

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: SUBJACENT CULTURE, ORTHOGONAL  
COMMUNITY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC  
ANALYSIS OF AN ON-LINE *BUFFY THE*  
*VAMPIRE SLAYER* FAN COMMUNITY

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This dissertation presents an ethnographic analysis of the community of fans of the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* whose members frequented the online linear posting board known as The Bronze. *Buffy* originally aired from 1997 until 2003, but the community that formed at the official *Buffy* fan site in 1997 continues on in real life and on line, having survived the end of *Buffy* and the closure of all three of its official posting boards.

This study uses an interdisciplinary combination of textual analysis and ethnographic techniques (interviews, participant observation, autoethnography, cyberethnography) to ascertain the importance, relevance, and meaning of The Bronze community to its members, known as Bronzers. I argue that the nature of the linear posting board allowed Bronzers to form a unique and long-lived community by using The Bronze in creative and imaginative ways. In particular, language—to some degree appropriated from *Buffy*—was used by Bronzers to write a better world for themselves on

line. Hence, the community is built on (and maintained by) language that is used in an unusually postmodern manner.

As a group, Bronzers tend to be highly educated, literary, and artistic. To Bronzers, much of *Buffy*'s appeal was its emotional realism and imaginative depth. Unusually for television, these elements were combined with strong female leading roles, a cast of bookish and somewhat countercultural characters, and a foregrounding of emotionality and interpersonal relationships. Bronzers were drawn to these aspects of *Buffy*—which formed its “gothic aesthetic”—and in turn created their own somewhat countercultural community, one that came to reflect their own close ties and emotional attachments.

I argue that The Bronze community exists subjacent to mainstream cultural formations, and orthogonal to real life communities. Using this framework, a number of implications emerge for computer-mediated communication in general, including an explanation for the prevalence of hostility in online communication. Furthermore, when situated in its broader context, The Bronze can be seen as a meager palliative to the damaging effects of contemporary post-industrial capitalism, one that nonetheless illumines the brightly stultifying commonplaces that lead people to seek shelter in dimly-lit imagined spaces.

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ANALYSIS OF AN ON-LINE BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER FAN  
COMMUNITY

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## Chapter 1: Introduction<sup>1</sup>

It was a Sunday morning in March of 1997, and I was flipping through all the junk that comes wrapped in plastic in the Sunday *Washington Post*. The *TV Week* magazine caught my eye: the cover announced an interview with the star of a new television series entitled *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Moore). I found it hard not to smile at the title. The name *Buffy*, ever since I could remember, connoted the exact opposite of *Vampire Slayer*. I mean, everyone knew that slaying vampires was a dirty business, certainly not the purview of some prissy brat in heels. *Buffy* was just no kind of name for a badass vampire slayer.

The *TV Week* cover reminded me that I had wanted to see the 1992 movie from which the series took its name, but had never gotten around to it. I never really liked horror movies, but had always been fond of vampire stories, and this *Buffy* movie seemed like it might have the right combination of (1) vampire lore and (2) not being stupid and gross. Plus, it seemed a clever idea to me that the “chosen one,” the unwitting recipient of a unique talent for killing vampires, was a popular, rich, snotty, ultra-trendy high school cheerleader.

And so the interview with Sarah Michelle Gellar, the actress playing the new Buffy, caught my attention. I was reminded that I had recently heard somewhere that *Buffy* was being turned into a television series, and I had wanted to watch it. So I checked the listings, and noticed that the first episode had already aired. I was miffed, but not too much, because I figured that, like most TV shows, and especially those based on books or movies, this one would suck. I imagined yet another horrid spin-off of the



*Ferris Bueller* faux-teen-angst genre, wherein cruel teachers would oppress their students through the use of such torturous devices as taking attendance and imparting useful information.

Such were the thoughts that fluttered in the back of my mind as I turned the page to read the interview. In retrospect, it's not surprising that my automatic reaction to a new show would be the expectation of a complete inability to relate to it. That's how I react to most TV shows, and indeed much of popular culture. For example, I love popular music, but most of what I've heard on the radio since the 1990s—roughly when Infinity Broadcasting bought up all my favorite radio stations—is intolerably annoying. It's a rare thing for me to be impressed by, much less enjoy, a movie. And as for TV: I don't even know what channels the major networks are on, and, frankly, I enjoy most commercials more than most TV shows. And I hate commercials.

Perhaps this attitude is characteristic of the coveted “male, 18 to 34” demographic. Indeed, perhaps the reason we were so coveted was that we—I include myself in this group, even though I grew out of it during *Buffy*'s original run—were consumers of popular culture who disdained popular culture. Then again, maybe it was just a matter of taste, no doubt partly informed by the fact that it's hard to be mainstream when one is marked (as am I) as a racial outsider. Or, perhaps this was not so much a matter of age or taste, but of demographics: the cultural landscape that my generation had inherited increasingly felt like a homogenized wasteland, characterized by crass commercialism, self-righteous consumerism, and the valorization of excess (Gordinier 11-19). My predecessors, the Baby Boom generation—that demographic juggernaut whose leading lights had spectacularly and unselfconsciously failed to die before they got

old—seemed clueless about the dangers lurking just below the surface of their glossy American dream, apparently unaware of the monsters slowly being unleashed by the uniquely American combination of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and exceptionalism.<sup>2</sup> They were seemingly oblivious (or perhaps merely sequestered in suburbs and SUVs) to the slow-motion train-wreck of increasing poverty, ongoing wars, collapsing economies, rising inequality, unrelenting institutionalized bigotry, flourishing anti-intellectualism, revivifying culture-war demonization, and, not to put too fine a point on it, our feckless march toward global environmental apocalypse.

It was in this dispiriting context that I found myself (perhaps ironically) reading about what was on TV, figuring that doing so would save me the trouble of having to actually watch TV. Thus, as I read the interview with Sarah Michelle Gellar, the star of the new *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (BtVS) TV series, it came as quite a surprise that she was describing her role in very different terms than I had expected. Gellar, who by 1997 had spent 15 of her 20 years as a television actress, had won an Emmy, and looked every bit the stereotypical California bleached-blond bombshell she played on *Buffy*, and who had already won an Emmy, was talking about what it was like to be an “other.”<sup>3</sup>

An “other” what? What on earth could she have had to complain about? Embedded somewhere in that interview—whether or not Gellar intended it to be—was that everyone, and everything, can be an “other.” Some are more “other” than others, but to some degree, everyone and everything has the potential to be alienated and “otherized.” This was much more depth than I had expected. So I watched the show. A lot.

Computers are a lot like televisions. That's probably because the only part of the computer I regularly look at is the display, which is really just a TV screen. But beyond that, they both have the same unfulfilled promise. Television offers us worlds both sublime and mundane. On TV, life is as it should be, full of magic and mystery, and the world is a consumer paradise where we can be what we want and satisfy virtually every human need and desire. I find that it's not hard to get sucked into the magical world—and worldview—of TV.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, it's also not too difficult to break television's spell. Usually, all it takes is simply turning my head and noticing that I'm still in my living room. But, just in case that's too much effort, I can always just wait a few minutes for the next commercial, when a few loud words from my sponsor will usually snap me out of my reverie by reminding me that my life will undoubtedly be empty and unfulfilling unless I talk to my doctor about a wide variety of conditions I don't have and don't want to know about, especially if they involve former Senator Bob Dole advertising Viagra on The Weather Channel. Which, by the way, is exactly the kind of shameless commercialism that fuels my contempt for television and will probably leave me scarred for life, and all because I made the mistake of turning on the TV to find out if it was going to rain.<sup>5</sup>

Like TV-land, cyberspace is a vast uncharted territory that promises to change the world as we know it, especially if the world as we know it needs more porn. Web sites are a gateway to fantasy sitting right atop our desks. And yet, the most wondrous sites with the most impressive graphics, even if not punctuated by slow connections and all manner of advertisements, are hardly impressive when bathed in the fluorescent glow of my windowless office, my constant reminder that I'm probably not having fun.<sup>6</sup> But

even if this wasn't the case, and even if my gateway to a better world was somehow more enticing than the little coffee-stained monitor on my desk, there would still be one unavoidable fact: the Web, just like TV, is really just a bunch of overhyped moving pictures on a screen. It's all about marketing a fantasy that will never be real enough to offer more than a fleeting and unsatisfying—but potentially addictive—escape from reality.

That, at least, is how I saw things in 1997, when *Buffy* first aired. But in Internet years, 1997 was eons ago. Since then, several generations of technology have come and gone. Now, rather than turning on the TV to see Viagra ads, I can simply check my email. For example, in the junk folder in my e-mail application, at this very moment, 10 of 37 messages—that's 27% of my junk mail, and 6% of all incoming mail—have *Pfizer* (the maker of Viagra) in the subject line.<sup>7</sup> And, lest the reader suspect that I'm exaggerating the importance of technology to the Brave New World on our mass-mediated horizon, I might also mention that in Afghanistan—the site of the longest-running US war in history—not only have US forces increasingly been using unmanned drones for so-called “targeted” assassinations, but they've also been using Viagra to bribe Afghani warlords.<sup>8</sup>

Back in 1997, I recorded *Buffy* on videocassette tapes (I recorded every episode starting with the second because, like many other fans, I knew I would want to watch the episodes again before the next episode aired). But videotapes and VCRs have all but disappeared, having been replaced by DVD, Blu-Ray, Tivo, YouTube, BitTorrent, iTunes, and a variety of on-line streaming options. Indeed, when *Buffy* first aired, having a “web presence” was a relatively new idea. Now, however, many broadcast television

shows and some pay-TV shows can be viewed on line without charge, while others are available on line for a fee. Furthermore, due in part to deregulation—especially the Telecommunications Act of 1996—media consolidation has increased dramatically in the last several years, leading to a decrease in the diversity of programming on traditional media outlets (Zinn 671). One result has been a movement away from broadcasting: some television series now offer additional or related Web-only episodes, while others have been made solely for on-line viewing (Kushner “TV”). For example, *Star Trek: Phase II* is a free on-line series, while *Dr. Horrible* was an attempt by the creator of *Buffy* to determine whether television available via the Internet could be a viable alternative to broadcast television (Kushner “Revolt”).

Computer technology has changed even more dramatically than television technology. I no longer stare at a beige, coffee-stained, 14-inch cathode-ray tube (CRT) monitor. I now stare at a variety of digital displays, none of which are either beige or coffee-stained, a fact that apparently reflects a less utilitarian aesthetic on the part of the computer industry, as well as greater awareness on my part of where not to put my coffee. Similarly, my TV is no longer a 13-inch, 60-pound box full of tubes. It, too, is a digital flat-panel display, even more like a computer screen than was my tube TV. Thus, not only has technology changed, but it has ostensibly increased the similarity between televised entertainment and computing.

So-called “new media”—media forms based on digital data and technology—have grown increasingly compatible with traditional broadcast media over the last several years. However, new media technology—computers and Internet-based technology—has changed much faster than broadcast technology, allowing it to encroach on television’s

position as American society's primary entertainment medium. Indeed, although the Internet has been in existence since the 1960s, it was largely arcane until the 1990s (Rheingold 59). The word *cyberspace* was coined by William Gibson in 1984, but it was not until the creation in 1990 of the World Wide Web—an application that could be used to “browse” through sites or “pages” that were accessible via the Internet—that the Internet became generally accessible or useful (Whittaker 4, 19). The Web was made publicly available in 1991, and the first free graphical Web browser, Mosaic, became available in 1993 (NCSA; Stewart; Whittaker 250). Even then, however, very few people used the Internet or the Web. In 1997 (when *Buffy* first aired), 2% of people worldwide and 22% of people in the US were Internet users (ITU “Internet”). By 2011, those figures had risen to 32% of people worldwide (with much of the recent increase in use coming from Asia), and 78% of people in the US (ITU “Percentage”).

When new episodes of *Buffy* were airing, it was among the most-viewed of the shows on the fledgling Warner Brothers television network (The WB), but overall was one of the least-watched shows on television. The number of *Buffy* viewers ranged from around one million to five million per episode. BtVS's low viewership typically caused it to be ranked in the bottom half of primetime television shows, and it was often ranked very near the bottom.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, *Buffy* was critically acclaimed as one of the best shows on TV, and was considered a “cult hit” that drew just enough viewers and had a strong enough on-line fan base to keep The WB in business.

By 2011, the media landscape had changed significantly. Perhaps most obviously, it could accommodate a significant increase in both size and activity. Internet use had grown to the point that *Buffy* could be found in Encyclopædia Britannica Online,

“Buffy Studies” had acquired its own on-line academic journal (and Wikipedia entry). However, in some areas new media was attracting surprisingly large numbers. For example, the world’s most-played massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), *World of Warcraft*, boasted 12 million subscribers at its peak (Blizzard; Vidalon). The world’s largest “social networking” website, Facebook, provides an even more dramatic example: created in 2004, it claimed some 500 million users in 2010, 800 million in 2011, and a billion in 2012 (Darwell; “Facebook Growth”; “Facebook Statistics”; Silvers; “The Recap”).

Indeed, there has even occurred a shift in terminology during these few years. What was once referred to as *cyberspace*, which is itself an abstract conceptual terrain accessible via the World Wide Web, is now commonly, and incorrectly (although perhaps ironically), referred to metonymically as “the Internet.” That the physical medium, the wires and hardware, is in public discourse considered a reasonable approximation of an abstract conceptual environment is an indication that cyberspace is now seen as much less exotic and sublime, and much more quotidian. Thus, it seems that in the nation’s cultural imagination, the Internet has gone from a new frontier to a mundane fact of everyday life.

The few individuals who did regularly use the Web in the mid-90s were clustered at universities and other white-collar, high-tech, research-oriented workplaces (Rheingold 61). And those few people were generally familiar with computers and computing. The Web was much less intuitive than it is now, as Web sites were mostly text, web communities were text-based, access to the Internet required knowledge of text-based code and commands, and very few Americans even had Internet access, much less the

ability to access and modify Web-based content. Thus, if anything, computer and television technology have been increasing in similarity since the 1990s, as computer technology has advanced rapidly, enabling computers to be used not only in research environments, but also as the primary medium for both home entertainment and commerce.

I hadn't realized it at the time, but the relationship between three different media—my brain, my TV, and my computer—began to form when I first started watching *Buffy*. I was, at the time, working as a statistics programmer. My job was, basically, to compute. More specifically, my job was to tell a computer to run statistics programs that would make the computer generate statistical data that I would interpret. Much of my time was spent writing equations using code. Thus, at best, the computer was to me a symbol of an opaque technology that made me work hard and think hard. And at worst—and this was by far the more typical experience for me—it was the direct cause of hours spent in frustrating isolation, trapped indoors with my head throbbing from eye strain, wishing I was outside actually doing something. To me, the computer was both the symbol and the cause of anti-social behavior. Why anyone would ever have even bothered to invent the thing in the first place was beyond me.<sup>10</sup> The fact that I spent my days in front of such a machine reflected my abject failure to avoid what I hated doing. And yet, despite all this, I found myself surrounded by more and more personal computers, and fewer and fewer people who used them to compute. Indeed, these hi-tech devices, these ubiquitous beige boxes, seemed for the most part to be merely fancy typewriters. And so I found myself wondering whether they were good for anything



other than statistics and spell-checking.

It was at this job that it occurred to me that, to many people who fall roughly into the occupational category commonly known as “middle management,” computers were good not only for computing, but for professing the technological prowess of their users. In other words, computers existed to justify their own existence, while simultaneously conveying status upon the user. Having found myself in a work environment in which one of my main tasks was to maintain my technical skills—or at least the appearance thereof—I availed myself of the opportunity to familiarize myself with computer technology. And so it was that I discovered another use for computers: they were more than just fancy calculators and spell-checking typewriters; they could also be used to get information.

