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“The Caucasian Persuasion Here in the ‘Dale’”: Othering, White Normality, and Post-  
Racialism in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

by

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The television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, hereby referred to as *Buffy*, is upfront in its critiques of structural patriarchy, xenophobia, and racism. “It’s about power,” the show’s ultimate villain, the First Evil, states. In the finale, “Chosen,” the protagonist, Buffy, decides to share her supernatural power with women across the world: “I say we change the rule. I say my power should be our power.” In the montage that follows this declaration, the audience is treated to images of girls across the world standing up for themselves with confidence; these images range from a batter at a softball game looking up with a smile, to a daughter physically standing up to an abusive father. These girls have been unshackled from the confines of patriarchy, represented by the bureaucratic shadow government of the Watcher’s Council, the same organization that had sought to isolate and control young women like Buffy for countless generations. As such, the series establishes itself as an effort to critique and dismantle oppressive forms of institutional power. Primarily, *Buffy* does this by promoting the resistance of women against patriarchal control, but also by demonstrating the influence of a powerful cabal of men<sup>1</sup> across boundaries of race and class. Read along these lines, the finale becomes an episode about the liberation from and abolition of the patriarchal structures that have oppressed Buffy throughout the series. This coda then imagines a world where the institution of patriarchy, and indeed all oppressive power structures, represented by the First Evil, have been dismantled.

On the surface, the show’s advocacy for the abolition of the Watcher’s would seem to imply a similar critique of other sources of oppressive institutional power. Indeed, other antagonists of the series include the Mayor, representing political patriarchy; Caleb, whose “introduction as a preacher and his use of biblical/Christian rhetoric ally him with patriarchal

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<sup>1</sup> The original Watchers were exclusively men. While the occasional female Watcher is represented on screen, they are often relegated to a background role but for the exception of antagonist Gwendolyn Post, introduced in Season 3 episode, “Revelations.”

institutionalized religion” (Jowett 116); the Trio, three young men who become increasingly focused on sexually dominating women; and at times the police force of Sunnydale, who are often depicted exerting excessive force or sheer incompetence. *Buffy* touches on intersectional themes too, giving attention to how these powerful institutions affect individuals who exist at intersections of race, class, and gender. The show has thus garnered a cult following based on its reputation as a progressive feminist show that subverts historically sexist stereotypes common to the fantasy-horror genre, even as its social commentary and diversity of representation often fall short of present-day standards.<sup>2</sup> However, even as scholars have unpacked the show’s frequent literary references and thematic sophistication, deeper analysis reveals a work that fails to deconstruct racist and sexist power structures, or to reimagine the social order in a truly intersectional way. Specifically, *Buffy* falters by assuming that a solution can be found within the pre-existing social structures that it tries to deconstruct. Such an assumption recalls contemporary liberal platitudes that seek largely cosmetic solutions to structural problems, surface-level reform over abolition. And *Buffy*’s confrontations with racism and sexism fail to contend with where these ideologies come from in the first place. The resulting effect is an unintentional reproduction of racial stereotypes that the show outwardly criticizes but inwardly reproduces. This contradiction, even if accidental and well-meaning, results in a work of popular culture emblematic of a post-racial ideology which labels race as a thing of the past even as it encourages racial difference.

In this thesis, I draw on Hazel Carby’s conception of fantasized black subjects, the construction of a singular black experience as representative of inherent racial difference, and

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<sup>2</sup> In horror, it is a long held “dictum of the genre that women make the best victims” (Williams 5). Joss Whedon states in a 1998 interview that the conception of *Buffy* came from watching a lot of horror movies “with blond girls getting themselves killed in dark alleys.” He wanted to subvert that stereotype by depicting the blond girl heading into the alley and killing the monster.

apply it to the construction of *Buffy*'s setting to reveal how the show represents the race-blind worldview often inadvertently adopted by a well-intentioned but otherwise flawed ideology that promotes diversity and difference while leaving deeper structural inequities in place. I contend that viewing race as a marker of inherent "Otherness" complicates the conventional scholarly reading of *Buffy* as an "intersectional feminist" show by exposing its construction of non-white characters as Others. In addition, by studying how the show represents race through its lighting and makeup process, we can apply the analysis of Richard Dyer to demonstrate *Buffy*'s assumption of whiteness as the social default. By examining *Buffy*'s deployment of genre tropes and conventional representations of the "Other" as inherently different from the white default the show assumes through its aesthetic construction, I suggest that the post-racial worldview of *Buffy*, despite its attempted critique, ultimately ends up reifying racial difference. I first define my core critical concepts, including that of the Other, Hazel Carby's conception of difference, and Richard Dyer's "Lighting For Whiteness," in relation to existing scholarship on the "Buffyverse." Then, I analyze the visual and textual construction of *Buffy*'s setting, Sunnydale, to demonstrate how the series elevates middle-class white suburbia by treating it as the aesthetic default. Finally, I analyze the representation of several of non-white characters in the show, including Kendra, Sineya, and Robin Wood, examining their interaction with the show's setting to show how *Buffy* constructs race. Ultimately, I argue that *Buffy*'s representation of race flattens its non-white characters under the guise of inherent difference, even as it adopts a post-racial philosophy.

