit her to discover the necessary information to solve each case. More

important is that her skills and capabilities allow her to antagonize dominant power structures and bring relief to the corruption therein. For example, in the pilot episode, the Sheriff's Office is run by Sheriff Lamb (Michael Muhney), Keith Mars' replacement. Lamb is incompetent and incapable of fulfilling his obligations to the citizenry he is sworn to protect. Flashbacks show the new sheriff mocking a disheveled and distraught Veronica as she attempts to report being raped, cruelly suggesting she needs to acquire "a little backbone" rather than crying ("Pilot"). In the episode, Veronica manipulates the justice system as part of a deal she made to protect a friend, the outcome of which is all the more satisfactory for the viewer given Lamb's cold and cruel treatment of her. Ever resourceful, Veronica calls on her connections and sleuth abilities to switch out an incriminating video tape in the Sheriff Office's evidence locker. Then, in court, when Sheriff Lamb is testifying against local gangbangers for shoplifting, the videotape played to corroborate his testimony shows not the shoplifting but one of his officers accepting sexual favors in a patrol car from a female employee of a local strip club. Veronica's turn at shielding her friend who reported the shoplifters does allow the gang members to escape punishment for their crime. However, this move exposes the corruption in the Sheriff's Office and thereby gives retribution to the young woman exploited by the officer. As mystery novelist Alafiar Burke explains:

Only because of Veronica's black-market intervention [is] the judge able to see an important truth—one that [has] nothing to do with shoplifting and everything to do with Neptune's inept and boorish law enforcement.

Message: while the cops are getting their shields polished, Veronica's dusting off a little old-fashioned justice. (117-118)

Veronica's actions, then, can be judged as valid and heroic by the audience although they circumvent the letter of the law by tampering with evidence.

Throughout the course of *Veronica Mars*, the titular heroine must often navigate tricky ethical waters to ensure justice on a greater scale is served. She is not always 100% accurate that her decisions to abandon the moral high ground will serve the greater good, but, as *Television Without Pity* critic John Ramos points out, "the fact that we [viewers] find her sympathetic, and even cheer her on, suggests that we understand and condone this behavior" (112). In her small subversions of the letter of the law to uphold the spirit of justice, Veronica is no different from other cult television heroines.

Veronica's vigilantism aligns her with heroic figures of Western films who rely on individual grit and determination to prevail. This allusion falsely suggests that she operates as something of a "lone wolf" hero. Instead, *Veronica Mars* clearly subverts that aspect of vigilante traditions by constructing its heroine as community-centered and ultimately reliant on collaborative heroism for survival and success. To be fair, Veronica at first appears to be a throwback to older models of cult heroes because she is initially presented as a fiercely independent social outcast and thereby must operate alone. However, Veronica's commitment to her community is demonstrated in several ways over the course of the series and her ultimate reliance on collaborative, community-based strategies to fulfill her heroic role tells a different story.

Although she adopts vigilante methods and operates outside the law at times, Veronica is also clearly constructed as a community activist. This characterization is solidified in the opening scenes of the pilot when she comes to the rescue of Wallace Fennel (Percy Daggs III), an African American male student who has been stripped naked and duct-taped to the school flag pole. This modern-day lynching was perpetrated not from ideals of white supremacy but as retribution. Wallace is the one who initially reported shoplifting by members of the biker gang. While other members of the student body stand around laughing at Wallace and taking pictures of his humiliation on their cell phones, Veronica pulls out a pocket knife and cuts him down. Although this earns her the observation, “You *are* a freak!” from another student, the action clearly positions Veronica in opposition to this “lynching” and the ethos of Neptune which allows such injustices to exist. Because of her actions here, Wallace befriends her; he eventually becomes a central part of her heroic community and one who acts alongside her efforts to fight injustice.

Perhaps the ultimate symbol of her status as community-centered is found in the desolate series finale scene in “The Bitch is Back.” There, Veronica tries to effect social change by casting a vote in her local election. She has experienced how crooked city government can be, ranging from her father’s recall from office to the acquittal of Lilly’s killer due to the manipulation of the court system and public opinion. Yet she casts her vote in the election—a primary signifier of the American democratic process—and makes her voice heard. Even though her father’s chances of re-election at this point are slim because his opponents have unfairly influenced public opinion, Veronica still

participates in the voting process. As many times as the system has fallen short of serving its community, Veronica could easily have lost faith in its potential for serving the greater good and ceased her participation in it. However, her vote is the contribution of her voice in the community's election process; by adding her voice, Veronica clearly demonstrates her devotion to her community. While she often circumvents the law, she still maintains optimism in the ability of the community to empower itself through activism and civic engagement.

Even as Veronica appears initially to be something of a loner, her community-centered status shines through in her creation of a network of allies who support her dedication to justice. In addition to her father, this network is comprised primarily of peers in her age group, ranging from close friends like Wallace and Cindy "Mac" Mackenzie (Tina Majorino) to sometimes-allies like Eli "Weevil" Navarro (Francis Capra). Like Wallace and Veronica, Mac comes from a working class family; her lack of wealth, refusal to conform to standards of hyper-femininity, and interest in and talent with computers set her apart from the popular crowd. Also like Veronica, Mac uses her talents to subvert the system that is stacked against her. In "Like a Virgin," for example, she designs a website that evaluates one's "purity" through a "list of questions of everything you could possibly do that's dirty or fun or illegal" and then sells the results—both to the individual who self-reports and to anyone willing to pay for someone else's scores. By capitalizing on her wealthy classmates' vanity and desire to gossip about and humiliate one another, Mac earns the money to buy herself a car. Unlike the wealthy young women in her high school, Mac's parents cannot afford to give her a car. Given