Back then, most of the work-related information I was looking for on the Web was just as difficult to obtain as it was without using the Web; the main difference was that if I was going to not find something, I could not find it faster. Fortunately, *Buffy*-related information wasn't like this. Having rapidly become completely obsessed with *Buffy*, one of my first information-gathering projects using the newly discovered power of the Internet was therefore to find *Buffy* sites. The official site—at the time at [www.BuffySlayer.com](http://www.BuffySlayer.com), and then at [www.Buffy.com](http://www.Buffy.com)—was my favorite of these. Not only was there a great animated logo that I could have running in the background, but there were helpful things like episode summaries, biographies of the actors, and links to the Web sites of bands (almost all of whom were unsigned, and most of whom I really liked) who played at the show's fictitious club, The Bronze. There was also an area where I could go to talk with *Buffy* fans. This area was also called *The Bronze*,

apparently indicating that this was a virtual version of the club on *Buffy*. I assumed this took me to a chat room, which I was familiar with, but not particularly interested in, and so I avoided this part of the site. But, one day, being curious and having explored the rest of the site, I clicked on the icon for entering The Bronze, and was greeted with the following message:

Welcome to The Bronze  
PLEASE READ BEFORE ENTERING  
The Bronze Posting Board is a highly developed community of "Buffy"  
fans from around the world. If you're new, it can seem confusing, or you  
may feel like it's difficult to be heard. Please read the following  
information to learn more about how to participate<sup>11</sup>

And so it happened that I discovered a third use for computers: they could be used for finding research topics.

When I first saw the welcome message at The Bronze, however, I had no idea that a research topic was brewing in the back of my brain. At the time, all that registered was surprise at the notion that computers were intentionally being used for yet another purpose that I hadn't considered: they were being used to communicate, to build communities. As it turns out, I would review the information on this page repeatedly, both in order to learn how to participate and to try to understand some of the rules and assumptions on which this community was based. My initial reaction, however, was to the excerpt above: I had no idea how a community, much less a "highly developed" and global community, could come into existence based on a Web site that was based on a TV show.

How was it possible that, hidden in the ether and connected to the wires running to my desk, there were people who were part of a highly-developed global community? What exactly did it mean to be a "community" of people who did not interact in person,

and whose community was based on a Web site that was based on a TV show? Why would a community form in, of all places, cyberspace? How could there be a community of persons whose only common ground was twice removed from real life?

This dissertation presents an ethnographic analysis of the on-line community of fans of the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (BtVS) whose members frequented the online linear posting board known as The Bronze.<sup>12</sup> BtVS began its seven-season run on the fledgling Warner Brothers (The WB) television network as a mid-season replacement for a canceled show. Original episodes aired on The WB from March, 1997, until 2001. The show ended after two more years, in 2003, on Paramount Studio's network, UPN; *Buffy's* spin-off series, *Angel*, remained on The WB and ended in 2004. But the internet fan community that formed at the official *Buffy* fan site in 1997 continues on in real life (RL) and on line, having survived the end of *Buffy* and the closure of all three of its official posting boards.

This study uses a combination of textual analysis and ethnographic techniques as typically practiced in American Studies to ascertain the importance, relevance, and meaning of The Bronze community to its members, who refer to themselves as Bronzers. The Bronze community is here defined loosely, and is understood to function according to community member's definitions as an open community—there are no membership requirements—that continues to function as a global community.

As discussed further in chapter 4, this dissertation is also something of an experiment in ethnographic and auto-ethnographic writing. The community of interest in this ethnography existed not only in cyberspace, but in language, in words.

Understanding the community required my immersion in it; hence, “writing culture” requires the language of the community as well as academic language. This ethnography is also to some degree an example of its own subject matter, as it not only documents a community, but expresses it in a manner similar to that in which community members express themselves, to allow the reader to experience the community in similar fashion to my own experience with the community. In other words, as well as analyzing this community and interpreting its member’s meanings and behaviors, I convey what it felt like to be a community member. Hence, the approach taken here is empirical and chronological, foregrounding the lived experience of community members.

The primary concern underlying this study is community, community membership, community activities, and the meaning of community to individual members. But the question remains: what is meant by the word *community*? As the ethnographer, I was very concerned with this question; it turns out, however, that I was the only one. As addressed in chapter 4, all of my informants readily described the ways in which their community was a unique community. But none of them, even when prompted, questioned whether it really was a community. However it is that Bronzers define “community,” The Bronze clearly fits their definition.

A less tautological approach might be to start with Raymond Williams, who writes in Keywords that the concept of community “became established in English in a range of senses.” These five senses are: (1) “the commons or common people, as distinguished from those of rank”; (2) “a state of organized society, in its later uses relatively small”; (3) “the people of a district”; (4) “the quality of holding something in common, as in community of interests, community of goods”; (5) “a sense of common

identity and characteristics” (75). Williams notes the distinction “between the more direct, more total and therefore more significant relationships of community and the more formal, more abstract and more instrumental relationships of *state*, or of *society* in its modern sense” (76). Inasmuch as The Bronze is a community, it is so not in the first three older and more formal senses of the word, but in the latter two.

Williams’ definition comports with that of Marshall’s Dictionary of Sociology:

The concept of community concerns a particularly constituted set of social relationships based on something which the participants have in common—usually a common sense of identity. It is, to paraphrase Talcott Parsons, frequently used to denote a wide ranging relationship of solidarity over a rather undefined area of life and interests. (97)

Howard Rheingold pushes the concept of community further still from the older sense. Rheingold follows Barry Wellman in saying that communities are “social networks” (359). Rheingold quotes Wellman in writing that a community is a social network from which “people usually obtain support, sociability, information and a sense of belonging” (360). Rheingold cautions against “romanticizing the notion of community, of assuming a state of pastoral existence that once existed in pretechnology small towns.” The communities of yore—characterized by in-person interactions and geographic limits—while certainly different, were not necessarily better: “If the shadows of urban and mediated experience are alienation and superficiality, the shadows of the traditional community are narrow-mindedness and bigotry” (361). Virtual communities, then, are online social networks, or “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (xx).

As David Bell explains in his Introduction to Cybercultures, the concept of

“community” defies consistent definition, and different authors use the term to mean different things (97-106). In this study—following, for example, George Lipsitz’s “Listening to Learn”—I use concepts of “community” as used by my informants in order to avoid imposing my own views on community members (624-29). In most of my interviews, informants themselves specified that The Bronze is a community before I asked about it. In many cases, informants told me that they preferred this community over other Internet groups, and explained why they did not consider these other groups to be communities, or why The Bronze was a “better” community for them.

Just as the concept of “community” can be problematic, so too is the concept of “real life.” At the beginning of this project, it seemed straightforward enough to ask, as I did above, how there could exist a community of persons twice removed from real life. With the term “real life,” I was referring to the lives of persons who were neither fictitious nor virtual. I was referring to the domain of the non-fictional biological persons who were watching *Buffy* and posting at The Bronze. The term “real life” was used in contradistinction to both the fictional life depicted on *Buffy*, and the virtual life of cyberspace. The word “real,” therefore, was used as in the vernacular to imply something tangible, rather than in the literal sense of implying that which exists (as opposed to that which does not exist). Bronzers could be said to be twice removed from “real life” in that they were real people who were talking about fictional events in a virtual setting.

Even in this loose sense of the world “real,” however, my informants regularly complicated its meaning and challenged the putative boundary between real life and virtual life. None of my informants argued that the real and the virtual were equivalent,

or that in-person interaction was the same as mediated communication. Nor did any of my informants see cyberspace as a substitute for in-person interaction. But they did show that words such as “real” and “virtual,” that ostensibly seemed to make useful distinctions, were in fact quite problematic.

This dissertation also describes what community looks like in the context of contemporary postindustrial capitalism. Part of the reason that The Bronze became such a close-knit community is that it came into existence at a unique point of inflection in the trajectory of its development (and media technologies in general). In 1997, the Internet and the Web were developed enough to be usable to the general public, but new enough to attract a fairly specific type of user and be relatively unconstrained by the corporate and governmental powers that would seek to control them. Indeed, simply having a corporate “web presence” for a television show was a fairly new concept.

At the time, the ability to “monetize” users—collecting and selling user data, as companies such as Facebook and Google have proven so adept—wasn’t technologically feasible (Angwin; Hill). Even advertising was relatively uncommon: banner ads and pop-up ads existed, but targeted advertising may not have even been invented yet. And there was certainly still an expectation of privacy on line; there were not thousands of companies tracking individuals on line, nor was the government allowed to collect all Internet user data (Nakashima; Rosen; “What They Know”). In other words, simply having a Web site was cutting edge; The Bronze didn’t have ads because it was the ad itself. It wasn’t possible to structure web sites to force individuals to interact in such a way companies could make money from those interactions, nor was it possible to require them to divulge personal information for data-mining purposes. Or, to put it another

way, The Bronze is an example of McLuhan's famous aphorism that "the medium is the message" (Understanding Media). The Bronze provided a blank slate to write on, because that's what was possible at the time; Bronzers, in turn, used The Bronze as they wanted given its constraints. The community became what it did—to some degree at least—because the medium shaped it according to its own parameters.

The focus in this dissertation, however, is not primarily on technology, but rather on what people did with it, and what it meant to them. This dissertation argues that The Bronze became a community—a stable group of people who communicated regularly about matters of significance in their lives—as a result of a common appreciation of something that is premised on the alienation of contemporary life. Community members used the opportunities provided by The Bronze to collectively develop practices, traditions, and manners that supported and sustained the community. Obviously, none of this would have occurred if *Buffy* and The Bronze did not serve some meaningful and compelling purpose. The central aim of this study is to identify that meaning and purpose. Among the questions to be addressed are: Is The Bronze a community? If so, how does it function as a community? To what extent? How and why did The Bronze become a community? What needs (broadly defined) does this community meet for members? How does social injustice—such as homophobia—become mapped from real life into cyberspace, and how does this affect community? How is the production and consumption of popular culture changing as a result of computer-mediated communication, and how does this affect community? In what ways does this community reflect the current "post-modern" cultural moment? In order to explore these issues, I draw from existing work from a variety of areas, including cultural



anthropology, media studies, gender studies, and popular culture studies.

The second chapter of the dissertation reviews the existing academic literature, contextualizes this work in relation to other scholarship, and describes the approach taken herein. Accordingly, Chapter 2 first provides a brief overview of the “ethnographic turn” in American Studies. Second, it provides an overview of the ethnographic method used. Third, I discuss the work of a number of scholars in American studies, media studies, and related fields, in order to position this study relative to key scholarship on which this ethnography draws and from which it follows. Fourth, I discuss a specific subset of interdisciplinary literature that has sprung up since the time that *Buffy* was being broadcast in its original incarnation. This literature is known collectively as “*Buffy* Studies,” and reflects the popularity of *Buffy* among academics as well as fans. Fifth, I discuss the two existing studies of The Bronze community. And finally, I offer some closing notes on methodology in order to both locate and question the place of ethnographic analysis in the context of a pervasive, encompassing, and accelerating global capitalism.

The third chapter of this dissertation focuses on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* itself. Since The Bronze would not exist without *Buffy*, Chapter 3 provides context that suggests the show’s appeal to its fans. Because this ethnography is a direct result of my own interest in *Buffy*, this section also serves to highlight some of what I find meaningful in it. In Chapter 3, I focus on the relationship between text and context in order to provide the cultural background for the primary purpose of this dissertation, which is ethnographic analysis of a fan community. In other words, I discuss *Buffy* to assess what it means to

fans, and connect the show to the lived experiences of fans who use the show in a variety of ways to make meaning in their own lives. Thus, rather than address *Buffy* as literature, I will instead focus, somewhat auto-ethnographically, on the initial reactions to the show that drew me to *The Bronze*, since it is through the lenses of these reactions that I interacted with community members. The primary focus will be on themes that either reflect my own interest in the show, or that appear to address or reflect contemporary cultural issues.

In chapter 3, then, I begin with a self-ethnographic perspective to discuss the appeal of *Buffy*. I then expand this perspective to examine *Buffy* and the “Buffyverse”—the fictitious universe in which the characters in *Buffy* exist—in their broader social context in order to determine what drew fans to the show, and what about the show might lead to the formation of a close-knit community. I follow Rosalind Williams in examining the “truth of fantasy,” exemplified in *Buffy* by storytelling rife with imaginative feats that nonetheless could feel more real, more true, and more emotionally powerful than television’s standard aesthetic of realism. The resulting aesthetic is what I call a “gothic aesthetic”; I argue that this aesthetic appealed to sophisticated media consumers who appreciated a postmodern approach to storytelling, and who could appreciate layers of irony and glib intertextuality that was rooted in both classic literature and pop culture. In other words, this aesthetic explains much of the appeal of *Buffy* to *Bronzers*. Next, I examine the devices that were used to achieve this effect, including the inversion of standard plot devices and the inventive and subversive use of language and music. Finally, I focus on *Buffy* as cultural criticism, and discuss several themes that exemplify the context—literally, the ethnographic scenes and the cultural background—

in which the community formed.

Chapters 4 and 5 form the crux of the dissertation and describe my ethnographic interviews with Bronzers and my participant observation at The Bronze. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 informants who were generally considered “regulars” at The WB Bronze, and who are still active community members. Active membership can be measured in both individual and community terms. At the individual level, Bronzers communicate with each other using computer technology, but also by telephone, postal mail, and in person; in-person communication takes place informally, and also at several national and international social and cultural events. At the group level, several real life Bronzer communities have been especially active. I focused my in-person interviews on members in three of these communities—those in Los Angeles, Toronto, and Washington, D.C.—with a view toward understanding both the virtual lives and the face-to-face lives of community members.

Chapter 4 describes in detail my concurrent entry into The Bronze and this ethnographic project. Drawing on in-depth ethnographic interviews, this chapter explains how The Bronze functions as a community, and indeed a unique community, through the complicated medium of the linear posting board. I argue first that The Bronze became a unique community due to its connection to *Buffy*, the nature of the technological medium, and a tendency to attract a specific type of person. This typical Bronzer was a literarily-inclined and community-minded individual who relished the emotional connection of The Bronze, and could identify with being part of a community of outcasts. Second, I argue that language was used in a particularly empowering way, and this allowed Bronzers to engage in the creative constitution and re-constitution of their communicative

environment and mental landscape. In other words, Bronzers were able to write a better world for themselves. Third, I argue that it was a particularly postmodern use of language that characterized The Bronze, and that this use of language led to an extraordinarily rich, engaging, and flexible community.

The fifth chapter extends the ethnographic analysis of Chapter 4 in two ways. First, it expands on participant observation by approaching The Bronze community from the point of view of an ethnographer who has also become a regular community member, and as such offers a translation of the key conventions and rituals—the things people actually did—that defined the community. Second, it expands the ethnographic analysis by drawing on interview data from additional research participants. This second group of informants was interviewed in greater detail, and in most cases I spent between one day and one week with them as they went about their workaday lives.

In this chapter I also consider race and sexuality in cyberspace. Following from the work of scholars of race in cyberspace, I develop a concept of “imagined audiences,” and show that in some ways, cyberspace can allow racism to thrive in ways that wouldn’t be possible in real life. I also discuss the “flame war” that erupted when one of *Buffy*’s main characters comes out as a lesbian, and analyze the ways in which sexuality is constructed and mapped in cyberspace. I find that, as is the case with race, “disembodied” communication does not necessarily lead to less homophobia. However, unlike with racism, community members seem quite sensitive to homophobia, and are willing to strongly police their community and defend against homophobic attacks. I argue that, while Bronzers were generally anti-homophobic to begin with, that anti-homophobia was strengthened as a result of the show’s support of that position,

combined with the ugliness of anti-gay attacks by individuals who were not regular community members. I then examine why it is that hostility is so prevalent in computer-mediated communication, and use recent discoveries from the field of neuroscience to explain what I refer to as “Internet Hostility Syndrome.”

In the last part of this chapter, I show that The Bronze (as a cultural formation) exists subjacent to everyday life: although Bronzers live their lives in offices and dorms and a variety of other settings, they live their Bronzer lives just below the radar of mainstream culture. The Bronze is a subculture, one that has no recognizable source of cohesion except to the members who keep their community in their imaginations. Furthermore, Bronzer community exists orthogonal to mainstream RL communities: like a piece of paper viewed edge on, it can be in plain view but unrecognizable. The Bronze community intersects many other communities, cutting across and lying beneath mainstream communities and cultural formations. While they inhabit the physical worlds of work and school and home, Bronzers write their community into existence, often without the full consent or understanding of the persons with whom they occupy other communities.

I conclude by arguing that many Bronzers are living non-traditional lives, but they are doing so in a society that does not recognize that “traditional” lives are frequently untenable. The social expectations with which they are confronted—education, marriage, home, career, children—are simply impossible to accommodate in a world of declining opportunity. Like most people, Bronzers are reacting to social, economic, demographic, and environmental change. And like their heroes on *Buffy*, Bronzers very often carry with them the scars of myriad cruelties and injustices visited upon them throughout their

lives by all manner of cliques and claques that maintain their own status through the pathological revivification of social pressure and conformity. As a result, they feel like outcasts—or at least understand what it’s like to feel that way—and they’d rather engage with ideas and imagination than with the endless absurdities of the real world.