Putting aside *Buffy*'s usage of the trope for a moment, we can define Othering as the separation of individuals or groups due to a perceived difference in social or political identity. In horror, this separation based on difference is used to evoke fear, represented through a variety of

monstrous forms. Gothic horror, as Jack Halberstam explains in *Skin Shows*, “inspires fear and desire at the same time — fear of and desire for the other, fear of and desire for the possibly latent perversity lurking within the reader herself” (12). Historically, the role of the Other has been filled by all manner of monsters, such as the creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to H.P. Lovecraft’s eldritch abominations. Regardless of its form, the emotion that the Other evokes is predicated on an unknown difference. *Buffy* represents the Other most obviously through its representation of vampires and other supernatural creatures, using horror genre tropes of the unknown to induce fear and terror; but the “mere fact that something is new or strange isn’t enough to make us afraid of it” (Johnson 16). Allan Johnson, aiming to deconstruct cultural myths about difference, challenges the idea that “everyone is naturally frightened by difference,” dubbing such an idea “a cultural myth that, more than anything, justifies keeping outsiders on the outside and treating them badly if they happen to get in” (16).

To an extent, *Buffy* recognizes that the Other has largely been used to play upon mythic fears of difference. Characters that join the main cast in later seasons are pulled directly from the roster of Others that the horror genre uses traditionally to evoke fear and desire of the unknown: Anya the demon and Spike the vampire both eventually come into the good graces of the show’s inner circle of characters, but only after facing hostility and prejudice. In this way, *Buffy* utilizes expectations of the Other to turn the trope on its head, using the dynamic between Othered demons and humans to encourage acceptance of the mythologized Other.

However, *Buffy* tends to construct non-white characters as Others. Despite attempting to subvert traditional conceptions of the Other through its vampire and demon characters, *Buffy* focuses on the inherent difference of non-white individuals when compared to the show’s elevated default of whiteness. Hazel Carby notes that an emphasis on difference, of “otherness”

— most often by the well-meaning liberal — forces us to ask, “different from what and for whom?” She continues, “the theoretical paradigm of difference is obsessed with the construction of identities rather than relations of power and domination, and, in practice, concentrates on the effect of this difference on a (white) norm” (12). While the show promises that humans and demons can share understanding despite differences, it also represents non-white characters as if their differences were “unbridgeable human divisions” (Carby 12), and that coming to a shared understanding can only be done by flattening any and all difference in favor of the white cast of characters. One explanation for this apparent contradiction lies in Carby’s conception of the fantasized black subject, referring to black subjects which have been Othered and reduced to meaningful representations of a monolithic black experience, framed explicitly for a white audience to learn about and respond to an Othered “black experience.” For example, in academia “black texts have been used... to focus on the complexity of response in the (white) reader/student’s construction of self in relation to a (black) perceived ‘other’” (Carby 12). This conception of the Other plays into Halberstam’s definition that the desire for the Other relates to perverse feelings lurking within the reader. Furthermore, the construction of the Other within *Buffy*, as represented through non-white characters, serve a white audience by encouraging a focus on the response that audience has to the Other, rather than attempting to promote an honest understanding *Buffy*’s non-white characters. In short, any individual difference that does exist is flattened as these subjects are converted to a monolithic Other, invited into a putatively “post-racial world” constructed primarily for a white audience.

This race-blind approach to character and setting within *Buffy* ends up inadvertently reproducing race. Because *Buffy* assumes post-racialism, it never realizes the limitations its brand of white feminism places upon its discussions of race. The show can condemn racism, but never

grapples with the structures that informed a setting where Buffy would have zero non-white friends until the seventh season of the show. Bonilla-Silva defines the post-racial school of thought as a “racial ideology based on the superficial extension of the principles of liberalism to racial matters that results in ‘raceless’ explanations for all sort of race-related affairs” (1364). Therefore, post-racialism is still racial ideology, not the absence of racial ideology, capable of reproducing race even as it seeks to minimize it.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, *Buffy* both promotes and minimizes difference. By Othering non-white characters, *Buffy* defines and elevates racial difference via Carby’s conception of unbridgeable human divisions that become a tool for a white audience’s expression. And by adopting a post-racial view, *Buffy* erases and denies difference based on the unequal opportunity its white setting allows its non-white characters. Essentially, the feminism of *Buffy* is an echo of the white feminism bell hooks observed in the 1970s, a “movement erasing and denying difference, not playing race alongside gender, but eliminating race from the picture” (56). The erasure of race in *Buffy* favors the white default it assumes, which only further promotes the idea of non-white characters as something Other.