Mac's lack of social power otherwise, the audience can easily sympathize with and endorse her subversion of those with power. As Veronica says when she deduces that Mac is behind the purity test, "How can I resent someone who took sex-crazed [rich kids] for their allowance money?" In contrast, Weevil comes from a blue collar Latino family. He is also a classmate and the leader of the biker gang that Wallace reported for shoplifting. Weevil helps Veronica when their interests align. Sometimes she helps him out of a jam, and other times he intends to gain something else from assisting her. He even allies with her when it affords him the opportunity to disrupt the privileged lives of individuals who look down on him and those like him because they are poor and Latino. In "The Girl Next Door," for instance, Weevil and his bikers enter a haute couture clothing boutique. Each biker proceeds to try on various items and make a mess of the stores' orderly displays in order to intimidate the store clerk. This tactic is used to gain some evidence Veronica needs in an investigation. Weevil agrees to do this favor not in return for money but because he has the opportunity to challenge a social order that would value expensive clothing and those who can afford it over blue collar, ethnic immigrant families like his. That Veronica's primary peer allies consist of minorities—poor whites, women, Latinos, and a "helpless" African American—is a testament to who Neptune's society disenfranchises. Although some wealthy students eventually do ally with Veronica, for the most part those who live a life of privilege have no interest in aiding her because the system already benefits them. It is only those outside the system's privilege who see the value in Veronica's approach and are driven to collaborate with her.

In addition to her peer allies, Veronica's community-centered heroism gains her the respect and trust of community leaders, such as the captain of Neptune's fire brigade, the (vice-) principal of her high school, and the Dean of Students at her college. The Fire Captain facilitates the evidence tape switching in the pilot episode as a favor to Veronica and out of recognition for the new sheriff's corruption. In contrast, both of the school officials regularly ask for Veronica's help directly or position her to provide them assistance when they cannot directly request it. The high school vice-principal, for example, "punishes" Veronica for a transgression by assigning her filing work in the school records room, thereby giving her access to otherwise confidential information. For Veronica, this information leads her to come to know her absent mother better. For Vice-Principal Clemmons, it leads to career advancement when Veronica discovers that, twenty-five years previously, the current principal had an affair with and impregnated a disabled female student while he was a teacher at the school and then abandoned their infant daughter in the high school bathroom. Clemmons' "punishment" facilitates Veronica uncovering important personal information as well seeking justice for the student—now the school lunch lady—and advancing Clemmons' own career ("My Mother, the Fiend"). While teenagers usually recognize injustice in the world around them, the fact that community leaders acknowledge Veronica's heroic motivations and ask for her assistance (even through manipulation) points to their awareness of the value of her skills. What is more, these adult authority figures realize the need for a heroic figure to handle those pressing civil issues traditional judicial structures fail to address. More significant is the fact that those in Veronica's network eventually are empowered

independently or along with Veronica as a result of their association and collaborations with her. Whereas River's and Max's relationships with their family-communities are symbiotic with each taking on the protective role at different times, Veronica and her peers must collaborate in dangerous situations, both to solve mysteries and to survive to make public their discoveries. As such, *Veronica Mars* models a collaborative approach to community-centered heroism led by a cult television heroine.

In order to explore the complex, yet fairly uniform pattern that characterizes Veronica's solving of larger mysteries in the series, I will examine the resolution of two major story arcs. This examination highlights *Veronica Mars'* construction of community-centered heroism as a collaborative action and offers insights into genre implications for the cult television heroine. Lilly's murder (which dominates the first season) and the college campus serial rapist storyline that underscores the first half of the third season follow a similar pattern in the resolution of their respective mysteries. In both storylines, Veronica uncovers the information necessary to reveal the villain. Her work and talents lead to protecting the community. On the one hand, every case she solves brings her closer to acceptance in her community and builds her clientele as well. On the other hand, the discovery of the major villains' identities places Veronica in vulnerable situations that threatens her life and compromise her ability to save herself. Veronica's survival in each instance depends on collaborative assistance. Further, the disclosure of the villains' identities does not lead to justice by conventional means (i.e., court of law); instead "justice" is achieved through alternative means such as vigilante actions by various other individuals. Most often the series' narrative functions to support

these acts of vigilante justice, suggesting that the model Veronica sets by challenging corrupt authority and doing the job of incompetent authority is picked up by those in her immediate community circle. Through their exposure to her dedication to justice, her community members are influenced to labor together battling injustice and to seek out justice themselves when traditional channels fail.

The first storyline that establishes this pattern is Veronica's search for Lilly's killer in the first season. Frequent use of flashbacks reminds viewers of this motivation. While Veronica does discover Lilly's true killer, the way the events play out upon this discovery establishes a pattern that foregrounds the necessity of collaborative heroic efforts for community activists like Veronica. The first season's primary story arc climaxes in "Leave It to Beaver" with Veronica's discovery that Lilly's killer is Aaron Echolls, an A-list Hollywood action film star who is one of Neptune's more notorious celebrity citizens and Lilly's boyfriend's father. Lilly and Aaron were having an affair, and she discovered him secretly videotaping their trysts. When she threatened to release the tapes to the tabloids, Echolls flew into a rage and killed her. While searching Lilly's secret hiding place for evidence, Veronica discovers the tapes; the new knowledge about Lilly and Echolls' affair, coupled with Veronica's own knowledge of Echolls' violent nature,² leads Veronica to identify Echolls as her friend's murderer. Her intended next step is to deliver the tapes and her theory to the police and let them arrest and prosecute Aaron Echolls. That Veronica intends to turn the evidence over to the authorities demonstrates her desire to believe in the system, even though it has failed her and she has successfully manipulated it in the past. Her actions not only seek justice for Lilly, but

they also attempt to bolster the community social structures by forcing them to perform justice.