As a group, Bronzers tend to be highly educated, literary, and artistic. To Bronzers, much of *Buffy*’s appeal was its emotional realism and imaginative depth. Unusually for television, these elements were combined with strong female leading roles, a cast of bookish and somewhat countercultural characters, and a foregrounding of emotionality and interpersonal relationships. Bronzers were drawn to these aspects of *Buffy*—which formed its “gothic aesthetic”—and in turn created their own somewhat countercultural community, one that came to reflect their own close ties and emotional attachments. Despite its many positive qualities, however, *The Bronze* takes on a depressing hue when situated in its broader context, which is a postindustrial capitalism characterized by a hegemonic neoliberalism and unchecked corporatism that inflicts the very injuries that *The Bronze* community alleviated. Hence, *The Bronze* can be seen as a welcome but meager palliative to the damaging effects of contemporary North American life, one that nonetheless illumines the stultifying horrors of everyday life that lead people to seek shelter in dimly-lit imagined spaces.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this dissertation have been previously published in *Buffy and Angel Conquer the Internet: Essays on Online Fandom*, ed. Mary Kirby-Diaz.

<sup>2</sup> The song “My Generation,” by The Who, was something of an anthem for the Baby Boom generation, and contained the lyrics “I hope I die before I get old.”

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, I do not have the original quotation. However, a later article in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer Official Magazine* contains a quotation that conveys a similar sentiment to that of the TV Week article. In this article, Sarah Michelle Gellar says: “Kids were hard on me. I was always excluded from everything because I was different” (Springer 18).

<sup>4</sup> Neil Postman, in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, follows Marshall McLuhan in describing how television is pernicious not necessarily due to its content, but because of the worldview it engenders among viewers. Postman suggests that in actuality TV shows promote commercials, while commercials promote shows. Hence, both commercials and shows promote a way of thinking, a worldview, designed to entice the viewer into unexamined commercialism and consumerism. This argument has been supported by subsequent research, such as, for example, Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s “Television Addiction Is No Mere Metaphor.”

<sup>5</sup> Restrictions on the advertising of drugs on television were eased in 1997, which led to, among other things, Bob Dole’s famous commercial for Viagra (Galewitz).

<sup>6</sup> Put another way, I was cycling between frames of reference as I cycled between office, TV, and computer. Although I didn’t realize it at the time, this process is expounded by John Caughey, in “Gina as Steven” and *Imaginary Social Worlds*. The

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basic idea is that people cycle through many different imaginary worlds that they use to make meaning of their everyday lives, and that they use to help them think through plans of action in dealing with problems in their everyday lives. Apparently, without knowing it, I was doing this too, as I first began to understand the relationships between me, *Buffy*, and the on-line community it engendered.

<sup>7</sup> On this date, 11 Nov. 2009, I happened to check my Junk Mail folder to see if anything important got marked as “junk,” whereupon it occurred to me that it might be amusing to make a quick count of how much Viagra spam was currently cluttering my email account. I was wrong. It’s not amusing.

<sup>8</sup> On the use of robot assassins, see Tom Engelhardt, “America Detached from War.” On the use of Viagra, see Joby Warrick, “Little Blue Pills.” And on the Orwellian “kill list,” see Becker and Shane, “Secret ‘Kill List.’”

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, “Nielsen Ratings,” [Internet Archive](#), for a compilation of Nielsen data on numbers of viewers. For a compilation of Nielsen data on rankings, see, for example, “Nielsen Ratings,” [Buffy](#). For an example of reported Nielsen data, see, for example, “How Did Your Favorite Show Rate?”

<sup>10</sup> Noam Chomsky, in his essay “Crisis and Hope,” addressed this as follows: “if Americans a half century ago had been given the choice of directing their tax money to Pentagon programs to enable their grandchildren to have computers, iPods, the Internet, and so on, or putting it into developing a livable and sustainable socioeconomic order, they might have made the latter choice. But they had no choice.”

<sup>11</sup> The Bronze Welcome page was at  
<[http://www.buffy.com/slow/index\\_bronze.html](http://www.buffy.com/slow/index_bronze.html)>.



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<sup>12</sup> The address of The Bronze linear posting board was  
<<http://board.buffy.com/bronze/postingboard.shtml>>.

## Chapter 2: Literature

### Ethnography in American Studies

This study is primarily empirical and ethnographic. It is based on a combination of textual analysis and ethnographic techniques that are rooted in what George Lipsitz calls the “emerging anthropological approach within American Studies” that began in the 1970s. According to Lipsitz, “Reviewing the field in 1979, Gene Wise argued for a new American Studies, one that would be self-reflexive, pluralistic, and focused on the particular and concrete practices of American everyday life, while at the same time remaining comparative and cross-cultural” (“Listening to Learn” 623).

In that review essay, Wise attributes much of this approach to R. Gordon Kelly, who, rather than make inferences about culture from specific texts, instead “began with the social situation out of which both literature and culture are constructed,” treating literature like any other human product, “as a particular construction of reality coming from a particular context, created and consumed by particular types of people in response to particular experiences in their world” (319-20). In other words, rather than assume that a text can explain a culture, we might instead look for factors that explain both together. For example, rather than focusing on what behaviors are “caused” by *Buffy*—a tautological approach that reached an apex of absurdity when *Buffy* came to be identified as a cause of the Columbine High School massacre—we should also recognize that both *Buffy* and the culture it informs are embedded in a matrix of social forces.

As Kelly pointed out, it is problematic to assume a unitary American culture. His solution was cultural anthropology: to learn directly from people about their various

American cultures (98-99). The connection between consciousness and empirical “fact” thus becomes not a matter of imposing academic notions upon cultures, but of exploring how people using those cultures theorize their own consciousness. By using ethnography not to represent others, but as a vehicle by which we help people represent themselves, ethnography can bridge the gap between peoples’ consciousness and their social and empirical lives.

According to Wise, the work of John Caughey in particular led to the ethnographic turn in American Studies in the 1970s. While social constructionists Berger and Luckmann were concerned with the manner in which society’s codes were constructed, the new American Studies approach was concerned with laying bare these codes. Caughey, in “Simulating the Past,” followed from anthropologists whose concern was “methods for understanding culture as a cognitive system. [. . .] In this approach, culture is not used to refer to overt behavior or the products of behavior. The term is restricted to the ideas, images, beliefs, plans and values, the total ‘world view,’ conscious and unconscious, as it exists in people’s minds” (626-27). The point of this approach was to apprehend “the unobservable culture which lies behind the observable artifacts” (628).

### **Ethnographic Method**

Methodologically, this study relies heavily on basic ethnographic procedures as delineated in James Spradley’s classic The Ethnographic Interview, and Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw’s Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes. It also draws on the work of several scholars who focus on specific aspects of ethnography from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. One such scholar, Joshua Gunn, in discussing his ethnographic work on

gothic subculture (published in Goodlad and Bibby's 2007 Goth), offers a pithy summary of qualitative methods as follows:

there are two general approaches to the qualitative study of subcultural groups. What I will call the 'anthropological' approach tends to emphasize ethnology and participant observation, often with an eye toward producing empathetic accounts of subcultural resistance from the bottom up. These accounts are usually highly descriptive and tend to venerate subcultural subjects as exhibiting behaviors typical and expected of them given the norms of their culture. The often criticized celebratory tincture of ethnography is in part a result of the reflexive and self-critical modes that began to emerge with the works of Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, and others in the mid- to late 1980s [. . .]. Central to these new modes of ethnography is an emphasis on the inevitable rhetoricity of ethnographic descriptions, the inseparability of the 'poetic and political,' the interpenetration of 'academic and literary genres' of reportage, and the necessarily subjective, socially constructive nature of all descriptive writing [. . .]. Such commitments led to a profound interest in the reflexive modes of ethnography first introduced by feminist scholars, and a deep suspicion of the authoring self [. . .].

On the other hand, what I will call the 'sociological' approach tends to replace ethnography with abstract, structuralist (frequently Marxian or materialist) readings. Here the individual subject's autonomy is muted in favor of underlying determinants such as ideology. (42)

Gunn argues that both approaches are valid, and are complementary and overlapping rather than mutually exclusive. He concludes by noting the ethical imperative of using ethnography to further both academic knowledge and social justice, "insisting that we consult those whom we claim to represent and critique" (60-61).

Also of interest in Gunn's work is his description of gothic subculture, quoted here since the idea of "the gothic" is something of a recurring theme in subsequent chapters. Gunn writes that "the subculture is resistant stylistically, sexually, and sometimes politically, because goth's resistant gestures are premised on a kind of lifestyle irony [. . .] gothic performativity demonstrates the dynamic ways in which people resist the cultural mainstream in spaces of ambivalence" (41).

This dissertation is situated in what Gunn refers to as the “anthropological approach,” and therefore turns next to anthropologist James Spradley. According to Spradley, “the people we study or seek to help have a way of life, a culture of their own [. . .]. No longer relegated to exotic cultures in far-off places, ethnography has come home. It has become a fundamental tool for understanding ourselves [. . .]” (iii). Not only should ethnography be self-reflexive, but it should allow the ethnographer to get inside the heads, as it were, of community members: “*Ethnographic analysis* is the search for the parts of a culture and their relationships *as conceptualized by informants*. Most of the time this internal structure as it is known to informants remains tacit, outside their awareness” (93). It requires “going beyond what is seen and heard to *infer* what people know. It involves reasoning from evidence (what we perceive) or from premises (what we assume)” (8). Furthermore, what people know may be outside the purview of typical “objective” social science research: “ethnography alone seeks to document the existence of *alternative* realities and to describe these realities in their own terms. Thus, it can provide a corrective for theories that arise in Western social science” (11).

In order to learn what other people know, it is important to understand how we know how to learn what other people know. The lenses through which the ethnographer views others must be revealed to prevent specious generalizations. Heewon Chang, in her 2008 Autoethnography as Method, discusses various notions of self and other and describes methods of self-narrative, distinguishing between autobiography, self-ethnography, and autoethnography. Autobiography differs from autoethnography in that the latter “shares the storytelling feature,” but “transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation” (43). Furthermore, autoethnography is

itself a term with several meanings, although in each case it refers to a connection between self and culture. Chang writes that in its original use, the “self” in autoethnography referred not to the ethnographer but to informants in “their cultural accounts of themselves” (46). It later came to refer to ethnographic accounts of one’s own group (47). Now, it often refers to the ethnographer’s own self. It does not, however, refer to the “self alone,” but rather the self as “a subject to look into and a lens to look through to gain an understanding of a societal culture” (48-49).

Boellstorff et al., in their 2012 Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method also point to the importance of properly addressing the self and subjectivity in ethnography. Regarding subjectivity, the authors write:

All science contains strong elements of subjectivity in the sense that science results from the world of *subjects*, that is, scientists. [. . .] We always begin from somewhere. Rather than pretend a ‘God’s eye view’ of the world is possible, it is more scientific to realize that science generates situated knowledge [. . .] that is a complex product of what is already known (whether what is known is accepted or challenged) and the contemporary worldview shaping interest and attitudes.

Subjectivity is actually a vital part of ethnographic rigor, not only for how it offers us a position from which to engage and interpret, but because it forms the backbone of intersubjective understanding. Intersubjectivity, the dynamic flow of communication and engagement between people, is one of the foundations of the ethnographic encounter. (41-42)

Whereas Chang focuses on self-transformation and self-discovery, Boellstorff et al. point to self-ethnography as important for academic rigor, considering not only “how we might generalize, but how we might use our work to problematize existing generalizations, even our own” (180). They go on to write that “We need not cede generalizations to other disciplines and approaches that face methodological conundrums of their own” (181).

John Caughey, in his 2006 Negotiating Culture and Identities, offers a methodological guide to self-ethnography, writing that “it is now recognized that the

culture the ethnographer brings to the encounter affects what happens. It is considered important, then, that the ethnographer should be aware of his or her culture in order to avoid blunders and misinterpretations that reflect his or her own cultural perspectives” (30). The focus here is on knowing one’s own culture, and using the ethnographic interaction to both expose one’s own perspective and the informant’s (25-31). Caughey stresses the importance of recognizing multiple perspectives, writing that “most of us know and think with a variety of different cultures or cultural traditions” (9). These various perspectives are used by individuals to construct their identities, and are enacted differently in different “social worlds” (44-51). Hence, it is important to interact with informants in all these roles (53-55).

Michael Agar’s Language Shock was also particularly useful and influential to this project. As discussed in Chapter 3, language is used in *Buffy* to reference or undermine certain tropes, and that meticulous attention to language was continued in conversations at The Bronze. Agar’s concept of *languaculture*—which reflects “the *necessary* tie between language and culture”—in particular proves valuable (60). His view of language is similarly useful:

Popular ideas about “language” squeeze the concept much too tightly. The tendency is to draw a *circle* around language, to herd neat sentences into the corral and wrangle out the parts of speech. But most problems with language, the problems that come up when you try to *use* it to *communicate*, aren’t about sentences and parts of speech. They have to do with wild herds of sentences. (15-16)

Agar describes the ethnographic process as one of learning a language and a culture—a languaculture—that can be transformative: “you can’t *use* a new language unless you change the consciousness that is tied to the old one, unless you stretch beyond the circle of grammar and dictionary, out of the old world and into a new one. And

Americans are famous for thinking they've got the best consciousness around" (22).

Furthermore, "You have to know how to *speak* and *act* at the same time. Learning a new languaculture isn't just words and sentences and frames; it's discourse and frames, or *speech acts*" (144).

In my experience, Agar is correct on all counts: ethnography does require getting inside other people's heads, and even in a case like mine—in which the ethnographer is interviewing individuals who speak the same language and share a common interest—that requires a new language, a new culture, and a new consciousness. According to Agar:

Language fills the spaces between us with sound; culture forges the human connection through them. Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture.

If you do start to see things this way, you change. The old "self," the one in your heart and mind and soul, mutates as it comes into relationships with others. The self stretches to comprehend them all. A life of Being turns into a life of Becoming. (28)

Lila Abu-Lughod, in "Writing Against Culture," offers a strategy for conducting ethnographic research that, unlike those mentioned thus far, focuses less on the process and more on the results of ethnographic research. Noting the fraught history of anthropology, she writes that "'culture' operates in anthropological discourse to enforce separation that inevitably carries a sense of hierarchy. Therefore, anthropologists should now pursue, without exaggerated hopes for the power of their texts to change the world, a variety of strategies for writing *against* culture" (138).

Abu-Lughod mentions two specific pitfalls. First, she notes the example of Clifford and Marcus's Writing Culture, arguing that while they display sensitivity to "questions of otherness and power," their "hyperprofessionalism" reveals the hierarchy



that puts them at the top and allows them to write from a position of power. Second, when “one generalizes from experiences and conversations with a number of specific people in a community, one tends to flatten out difference among them and to homogenize them” (152). This project, then, reflects the importance of “writing against culture.” Writing from a feminist perspective, Judith Stacey largely concurs, writing as follows:

Postmodern ethnography is critical and self-reflexive ethnography and a literature of meditation on the inherent, but often unacknowledged hierarchical and power-laded relations of ethnographic writing. Like feminist scholars, critical ethnographers tear the veil from scientific pretensions of neutral observation or description. [ . . . ] ethnographic writing is not cultural reportage, but cultural construction, and always a construction of self as well as of the other. (24)

The question remains, however, of how this is to be accomplished.

One way to write against culture is to adopt a technique used by the same James Clifford criticized by Abu-Lughod. Clifford, in The Predicament of Culture, uses multiple viewpoints to convey the multiple perspectives that converge and emanate from a single event. He describes the 1976 lawsuit of the Mashpee Indians for the return of their land in what is now Massachusetts, and the resultant court hearing in which a judge had to determine whether the Mashpee had legal standing to sue. In doing so, Clifford offers multiple perspectives, including “objective” historical background information, ethnographic information, and interpretive generalizations (277-84). He also provides two versions of history to show how the same evidence can be used to make different cases (306). Ultimately, however, he shows how multiple perspectives interact, rather than simply narrating or asserting. He shows also how different individuals and groups might reach different conclusions, but at the same time, does not retreat from the

argument that the trial was a product of the oppression of Native Americans, the racism and pathological obtuseness of white Americans, and a legal system wholly inadequate to the task of justice for non-dominant groups (327-44).