The post-racialism of *Buffy* is only one aspect of the show designed specifically for white liberal audiences. Chiefly, its progressive feminism, beyond excluding non-white characters, is also performative at times. That is, the show can be more interested in making a (white) audience feel good about themselves rather than critiquing anything meaningful. Although *Buffy* hosts several villains which represent broader structures of institutionalized patriarchy, it also presents a handful of antagonists displaying overtly sexist traits which exist merely to give the audience someone to hate. In “Phases,” Cain, the werewolf hunter, who demeans Buffy’s skill as a fighter

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<sup>3</sup> In “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America,” Barbara Jeanne Fields argues that the “creators and re-creators of race” (118) include well-meaning individuals who promote racial difference in the name of diversity.



because she is a girl, is one such example. Caleb, a preacher who is introduced as he kills a girl and calls her a whore, is another. These villains express an intentionally “exaggerated nature, [which] immediately and undeniably identifies [them] as ‘evil’” (Jowett 16). Barely written as more than sexist caricatures, these characters shift the blame towards bad individuals rather than the institutional power *Buffy* criticizes in forms like the Watcher’s Council.

Likewise, the show occasionally references the racist treatment that non-white characters have historically received in horror: “The black chick always gets it first,” Rona says in “Potential,” a line that white audiences will appreciate for its apparent acknowledgment of racist horror genre traditions. The line also references and by acknowledgement excuses the fact that *Buffy*’s first major non-white character met an unceremonious death not too long after her introduction to the show. White audiences are encouraged to either forget or grow more comfortable with that specific reproduction of a racist tradition, as the acknowledgement seems to be progress enough. As Sarah Ahmed writes in *On Being Included*, it is in moments like these where “antiracism becomes a matter of generating a positive white identity that makes the white subject feel good” (169) rather than seriously challenging any racist traditions. It is a form of “likable whiteness.” Thus, we can read *Buffy*’s post-racial progressiveness as attempting to represent a likable white identity.

Despite paying lip service to anti-racist thought, *Buffy*’s defaulting of whiteness begins with the real-life production of the show, which aids in constructing the fictional setting with a specific brand of whiteness in mind. Specifically, the lighting, blocking, and makeup choices throughout the show privilege whiteness by favoring white faces as the visual standard. Black faces are often decentered, facing away from the camera, or shadowed via unequal lighting when

compared to white actors on the same screen. This phenomenon is not new to movie and television sets, as Richard Dyer explains,

cameras and lighting were developed taking the white face as the touchstone... Certain exposures and lighting set-ups, as well as make-ups and developing processes, have become established as normal. They are constituted as the way to use the medium. Anything else becomes a departure from the norm, or even a problem. In practice, such normality is white. (660)

These film practices, based around the white face, make filming non-white faces a “problem.” Non-white faces become either washed out or overly shadowed when utilizing technologies that have been specifically tuned to the white face. Thus, a white normality comes with “deleterious consequences for non-white performers... evident in films which not only have stars of different colours but also apparently intend to treat them equally” (Dyer 662-663).

Scholars studying the Buffyverse have done so with a view to reconcile its multi-layered representations of race, class, and gender. On one hand, Frances Early argues that the show succeeds as a feminist program, continuing that the character of Buffy both challenges patriarchal beliefs about women and stands as “an open image of an empowered transgressive female just warrior” (57). On the other hand, Lynne Edwards finds that the character of Buffy “fails to push the ideological envelope beyond aggressive female,” noting that the protagonist fulfills many traditionally accepted social identities in that she is “white, middle-class, very attractive, heterosexual, and very feminine” (39-38). Lorna Jowett finds evidence for both readings of the show, as in her critical book-length study of *Buffy*'s approach to sexuality and gender, she finds the series to be a contradictory mixture of “subversive” and “conservative.”