However, Veronica's attempts to alert the police are thwarted. Echolls learns of her discovery and hides in the back of Veronica's car. He menaces her as she drives back to Neptune to turn the tapes over to the authorities. Veronica, realizing that he will not let her go, uses her wits to attempt to escape the situation. She purposefully crashes the car, betting on her seatbelt to limit her injury and Echolls' unrestrained position in the back seat to afford her the upper hand. She escapes the car and runs to a nearby house for help. Unfortunately, Echolls regains consciousness and soon pursues her. At this point, their conflict becomes a contest of physical strength and the actor who has been trained as a Hollywood action star has a distinct advantage over the slight, petite girl detective. Further, Echolls has a violent nature fueled by rage. These physical attributes give him the advantage over Veronica.

Veronica has anticipated the need to separate the tapes from her possession and hidden them in various locations outside the house. This does not stop Echolls, however, from using his superior physicality to knock her unconscious and then lock her in an old refrigerator in the house's yard, a nod to the all-too-common "gruesome ways... female superheroes [have been] killed" in comics—a prime media genre outside of television and film in which cult heroines exist—according to media critic Shannon Cochran (23). The pattern of gruesome endings for female superheroes comprises quite a disturbing and extensive list, and Cochran offers a few examples to demonstrate the range of endings: "An earl[y] Batwoman was murdered, a female Robin was tortured to death with a power

drill, one Batgirl was crippled by the Joker, and another one was turned to villainy” (23). This trope was termed “women in refrigerators” by comic book writer Gail Simone in 1999, who compiled a list of ninety female heroines who died or lost their powers, a pattern absent among male superheroes in comic books. Cochran explains that “the women-in-refrigerators syndrome got its name [from Simone] from a 1994 *Green Lantern* story arc, in which the titular hero’s girlfriend is strangled and later discovered in a fridge” (23).³ By imprisoning Veronica in a refrigerator, series creator Rob Thomas and his creative team clearly allude to this trope.⁴

Although Echolls promises to release Veronica if she tells him where the tapes are, he does so while pouring gasoline around the discarded appliance-turned-prison. One of his last “arguments” attempting to convince Veronica to reveal the location makes known his true nature and intent when he starts talking about Joan of Arc while pouring gasoline liberally over and around the refrigerator. He says in a tone of affected reasonableness tinged with a hint of desperation, “God didn’t really talk to her [Joan of Arc]... It’s true. I saw it on TV... they decided she had a *brain tumor*” (“Leave It to Beaver,” emphasis added). His emphasis on “brain tumor” is threatening, and implies his desire to believe that society will always stand behind the wealthy, popular (male) citizen over the fringe “crazy” woman/girl who dares to oppose him. He declares, “I’m not going to let a seventeen-year-old piece of ass ruin my life!” His derogatory comment here applies to both Veronica and Lilly. Although he only had an affair with the latter, his characterization of the two girls reveals that he sees them as nothing more than (sexualized) objects. His anger is enflamed by the idea that someone he has relegated to

the status of object could wield the agency necessary to disrupt his privileged life—especially when that someone is young and female.

Echolls continues his villainous monologue, and in doing so shows more of his desperate fear that Veronica may be his undoing. His perception of his social status as both a wealthy man and a celebrity is that he is untouchable and invincible. He is thus galled to learn that the actions and intelligence of one high school girl may bring about his ultimate downfall. As he continues his monologue, his voice is pitched to emphasize the threat of his next words about Joan of Arc—“Burned alive!”—before his tone abruptly shifts to mock sympathy as he says, “What a waste. She thought her death meant something. But all it meant was she was *crazy*.” Echolls is not only playing on older stereotypes that characterize socially-transgressive women as mentally unstable; he is also referencing the Mars family’s fall from popularity in Neptune. Echolls knows that Veronica’s story will be easy to discount because of her family’s positioning on the margins of Neptune society, and he reminds Veronica of this reality with his comment. He whispers maliciously, “Think about that, Veronica.” It is clear in this moment that Echolls has all the power because his physical strength gives him initial advantage over Veronica—something that is all too often true in gendered conflicts and abusive situations. Similarly, Echolls’ implication that Veronica is crazy is a traditionally gendered response to women who stand to disrupt the social norm by challenging inequalities and those in positions of privilege.

Because she does not have the physical superpowers that most cult television heroines possess, Veronica is stuck, and it is clear she has to rely on someone’s help to

save her from becoming a “martyr.” Veronica’s heroic collaborator comes in the form of her father, Keith Mars. Although Veronica’s family suffers from dysfunction due to Mrs. Mars’ alcoholism and abandonment of her husband and daughter, Keith and Veronica’s relationship is strong, and their bond was enhanced by their reliance on one another after Mrs. Mars walked out. When Veronica does not appear home on schedule, Keith goes looking for her and arrives in time to provide the collaborative help.

The two men fight, and it seems like Echolls has gained the upper hand, suggesting the unfortunate reality that wealth and power often triumphs over justice. However, Keith manages to temporarily incapacitate Echolls with a hit to the groin, literally and symbolically attacking Echolls’ masculinity, a stand-in for all elements of privilege that Echolls has abused his whole life. Keith has physically bested the killer, yet, as Echolls lies on the ground, he manages to reach down to his pants pocket and pull out a lighter. Although Echolls has seemingly been beaten, the social power he possesses is so great and so interwoven into the fabric of *Veronica Mars*’ world that it cannot be completely overpowered within the narrative’s constraints. The fact that he can still reach for the lighter—which he notably retrieves from his groin area, the same region on his body as the physical manifestation of his phallic power—and start the fire symbolizes the extent of this power. Igniting the lighter, Echolls tosses the flame toward the previously spilled gasoline, setting the area around the refrigerator ablaze. The flames become an extension of the power that was represented by the lighter. By starting the fire, Echolls is attempting to destroy that which threatens to fully disempower—and in his view, emasculate—him: Veronica. He is as willing to kill her to obliterate the threat she poses

as he was willing to kill Lilly for posing the same threat. Echolls cannot see that his attitude toward and abuse of his social power have twice positioned him to be threatened by the knowledge and actions of a “seventeen-year-old piece of ass” because he perceives the girls only as objects, not as subjects with independent agency and legitimacy in society. They are (should be), in his mind, at the opposite end of the social power spectrum from himself. Rather than recognizing this attitude’s flaws, he foolishly assumes that if he removes the threat, his privilege will protect him.