As Renato Rosaldo points out, this requires knowledge and awareness of historical and cultural context. In Culture and Truth, Rosaldo argues for the “remaking of social analysis,” which he says was “inspired at its heart by such struggles to remake institutions and the social relations of their members” (xiii). Such struggles have resulted from the fact that “culture,” as Abu-Lughod says, can be used to exclude and demean peoples. Hence, social analysis should be conducted to support historically marginal or subordinate peoples, and ethnographers should actively challenge the hierarchy described by Abu-Lughod: “Social analysis must now grapple with the realization that its objects of analysis are also analyzing subjects who critically interrogate ethnographers—their writings, their ethics, and their politics” (19-21).

Guenter Lenz, in “‘Ethnographies’: American Culture Studies and Postmodern Anthropology,” takes a position similar to Abu-Lughod and Rosaldo, writing that as “anthropology has widely been implicated from its beginning as an academic discipline in Western colonialism and imperialism, *postmodern* ethnography as cultural critique must be (re)constituted as a critique of *colonialist* and *post (or neo) colonialist* discourse” (10). One possible solution to this problem is ethnographies “that do not set out to ‘present’ or ‘represent’ something. Instead, they want to ‘evoke’ in the reader a constructive effort that ‘makes available through absence what can be conceived but not presented’ and that produces the—or one—meaning of the text” (9-10).

In contrast to Lenz's evocative approach, Leon Anderson's 2006 article on "Analytic Autoethnography" bemoans the fact that autoethnography has come to be seen as synonymous with evocative autoethnography. Anderson argues for a reassertion of the realist perspective in the use of autoethnography—what he calls "analytic autoethnography"—while implicitly criticizing evocative autoethnography. According to Anderson:

Unlike evocative autoethnography, which seeks narrative fidelity only to the researcher's subjective experience, analytic autoethnography is grounded in self-experience but reaches beyond it as well. [. . .] The purpose of analytic ethnography is not simply to document personal experience, to provide an "insider's perspective," or to evoke emotional resonance with the reader. Rather, the defining characteristic of analytic social science is to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves. (386-87)

According to the above distinction, this study would fall into the "analytic" category of autoethnography. However, this distinction is less obvious in practice than in the above articulation. Anderson's focus on emotional resonance may be overstated for three reasons. First, as discussed in Chapter 5, humans in fact think with emotions; there is no clear distinction between thinking and feeling, and therefore distinguishing between the two can be counterproductive. Second, this ethnography is about a community that formed in response to a TV show about emotions; in this case, excessive concern with the degree of emotional resonance may well cause both the researcher and the reader to miss the point. And third, identifying my own subject position (which often includes emotions) will, I hope, allow the reader to see the thinking—the cultural analysis—that went into the ethnography.

Following the type of ethnographic research approach outlined in Spradley's Ethnographic Interview, a number of questions about The Bronze community emerge (as

discussed in Chapter 1). Is The Bronze a “community”? Why? How so? Is there something unique about it? Is there any reason that The Bronze would take any particular form as a community? Are Bronzers a specific self-selecting group with specific characteristics, or merely an arbitrary group of people? In other words, why would individual *Buff*y fans become a community of *Buff*y fans? Regarding the questions of “why” and “how” The Bronze is a community, additional questions emerge. How does the community function? Why do members like it? What are the community’s rituals and norms? What are the limits and boundaries? What needs does the community fulfill? What is meaningful to community members?

Traditional ethnography may in some ways be inappropriate for an online community. Nonetheless, rather than make a priori assumptions about methodological issues, I opted to follow a traditional ethnographic approach. In other words, rather than modify ahead of time the ethnographic approach put forth by Spradley, I instead tried it and waited to see what happened. For example, when I first decided to interview Bronzers, I posted a message at The Bronze. I received three responses by email, one of which was from a local Bronzer who lived and worked only a few miles away. I therefore interviewed two people by email, and one in person. The local Bronzer introduced me to the group of locals—the Mayberry Bronzers—of whom I interviewed two more individuals in person. Thus, while engaging in participant observation on line, I was also able to interact with the locals as a group, and also interview some of the local Bronzers.

Similarly, in advance of a conference in Toronto, Canada, I contacted a Toronto Bronzer to ask if I could interview her in person, since I had heard that the Toronto

Bronzers were among the most active in-person groups. My Toronto informant helped me set up in-person interviews with four other Bronzers. I was also able to modify my participant observation to include extended stays so that I could accompany two of these Bronzers as they went about their everyday lives.

I organized my interviews with five Los Angeles Bronzers in similar fashion. Being a frequent visitor to Southern California, I had already met several LA Bronzers, and so contacted them to conduct in-person interviews. I also arranged to spend at least one day with three of these informants as they went about their workaday lives.

In terms of the ethnographic writing—as opposed the ethnographic research process—the approach taken herein was to not only avoid the pitfalls highlighted by the aforementioned scholars, but in particular follow the advice of Abu-Lughod to “write against culture.” One way of doing so is to combine Abu-Lughod’s critique with Agar’s metaphysical guidelines, and, in turn, combine those with the embrace of multiple perspectives as delineated by the aforementioned scholars. In this ethnography, instead of trying to write about others, or translating for an academic audience, I have written with the language and the point of view of a community member wherever possible and appropriate. Furthermore, where possible, I have done so with “thick description,” per Clifford Geertz’s Interpretation of Cultures (7). And, following Lenz, I have at times used evocation and polyvocality (as opposed to representation).

Similarly, where necessary and appropriate, I have used the language and perspective of academia. Thus, instead of attempting to hybridize or combine the voices of community members with the voice of the ethnographer, I have adopted as much as possible the voice of the consciousness that comports with each languaculture (per Agar).

In presenting both voices, my hope was that each voice would make more sense in the context of the other than it would otherwise, and that in doing so the culturally dominant voice would not be privileged. In addition, my hope was that the ethnographic account would be accessible to multiple audiences from whatever perspective they choose to read it, whether as community members, academics, or simply interested readers.

In writing against culture, however, the social location of the ethnographer (as incipient community member) becomes an important aspect of the ethnography. Indeed, my original intent was to be a lurker, someone who watched the community on line without participating. However, I eventually became a full participant in the community, to the degree that it became “my own people.” Hence, not only was a degree of self-reflection and self-ethnography relevant, but my account became more auto-ethnographic in the sense that community members increasingly became the ethnographer’s “own people.”

As it happened, this ethnographic project ended up moving beyond traditional ethnography in some unexpected ways. First, The Bronze community was, and still is, atypical in that it was a community precisely because it was on line. In other words, it was not a community that went on line, but rather a community that began on line and went off line. Hence, the analysis must recognize that the community’s architecture—the Web site—informs the nature and language of the community to an unusual degree.

Second, as discussed in the final section of this chapter, this study is one of the longest-running ethnographies of an Internet community. As such, it entailed something of a shift in viewpoints, or aspect, on my part, in order to take account of the ways in which the world has changed. Indeed, there are some disturbing parallels between the

real world and the Buffyverse, in which Sunnydale—after seven years of Buffy fighting to save it—collapsed in on itself.

### **Theory and Practice**

There are several authors from whose work this study follows. As mentioned above, John Caughey's work was instrumental in the turn toward the "new American Studies" that began in the 1970s. In his Imaginary Social Worlds, Caughey elucidated the importance of imaginary social relationships. These relationships are both imaginary—in that they are unilateral projections formed from someone's imagination—but are also real, in that they involve real thoughts, emotions, and actions. Inasmuch as all humans must imagine occurrences across time and space—because they cannot be directly observed, but must be accounted for in order to function over time—the activities of the imagination reflect an individual's underlying epistemological concerns.

Contemporary life, characterized by highly abstract and symbolic activities, would seem to require a great deal of imaginary activity simply to function in society. Indeed, modern Americans have relatively few direct interactions with the natural world within which they have evolved. Even the most basic material elements—food, water, shelter, waste—are arranged far outside the purview of most Americans, who increasingly spend their days manipulating symbols. Hence, most Americans must base their actions not on sensory input from the real world, but imagined input from a world of abstractions. In this sense, Caughey anticipated one peculiarity of the digital revolution in American life: the ability to form communities based on computer-mediated communication about imaginary social relationships with mass-mediated fantasies.

I also draw on Caughey's "Gina as Steven," which engages seriously the imaginary social relationships that people can form with characters on television and in the movies. Caughey's study considers Gina, a psychotherapist who frequently spends her day counseling rape and domestic abuse survivors, and her imaginary relationship with action-hero movie star Steven Seagal. Gina's relationship with Steven provides a way for her to feel empowered and safe from the kind of abuse she must deal with during the day, giving her a sense of individual autonomy and self-determination. While it may seem unremarkable that such relationships exist, Caughey's implicit purpose is to examine why they do, and what purpose they serve. Caughey notes several ways in which Gina cycles through various identities—what we might call the different "hats" we wear—and their resultant emotional states.

Anthropologist S. Elizabeth Bird, in The Audience in Everyday Life, argues that scholarship such as Caughey's has led to a so-called third generation of reception studies and an "anthropology of mass media" (5). Caughey, she writes, "was a pioneer in media anthropology with his exploration of people's 'imaginary' relationships with media figures. His studies go far beyond any notion of a fixed, static 'audience'" (5-6).

According to Bird, Caughey's studies

    speak volumes about how media images are naturalized into everyday American life, just as spiritual and mythological images are naturalized in oral cultures. His nuanced, sensitive account of one woman's "imaginary relationship" with actor Steven Segal is an intriguing exploration of how significant media can be in both personal identity and enculturation [. . .] Occasionally, other anthropologists have followed this lead, focusing not on specific text/audience relationships, but on everyday experience, as in Fisherkeller's provocative study of adolescent identity construction, in which she uses an in-depth life-history approach to conclude that teenagers "look to television culture, consciously or not, to acquire *imaginative strategies* for acting on their dreams and hopes for the future, and for coping with social dilemmas" [. . .] These kinds of analyses,



focused on small-scale exploration of individual's processes of meaning-making, can take us in directions that are quite different from conceptions of the static audience. (6)

Bird argues that the notion of an audience has itself become problematic, since it requires "rigid distinctions between culture as experienced through interpersonal communication and through media" which are untenable because "the two are inextricably mixed" (190). However, this

is not to suggest that we abandon the "audience" in despair, just because we cannot usually pin them down for clear study. And we do not need to abandon ethnography, just because as an enterprise it has become so complex. Even as we acknowledge the importance of global and national economic and political forces in constructing the mediascapes in which we live, we don't all need to become political economists. [. . .] We do need to move "beyond the audience" as a theoretically definable construct, but we should not be abandoning the goal of understanding real people, living real lives in which media play an ever-increasing, if certainly problematic, role. Above all, the ethnographic perspective on media reception offers a necessarily humanistic alternative to more controlled, scientific analyses of "media effects" or the "culture industry." Only ethnography can begin to answer questions about what people *really* do with media, rather than what we imagine they *might* do, or what close readings of texts *assume* they might do. (190-91)

A classic approach to media and audience interactions is Janice Radway's Reading the Romance. Radway argues that women who routinely read romance novels do so in a specific context. Radway's readers are usually ambivalent about this: while they generally read in contexts that are of their own choosing—for example, as mothers and wives—their emotional lives are often unfulfilled. Romance readers therefore read in ways that address their unmet needs: they tend to interpret books and identify with characters in ways that allow them to experience a "better" version of those lives. Readers identify with the characters such that a more optimistic future can be imagined and enjoyed for at least a short time. In other words, readers engage the books through

the lens of their own experiences. Furthermore, Radway depicts romance readers as both feeling and thinking beings, adopting a feminist perspective in arguing against the type of mind-body duality that would privilege rationalism. She does so by showing how readers' resist the idea that their interest in romance fiction is frivolous or unserious.

Another classic approach, this one from the perspective of the national (rather than individual) imagination, is Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities. Anderson coined the term *imagined communities* to explain the "anomaly" of nationalism relative to Marxism, seeking to understand why the meanings of nationalism can today "command such profound emotional legitimacy" (4). Anderson is describing communities in which most of the members will never know each other personally—hence, they must, to some degree, be imagined by community members—and asks how it is that such communities come to be imagined. Although the focus is on nationalism, the basic argument can be applied to other kinds of social units (including communities) as well.

Anderson's argument is that nationalism, understood here as an identification with the modern sovereign state, became possible only as two previous cultural formations—religious communities and the dynastic realm—began to unravel. Nationalism in the modern period then came to serve many of the functions previously performed by these other formations. Anderson identifies one of the characteristics of the imagined community as having a particular experience of time, a "conception of simultaneity," an awareness that regardless what someone is doing, other people are likely doing it as well. This awareness of others living parallel lives, coordinated by

clock and calendar, is for Anderson the ultimate example of the means by which an individual can maintain the notion of being a part of a national community (35).

Anderson's work is important to this project for three reasons. First, it identifies "community" as a concept that is inherently flexible and can accommodate significant variations of nature and scope. Second, it recognizes the importance of emotional affiliations.<sup>1</sup> Anderson offers what he calls a "perhaps simpleminded" observation:

The extraordinary survival over thousands of years of Buddhism, Christianity or Islam in dozens of different social formations attest to their imaginative response to the overwhelming burden of human suffering—disease, mutilation, grief, age, and death. Why was I born blind? Why is my best friend paralyzed? Why is my daughter retarded? The religions attempt to explain. The great weakness of all evolutionary/progressive styles of thought, not excluding Marxism, is that such questions are answered with impatient silence. (10)

Third, Anderson offers a useful distinction between pre-modern cultural formations (communities defined either by religion or dynasty) and the modern nation-state:

These days it is perhaps difficult to put oneself empathetically into a world in which the dynastic realm appeared for most men as the only imaginable "political" system. For in fundamental ways "serious" monarchy lies transverse to all modern conceptions of political life. Kingship organizes everything around a high centre. Its legitimacy derives from divinity, not from populations, who, after all, are subjects, not citizens. In the modern conception, state sovereignty is fully, flatly, and evenly operative over each square centimeter of a legally demarcated territory. But in the older imagining, where states were defined by centres, borders were porous and indistinct, and sovereignties faded imperceptibly into one another. Hence, paradoxically enough, the ease with which pre-modern empires and kingdoms were able to sustain their rule over immensely heterogeneous, and often not even contiguous, populations for long periods of time. (19)

If monarchy was a transverse organizational structure that was dissolved by the modern nation-state, then the question remains: how are communities organized now? This is discussed in Chapter 5.

This work also draws on and follows from a number of scholars whose work does not follow the American Studies lineage from the 1970s as described above. Two important sociological treatises that were written in the 1960s and provided the epistemological framework for this lineage are Berger and Luckmann's Social Construction of Reality, and Thomas Kuhn's Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Kuhn, writing in 1962, created a theory of knowledge production. Sociologists Berger and Luckmann, writing four years later, created a theory of knowledge.

According to Kuhn, academics tend to become stuck in a particular type of social construction, that of “normal science.” The questions that academics ask are determined by the paradigm in which they operate. Research is more likely to be well-received if it expands the sum of knowledge within the current paradigm than if it challenges the paradigm itself. Indeed, the latter type of research is likely to be ignored and incomprehensible because it is not based on anything previously comprehensible. Thus knowledge that deepens the paradigm is that which “advances” the field. Knowledge that broadens the paradigm, that challenges the old rules, tends to be ignored, misunderstood, or taken up in interdisciplinary settings.

Kuhn's concept of “normal science”—what we might refer to colloquially as “inside-the-box” thinking—provides interesting analogies when applied outside of academia. For example, this study is of a fan community that was given a “box”—in the form of a TV show, and a space to write about it—and built a community within those parameters. Similarly, both fan fiction and academic work based on *Buffy* takes the “box” of *Buffy* for granted. And, as discussed in subsequent chapters, what fans took from the show—the uses and gratifications, as it were—tended to be within-paradigm or

within-the-box ideas. One possible implication is that in any given cultural setting, most individuals will act according to the parameters that have been created externally for them. If this is indeed the case, then it undermines the argument that individuals use media culture for their own purposes and therefore can use it to improve themselves, and with potentially liberating effect. Instead, the implication is that most people will happily play in whatever sandbox they are given without questioning its boundaries. In other words, media culture isn't liberating; it just constrains people's thinking.