Like Louis and Riggs, I suggest that the show's complex politics cannot be approached in binary terms as a success or failure. The show strives—and at times succeeds—at embodying a “liberal, emancipatory, discursive feminism.” However, “a reading of this effort reveals gaps, inconsistencies, and contradictions within both the show's version of feminist empowerment, and within the larger world's feminisms also” (Louis & Riggs 3). These problems don't necessarily erase the show's attempted engagement with feminism, nor do its attempts at engagement redeem the show as successfully feminist. Across seven seasons of *Buffy*, the series at times decidedly subverts traditional stereotypes of femininity and masculinity, and at other times reinforces those same stereotypes. Furthermore, many of the oft-noted contradictions in *Buffy*'s espoused feminism coincide with its representation of non-white Slayers (young women imbued with strength to protect the world from vampires and other demons) alongside Buffy. As such, there remains an inextricable connection between the show's questions of race and its questions of gender. The espoused feminist philosophy of the series is directly contradicted by the erasure of non-white characters for the first six years of *Buffy*'s run. The feminism of *Buffy* can thus be defined as a specific brand of “white feminism,” where “almost no attention is given to the relationship between girls of different races” (hooks 59). Exceptions where Buffy does interact with non-white characters are especially telling, as they fail to acknowledge or adjust for the elevation of whiteness that permeates the show and results in the reproduction of the Other.

In *Buffy*, Kendra is a black Slayer who is at least equal in power to the show's protagonist, and stronger than any other character on the show. Yet, when displayed alongside other white characters, Kendra is rarely given equal lighting. Instead, she is cast in shadow, often relegated to the side of the frame, even as the white faces she shares the screen with are fully lit. In “What's My Line? Part 1,” Kendra confronts the vampire Angel across the bars of a cage. The

resulting scene frames Angel and Kendra across from each other, but despite Kendra's victory in the preceding action sequence, the lighting does not treat her equally to the white vampire (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Kendra and Angel's confrontation; "What's My Line, Part 1." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, created by Joss Whedon, season 2, episode 9, Mutant Enemy, 1998.

The lighting and blocking in this scene result in a frame which casts Kendra's face in shadow. Combined with the visual obstruction of the cage, her expressions are obscured, and her moment of victory is reduced. In contrast, Angel, pictured on the left, is brightly lit and much more visible than the woman who beat him. The lack of careful lighting for Kendra's face becomes a pattern for her appearances; the disparity in lighting becoming even more obvious when Kendra is portrayed alongside Buffy.

In the next episode, "What's My Line? Part 2," Kendra and Buffy are allied together, possessing of the same supernatural calling, powers, and ability. The two characters should be treated equally. Yet, when the two are pictured interrogating a lead together, Buffy is elevated by virtue of greater visibility (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. The Slayers interrogate Willy; “What’s My Line, Part 2.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, created by Joss Whedon, season 2, episode 10, *Mutant Enemy*, 1998.

Though a dimly lit scene to begin with, the disparity between characters is clear. This time, the white character, Buffy, is placed between Kendra and the light source for this scene, casting a direct shadow over her face. In addition, Kendra is relegated to the side of the frame, allowing for the focus of the scene to be on Buffy’s interrogation of Willy, while Kendra stands passively, nearly invisible, and speaks not one line of dialogue through the whole shot.



Fig. 3. The Slayers interrogate Willy, continued; “What’s My Line, Part 2.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, created by Joss Whedon, season 2, episode 10, *Mutant Enemy*, 1998.

At times during this scene, Kendra’s face all but disappears entirely, as getting a clear shot of Buffy is privileged over lighting Kendra’s face (fig. 3). In this case, Kendra exists within the

frame merely as a tool to elevate Buffy's actions. Kendra becomes nearly invisible, lacking agency in this scene even as she cooperates with Buffy. The result of this treatment of black characters across the show is the creation of the "white normality" that Richard Dyer defines. Lighting for Kendra and making space for her within the frame is a "problem" for *Buffy*, which even if an unconscious decision, constructs the visual space of *Buffy* as one where non-white characters are unwelcome.

Furthermore, though non-white characters are rare on *Buffy*, the show continuously reinforces its production of a white normality by depicting a specific kind of whiteness as normal. For example, the character of Angel is coded a different shade of white depending on whether he's displaying his good persona, or his evil alter ego (fig. 4).