Once Echolls starts the fire, the onus for Veronica’s rescue is on Keith, who must cross the flames, or the barrier of Echolls’ privilege, and tip the burning refrigerator over. As soon as Keith frees Veronica, however, he collapses in the flames and their positions reverse—he is now reliant on her aid. Veronica pushes him free of the fire before grabbing a blanket and beating out the flames still burning on his clothing. Although neither Mars could have survived the fire on his or her own, by working together, father and daughter both survive; their collaboration trumps Echolls’ extensive privilege. Aaron Echolls’ character backstory that positions him as an A-list star of Hollywood action films provides an added dimension to this sequence of events. While this aspect of the character’s background situates him in an extreme position of privilege through both wealth and star status, it also opens up his confrontation with Veronica to be read as satirizing the Hollywood action hero genre. This genre is notorious for glorifying the solitary masculine hero. While the scene has elements commonly found in Hollywood blockbusters featuring action heroes—fist fights, life-threatening danger, car crashes, fire, a damsel in distress, etc.—the literal action hero here is not the hero. Instead, he is the

villain, and he is defeated by the balding, middle-aged ex-sheriff and his petite teenage daughter (who, incidentally, *is* the damsel).

With Keith and Veronica distracted saving one another from the more immediate threat of the fire, Echolls flees. The social status that has given him the upper hand thus far, however, fails him, and collaboration of a different sort is in order. He runs into the road and is hit by a delivery truck—bearing a logo of a lily in bloom and the company name “Thomas.” The symbolism of the blooming flower that shares a name with Echolls’ previous victim and Veronica’s motivation for seeking justice suggests that Lilly has the last laugh, that ultimately Echolls’ social privilege is not enough to protect him or sustain his continued abuses of the system. Further, “Thomas,” the name of the series’ creator and auteur, arrives as the *deus ex machina*. The show’s rules of logic, when held up to Echolls’ capacity for violence in comparison to the other characters’, demands a meta-intervention to stop him. When the truck’s driver attempts to help Echolls, Veronica enters the scene and her empowerment is restored. She holds her father’s gun, and the firearm becomes the ultimate source of power in the scene. The woman-holding-the-gun trumps the expanse of masculine power that has given Echolls the advantage thus far. The power that the weapon grants Veronica makes clear that she will triumph, but she could not have come into possession of the weapon without the collaborative efforts she and Keith used to save one another. Through Veronica’s efforts, Echolls’ role in Lilly’s death is uncovered, but her further mediation of the heroic role is reliant on collaborative community support to overcome her limited social power. Veronica extends this mediation to telling the driver to call the authorities. By summoning them to arrest

Echolls, Veronica is calling upon the legal/law enforcement community to do their job. This gesture invokes a community-centered commitment to uphold the judicial structures assigned to her society, even if she might circumvent legalities in her discovery of truth.

Veronica's and Keith's survival and Echolls' arrest seem to provide resolution to this storyline. That resolution, however, is undermined in the second season, a chilling function of *Veronica Mars'* non-fantasy genre status. Like viewers' real world, *Veronica Mars'* judicial system is not infallible, and sometimes killers go free. Whereas the first season concludes with Lilly's murder solved along with other mysteries, the second season follows Aaron Echolls' trial and his eventual acquittal through legal but unethical machinations on the part of Echolls' defense attorney. "Justice" is only served when Lilly's brother contracts Echolls' execution through a professional hit ("Not Pictured"). What is important about this sequence of events, however, is less the means through which Echolls is eventually stopped and more the fact that, in the moment of revelation, Veronica does not stand triumphant as the self-saving heroine. Rather, she solves the case but finds herself at a physical disadvantage. She has to rely on collaboration with others—in this case her father and the truck—to save her; her heroism must be augmented by the community she has formed.

This pattern of reliance on collaborative efforts to survive the confrontation with the major story arc villain is repeated in the conclusions of the second and third season story arcs. In the second, Veronica's boyfriend (ironically Aaron Echolls' son Logan) is her collaborative partner in facing down a gun-wielding classmate who has killed several other students and who raped Veronica prior to the show's beginning, and "justice" is

served when the classmate commits suicide. The resolution of the third season story arc fully displays the strength of Veronica's collaborative heroism, though, because her collaborator is not a family member or close friend. Instead, it is a young woman who initially dislikes Veronica but whose empowerment by Veronica's efforts and example allows her to move from victim to heroic collaborator.

In this story arc, sexual assault is the driving force in *Veronica Mars*. Having graduated high school at the end of the second season, Veronica continues to live at home but begins her post-secondary education at a local private school, Hearst College. Unfortunately, Hearst is plagued by a serial rapist whose victims share three things in common: they had attended an alcohol-laden fraternity party the evening of their rape (there is no site on a college campus more representative of patriarchal models of privilege than fraternities, especially as they are depicted in *Veronica Mars*); the victims had been unwillingly dosed with GHB, the date-rape drug; and the victims had all woken up with their heads shaved, a visible reminder of their assault. Shortly after the school year starts, Mac's roommate, Parker Lee (Julie Gonzalo), becomes the rapist's latest victim. Veronica dedicates herself to uncovering the rapist's identity partly because of her own experience as a rape victim and partly out of guilt; Veronica had the opportunity to interrupt the assault, but she did not realize that Parker was drugged and being raped rather than engaging in consensual activity ("Welcome Wagon"). Given Veronica's own past as a victim of sexual assault and the lack of compassion she was shown by authority figures when she reported the rape, her dedication to uncovering the rapist's identity and stopping him from harming more women is easily understood. Further, Parker's sense of

betrayal when she learns Veronica could have intervened situates Veronica's future collaborator in opposition to the heroine. Her eventual collaboration thus reinforces the power of Veronica's methods.