Berger and Luckmann have provided us with the now-familiar concept that reality is socially constructed. The usefulness of their work is that it provides a theory with which to connect the realms of consciousness and reality. Berger and Luckmann's theory is of the sociology of knowledge, an area "concerned with the relationship between human thought and the social context within which it arises" (4). Their thesis is that the reality that humans take for granted is the one they must live in pragmatically. Their "man on the street" has little interest in ontology or epistemology, in consciousness or "reality" (22). Instead, the typical person does what works, and if it works for long enough, it becomes "recipe knowledge" (41-43). For the typical person, the reality of everyday life is "unproblematic [. . .] until its continuity is interrupted by the appearance of a problem. When this happens, the reality of everyday life seeks to integrate the problematic sector into what is already unproblematic" (24).

Thus, individuals inhabit multiple realities. Those realities that become "objectified," whose existence becomes known to other people, are those which individuals tend to treat as the most real realities, because those realities are reinforced by interaction with other individuals. The main method of reinforcement is language.

Hence, realities about which we communicate are reinforced, and are taken for granted. As a theory of knowledge, Constructionism allows us to view cultures as having been created within a social context, and therefore undermines essentialism.

The primary focus here is people and their imaginations, mental landscapes, and emotional attachments. However, both old media (such as television) and new media (such as the Internet) are important elements herein. As with any aspect of media, there are those who argue that television has few (if any) redeeming qualities, and those who argue that it may not be entirely bad. Of those in the former category are Neil Postman (Amusing Ourselves to Death), who points to TV's negative effects on viewers (consumers), and Noam Chomsky (Media Control), who points to the problematic production side of TV. In the latter category are scholars such as Henry Jenkins, who shows that consumers are much more sophisticated than is often assumed (Textual Poachers). Postman's argument is, basically, that American democracy is something like Aldous Huxley's Brave New World. Rather than being controlled by some totalitarian force, like the former Soviet government, Americans are being controlled by their own delusions of freedom. Americans, inundated with trivial information, have become unable to make informed decisions about their society, and are capable only of being entertained. Postman's argument is similar to Gramsci's regarding hegemony, or Foucault's regarding the panopticon, inasmuch as social control need not be authoritarian to be dominant and oppressive.

Postman follows Marshall McLuhan (Understanding Media) in arguing that the medium is the message, to wit that TV controls not what we think, but how we think. The result is that television functions as disinformation. Says Postman: "Disinformation

does not mean false information. It means misleading information—misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented or superficial information—information that creates the illusion of knowing something but which in fact leads one away from knowing” (107). Postman, writing in 1984, was prophetic, anticipating as he did the rise of cable TV and the Internet, not as sources of information, but as sources of additional disinformation.

Much as Janice Radway showed that romance readers may be quite adept at using romance novels to reconstitute themselves as something more to their own liking, so too Henry Jenkins shows that fans are more sophisticated than is often thought. Rather than passive viewers, they are “poachers” who appropriate elements of popular culture to construct their own identities and meaning systems, just as people have always used cultural elements to construct their identities.

Thus, on the one hand, large corporations and political elites control the flow of information. But, on the other hand, individuals exhibit sophisticated behavior in resisting disinformation. But, the problem, as Bourdieu (On Television) and Chomsky (Media Control) remind us, remains: individuals may be resisting, but they are nonetheless mired in frameworks controlled by powerful and elite interests. Resistance to social control is one thing, but having a voice in that social control quite another.

Much of what follows makes reference to postmodernism and postmodern theory. The term is generally used broadly to refer to a set of scholarship, particularly that which follows from poststructuralism, that in the aggregate constitutes “postmodern theory.” I realize that there are many postmodern theories, and that there are many postmodern theorists (some of whom would eschew the term), but I follow here Best and Kellner as thinking of postmodern theory as a body of work that critiques Enlightenment rationalism

and universalism, and that “rejects modern assumptions of social coherence and notions of causality in favour of multiplicity, plurality, fragmentation, and indeterminacy. In addition, postmodern theory abandons the rational and unified subject postulated by much modern theory in favour of a socially and linguistically decentered and fragmented subject” (Postmodern Theory 3-4).

This study draws on additional scholarship on postmodern theory as well, much of which articulates the postmodern moment as being both a challenge to modernism—postmodern in the sense of coming after modernism—and an alternative to modernism. Most such work focuses on that which has become unhinged and multifaceted: language, culture, and identity. The instability of language, combined with new communications technology, allow multiple meanings to proliferate. As meanings proliferate, so too do identities, challenging the notion of an essential self. And as different cultures with multiple meaning systems come in contact with each other—an inevitability in an era of global capitalism driven by unhinged capital that travels at the speed of light—confusion, instability, and multiplicity result, while essentialism and homogeneity are subverted. Among the scholars that address this phenomenon are Baudrillard (Simulacra and Simulation), Berkhofer (Beyond the Great Story), Best and Kellner (The Postmodern Adventure), and Hawkes (Structuralism & Semiotics).

There is a significant overlap between theorists of the postmodern and theorists of media culture and cyberculture. Recent cyberculture research includes work by a number of important scholars, including Henry Jenkins (Spreadable Media), Jane McGonigal (Reality Is Broken), Howard Rheingold (Net Smart), Clay Shirky (Cognitive Surplus), Rainie and Wellman (Networked), Mark Bauerlein (The Digital Divide), Nicholas Carr



(The Shallows), Lisa Nakamura (Race After the Internet), and Sherry Turkle (Alone Together). This dissertation is informed in particular by the latter three of these, as their focus is less on ways that individuals can use new media, and more on what new media is doing to individuals and society.

Many of these scholars have contributed important early work to cyberculture studies. This dissertation is informed in particular by Kellner (Media Culture), Mitchell (City of Bits), Bell (An Introduction to Cybercultures), Rheingold (The Virtual Community), Stone (The War of Desire and Technology), and Turkle (Life on the Screen). Sherry Turkle's work has been particularly useful, as she has discussed the positive or liberating effects of new media and technology, and was among the first to see the benefits of the digital age, but has also articulated many important concerns in later work (such as The Inner History of Devices and Alone Together).

Three additional works, all of which address race, require mention. The first is George Lipsitz's The Possessive Investment in Whiteness. Lipsitz shows how white Americans continue to maintain their identification with whiteness because of the psychic and material benefits that accrue to whites. But in doing so, he also shows how whiteness is fundamental to America, so much so that white America has expended enormous effort in maintaining that distinction. The following passage is Lipsitz's brief history of American racism.

Desire for slave labor encouraged European settlers in North America to view, first, Native Americans and, later, African Americans as racially inferior people suited 'by nature' for the humiliating subordination of involuntary servitude. The long history of the possessive investment in whiteness stems in no small measure from the fact that all subsequent immigrants to North America have come to an already racialized society. From the start, European settlers in North America established structures encouraging a possessive investment in whiteness. The colonial and early

national legal systems authorized attacks on Native Americans and encouraged the appropriation of their lands. They legitimated racialized chattel slavery, limited naturalized citizenship to 'white' immigrants, identified Asian immigrants as expressly unwelcome (through legislation aimed at immigrants from China in 1882, from India in 1917, from Japan in 1924, and from the Philippines in 1934), and provided pretexts for restricting the voting, exploiting the labor, and seizing the property of Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans. (2)

Lipsitz shows in rich detail how whiteness has protected and propagated itself, in federal housing, in education, in law, in business, in politics, in war, in economics, and in the discourse surrounding all of these. The reason whiteness succeeds is traced to the Enlightenment:

the stark contrast between nonwhite experiences and white opinions during the past two decades cannot be attributed solely to individual ignorance or intolerance, but stems instead from liberal individualism's inability to describe adequately the collective dimensions of our experience. As long as we define social life as the sum total of conscious and deliberative individual activities, we will be able to discern as racist only *individual* manifestations of personal prejudice and hostility. Systemic, collective, and coordinated group behavior consequently drops out of sight. Collective exercises of power that relentlessly channel rewards, resources, and opportunities from one group to another will not appear 'racist' from this perspective, because they rarely announce their intention to discriminate against individuals. Yet they nonetheless give racial identities their sinister social meaning by giving people from different races vastly different life chances. (20)

Lipsitz thus follows Cornel West's argument that racism is the unsurprising outcome of Enlightenment thinking that was based on Cartesian dualism, a scientific (and scientific) obsession with measurement and classification, and the privileging of Greek visual imagery (West 50-53). The result is that "Americans produce largely cultural explanations for structural social problems," and the fundamental racism of American society continues unnoticed (Possessive Investment 17). The key insight in these passages, then, is that "liberal individualism" is the ideological framework underlying

much of American culture, but is incongruous with concepts such as *culture* or *society*, and therefore gives the wrong answers to questions regarding American cultures.

The second work is Race in Cyberspace (2002), edited by Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman. In many studies of media, digital culture, and cyberspace, race is not addressed, or is treated as an issue that is attached to the body and is therefore irrelevant in cyberspace. Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman were among the first to argue explicitly that humans do not leave their ideologies in their bodies when they go on line. Indeed, they were among the first to write about race in cyberspace not by appending the concept of race to the concept of cyberspace, but by recognizing that race was never absent from cyberspace in the first place. Although their focus is on race, the outcome is less a discussion of race and more an accurate depiction of cyberspace.

The third work is Race After the Internet (2012), edited by Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White. The essays in this volume address race in the current moment, characterized as it is by the mundane ubiquity of digital technology, and the allegedly “post-racial” environment in which it is possible for the US to have a black president. Nakamura and Chow-White describe this moment much like Lipsitz might, as a combination of liberal individualism in cultural matters, neoliberal economics, and neoconservative politics: “the neoliberal ideology that defines our current political, economic, and socio-cultural moment moves race, like all other forms of personal identity, into the realm of the personal rather than the collective responsibility” (4-5).

Perhaps the most intriguing of the essays in this volume is Alexander R. Galloway’s “Does the Whatever Speak?” Galloway’s title is a play on Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” The argument is that the postmodern was successful in

challenging oppressive grand narratives. Economic and political elites—characterized by the ideologies of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, respectively—took the opportunity to agree that there were no universal truths. Then they took it one step further, claiming that there were in fact no truths at all, and should therefore do whatever they want. The result has been a return to the unexamined grand narratives of the past, in which the wealthy continually remake the rules of capitalism for their own benefit while the powerful continually remake the rules of society for their own benefit. In other words, the left won the culture war but lost the economic war, and then turned around and lost the culture war, too.

Galloway's solution is something like a new universalism against the current postmodernism that has been reduced by neoliberalism into nothing more than pointless consumer choices, and that has reduced the subaltern to powerless units of labor. In other words, "subaltern positions exist entirely within normative discursive structures." Whatever it is that manages to avoid becoming such a subaltern—the whatever—would then take the position that "yes, the old system of transcendental essentialism is still our enemy, we do not want to return to a politics of essential purity in which only certain subjects are dominant and all others are consigned to alterity; but at the same time, the new system of transient anti-essentialism is our enemy too, for we also reject the new customized micropolitics of identity management, in which each human soul is captured and reproduced as an autonomous individual bearing affects and identities" (124-25).

This "whatever" position captures something of the tensions that were embedded in the lives of my research participants. Some of these tensions were overt and political,

and some were subtle and internalized, but they were clearly present in ways sometimes intangible, often ineffable, and frequently intractable.

### **Buffy Studies**

Since the time that I started writing this, a significant academic literature, sometimes referred to as *Buffy Studies* or *Whedon Studies*, has sprung up. The latter term refers to the expanding repertoire of Joss Whedon, the creator and executive producer of *Buffy*, who went on to create the spin-off series *Angel*, the series *Firefly* and its spinoff movie *Serenity*, the series *Dollhouse*, and the Web-based miniseries *Dr. Horrible*.

Writing on *Buffy*—scholarly and otherwise—has proliferated to the point of meriting its own reference catalog (Macnaughton).<sup>2</sup> Many of the scholars working on *Buffy* are also fans, and there is a recurring argument in the work that *Buffy* deserves serious study because it speaks to the experience of modern life, especially in that it addresses certain forms of endemic alienation. (There is also an enormous quantity of fan fiction—perhaps more so than for any other TV show—based on *Buffy*, but that is outside the scope of this study).<sup>3</sup>

Much of the *Buffy Studies* scholarship has taken the form of literary criticism, and especially close readings of *Buffy*.<sup>4</sup> This literature, although representing fields as disparate as physics and philosophy, is largely the product of literary and popular culture scholarship, and therefore the focus is often on the text (the show) itself. Much of this scholarship, in fact, has been produced by academic fans, or “aca-fans” in Henry Jenkins’s parlance.<sup>5</sup> This scholarship, in the main, is about what *Buffy* means. For example, one of the earlier compilations of *Buffy Studies* scholarship was David Lavery

and Rhonda Wilcox's Fighting the Forces. Most of the essays in this volume function as literary criticism; the two exceptions are an essay on Fandom (Busse), and one on The Bronze (Gatson and Zweerink). Furthermore, this volume, taken as a whole, seems to straddle the line between fandom and scholarship, arguing that *Buffy* should not be dismissed as low or popular culture, but should be esteemed as art and literature worthy of serious academic consideration. Wilcox takes this idea further in Why Buffy Matters: The Art of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, arguing explicitly that *Buffy* is "art of the highest order" (1).

Several common themes emerge from *Buffy* Studies when considered in the aggregate. First, much of the work produced on *Buffy* focuses on the combination of horror and satire. Matthew Pateman's The Aesthetics of Culture in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, for example, first examines the tropes on which the show depends to be recognizable as horror, and then examines the inversions of these tropes to critique the horror genre. In this inverted form, the true horror is the banality and alienation of modern life, especially in high school.

Second, there are many studies that focus on gender and sexuality. Much of this work questions the degree to which *Buffy* can be read as a feminist icon. For example, Lorna Jowett's Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the *Buffy* Fan uses *Buffy* as an introduction to feminism and gender theory. Much of this work is also concerned with sexuality and the extent to which characters can be "queered," in the sense of disrupting traditional representations and understandings of gender and sexuality.

Third, issues of religion, morality, and philosophy also figure prominently in *Buffy* Studies, examining *Buffy*'s explicit engagement with and ambiguous critique of

religion, particularly Christianity. For example, Jana Riess' What Would Buffy Do? The Vampire Slayer as Spiritual Guide makes connections between themes in *Buffy* and themes in Christianity, arguing that the character of Buffy is a (perhaps unwitting) model of religious ethics and spirituality. Similarly, K. Dale Koontz's Faith and Choice in the Works of Joss Whedon situates *Buffy* in a larger history of the ideas of faith and choice in Christianity, and examines the continuity of certain key themes, such as redemption.

Other studies have used *Buffy* to highlight relevant theoretical work. For example, James South's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale compiles essays that use *Buffy* as a teaching tool to highlight philosophical concepts that might otherwise be inaccessible to students. And Michael Adam's *Slayer Slang* takes, in one sense, the opposite approach I do: Adams also studied *The Bronze*, but from the perspective of a "lurker," an observer whose presence was never made known. Adams takes a philological approach to the slang of *Buffy*, spelling out the unwritten rules of language as used in *Buffy* and, by extension, by fans.

Incidentally, Adams' work on language is of particular interest to me. While I was engaged in participant observation, he was observing *Bronzers* as they used and created their own slang—I might go so far as to call it a dialect—based on the particular language of *Buffy*. I had devoted only cursory thought to my own writing style, but generally wrote in a manner that came naturally to me. As it happens, while I was trying to figure out what people were saying, Adams was studying the rules of this language to figure out how they were able to say it in the first place.

## **The Bronze Studies**

There are two ethnographic research projects, both by Bronzers, that focus specifically on The Bronze. The first is Sarah Gatson and Amanda Zweerink's 2004 study entitled Interpersonal Culture on the Internet: Television, the Internet, and the Making of a Community. The second is Stephanie Tuszynski's 2006 dissertation, "IRL (In Real Life): Breaking Down the Binary of Online Versus Offline Social Interaction." Tuszynski also wrote and produced a documentary film to accompany her dissertation; the film is titled "IRL (In Real Life): The Bronze Documentary Project."