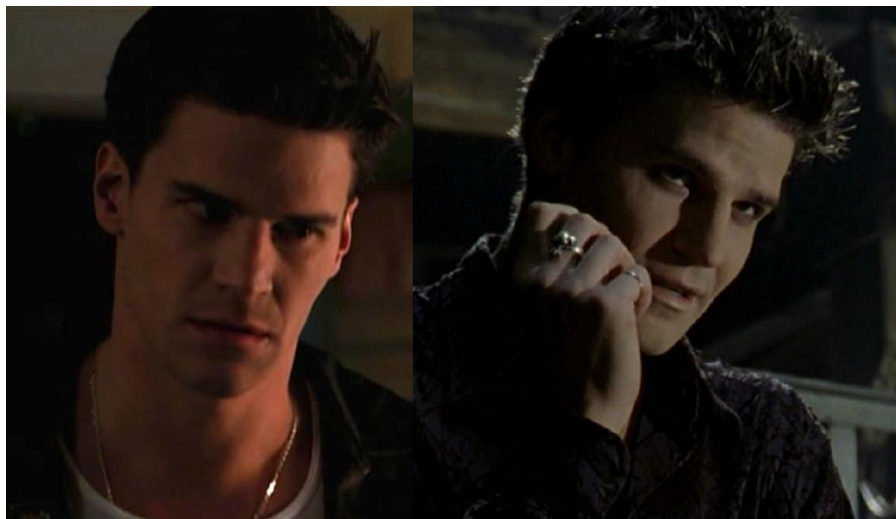


Fig. 4. Comparison of Angel and Angelus' skin tones; "Angel." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, created by Joss Whedon, season 1, episode 7, Mutant Enemy, 1997; "Passion." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, created by Joss Whedon, season 2, episode 17, Mutant Enemy, 1998.

Angel, the good vampire, is pictured warmly lit on the left. On the right, is Angelus, the same character now turned evil, and framed by cold lighting. On top of the change in lighting, Angelus is also wearing makeup that makes his skin tone noticeably paler, along with dark eyeliner that makes the paler shade stand out even more. The pale look of Angelus becomes a shorthand for

the show to convey that this formally good character has been corrupted, marking him as aesthetically different from the rest of the main cast. The shift away from a “healthy white” skin tone is an explicit and intentional choice to showcase Angel’s turn to evil, simultaneously revealing a conscious understanding of the show’s default whiteness. The aesthetic choices surrounding Angel highlight that the production does understand how to light for different skin tones, contrary to the seemingly accidental lighting gaffes that shadow the show’s non-white characters. Furthermore, the choice of coding Angelus as an extremely pale white demonstrates that *Buffy*’s construction of normality is limited to a specific kind of whiteness.

Within *Buffy*’s fiction, the town of Sunnydale, the setting, is constructed as a ubiquitously white and specifically middle-class neighborhood. From a numerical standpoint, a town supposedly located in Southern California skewing so much towards white demographics does so to an unrealistic degree. However, *Buffy*’s depiction of Sunnydale as white extends beyond the number of non-white characters onscreen. The extent of varied environments the audience witnesses onscreen within the setting of Sunnydale is threefold: Buffy’s high school, Buffy’s neighborhood, and darkened alleyways. The “normal” Sunnydale that the audience sees consists of brightly lit suburban neighborhoods. In the darkened alleyways, Buffy fights off the threats to the suburban lifestyle that seemingly make up the entirety of Sunnydale. When the town is finally destroyed in the finale of the series, the protagonists mourn the loss of staples of the middle-class suburban lifestyle, “all those shops gone, the Gap, Starbucks, Toys ‘R’ Us...” While written as a joke, the line is emblematic of the construction of Sunnydale as a two-dimensional town. The first dimension is that of the middle-class normality which Buffy lives in, and the second is that of the dark underground, composed of both alleyways and literal underground sewers, where monsters roam and threaten the suburban dimension. The parallels

between this construction of Sunnydale and the racial anxieties that white suburban neighborhoods are often fraught with in the real world is not to be overlooked, as through these parallels the show establishes middle-class suburbia as its normality.

*Buffy* certainly doesn't ignore this parallel, as when Mr. Trick, a black vampire, assumes the Mayor has asked to see him to run him out of town due to being an undesirable element. In "Homecoming," Trick makes explicit the racial normality that Sunnydale assumes, "if this is the point where you tell me that I don't fit in here in your quiet little neighborhood, you can just skip it. 'Cause, see, that all got old long before I became a vampire." Here, the show nears a critique of its own construction of race, recognizing that Trick doesn't fit within the show's setting because he has been Othered not only as a monster, but as a black person. At this moment, *Buffy* recognizes that Sunnydale resembles a segregated white suburb that disadvantages people of color. Unfortunately, however, the show seems to forget this idea almost as soon as it recognizes its own structural racism. Trick pays more lip service to the idea in "Faith, Hope & Trick" — "I mean, admittedly, it's not a haven for the brothers. You know, strictly the Caucasian persuasion here in the Dale" — but the show never pursues the concept further. Instead, the show presents Sunnydale as racially segregated, but then tries to pass that off as normal, minimizing the consequences of defaulting whiteness. The show assumes that by adopting post-racial view Bonilla-Silva defines, such racial segregation can instead be attributed to any manner of "raceless" explanations.