The show consistently engages questions of sexual assault against women because such attacks are one of the most consistent and obvious criminal indicators of the depths of corruption within patriarchal social structures. Just as *Xena's* heroic team frequently outwits and outmaneuvers male opponents who assume their social power affords them unlimited access to women's bodies, *Veronica Mars* repeatedly positions its heroine to confront sexual abusers—her own and others—as a plot point that demonstrates the heroine's ability to effect social change on a deep and meaningful level. Not everyone in Neptune who works toward discovering truth does so in the name of community justice, however, and the show contrasts Veronica and her collaborative practices with such individuals to highlight the efficacy of her approach. During her investigation into the college campus rapist, Veronica butts heads with another student running his own investigation. Tim Foyle (James Jordan) is the Teaching Assistant in Veronica's Introduction to Criminal Justice class. He is jealous of the young woman because she has gained the professor's favor—a spot he used to hold. When Veronica needs to speak with Tim on an unrelated matter, she finds his office empty, and while she waits, she looks at the rape investigation board he has constructed. When he finds her looking, he mockingly asks, "Did I miss something? Are we working together now?" ("Spit and Eggs"). He declines to share the information he has uncovered because "When I solve it, I want [their professor] to know where credit's due." Veronica calls him on his flawed perspective by

replying, “And here I thought we were trying to protect girls.” Indeed, Veronica—with the help of her allies—uncovers the rapist’s identity, while Tim’s efforts are ultimately unsuccessful.

At the mystery’s end, Veronica discovers that while there is one (wealthy, arrogant, privileged) man who perpetrates the rapes, he is aided by an accomplice who drugs girls who call the “safe ride home” program (“Spit and Eggs”). Like the other major mystery story arcs, Veronica’s final confrontation with the villain leaves her at a physical disadvantage, reliant on collaboration for survival. Veronica eventually survives two physical confrontations with the rapist Mercer Hayes (Ryan Devlin). In the first, he gains the upper hand and she escapes by scratching his face and then stabbing him in the leg with the horn of a unicorn statue she finds in the latest victim’s room. The series’ choice of weapon for Veronica telegraphs the ultimate fate of the college rapist. Although the weapon is one of opportunity, few other sharp objects lying around a dorm room would hold the same symbolic significance. In mythology, unicorns are associated with sexual purity. In contemporary culture, unicorns are associated with teenage girls and young women, and an interest in unicorns often serves as a marker of the innocence that accompanies adolescence and yet-to-develop maturity. A unicorn figure positioned as Veronica’s means of escape from the college rapist signifies the preservation of its owner’s innocence in the form of her escape from sexual assault and Veronica’s eventual triumph over one who would irrevocably take such innocence from young women.

Unfortunately, because Veronica has not yet realized Mercer has a partner, as she runs from him, she sees an ally in the dormitory resident advisor, Moe—the partner. Moe

(Andrew McClain) pretends to call the police and offers Veronica (GHB-laced) tea. Moe leaves the room, and the drug starts to affect Veronica's senses; she realizes that she is being incapacitated and will soon be unable physically defend herself. She hides in the room's closet and attempts to escape when Mercer and Moe discover her hiding place. In the ensuing struggle, Mercer throws her to the floor. In a scene that mirrors Aaron Echolls' last exertion of his power, Veronica uses the last of her strength to reach into her jeans pocket and pull out a rape whistle. As with Echolls' lighter, the location of the whistle alludes to Veronica's sexuality, but her retrieval of the whistle represents reclamation of the agency taken from her when she was raped. She is able to briefly blow the whistle—also a fitting allusion to “whistleblowers” who speak up against injustice at great personal cost—before Mercer takes it away from her. It seems that once again, Veronica's petite physicality positions her at a disadvantage. Whereas Aaron Echolls' tossing of the lighter as he lay beaten on the ground was a last desperate display of his (waning) power, however, Veronica's desperate action here is a call for aid, for collaboration. One resident in the dormitory does hear the whistle and comes to investigate—Parker, Mercer's former victim and part of Veronica's motivation for so actively seeking the rapist's identity. Parker rallies the other students in the dorm and through her social activism, Mercer and Moe are scared off before they can harm Veronica further. Just as the unicorn-as-weapon foreshadows the power of the intended victim to be her attacker's downfall, Parker's positioning as Veronica's collaborator here meets out a kind of karmic justice that is more believable than the lily-logoed truck that incapacitates Aaron Echolls, rewriting the series' previous pattern to a degree. Even more

significant is that Parker is not especially close to Veronica, still resenting the detective's previous inaction. However, Parker has not been unaffected by Veronica's promises to seek justice on her behalf or her modeling of collaborative social activism. Parker's actions aiding in Veronica's rescue help Parker to reclaim the agency she lost as a rape victim and reinforce the value of collaborative community-centered heroism in impacting more than the heroine's immediate circle of friends and family. Like Buffy, Veronica has shared her power.

My intentions in critiquing this pattern in *Veronica Mars* is not to dismiss it or the series for failing to live up to some model of feminist potential by limiting Veronica's ability to be self-saving and forcing her to rely on collaborative efforts; rather, I contend that recognizing and examining this pattern of collaboration sheds light on another model of community-centered heroism available to cult television heroines. Moreover, *Veronica Mars*' liminal genre positioning in relation to other cult shows featuring heroic girls/young women marks Veronica's model as more directly attainable to viewers. Because of its non-fantastical genre elements, the show is closer to viewers' reality, which both allows and forces *Veronica Mars* to acknowledge and address the barriers female activists—real life community-centered heroines—must face and overcome.