Gatson and Zweerink's study is sociological, and uses ethnographic methods as are typically used in sociology. The focus is on the demographics and behavior of The Bronze, documenting, as it were, who does what. Theirs is an "organic" study, in that both Gatson and Zweerink were Bronzers first, and subsequently met in person, became friends, and decided to conduct research on The Bronze. They used an online survey to collect demographic information about Bronzers and to solicit answers to open-ended questions about participation.

Gatson and Zweerink track The Bronze from 1998 through 2003, documenting and mapping the many dimensions of the community. More precisely, they track The Bronze community from 1998 through the closure of the official Warner Brothers website, its continuation in a member-owned Bronze Beta site that closely replicates the original, and its expansion into multiple face-to-face events and activities. Their highly descriptive study takes as its premise that The Bronze is a community, and that it is organized in several different ways; hence, it can be viewed according to these different angles. The focus is on the ways in which the community existed in sociological terms:



the place of The Bronze posting board community in the context of an official fan site owned by a corporate television network; the relationship of The Bronze as a whole to temporal subgroups, face-to-face subgroups in some geographical areas, and to other *Buffy* sites or groups; the ways that community boundaries were enforced and conflict was managed; internal and external politics, especially with regard to the annual Posting Board Party.<sup>6</sup>

Tuszynski was also a Bronzer before writing her dissertation on The Bronze. Her work is an American Cultural Studies dissertation that uses the Bronze as a means of furthering scholarly discussion regarding concepts of community. Its main concern is the boundary between “real life” and “virtual life,” and as such, is primarily in conversation with media studies. Tuszynski positions The Bronze as an example of a community that complicates an “online vs. offline”—or “virtual vs. real”—binary. She shows that such a dichotomy is untenable, and concludes that The Bronze was indeed a “real” community.

In doing so, Tuszynski deftly addresses the issue raised in the previous chapter regarding my own use of the concepts of “real life” and “virtual life.” She shows, as I would learn over the course of my own interviews and participant observation, that the “real” and the “virtual” are neither as distinct nor as well-defined as they may seem. Furthermore, Tuszynski’s work prefigures Jason Farman’s Mobile Interface Theory, which expands the complicated relationship between the “real” and the “virtual” to include mobile media, and shows the distinction between these terms to be specious and insupportable. Tuszynski’s ethnographic interviews take the form of on-camera interviews of Bronzers, combined with surveys conducted by email. The in-person interviews were 30 minutes in length; the email surveys asked the same questions as did

the interviews, and were sent to Bronzers who were unavailable to meet in person. (I, too, was interviewed in person by Tuszynski, and appear in the documentary).

Tuszynski notes that some of the criticism of using the term “community” to apply to online groups comes from an assumption of transience or weak interpersonal connections. She writes: “I do not argue that unlike physically packing and relocating an entire household, departure from an online group is far more simple *in terms of what must be done to leave*. The difficulty lies in equating ease of departure with a lack of repercussions because of that departure. Just because something is easy to accomplish does not make it easy to do” (48). Tuszynski’s objection here is to the imposition of assumptions about the characteristics of a community onto the community itself. If the Bronze struggled with issues of permanence, it was much more in terms of the transience of its “physical” structure than the interpersonal relationships. The fact that after the closing of the official WB site, the group reconstituted itself first on a temporary site and then a new permanent site (The Bronze Beta), is evidence against the assumption of weak or transient online ties, and also indicates the need to engage such communities on their own terms.

Both of these studies grapple with the difficult question of defining “community,” but from rather different assumptions. Both studies deal with the “policing” of the community, and how it responded to people who violated both the technical rules, or rules concerning interpersonal respect (which were taken more seriously). Taken together, these studies indicate the importance of understanding that there are multiple ways of defining this community, and that each approach will position the community in a different way.

There are significant differences in the ethnographic methods used in these studies, and these reflect different disciplinary priorities and academic concerns. Perhaps the most consequential difference between the method in these studies and ethnography as conducted in this dissertation is that, as Bronzers, all of these researchers had access to their own experience as participants and their own observations in the course of that participation. In contrast, in the case of this dissertation, The Bronze was chosen precisely because I did not have any prior experience with fandom, Internet communities, or Web-based communication. As mentioned above, one of the purposes of ethnography as conducted herein is to interrogate the ethnographer's unexamined assumptions and make those visible to the reader, so as to make as transparent as possible the biases imposed by the ethnographer's social location. In this approach, ethnographic analysis benefits from a lack of preconceptions about the community in question, since the disjuncture between researcher and community exposes the researcher's biases, as well as the breakdowns in communication that allow the ethnographer to understand the culture through its language.

The second major difference in ethnographic methods is that, in the approach used herein, there was little standardization across the interview process. As in the case of having prior knowledge of a community, there are both advantages and disadvantages to this approach. On the one hand, without asking the same questions, it is difficult to compare answers. On the other hand, however, if the goal is to apprehend member's meanings, allowing members the flexibility to talk about whatever they want, in whatever real-world situation presents itself, is often more effective.

### **Postscript: Goth, *Buffy*, and the Myth of America**

Benjamin, a Bronzer friend of mine in Texas, was recently tasered, pepper-sprayed, and beaten by police; and this after police had already handcuffed him.<sup>7</sup>

Benjamin had been nonviolently protesting the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline, which is being built by a Canadian oil company, TransCanada, to extract and transport oil from Alberta's tar sands. Extracting that tar sands oil would irrevocably alter the global climate, making it incompatible with the current state of human evolution. Some of the land for the pipeline has been seized using eminent domain, and construction has begun even on land on which the company's right to build is in dispute or under court review. According to news reports, the "pain compliance" techniques visited on Benjamin by police were undertaken in consultation with TransCanada employees. Given that a foreign oil company was able to take direct action to seize private property, it seems unsurprising that local residents would respond with direct action to prevent such seizure, especially since the locals are acting to potentially avert a global apocalypse. Not unlike Buffy, Benjamin is quietly, in his everyday life, trying to save the world. But in practice, given the enormous power of the forces bearing down on my friend and his band of local activists, the situation seems bleak.

In this context, it remains important to write against culture. But situations like these seem to demand something stronger or more intense, something more that might be done, some different angle that might be considered, or some technique or framework that might be employed. Perhaps, to borrow from the Occupy Wall Street movement, they demand not only "writing against culture," but also something like "occupying culture."

Benjamin's story puts in stark relief the local and the global. Unfortunately, it is hardly anomalous. At the time of this writing, entire nations are planning for evacuation because of rising sea levels caused by global warming (Berzon; O'Hehir). In Pakistan alone, millions have been displaced (Cole). Around the world, resource wars are on the horizon not (only) because oil is disappearing, but because water is disappearing. The single biggest cause of global warming is, of course, the United States. Americans create a disproportionately large quantity of waste and pollutants, and this has direct consequences for people everywhere. It is possible that there are people in the world who have never heard of America; but it is impossible that anyone anywhere on this planet could be unaffected by "civilization." The consequences of civilization are now in everyone's air and water, food and weather. And in our blood.

In the latest indication that American political discourse has become a free-floating bubble of self-contained discourse—unhinged from the reality from which it arose—our two-party presidential debates elicited not a single mention of climate change (Goldenberg). There was, however, much tough talk about dealing with intransigent nations. This despite the fact that the United States has troops in at least 150 countries—174, according to the announcer at the halftime show of this year's Super Bowl—out of some 200 countries. There are probably over 1,100 US military bases worldwide, but apparently nobody knows for sure (Turse).

If political discourse is unhinged, financial economics is even more so. Completely severed from what economists call "the real economy," American financial institutions have taken the lead in wrecking their own economy as well as several others. One of the hardest hit is Greece, the home of classical art and literature, where sections of

Athens have been ceded to neo-fascist vigilantes whose attempts at ethnic cleansing have been opposed not by authorities but by bands of anarchists who do battle with them (Margaronis).

In other words, the reach of our consumption, our militarism, and our toxins, are so great that nobody can escape. Even China, currently the world's biggest polluter, is polluting in part to make inexpensive products for export to industrialized nations like the US.<sup>8</sup> How does one "write against culture" in this context? What does it mean to write against culture when every culture is itself in the death-grip of post-industrial capitalism?

Against the backdrop of impending doom mentioned above, it seems we need a way to intensify our "writing against culture" to account for the fact we're living in—or soon about to—a bleak postmodern era, and that this may in fact be a permanent and ever-worsening condition. If so, then perhaps there's a lesson to be re-learned from the rise of (what would come to be known as) "goth," which is a style of rock music that arose from punk rock, and is closely identified with the British band Bauhaus:

Bauhaus formed in 1979 out of the same social muck that produced the English punk boom a few years earlier: skyrocketing unemployment, burning racial tension and, worst of all, disco. But at least the Sex Pistols had artsy King's Road as their ground zero. At the time, the members of Bauhaus were living in Northampton, a depressing industrial town about 60 miles northwest of London. "It was dismal: bad food, bad weather and Mary fucking Poppins," Ash says. "It sucked all around." In response to their joyless surroundings, Ash, Murphy, drummer Kevin Haskins and bassist David J started playing spare, haunting music that cut deeper into punk's dreary nature than any band had previously gone. Instead of raging against the bleakness that enveloped their lives, Bauhaus dwelled on it. Their lyrical obsessions that later became goth clichés — bats, dead horror movie actors — were extensions of that hopelessness. "We had no prospects, no future. It really was shit," Ash says. "That's why we sounded the way we did."

We don't have Mary Poppins, but we do have Disneyland and shopping malls and Sunnydale. Could it be that what bleakness did for punk rock—create goth—it could also by analogy do for ethnography? Perhaps by cutting deeper into the true dreary nature of everyday life, bleakness can at least create a sense of despair that can cut through indifference, that can pierce the stories that belie the myth of the American dream. Perhaps this could be accomplished much as *Buffy* pierced the masquerade of sunny suburban Sunnydale by adding that paragon of gothic liminality, the vampire.

In this case, what began as (what I thought was) a straightforward question—why would people form a community out of a TV show?—turned out to require a mental adjustment of sorts, a change in viewpoint or aspect. This shift is perhaps less a matter of method and more a matter of what we might call an ethnographic stance, the intellectual equivalent of a move toward “haunting music that cut deeper into punk’s dreary nature,” something akin to post-punk or gothic ethnography. It is unclear what this shift is, or to what stance it is moving. However, it would seem to require that we turn our gaze around, inverting and subverting it, twisting and turning it, casting a critical and haunted eye, asking not merely “what are you doing?” Rather, it requires asking—with incredulity, or dismay, or perhaps horror—“what have we done?”

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack's "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses" explicitly notes a tendency for the presentation of women's feelings and thoughts to be modified to fit dominant ideologies, and directs the interviewer to consciously interrogate the forces and circumstances that might silence people. Ruth Behar's The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart also demands emotional awareness on the part of the ethnographer as an ethical obligation. Rey Chow's Writing Diaspora also implicitly challenges the erasure of emotional awareness in modern scholarship. Gloria Anzaldua's Borderlands/La Frontera examines the emotions of confusion and ambivalence when faced with competing social "scripts."

<sup>2</sup> Much of the scholarship can be found in *Slayage*, an online journal of *Buffy* Studies.

<sup>3</sup> Fan fiction is stories written by fans using characters created by someone else; *Buffy* fan fiction is based on the characters in *Buffy* and the Buffyverse. Fan fiction often focuses on feelings and fantasies prompted by the show. Of the general body of fan fiction, a significant proportion is "slash" fiction, which deals with relationships between the characters. Slash fiction takes its name from the slash between the names of two characters in a romantic pairing. Slash fiction is usually erotic—often homoerotic, as in, for example, Angel/Xander slash fiction—and is typically written by women. Although such material is beyond the scope of this study, the fact of its existence speaks to the powerful reactions that some viewers had to the show.



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<sup>4</sup> Probably the first comprehensive list of *Buffy*-related scholarship was compiled by Derik Badman's in his "Academic *Buffy* Bibliography," which I happened across on line while searching for *Buffy*-related articles in 2001. It was since been updated by Alys Hornick to include Whedonverse articles, and is available on-line as "Whedonology: An Academic Whedon Studies Bibliography." See also "Buffy Studies by Discipline," edited by David Lavery and Rhonda Wilcox.

<sup>5</sup> Jenkins discusses this concept of the "aca-fan" in his blog, Confessions of an Aca-Fan, at <http://henryjenkins.org>.

<sup>6</sup> There were multiple kinds of subgroups on The Bronze, but the temporal subgroups were some of the most significant. The Coffee Clubbers, for example, posted most often in the daytime, and typically from work or school. The Lovers Of Sleepless Evening Repartee-athons, (or LOSERs), posted most often at night, and typically from home.

<sup>7</sup> For news reports, see, for example, Bill McKibben's "TransCanada Turns Sadistic in Texas," as well as the reports by Amy Goodman and Chris Hedges. For the science of global warming, see McKibben's "Global Warming's Terrifying New Math," and Elizabeth McGowan's interview with NASA's James Hansen. On the issue of eminent domain, see, for example, the article by Gellerman, and the Austin American-Statesman editorial entitled "Respect Landowner's Keystone Fight."

<sup>8</sup> China currently emits more greenhouse gases in total, but not per capita, than any other nation. Most of the carbon currently in the atmosphere is a product of the industrialized nations, especially the US.

### Chapter 3: Watching *Buffy*, Reading *Buffy*

#### Introduction

There would be no Bronze without *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and there would be no such thing as a *Buffnography* without The Bronze. The situation of the ethnographer is, in this case, to some degree unprecedented. Prior to the creation of Web-based virtual worlds, the physical context in which a community existed was primarily geographical. The narratives that defined a community might reasonably be assumed to be most easily accessible through direct communication with community members in their own geographical location. Even as anthropologists shifted their focus away from other cultures and toward their own, as with the rise of urban and postmodern anthropology, the physical location of the community continued to provide, literally, the ethnographic background and context.<sup>1</sup>

In one sense, ethnographies of on-line communities are simply an extension of urban ethnographies, continuing the shift from the study of “other” or “exotic” or “primitive” cultures toward the study of communities that are part of a larger unit. In another sense, however, on-line communities do not lend themselves to standard ethnography, because there is no geographic or spatial location, no physical context, with which to situate the community as in traditional ethnographies. With a community like The Bronze, the physical context is virtual. Furthermore, the physical context, inasmuch as it exists at all, is itself a narrative—a set of televisual stories—that defines the community. The Bronze was part of a marketing strategy, created as a promotional tool for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The physical location was, to an outsider, a computer screen with words on it. *Buffy* was both the subject matter of that text, and its context; it

was a context in which community members created their own stories, narratives, and meanings.

Thus, The Bronze is best understood within the context of *Buffy*. Therefore, in this chapter—which serves as a preamble to the ethnographic analysis—I discuss *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as the text that provides context. I do so in four subsequent sections. In the first of these (“Words and Culture”), I take an auto-ethnographic approach to BtVS, and discuss a few key elements of the show that compelled me to go on line in search of all things *Buffy*. I tuned in to *Buffy* before I knew what American Studies was; it wasn’t until the third season of *Buffy* that I developed an academic interest in The Bronze. Therefore, I convey my initial interest in *Buffy* from a non-academic perspective. This allows me to express the perspective of an atomized viewer, one whose decision to tune in was made in isolation, and who experienced television in its traditional broadcast format, as a top-down and hierarchical system of delivery from network broadcasters to individual homes.<sup>2</sup>

I subsequently expand the auto-ethnographic perspective in order to analyze *Buffy* in its broader social context. One reason for doing so is to discern particular elements or aspects of the show that would explain its appeal to Bronzers and its importance in forming the basis of a unique online community. In other words, having explained what drew me to the show, I then highlight key aspects that might draw others to the show.

There are two sets of elements that are peculiar to *Buffy*, and relate to The Bronze community and its member’s meanings. The first is the unique use of language and dialogue in *Buffy* (discussed in the second section below, “Language and the Postmodern Self”). Language in *Buffy* is particularly postmodern; it has the effect of indicating

multiple possibilities and a decentered and shifting sense of self. It also has the effect of blurring otherwise clear boundaries between TV and its audience, and lends itself well to imagination and fantasy. As discussed in Chapter 4, this postmodern language also plays an important role in The Bronze community.

The second set of elements that are peculiar to *Buffy* involve its overall aesthetic, as discussed in the third section below (“The Postmodern and the Gothic”). In that section, I discuss the elements that account for *Buffy*’s aesthetic. This aesthetic, or “overall feeling” about the show, helps explain the intangible appeal of the show, and how that informs the fan community.