Thus *Buffy* tries to have it both ways. First, the show explores themes of racism and Othering through its horror tropes, deigning to subvert the fears that the genre historically plays upon. But when non-white characters are introduced, the drops any pretense of investigating the social structures that govern race as a "system of difference." (Hall) At most, the show seems to



acknowledge its construction of institutional racism through the show's elevation of white suburbia as the norm. But it never extends that acknowledgement into a critique, instead justifying its world by taking a race-blind approach to its characters, ignoring differences so long as they conform to the white normality. The result of this post-racial approach is a world that minimizes the racial difference bell hooks recognizes, elevating whiteness as the default experience. When non-white characters cannot or do not conform to that assumed default, their difference is played up as inherent, even as an unbridgeable divide such as Carby describes, existing only for white characters and audiences to Other and derive pleasure from.

Specifically, the character of Buffy benefits the most from the treatment of non-white characters on the show. The non-white Slayers introduced throughout the show consistently act as foils to Buffy's character, their difference helping her learn something about herself, before they are written off the show. Rachel McMurray, in her essay on non-white Slayers in *Buffy*, notes that "the privilege carried by Buffy's social status endows her with an agency simply unavailable" (60) to the non-white Slayers who are compared to her. Instead of critiquing racial ideology, the post-racial world adapted by *Buffy* favors focusing on individual difference, recreating race as a way to categorize that difference, instead of confronting the social structures that use racial ideology to create that difference in the first place. For example, the show never truly interrogates why Sunnydale is constructed as white segregated suburbia that it is, instead preferring to contend that anyone, regardless of race, could fit within its white normality. Barbara Jeanne Fields defines the recreation of race as "placing them [people of color] in a world exclusively theirs and outside history..." (118) Likewise, *Buffy* places its black characters outside the world of Sunnydale, as "fantasized black subjects" (Carby) that intrude on the presumed white norm. They are treated as foreign, different, and to some extent unknowable.

Because they enter a show in which they do not fit into the assumed default, they are inherently disadvantaged, forced to adapt or risk a tragic end.

The best example of *Buffy*'s treatment of non-white characters is the introduction of Kendra, the Other Slayer. In the show's mythology, there is never supposed to be more than one Slayer — more than one with vampire-fighting superpowers — at a time, when Kendra, a black Slayer is introduced, there is an immediate conflict involving whose identity as the Slayer is most authentic. Suddenly, Buffy's identity as the Slayer is challenged by the arrival of Kendra. In the end, Kendra merely acts as a challenge for Buffy to overcome and rightfully claim her identity as the slayer. Lynne Edwards, in her essay on the character of Kendra, observed that her identity "as a black Slayer... also signifies true Otherness; a Slayer seeking to pass for *the* Slayer" (42). Kendra can come close to acceptance by the show's setting by assimilating and allowing Buffy to teach her to shed her difference. However, Kendra's identity is forever marked as Other due to Buffy's status as the authentic and original Slayer. In the end, Kendra's difference can never claim the identity of the Slayer, only a Slayer; with that token identity, Kendra cannot be portrayed as truly equal to Buffy.

From her first appearance onscreen, the audience is told that Kendra does not belong in Sunnydale. She is an Other, belonging to the same category as the vampires, monsters, and demons that permeate the underbelly of Sunnydale. Kendra's first scene has no dialogue, in fact she remains silent for much of her first episode. When she finally speaks, her difference is only exacerbated further. "Could you stop with the Slayer thing?" Buffy asks in "What's my Line? Part 2," "I'm the damn Slayer!" Kendra's reply comes in a stilted accent, "Nonesense! Dere is but one, and I am she." Immediately, we recognize Buffy as being more casual than Kendra and willing to swear. Buffy continues the confrontation with her signature use of slang, "I'll back off,

but you promise not to go all wiggy...” Kendra betrays her difference by not understanding Buffy’s slang at first, to which Buffy taunts, “You know... No kick-o, no fight-o?” Finally, Kendra responds with the formal and passive, “I accept your scenario,” offering no emotional response to the condescending words she just received. Overall, “Kendra lacks the same agency exhibited by Buffy. Kendra’s speech style is passive, far more formal, and deferential than Buffy’s...” (Edwards 42) This gap in agency is exhibited in a number of other ways throughout the episode, allowing Buffy to maintain full possession of her identity as the Slayer.

Visually, the difference of Kendra when compared to the white default, represented by Buffy, is immediate and numerous. Though they share a common power, when standing side by side, the two Slayers have several aesthetic differences from each other (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Buffy and Kendra stand side by side; “What’s My Line, Part 2.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, created by Joss Whedon, season 2, episode 10, Mutant Enemy, 1998.