For all its engagement with detective noir and other non-fantastical genres, *Veronica Mars* is situated in a more "realistic" genre location, a liminal locale from which she can appeal to both cult fans and non-cult fans. Creator Rob Thomas acknowledges Veronica's liminal genre status in *Neptune Noir* (a collection of essays exploring *Veronica Mars* edited by Thomas):

Veronica Mars is...hmm...what's the euphemism I'm looking for? Let's go with heightened.

Discussion question: At the end of one of our big mysteries would fans of the show prefer we have Veronica call the sheriff's department to arrest the bad guy, or put Veronica in harm's way? One choice is the "reality" choice, the other is the "heightened" choice. I submit that most people would choose the latter. (94)

Indeed, Thomas and company's choice to use a "heightened" approach to key moments does make for more dramatic, compelling television. But it also makes clear the genre-based gap between Veronica and her community-centered cult heroine sisters. Xena and Buffy are afforded nearly limitless physical abilities through supernatural empowerment so that they are a match for the mythical creatures they fight. River and Max are afforded greatly enhanced physical and mental skills as a result of scientific experiments wrought upon them by their corrupt governments so they may fight those same powerful entities. In contrast, Veronica is afforded no special strengths or powers other than a quick wit and the learned detective skills she employs. Veronica's world is, like the others' worlds, exceedingly violent and corrupt, but it differs from viewers' "real" world only by means of the sustained concentration of corruption and violence—what Thomas calls the choice of a "heightened" representation of reality—not through the introduction of monsters or mad scientists. Other cult heroines are more fantastical, and Veronica Mars is more realistic, even if the action is "heightened" for dramatic impact. In the viewers' everyday lives, they will not become warrior princesses, slay vampires, or find themselves the

subject of malicious government experimentation (hopefully); but they may find themselves in a position to be socially active, to collaborate with others to fight the very real social injustices that make up Neptune and the “real world”—class disparity, racism, gendered violence, etc.

As Veronica realizes in the dismal closing scene of the third season that contrasts so sharply with the bittersweet dream sequence that ends the first season, collaborative community-centered activist efforts are not always rewarded with justice and/or immediate social change. For all of Veronica’s labors to ensure justice is enacted in her community, the fact that Keith—seemingly one of the few honest adult men in Neptune—will not win the election and be restored to the head of law enforcement, presents a dismal future for Neptune and raises questions about the long-term impact of Veronica’s heroic efforts. This too is more realistic, however. Social change rarely happens overnight, and one of the greatest challenges facing any social activist is sustained faith in the cause of social justice while facing slow-moving change. Other cult heroines can be afforded the power to more obviously and overtly succeed because that power is fantastical; even “heightened,” Veronica’s power is realistic. As such, it is limited, but it is also more exciting as it holds the potential to empower and mobilize all community members to actively and collaboratively combat modes of privilege that form the status quo.

Notes

¹ In fact, in addition to directly comparing *Veronica Mars* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Bornemann also alludes to the similarities between the two heroines when explaining her theory that *Veronica Mars* represents an evolution of the teen heroine that

she traces from Angela in *My So-Called Life* (1994-1995) through *Buffy* and to *Veronica Mars*: “Veronica ushers in a new, third wave of teen girl drama, in which the stakes and the hurts are as heightened as the real world will allow, and the lead [character] must bear the brunt of them. Which is to say Veronica gets her name in lights because she suffers. A lot” (186). The phrasing at the end of Bornemann’s line, “she suffers. A lot,” reinforces the connection to *Buffy*, as it echoes the epitaph Buffy’s friends carve upon her gravestone when she dies and is buried following *Buffy*’s fifth season: “She Saved The World / A Lot” (“The Gift”).

² Veronica witnessed Aaron brutally beating his daughter’s boyfriend in “Hot Dogs,” ironically to teach the boy a lesson about why he shouldn’t hit women, and then calmly ask his son about his day at school. Further, viewers and Veronica know that Aaron disciplines his son with a belt.

³ Cochran further writes that “In-an e-mail interview, Simone explains: ‘I and some male friends started making a list of the characters that had been killed, mutilated, or depowered (also a telling trend, as the more powerful a female character was, the more likely it was that she would lose those powers). It was shockingly long, and almost no one in the already small pool of valid superheroines escaped the wave of gynocentric violence’” (23).

⁴ Geoff Kloch notes Thomas’ use of this trope and suggests that Veronica’s survival of the refrigerator and Aaron Echolls’ Joan-of-Arc inspired threat “may be a revision of [the women-in-refrigerators] trend” (31, in footnote). Also, *Firefly*’s River’s introduction to viewers as emerging from cryogenic freezing within a shiny, chrome storage unit is another allusion to and subversion of this trope, as River’s emergence from her “refrigerator” signals her introduction into a new family-community, a community that facilitates her growth and recovery processes.

CONCLUSION

As *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Firefly*, *Dark Angel*, and *Veronica Mars* reveal, the most recent generation of cult television heroines are bound by two common traits: their construction of the heroine as a girl coming-of-age and the emphasis they place on community-centered heroism as a necessary component of the heroine's development and eventual rewriting of past heroic models. Existing scholarship on cult heroic figures at the end of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first focuses on the heroines as *women*, ignoring the fact that their relative youth is a key component of their construction and their ability to resist dominant social discourse. It is that youth, in concert with a dedication to communal activism that allows these cult heroines to succeed and be effective agents of social change. Each heroine adds to the cultural landscape, offering complementary models for how their (young) (female) viewers can resist dominant power structures that would silence girls, taking away their agency. Together these various models offer a complex vision for community-centered approaches to female heroism/activism.