A second reason for analyzing *Buffy* in its broader context is that the fan community was in actuality a set of relationships with a television show and its producers; to understand the community, it is necessary to understand something of the way it interacted with—and defined itself against—the broader culture in which it was situated. Therefore, in the fourth section of this chapter (“The Scenes That Set The Scenes”), I describe the ethnographic and televisual context—the scenes that formed the context of the text of the community—of The Bronze.

Thus, in what follows I discuss *Buffy* as cultural criticism by focusing on key themes and elements in *Buffy* that attracted my attention and that spurred me to think about and discuss the show. I will do this for four reasons: first, I wish to provide background for the reader. Second, the social location of the ethnographer is the lens through which he (in this case, me) views the ethnographic study. To see what the ethnographer sees, it helps to know through which lenses he sees. Inasmuch as the following is a product of my own perspective, my view of *Buffy* helps elucidate that

perspective and the biases that may be embedded in it. Third, although my ethnographic interviews focused primarily on the lived experiences of community members, we also discussed *Buffy* itself; aspects of the show to which I was attuned were therefore likely to come up in conversation. And fourth, I discuss *Buffy* as a text in order to consider what it was about the show that attracted viewers generally, and Bronzers specifically.

One might expect that a community would be held together with common interests; in the case of a fan community, then, it seems reasonable to ask why a community would form based solely on a common interest in *Buffy*. Furthermore, if a community can form based only on a common interest in *Buffy*—if a TV show is all it takes for individuals to form communities—one might reasonably ask whether community formation requires any commonalities at all. Will any group of individuals, if thrown together, eventually form a community? Or are there specific elements in a group that must exist for community-formation to take place? It may well be the case that communities will form even in the absence of common elements. Nonetheless, given that the Bronze community has been on line twice as long as *Buffy* was on the air, understanding it requires examining which elements (if any) have functioned as commonalities that hold the community together.

### **Words and Culture, Dialogue and Ethnography**

For some reason, I was surprised that I would like a show like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (BtVS). Perhaps it was out of some embarrassed need to justify my new obsession that I started devoting serious thought to why I liked the series. Or, maybe there was something intuitively meaningful in it that my brain was struggling to verbalize.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the reason, I found in it a great deal of relevance to life in general, and my life in particular, especially my life as an erstwhile high school student in Southern California. But I also found that not too many people were impressed by my new favorite pastime. So, aside from the perverse joy I felt in telling people that *Buffy* was the most profound thing I had ever seen, I didn't get much positive feedback from my pronouncements that the solutions to most of life's problems could be found on Mondays at 9 p.m. (8 central) on The WB. Incidentally, by its second season, the show had moved to Tuesdays at 8 p.m. Seven central.

Initially, it was the dialog in *Buffy* that captivated me. It was remarkably rich and incredibly funny. The characters were self-reflexive in the extreme, to the point that their conversations sounded almost like they were occurring in the third person, happening out "on the table" rather than emanating from their heads. The characters would often speak or narrate their actions as they were happening, as if they were constituting themselves with their words. Their words and actions were often of a piece, and the language was rich and messy and often indeterminate. More than mere narration, and more also than dialogue, it was like extemporaneous "speech acts" (Agar 144).

I found myself wondering whether my own wretched teenage experience might have been less awkward had I been as communicative. Of course, even if I'd had the communication skills, I would still have had to use them, and I don't know if any amount of cajoling would have convinced me to let anyone into the private little hell that was my teenage life. Besides, if the characters in BtVS were any indication, there would have been plenty of awkwardness regardless of how communicative I had been. Nonetheless, because the simultaneity of self-reflection and teen angst was so fascinatingly believable,

*Buffy* reminded me of just how many loose ends I had managed to leave untied as a teenager. I doubt that those ends will ever be tied, but at least I can get a little closure by understanding my own past via *Buffy*.

The dialogue in *Buffy* was fast-paced, witty, and crammed full of references to popular culture. It was, frankly, incomprehensible at times. I had initially assumed that was a by-product of our media age, and its obsession with attention-getting excesses. Movies were getting shorter but moving faster, with rapid dialog and scene changes, and, of course, ever more elaborate explosions and gruesome violence. Watching an “old” movie—like from the ’80s—was almost painful due to the interminably slow pacing. Similarly, TV shows seemed to be competing to become ever more crass, violent, salacious, obnoxious, foul, gory, and just really gross.<sup>4</sup> And, even worse, all the prejudices that I had thought were dying away—the casual sexism, racism, and homophobia that were so often played for laughs—seemed to be making a comeback. I had initially assumed, then, that the dialogue in *Buffy* was a “hook,” a marketing trick to outdo the witty banter of other popular shows by making this banter even faster and wittier. But it soon became clear to me that this dialogue wasn’t a gimmick. It simply wasn’t accessible enough, and, as I was to learn later, it was actually based on the way BtVS’s executive producer, Joss Whedon, spoke in real life. But there was also something else that suggested the authenticity of *Buffy*’s language: they talked like I talked!

Actually, it wasn’t so much that the characters talked like I did, but that they reminded me of myself when I was in high school. Indeed, they somehow captured the essence of my high school experience. *Buffy*’s mannerisms were so familiar as to be

unsettling. The character reminded me so much of a close friend that I was actually a little freaked out by the first few episodes I saw.

But it wasn't just that I felt like I already knew Buffy. After watching two episodes, I almost felt like I knew all the characters. In fact, I felt like I knew them all because I had gone to high school with them. Not literally, of course, but the sense of familiarity was unnerving. I had, after all, gone to some effort to repress any memories of high school. But all it took was an hour of BtVS, and I was back in high school; and, somehow, not horrified by the prospect. Memories of me and my friends came rushing back: gangly high school kids, making up their own words, their own slang, and somehow managing to communicate. We were nerds. We liked to read. And I, for one, learned fairly early on that if I used the language that I was reading in books, then the adults would make fun of me for acting too grown up, and the kids would make fun of me for being a big dork. Because, as everyone knows, only sissies who deserve to be picked on know big words. So, we tended toward irony and sarcasm, although this wasn't so much an intentional strategy as it was just the way things were.

It probably didn't help that I was an ethnic minority growing up at a time when there weren't very many people who looked like me. My father, originally from India, came to the United States for his Ph.D. Specifically, he came to Santa Barbara, a relatively small city some 100 miles north of Los Angeles that happened to be roughly where the fictitious town of *Buffy's* Sunnydale would be set.<sup>5</sup> He had come to the US just before the 1965 change in immigration law that relaxed quotas for non-white immigrants.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, there were relatively few immigrants from India (or other parts of Asia) in the US when I was growing up.<sup>7</sup> The few Indians I met of my own



generation had either immigrated with their parents when they were (like my sister) very young, or they were (like me) American-born citizens. In either case, we were permanently foreign, although perhaps not yet considered “model minorities” (Lowe 5).<sup>8</sup>

In other words, I stuck out like a sore thumb. My parents were foreigners who placed inordinate value on education, and seemingly had no clue that doing so would not in any way make me cooler in the eyes of my peers. Even worse, I had no idea that I had been born into the trajectory of a fraught racial history. Like most Americans, I thought I was an individual who was standing still, not flotsam drifting from one former British colony to another. I didn’t know I was already “raced,” or that I was here because they were there.<sup>9</sup>

The “here,” in this case, was Long Beach, California, a sunny, sleepy, smoggy suburb of Los Angeles built around military manufacturing. I’d heard it was founded—as if there weren’t already native peoples living there—by retired Iowa farmers who were determined to make sure Long Beach stayed sleepy and suburban. Rumor had it that back in the 1950s Long Beach was the first choice for the location of a new tourist attraction to be called “Disneyland.” But apparently this idea was rejected by the city because it might cause too much traffic. Instead, the city opted to generate tourist revenue by becoming the home of the permanently docked *RMS Queen Mary*, thus providing me with an enormous floating metaphor for my life. I was a brown bookworm in a racist white suburb where the main attraction was a big dumb ship that never went anywhere.

The peculiar thing about Southern California is that it was actually quite ethnically diverse; but it was segregated into different worlds, none of which I quite

belonged to. I knew few African Americans, and I didn't comprehend desegregation, even though I heard the word uttered often enough. There were Spanish-speakers in school, but rarely in the same classes as me. It would be several years before I learned that some of the non-English speaking kids with whom I went to school came from families that had lived in California for generations. Some of those kids were the descendants of Spanish colonists who had been in California since before it was part of the US. But, they weren't allowed to enter public schools until the 1950s, and so never learned English. They were, like me, permanently foreign; but, I didn't know this, separated as I was by both language and residential racial segregation.

I wasn't black, Hispanic, or white, which meant that growing up in Southern California was an exercise in not fitting in. And this kind of not fitting in wasn't the rugged-individualist kind of non-conformity, but instead ranged from the model-minority kind—wherein lack of overachievement was proof that minorities who were too lazy to live up to their potential were taking over the country—to the overtly racist kind. Of course, not fitting in, even in fairly benign circumstances like my own, is terrible for kids. Probably that has something to do with biology: in the wild, after all, not fitting in could lead to falling behind the herd and getting eaten. And being a violin-playing, book-loving, introvert was like the post-industrial equivalent of a wounded gazelle. That's because, in our modern human lives, children are both predators and prey; they seem exquisitely capable of smelling blood, and are quick to prey on their own kind. Put dozens of them in close quarters where they can't eat or drink or even use a bathroom without permission, pump them full of nasty cafeteria food, and do it while their bodies are full of hormones and their barely-formed brains cause them to act like sociopaths, and

what we get is public school. Which, age-restrictions notwithstanding, are sort of like prisons, right down to their ongoing privatization and corporatization.<sup>10</sup>

This is not the kind of environment in which being in any way different is a good thing. Still, I didn't have that history that everyone else had been born into, and so there was an awful lot that I just didn't comprehend. I'm not sure where I first heard it said, but I remember thinking that I was in the world, but not of it. So, like most immigrants, I tried—somewhat unsuccessfully—to blend in to the background, to will myself into invisibility or at least anonymity.

By the time I was in high school, I became vaguely aware that all of the above was taking place against an odd background. I might hear rumors about, or even witness, the occasional strange occurrence, which would then be quickly forgotten in light of whatever personal drama reared its ugly head. I vaguely remember, for example, a Monday morning on which a dead girl was found on campus, followed by another Monday morning and another dead girl found on campus. That's all I heard, but it seemed like it might become a trend. I heard once about a teacher who tried to break up a fight, only to be stabbed and taken to the hospital. I also heard about a drive-by shooting when the marching band was on the field at a football game at a rival high school. I remember a fellow marching band member being hospitalized after getting hit in the head by a rock, and another getting stabbed in the back during a band competition. We had plainclothes police officers at the school's entrances (although I soon developed a rapport with them, since I was regularly leaving campus with my violin for some extracurricular activity). We also had plainclothes cops on campus and in our classrooms, and red and blue accessories were banned because they were gang colors. And yet, nobody talked

much about any of these undercurrents; the sun kept shining, and the parents, I assumed, remained clueless, safely ensconced in the post-war suburbs of the American dream.

Memories of years past are, of course, dubious, especially when they're memories of a time before my brain had fully formed. But the weird thing is that, even though I never really "got" was going on when I was a kid, somehow *Buffy* did. The fictional culture created by BtVS captured something so fundamental about real life as I remembered it that I had to watch. It was what Michael Agar calls a *languaculture*, and, oddly enough, the fictional one of *Buffy* felt more real than the remembered, lived languaculture of my memories.<sup>11</sup>

From about the second episode of *Buffy*, I was totally hooked. I knew right away that I had to tell someone about this new life-changing discovery I'd made. Fortunately, I had two coworkers who humored me every Tuesday and listened to all the fascinating things I'd been thinking about since watching *Buffy* the previous evening. And, since we all worked on Wednesdays, too, I didn't mind when *Buffy* switched to its Tuesday time slot. But a question remained: if I watched this show because it was about my hometown, then why did other people watch it? I hadn't met anyone else who talked like I did, much less anyone who had gone to a high school that was so socially stratified that it had fraternities and sororities. Was my Southern California (SoCal) experience typical of high school? Or was it unique? And if it was unique, then why did anyone outside of SoCal watch *Buffy*?

The shooting script for the first episode of *Buffy*, "Welcome to the Hellmouth" (WTTH), offers a clue. Written by Joss Whedon, himself a New Yorker, it begins as follows:

FADE IN:

EXT. SUNNYDALE HIGH SCHOOL – NIGHT

The front of the affluent Southern California school gleams darkly in the moonlight.

The first daytime scene of the high school, filmed at Torrance High, begins as follows:

EXT. SUNNYDALE HIGH SCHOOL – MORNING

A day as bright and colorful as the night was black and eerie. Students pour in before first bell, talking, laughing. They could be from anywhere in America, but for the extremity of their dress and the esoteric mania of their slang. This is definitely So Cal.

Apparently I'm not the only one who thought there was something about *Buffy* that captured something specific to SoCal. But *Buffy* was apparently still accessible enough that the show caught on far outside SoCal, with enough of a following to be considered a cult hit, if not one with mass appeal.

The “esoteric mania” in *Buffy* is what initially drew me to the show: it made me feel like there was someone out there who actually understood what my life was like. Indeed, this is one reason that Joss Whedon is widely acclaimed: he “gets” it. And he helps us think through what “it” is, even if we’re not sure ourselves. And this is why *Buffy* caught on despite the specific SoCal experiences it depicted: it was about alienation, and it was about identity. I had specific experiences that I recognized in *Buffy*. But *Buffy* itself was less about the reasons for alienation, and more about the fact of being immersed in it. This common experience of alienation, I believe, is one reason that *Buffy* was far more accessible than I had originally anticipated. It was about the alienation that can be overwhelming when crystalized during one’s high school years, when social forces conspire to demand conformity to narrowly-defined notions of identity. It captured the hell of being a teen, a girl, a loser, and a nerd. It was like thick description: rich, arcane, and somehow, not too depressing.

Put another way, *Buffy* is cultural criticism that proved to have wide appeal. It embraces the notion of a dark underworld that interrupts and destabilizes the sense of order that characterizes contemporary life. It appeals to people who recognize irony and absurdity, and who recognize that the vagaries of everyday life can be horrifying.

Some of the elements that made *Buffy* such a cult hit—beyond capturing the “esoteric mania” of SoCal slang—will be discussed in the following sections. But first, a digression to explain the characters is necessary.

The title character is Buffy Summers. She is the Slayer, the only human in her generation who is the physical equal of a vampire, a fact that she desperately—and unsuccessfully—attempts to keep secret. She is the chosen one, the one person in the world with the preternatural ability to detect and fight vampires. Her sacred duty—of which she must repeatedly be reminded, as she would rather be living a “normal” teenage life—is to protect humanity from vampires and other such demonic entities.

*Buffy* begins in the middle of the 1996-97 school year. Buffy is a sophomore in high school, and has recently moved to Sunnydale, California—a fictitious town in the whereabouts of Santa Barbara—from Los Angeles with her divorced mother, Joyce Summers. At her previous school, Hemery High in Los Angeles, Buffy had saved many of her fellow students from a vampire attack by trapping several vampires in the school’s gymnasium and burning it down (*Buffy* movie; “Welcome to the Hellmouth”). Unfortunately, this resulted in her expulsion. Since Sunnydale High was one of the few schools willing to admit her, Buffy and Joyce moved to Sunnydale, while Buffy’s father (who becomes increasingly distant throughout the series), remains in Los Angeles. In the first three seasons Buffy and her friends are in high school, after which they graduate,

and Buffy attends the fictitious University of California (UC) Sunnydale.

Rupert Giles is the school librarian—or at least he was until he blew up the library, an event that coincided with Buffy’s graduation from high school (at the end of the third season)--and is Buffy’s Watcher. He trains her to kill vampires, and spends much of his time conducting research on demonic activity. Giles’ occupation as Sunnydale High’s school librarian provides him with a suitable cover for remaining accessible to Buffy during school hours, and for his obsession with books, especially those in the large collection of primary sources on the occult that he brought with him from his native England. In Season Six, Giles returns to England, and remains there for a substantial portion of the last two seasons of *Buffy*.