Here, Buffy remains centered, both figuratively and literally within the frame. Meanwhile, Kendra is relegated to the side of the frame. Immediately, comparisons between the two draw marked differences. Buffy poses with slouched posture, hand on her hip, wearing baggy clothes, with her emotions displayed uninhibited across her face. On the other hand, Kendra stands

straight with her hands clasped behind her back, wearing tight fitting clothes and exotic jewelry, all the while keeping a disciplined and stoic expression on her face. Despite the shared identity, the show positions a stark difference between these two characters in their calling as the Slayer, and their approach to the job. One approach fits within the narrow assumptions of Sunnydale, and one approach does not.

Thus, the show Others Kendra not only in appearance and personality, but through the visual structure of the show's ostensible moments of female collaboration. The question of legitimacy between Kendra and Buffy is precluded by Kendra's Othering, favoring Buffy not only because she is the protagonist of a show called *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but also because she represents the show's assumed normality. The only time at which Kendra is represented as an equal to Buffy is when Kendra attempts to be more like the white Slayer, such as at the end of "What's My Line? Part 2" when Kendra borrows Buffy's clothes and promises to "sit in a seat, not the cargo hold" — contrary to how Kendra entered the show. But even this promise to change and be more "normal" is not enough. During her next appearance on the show, Kendra is murdered, and following her death, Faith is introduced. Faith fulfills a similar role, being a white, lower class Slayer who also challenges Buffy's identity as the Slayer. Faith too, is different from Buffy, her lower class marking her as different in a category of identity, a category that like race, is "socially rather than biologically real" (Bonilla-Silva 1360). However, Faith receives a fully developed character arc, survives to the end of the show, and takes part in sharing Buffy's power equally despite difference. Kendra, on the other hand, merely acts as a steppingstone so the show can move on to Faith.

Kendra's fate on *Buffy* is ultimately plagued by the "color-blind racism" that Bonilla-Silva defines as masquerading in a post-racial environment. Racial ideology is not confronted by

rather placed on Kendra individually: Kendra is merely the first in a line of non-white Slayers that the show introduces, but whose purpose is to die. In consequence, Kendra's difference — not white, not middle class — when compared to Buffy is essentialized by transforming Kendra into the “fantasized black female subject” that Carby evokes. This essentialization is done both to further the status of Buffy as the titular Slayer, but also to justify a post-racial but still segregated setting. As Carby posits, the focus on difference in regard to Kendra “becomes totally compatible with — rather than a threat to — the rigid frameworks of segregation and ghettoization at work throughout our society” (12). Even when Kendra attempts to minimize her difference by changing her methods to match Buffy's, it seems the only way she can win any real approval as a Slayer is when she dies fighting vampires. Even then, the effect of Kendra's death is primarily in enabling the arrival of Faith, rather than resulting in any notable loss or mourning from the characters on the show.

In “Restless,” Buffy's confrontation with another black slayer, Sineya (also known as the First Slayer), is similarly revealing of the gap in agency between Buffy and non-white Slayers. In a dream sequence, the two Slayers stand opposite each other (fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Buffy and Sineya stand opposite each other; “Restless.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, created by Joss Whedon, season 4, episode 22, *Mutant Enemy*, 2000.

On one side of the frame, Buffy stands facing us, standing straight with a feminine dress — note that this is a reversal of her scene with Kendra. On the other side of the frame crouches Sineya, the First Slayer. She stands facing away from the audience, dressed in torn rags, paint on her skin, and by contrast very unfeminine. Though Sineya holds a chronological precedence over Buffy for the identity of Slayer, she is also portrayed as primitive and violent. In other words, Buffy is an evolution of Sineya, and Sineya’s primitive nature is painted as unknowable. As a reversal of Buffy’s comparison with Kendra, this example shows that despite Kendra and Sineya being markedly different, they have both been labeled as the Other, stripping away their difference. Buffy as the white protagonist will always represent the default the show assumes; the non-white Slayers will always represent a monolithic difference.

Furthermore, during this scene, Sineya fulfills the role of a fantasized black subject. She is first quite literally stripped of her voice. “I have no speech, no name,” says Tara, the woman who literally speaks for the First Slayer, unable to vocalize her own words. As Sineya introduces herself by proxy, she only furthers her difference as unknowable. “I am destruction — absolute, alone,” she says. In response, Buffy realizes she herself is not alone, even as Sineya repeats the assertion that she has “no friends... We are alone.” In this moment, Sineya only exists as a tool

for Buffy to discover something about herself in her response. As Carby notes that black texts have been “reduced to a tool to motivate that response,” Sineya has been reduced to a subject to evoke a complex response from Buffy. Even though Buffy verbally decries the fact that someone is speaking for Sineya in this scene, that line of dialogue doesn’t change the servile role the First Slayer ends up playing as first unknowable other, then catalyst for Buffy’s introspection.