Xena: Warrior Princess sets up an intergenerational mentorship model that revises Joseph Campbell's hero's journey by creating a new *home* for future heroines—a *home* freed from oppressive and restrictive heteronormative limitations imposed by patriarchal society. *Xena* rejects heteronormative standards and creates new forms of community, new *homes*, as a result. The series' engagement with lesbian (sub)text allows the show to interrogate heterosexist constructions of female strength, intimate

relationships between women, and nuclear family models. Further, the series' repudiation of heteronormativity allows it to bridge the gap between older generations of cult television heroines like Wonder Woman and those who follow *Xena*. Through its ongoing and consistent challenge to patriarchal structures of society and the lone (male) hero, *Xena* creates the space necessary for heroines like Gabrielle to grow and for girl heroes like Buffy, River, Max, and Veronica to emerge and be successful in subsequent American popular culture.

As such, *Xena* offers viewers a model of mentorship and demonstrates the value of this role for community growth and efficacy. Most cult television heroine shows of this grouping feature young women in a *bildungsroman* narrative situation, yet *Xena*'s central character is a grown woman, not an adolescent. The *bildungsroman* is a genre most often defined with the term "coming-of-age," but it is also sometimes called the story of "apprenticeship." *Xena* is just such a narrative wherein *Xena* is the mentor/master and Gabrielle the apprentice. Gabrielle is originally presented as a sidekick, a girl who runs away from home to avoid the dull and boring life of heteronormative domesticity her parents have planned for her. By the time *Xena* dies at the series' end, however, Gabrielle has grown into a warrior in her own right and inherits the central heroic role ("A Friend In Need II"). Over the course of six seasons, Gabrielle completes an apprenticeship and transforms from a clever and determined—if unskilled at fighting—peasant girl to a confident woman warrior in her own right. This passing of heroic mantle is signified by the passing on of *Xena*'s chakrum, a mystical weapon that up to the final episode, only *Xena* had been able to successfully use. Like pulling

Excalibur from the stone marked Arthur's destiny as the future king of Camelot in medieval romance tales, Gabrielle's successful wielding of the chakrum signifies her completion of her tutelage under Xena's guidance. The series sadly takes an all-too-traditional narrative path at its end in which the mentor/master (Xena) must die for the student (Gabrielle) to fully move into that same role. Nonetheless, the *bildungsroman* aspect of Gabrielle's story is significant and fitting for it parallels the role Xena played as a mentor and model for the community-centered cult television heroine shows that followed. Xena closes on an image of Gabrielle sailing off into the ancient world to continue fighting as Xena has taught her—and presumably, to someday move into the mentor role herself, passing on those same lessons to a younger generation.

It is fitting then, that a show premiering two years after Xena's start mirrors Gabrielle's final position as student-turned-leader of the community-centered cult television heroine. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* models a community-centered ethos, but does so in different ways than Xena, taking cues from those who had come before, especially in the ultimate outcome of the titular heroine's narrative arc. In 2001 when Xena concluded, *Buffy* ended its fifth season, a conclusion that also marked the end of its time on the WB television network. Although it was picked up by UPN for a sixth and seventh season, this transition marked the fifth season as something of a trail run for the ultimate conclusion of the series. Like Xena, Buffy also died at the end of this season, in a self-chosen sacrifice for the benefit of others ("The Gift"). And while Buffy had nurtured a strong community during her first five seasons, ending the show on her death would have positioned the series alongside older models which ultimately reject heroic

strength in women, often finally silencing them through death. The series' continuation, however, allowed for another conclusion—one that strengthened the show's community-centered construction of the heroine and fully positioned *Buffy* as *Xena*'s successor.

In contrast to *Xena*'s mentorship model, *Buffy* posits a social activist/community organizer model, revising *Xena*'s legacy so that instead of death as an impetus for the transfer of heroic agency and power, an intergenerational global community can grow. New heroines can fight alongside “old” heroines in the borderless heroic community. Throughout the course of *Buffy*, the interconnectedness of the metaphor-made-literal narrative technique that pairs apocalyptic storylines with coming-of-age milestones is central to the show's narrative structure and representation of the heroine. *Buffy*'s sophisticated, complex use of metaphor demonstrates how necessary a reliance on a community-centered ethos is for the heroine and the community to literally survive as well as to navigate the turbulent waters of adolescence and young adulthood. Further, over the course of seven seasons, Buffy and her friends learn that community is the deciding factor in their ability to go out into the world and effect genuine, long-term change. Community-centered cult television heroines like Buffy, then, are only effective if they can offer narratives illustrating how to turn female heroic potential into the political capital necessary for the destruction of far-reaching dominant power structures and the creation of new structures to fill the gap. This message is clearly conveyed in the series' finale, when Buffy rewrites the Slayer mythology, sharing the source of her power with girls and young women everywhere. By creating a global community that crosses all lines of social location like race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, and nationality, Buffy

serves as a model of a community organizer/activist. Whereas Xena was a feminist mentor, Buffy is a feminist activist preparing to step into the mentorship role, to lead this new global community as it challenges injustice and corrupt social structures in all societies.

Firefly and *Dark Angel* also rewrite heroic expectations through their symbiotic relationships between heroine and community. They draw on 1970s feminist ideas of *sisterhood* to inform their shared family-community model, rewriting those ideas to be more inclusive and avoid the segregating patterns of the past. The parallels between *Firefly* and *Dark Angel* are all the more notable in light of their (co)creators' previous work with cult heroines. *Firefly*'s Joss Whedon, of course, is also the auteur of *Buffy*. Similarly, *Dark Angel*'s James Cameron directed and co-wrote the influential *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* with the cult heroine Sarah Connor. Taking lessons learned from the successes of those previous projects, both Whedon and Cameron re-envision how the relationship between a heroine and community might function.

River and Max participate in a symbiotic relationship with the family-communities they find following their escapes from government manipulation and control. They are reliant on their original families to escape their government captors in their respective future dystopias, but escape necessitates the loss of that primary family. River and her brother Simon are cut off from their parents and family history, living as fugitives. Likewise, Max is separated from the other transgenic children she escapes alongside, not knowing at *Dark Angel*'s start if any of the others even succeeded in evading capture and reaching freedom. The communities that take River and Max in—the

crew of *Serenity* for River and the Jam Pony work community for Max—become family, and each heroine is nurtured and accepted for who she is, not what she can do.

Ultimately, both young women find the space to heal, (re)claim agency, and try on the heroic role before accepting the heroic mantle fully.

River and Max both model a vision of community heavily tied up in idea(l)s of family. In doing so, they offer a feminist model that reinvigorates the idea of sisterhood popular during 1970s second wave feminism, but which lost some cache subsequently. Sisterhood, as it was defined in connection to 70s feminism, was a troubled term. Those who championed sisterhood intended for women to unite under its banner and emerge stronger in support of one another. However, often women of color, lesbians, poor women, and women belonging to other marginalized identity groups felt that the term was a way for white, heterosexual, middle class feminists to erase/ignore the importance of differences in social location. River and Max do not call their community vision sisterhood, and indeed River's and Max's family-communities are composed of both women and men. The community-centered ethos that comes to define these two cult television heroines, however, is wrapped up in the same idea(l)s from which sisterhood originated. By protecting their family-communities, and, in Max's case, eventually creating a new family-community that blends the disparate parts of her past, River and Max are revising sisterhood and making it applicable to cross-gender communities that function like families. The groups are made stronger and more effective at enacting social change through their reliance on and faith in all community members. Moreover, the communities are composed of individuals representing a wide range of other social

locations from class status, to racial/ethnic identity, to wellness/(dis)ability. Both River and Max's past traumas play out upon their bodies, making clear the governments' attempts to literally rewrite their identities through body modulation. Equally clear is their family-communities' acceptance of them as they are, not for the skills they might be able to offer.

Moreover, the symbiotic nature of River's and Max's relationships with their family-communities de-centralizes their heroic role. They can take it on when most appropriate to do so, but other family-community members are equally as likely to step into the leadership role when their talents can be of use. This removes the troublesome potential for River or Max to be cast into the mother-leadership role that the family model might suggest. Rather, the sisterhood model ensures that the family-community functions as a group, different individual taking on leadership roles to the best effect, maximizing the family-community's efficacy in enacting change.

Veronica Mars follows this evolution, presenting an alternative, but no less effective, construction of community-centered heroism: the activist/ally model. Similar to *Buffy*, *Veronica Mars*' titular heroine is constructed as a social/political activist. Similar to River and Max, Veronica is also constructed as reliant on those in her community in new ways that challenge constructions of the cult heroine as always self-saving. Taken together, these rewritings of previous constructions of community-centered heroism means that *Veronica Mars* offers an activist/ally model. By building up a network of aligned individuals, Veronica is able to both uncover truths and bring them to light with her collaborators' aid.

Through collaboration, Veronica builds a network of allies—friends, acquaintances, and even adversaries—to whom she can turn for assistance. Veronica’s collaborative ally model encourages her allies to be proactive and to fight injustice on their own as well as in concert with her. It also reinforces the idea that collective action is necessary to effect ultimate change. This message is emphasized by the pattern developed in the conclusion to the major mystery story arcs. In this pattern, Veronica, with the aid of allies, uncovers the key evidence necessary to reveal the identity of the villain—evidence that corrupt local law enforcement was unable to discover. However, Veronica is prevented from reporting her findings to the authorities by the villain. He is either larger or better armed than she and quickly gains the physical advantage. Veronica can only overcome his advantage through collaborative efforts with her allies. The fact that the collaborative ally in the third season rapist storyline is a young woman who does not like Veronica all that much or know that Veronica is the person she is assisting underpins the efficacy of this approach—having been exposed to Veronica’s collaborative/ally model of community, Parker grows from a traumatized, insecure college freshman into a confident young woman who stands up to her attacker and aids Veronica without knowing Veronica is the one in need of assistance.

Through her reliance on the collaborative activist/ally model, Veronica Mars transgresses expectations for a community-centered cult television heroine, and this construction also speaks to the genre limitations of this heroic figure. Unlike Xena, Gabrielle, Buffy, River, and Max, Veronica does not live in an fantastical reality filled with ancient gods, vampires, or secret government programs that abduct/create girls they

can craft into weapons. As such, she has no enhanced physical prowess and her world, “heightened” as it may be for dramatic effect, is constrained by the limitations of its more realistic genre-setting. Nonetheless, Veronica’s efforts are effective and her collaboration with allies helps advance her goal of opposing dominant power structures that allow girls and young women like her to be victimized. In Neptune, however, justice is not always achievable and genuine change to corrupt social structures that encourage the crimes Veronica investigates is slow in coming. *Veronica Mars* provides a viable community-centered model for approaching social activism, but it also reminds viewers that such battles must be fought repeatedly and that we must have faith in the power of collaboration and allies, as well as community-centered approaches to heroism in general, to ultimately have the impact necessary to truly change society for the better.

By revising our understanding of who and what the cult television heroine can be, series like *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Firefly*, *Dark Angel*, and *Veronica Mars* complicate and re-envision female heroism. Drawing on the previous generation’s limitations and constructions, Xena, Buffy, River, Max, and Veronica offer us models for female heroism that are grounded in contemporary understandings of feminism, social advocacy, and a community-centered ethos: the mentor, the intergenerational activist/global community organizer, the family-community member grounded in a sisterhood ethic, and the political activist/collaborative ally. Clearly, they are far more than *just* girls.

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