Examining other non-white protagonists—of which there are few—we can find a rare example of a non-white character who seems to at first to fit into the show’s setting. In the final season of the show, the black principal of the high school, Robin Wood, is introduced to the recurring cast. He is the first black character to appear in more than a few episodes across a single season and to become a strong ally of Buffy — without dying. Robin, in contrast to Kendra, doesn’t have the same issues in needing to change to be more like Buffy to adapt to life in Sunnydale. In fact, coming in the final season of the show, we might read Robin as a response to the mistreatment of non-white characters in the show’s past. Unlike Kendra, he already fits into the setting just fine, his difference to Buffy minimized rather than essentialized.

However, even as Principal Wood stands as a critique of the show’s past handling of non-white protagonists, a pattern begins to emerge which reveals the specific normality non-white characters are encouraged to fit within in order to be portrayed as equal to white characters on the show. That is, while both Kendra and Sineya are Othered due to their immediate aesthetic difference to Buffy, Robin Wood enters the show already conforming to the normality the setting has defined. Lorna Jowett reads Wood as “whitewashed” and “assimilated,” (14) a middle-class professional from a place much like Sunnydale. In addition, as the son of a previously deceased Slayer, he is automatically given approval and equal status to Buffy. As a result, he is not Othered, and instead implied to be just like Buffy.

An early exchange between Buffy and Robin Wood reveals another dimension to the show's handling of his character. In the episode "Help" (Season 7), Wood refers to where he grew up in passing, to which Buffy innocently asks, "the hood?" Robin replies, "Beverly Hills... which is a hood." The moment is passed over and played for laughs but is rather revealing about the nature of the show's setting. That is, Buffy's assumption that the principal comes from a neighborhood quite unlike Sunnydale is seen as ridiculous. Instead, the audience is reassured that Robin Wood hails from an upper middle-class neighborhood, thus making his ability to thrive within Sunnydale when compared to other non-white characters consistent.

On the other hand, this moment also stands as a critique of the exaggerated difference which plagued characters like Kendra. Buffy, because of Robin's race, assumes that there must exist some greater divide between them. In response, Robin assures her, and the audience, that he grew up in a 'hood' not unlike her own, likely with similar experiences. This would play against some of Carby's fears of constructing the essential black figure as essentially unknowable due to some inherent difference in culture or race. Robin Wood, unlike Kendra, is not constructed as an "other" or distinctly different from Buffy in any meaningful way. Therefore, he can exist as a black character who doesn't encourage a reading of himself to satisfy the desires of white characters or audiences. However, Robin being the sole exception to a troubling pattern of representation in *Buffy* leaves an unsettling implicit conclusion. That is, non-white characters, to escape being labeled as an 'other,' must fit within *Buffy*'s specific middle class, suburban mold.

Wood's existence fails to challenge the white normality of Sunnydale, as he fits within the specific middle-class mold that the show supports. In this case, Wood poses an exception when viewed alongside Kendra and Sineya. He is like Buffy, inhabiting many traditionally accepted social identities; he is middle-class, straight, and attractive. When compared with



Kendra, a non-white character who is portrayed as different to the point of being unable to fit in to the landscape of the show, Wood seems to exist only because he already fits into the required mold. Though Kendra attempts to assimilate into the overwhelmingly white world of the show, she fails to even survive, despite learning to flatten some of her difference. In consequence, *Buffy* depicts a world in which non-white characters are accepted and elevated to the same status as the white cast, but only if they can fit within specific parameters. This want of the show to pretend that every character is or can be the same with regards to the show's setting, ends up only exacerbating the idea of inherent, irreconcilable difference in characters like Kendra. In essence, the show deigns to ignore the systemic structures that enforce the idea of racial difference.

Thus, the show's setting, normalized as white, creates an irreconcilable contradiction: the existence of black characters so destabilizes the show that their treatment as Others simultaneously exaggerates and flattens out difference. At the core of *Buffy*'s progressive messaging is an ignorance of the white norm the show has elevated. Without acknowledging the elevation of that norm, almost any black character introduced is hopelessly made into the Other, despite the overall themes of the show. Even when the show does briefly pay lip service to the fact of the show's whiteness, it only ever extends to acknowledgement, and never legitimate challenge of that normality. Ultimately, *Buffy* promotes racial difference as the assumed white normality of the show Others its non-white characters. At the same time, the show ignores differences in how its setting disproportionately favors whiteness and disadvantages non-white characters. The post-racialism of *Buffy* only recreates race as the failure of non-white characters is placed on their Otherness rather than examining the baseline assumptions of the show that cause these characters to be Othered.

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