Buffy’s closest friends (the “Slayerettes”) are Willow Rosenberg and Xander Harris. In high school, Willow is a smart, shy, computer geek and budding witch; she spends much of her time pining for her best friend, Xander. After high school, Willow comes out as a lesbian, and becomes a very powerful witch, which causes her to become temporarily evil. Xander is the loyal, passionate, and not-so-bright loudmouth. He is the only male character to support Buffy and her mission throughout all seven seasons of the show, and is the only character who never develops supernatural abilities. Joss Whedon has stated that Xander is the character most like himself. Although there were several cast changes during the course of *Buffy*’s seven seasons, the four main characters—Buffy, Willow, Xander, and Giles—maintain their roles throughout.

Cordelia is the rich, beautiful, popular, and utterly selfish person that Buffy once was. She’s a vacuous cheerleader, the envy of the girls and the object of much attention from boys. Cordelia is the queen of Sunnydale High, who, along with her gaggle of

wannabe girlfriends, the “Cordettes,” harasses the less attractive, less wealthy, and less cool high school students with her cruel barbs. Her connection to Buffy and her friends is somewhat karmic: she doesn’t like them, and they don’t like her, but because Cordelia works so hard at being the center of attention, she often catches the attention of supernatural or demonic forces, which requires Buffy and her friends to save her. Cordelia and Xander date—a fact which both Cordelia and Xander go to great effort to keep secret from their friends—for much of high school.

Willow’s boyfriend at the end of high school and into the first year of college is Oz, the werewolf guitarist of the band Dingoes Ate My Baby. Unfortunately, his lycanthropy becomes a problem during the gang’s freshman year of college at UC Sunnydale (Season Four of *Buffy*), and Oz leaves Sunnydale for less populated parts (and a movie career for actor Seth Green). The teenagers in the cast are often collectively referred to as the “Scooby Gang.” Apparently, this term was first used at The Bronze; it was first used in the episode entitled “What’s My Line.”

Angel is a vampire. In the Buffyverse—the imaginary universe of *Buffy*—when humans become vampires, the human soul that occupies a body is driven out, and is replaced with a demon’s soul. The human who has been turned into a vampire—who has been “sired” by another vampire—is therefore not a person at all, but rather, according to Giles, “the thing that killed him” (“The Harvest”). The demon is inherently evil—an oddly essentialist aspect of the mythology for an otherwise critically postmodern show—and hence generally functions only to drink human blood and cause human suffering. Angel, however, is not evil, because a curse restored his human soul, forcing his demonic self to be submerged beneath his human soul. Thus the demon soul suffers from being



trapped in a body over which it has no control, while Angel's human soul suffers from the knowledge of the horrors wrought by his hand, and from constantly fighting his (literal) inner demon. Unfortunately, the curse was broken for a few months in the second season, which caused Angel to revert back to being Angelus, an exceptionally sadistic demon. Jenny Calendar, the computer science teacher and Giles' girlfriend, was murdered by Angelus in the second season. After three seasons of *Buffy*, during most of which Angel was Buffy's boyfriend, Angel decides to leave Sunnydale and move to Los Angeles. He is the title character of the spin-off series *Angel*—whose first season corresponds to *Buffy*'s fourth—in which Cordelia is also a main character.

Joyce Summers is Buffy's mother. Joyce manages to remain ignorant of Buffy's true nature for most of the first two seasons of the show, instead rationalizing her daughter's odd behavior, and repressing the bizarre and violent events in which Buffy so often seems enmeshed. Joyce eventually does learn of Buffy's secret identity, and transforms from a clueless soccer mom to a strong and supportive parent (notwithstanding her attempt to burn her daughter at the stake in the third season). Joyce dies of natural causes in the fifth season.

## **Language and the Postmodern Self: Decentering and Diegesis**

### ***Decentering and Dialogue***

The “esoteric mania” above is what initially drew me to the show. But there was also second aspect of the language of *Buffy* that immediately caught my attention, and this was in no way familiar to me. This was the peculiar habit of *Buffy*'s characters of speaking of themselves with some distance. It was almost as if they were speaking in the

third person, or narrating their own ineffable experiences, as a means of breaking free from the habits of mind that might otherwise trap and consume them.

Berger and Luckmann, in their foundational work on social constructionism, describe language as a means of objectifying reality (74). This, it seemed to me, explained the odd turns of phrase uttered by *Buffy*'s characters. They regularly spoke as if their utterances could objectify their fraught emotional and mental states, and thus allow them to see the world in a more appropriate perspective than if their thoughts remained trapped in their heads. They were often like people paralyzed by anxiety—which, given that this was a horror show set in a high school, seems reasonable—who, by putting their feelings “out there,” could free themselves from their own minds.

I don't know why the characters talked like this. I had assumed that this kind of “thinking out loud” dialogue was simply a function of the medium, of giving the TV audience clues to follow the story. But the effect was, whether intentionally or not, to decenter the self, to proffer a sense of self that was not essential, but malleable.

For example, in the first episode, Rupert Giles, the British 40-something tweed-clad school librarian at Sunnydale high school, shows up at The Bronze, the fictitious all-ages club that's populated mostly by local high school students. He is searching for Buffy, but she finds him first, whereupon she confronts him by saying, “So, you like to party with the students? Isn't that kind of skanky?” Giles responds “witheringly” with, “Right. This is me having fun.” Later in the same conversation, Giles goes on to say, “I'd much prefer to be home with a cup of Bovril and a good book” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” script).

We might expect Giles to reply directly by saying he does not want to be there,

but is there because he needed to find Buffy. Instead, he uses sarcasm, and refers to himself as “me.” This may be simply an artifact of Joss Whedon’s writing style, but it has the effect of distancing Giles from his actions. Rather than simply stating, “I don’t want to be here,” Giles sarcastically describes what he does when he’s not having fun. The effect is to create two possibilities: the sarcastically uttered possibility of having fun at the Bronze, and the possibility of being at home with a book (uttered later) that the use of sarcasm implies. In other words, by saying the opposite of what he meant, Giles uttered two possibilities in one sentence, thus foreshadowing the preferred possibility that he elaborates later.

Furthermore, by referring to himself as “me,” Giles gives the impression that there’s a Giles that has a self, and that self is distinct from Giles’ body, so much so that Giles speaks as if he’s narrating what his body is (or might be) doing. Or, to put it another way: Giles saying “this is me having fun” rather than “I’m not having fun” indicates that there is more than one “me”—or more than one state of being “me”—and that this one isn’t having fun.

While referring to oneself in this manner suggests a postmodern perspective, such phraseology isn’t necessarily an attempt to do so. It might, for example, simply be an attempt by *Buffy*’s writers to be clever and different. Indeed, one writer mentioned at The Bronze that such clever language was added to initial drafts of scripts, and that writers would often need to find alternative ways of expressing dialogue to maintain consistency with Joss Whedon’s style. Still, even if clever dialogue was employed for no reason other than to attract viewers, the fact remains that the cleverness that attracts viewers is an affectation of heightened self-awareness and self-reflection.

The scripts for TV shows are typically written by a group of staff writers, each of whom writes roughly the same number of episodes. This was, to some degree, the case in *Buffy* as well. Writing credit would go to the individual who was assigned a particular episode to write, but the main ideas for stories would be discussed by the entire writing staff. According to *Buffy* writer Jane Espenson, “Joss and the whole staff work out the story for each episode together and in detail—in theory” (online posting). The writer for the episode then writes a “beat sheet” (a short outline), a full outline, and a first draft, and perhaps additional drafts. Joss offers revisions after each step, and upon receiving the final draft, does his own final rewrite. Whedon’s revisions, according to Espenson, “can be minor or enormous.” I imagine the script-writing process is not unlike an academic seminar in that sense: individuals create new ideas by drawing on other ideas and receiving feedback on drafts. Thus, one might hope that a television script for *Buffy* might embody the best of all worlds: the creativity of many individuals, all channeled into a singular artistic vision.

With a show like *Buffy*, it’s unclear—and perhaps can’t be known—how much of the dialogue can be attributed to Joss Whedon, and how much to the entire writing staff. However, it’s safe to say that the show was fairly consistent across episodes. I certainly couldn’t tell who wrote which episodes, or which dialogue, although in retrospect I did notice that Marti Noxon tended to write the “love story” episodes, and that my favorite episodes were written by either Joss Whedon or Jane Espenson.<sup>12</sup> Thus, whether the “postmodern” dialogue discussed above was a peculiarity of Whedon’s, or whether it was a product of some group process, it remained a recurring feature of the series. Additional examples from the first episode are as follows.

On Buffy's first day at Sunnydale High School, her first appointment is with the Principal, Mr. Bob Flutie, with whom she discusses her record at her previous high school, saying, "Mr. Flutie. I know my transcripts are a little colorful," to which Flutie replies, "Hey, we're not caring about that! Do you think 'colorful' is the word? Not 'dismal'? Just off hand, I'd go with 'dismal.'" Rather than saying, "I don't care about that," or "you shouldn't care," or "we shouldn't care," the Principal says, "we're not caring."

The present participle of the verb *care* indicates continuous action, or a state of being; it also indicates the active voice. Furthermore, the use of the gerund *caring* rather than the verb *care* is peculiar in that it implies that the "not caring" is occurring at this particular moment. Therefore, when Flutie says "we're not caring," it suggests a process rather than an essential quality, as in "not caring at this moment." The implication is that perhaps he does, in fact, care, just as Buffy cares. But in another circumstance—such as a future in which both Flutie and Buffy find themselves "not caring about" her grades—perhaps Buffy's transcripts wouldn't be as important. Indeed, perhaps Flutie actively wishes that transcripts didn't matter.

Thus, it's not that Flutie simply "doesn't care"; his lack of caring is neither static nor essential to him. On the contrary, Flutie is actively not caring because it takes actual effort on his part to ignore Buffy's dismal transcript (which includes a notation that she burned down the school gym). Flutie's "not caring" is a process in which he is engaged, rather than an elemental aspect of his personality. It's more suggestive of who he wants to be, rather than who he is, and therefore indicates the disjuncture between his ideals and his lived experiences.

It becomes quite clear as the show progresses that both Buffy and Flutie are conflicted, but both want Buffy to succeed academically. Flutie is described in the script as being “[c]aught between the old school of strict discipline and the new school of sensitivity.” Flutie’s use of the phrase “not caring” therefore suggests an implicit indeterminacy and impermanence in matters of identity. But it also suggests a distance between himself and his emotions, as if he sees himself as a narrator describing the two characters, Flutie and Buffy, who are in the process of not caring. This, of course, suggests that “not caring” is simply the objective appearance, not the subjective experience. It also conveys a somewhat odd dialogic quality, as if the “real” Flutie is describing the actions and characteristics of the human body known as Bob, but is not constituted by them. He’s more of a narrator, loosely affiliated with Bob, the manager of Bob’s characteristics, vested in Bob but not emotionally attached to him. In other words, whether Flutie is implying a processual notion of identity, or indicating detachment from an unknowable subjective self-experience, the effect is of a shifting, unstable self, and a self-identity based on a mutable pastiche of characteristics.

Hence, I tend to refer to this type of conversation in *Buffy* as “postmodern dialogue.” It reflects not a singular experience, but a range of possibilities visible to an outsider. These possibilities suggest that the characters lack an essential self, a core self; they are not static or passive, nor are they finished products. They are, instead, works in progress, in the process of continually choosing the characteristics that will allow them to be like who they want to be like. Furthermore, from the viewer’s point of view, the words were loaded: the general narrative could be conveyed while also suggesting multiple possibilities. Hence, the language, rather than limiting possibilities by

specifying or denoting their particularities, could instead open up possibilities.

Another example from this first episode comes from Buffy, who tells Mr. Giles that while she understands the dangers posed by vampires, she is weary of fighting vampires, and therefore wants nothing further to do with him: “To make you a vampire they have to suck your blood. And then you have to suck their blood. It’s a whole big sucking thing. Mostly, they’re just going to kill you. Why am I still talking to you?” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” transcript). The reason, of course, is that the audience must be clued in to the existence of vampires, because otherwise they might get confused and turn the TV off. But Buffy is also continuing to talk to Giles to convince him, and herself, that she’s not a traitor to the cause, she doesn’t want to be a vampire slayer, and she’s trapped (both rhetorically and physically) in a situation from which she can’t extricate herself.

A slightly different example comes from Xander in the episode “Nightmares.” In this episode, people’s nightmares start coming true, causing them to become paralyzed with fear. Giles, the librarian, finds he can no longer read. Willow is forced to perform classical opera, but the best she can do is stare at the audience in frozen terror, unable to do more than squeak. Xander is attacked by a knife-wielding clown. Like the others, he is at first terrified at this nightmare come true—drawn as it is from the memory of his sixth birthday party—and can barely run to save his own life. But at some point it dawns on him to step outside his own nightmare and see it for what it is: fear and anxiety that feeds on itself. And when this fear and anxiety is kept bottled up inside, it continues to feed on itself long after its source is gone. Xander breaks this cycle of fear-feeding-fear by, in a sense, accepting it and giving in to it. He stops running from the clown, and,

according to the shooting script, “Xander finally turns and SMASHES the clown in the face, knocks it on its ass,” whereupon he says: “You were a lousy clown! And your balloon animals were crap! Everyone can make the giraffe.” He leaves the clown on its ass, and says to the others, “I feel good, I feel liberated” (“Nightmares” script).

In this case, it is Xander’s self-liberation points to the importance of language, of thinking out loud—perhaps even “living out loud”—to negate habits of mind that might ultimately trap, restrain, or warp our thinking and our real lives. Xander uses in a curious bit of behavioral psychology on himself, uttering what he believes should be the appropriate verbalization of the event in question, then acting on it, and then realizing that he has come to believe it and feels liberated. Rather than continue to relive the horror experienced by a six-year-old boy who is terrified of clowns, Xander is able to shift frames of reference and realize that he can fight back; it is the articulation of this realization that frees him from his blind panic. The nightmare—indeed, the past—becomes no longer immutable. Xander changes his nightmare scenario by seeing himself doing something different—becoming someone different—to change his circumstances. It is only then that he can step outside his own narrative into a broader “meta-narrative” from which he can intervene in the narrative construction that he previously did not recognize as such, and had mistaken for reality.

A final example of the “postmodern dialogue” in *Buffy* involves a high school student, Jesse, muttering to himself after being rejected by the girl with whom he’s smitten. At The Bronze, Jesse asks Cordelia to dance. She says, “with you?” Jesse replies, “well, uh, yeah.” Cordelia retorts: “well, uh, no.” She then turns to her friends, and says, “come on guys,” whereupon the girls walk away, leaving Jesse standing alone



in a corner. Having thus been rather rudely shot down by Cordelia, Jesse says to himself: “Fine. Plenty of other fish in the sea. Oh yeah. I’m on the prowl. Witness me prowling.” While such self-narration might simply be a device to convey Jesse’s sentiments to the audience, it nonetheless sounds as if he’s simultaneously consoling himself and distancing himself from the pain of rejection. Lending credence to this second possibility is the fact that, according to Joss Whedon, this scene is lifted directly from his personal life: “This is one of the few things that is actually based verbatim on something that happened to me. One of the only times I ever asked a girl to dance in high school, her reply was ‘with you?’ I didn’t actually say anything after that, the way Jesse does, I just sort of slunk off for about four years” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” commentary).

As with the case of Mr. Flutie above, this type of language suggests multiple possibilities as well as a decentered self. For example, if Jesse truly believed he was a hopeless loser, it’s doubtful he would pretend to be unaffected by rejection, especially since there was nobody there to witness his resilience in resuming his “prowl” for “other fish.” On the contrary, his denial of rejection is simultaneously an acceptance of it, and an insistence—perhaps self-delusional—that his future reality will be the opposite of his lived experience. And it also begs the question: if the entity known as Jesse is being consoled, then who’s doing the consoling? As in the case of Flutie, it’s as if there’s an aloof, metaphysical Jesse, the manager of the body known as Jesse, the unknown self that pieces together various characteristics to create the physical being known as Jesse.

As mentioned above, this dialogue may be considered “postmodern” in its implication of a decentered and mutable self. In the Western tradition, postmodernism,

as described by Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, is a body of work that critiques Enlightenment rationalism and universalism, and that “rejects modern assumptions of social coherence and notions of causality in favor of multiplicity, plurality, fragmentation, and indeterminacy. In addition, postmodern theory abandons the rational and unified subject postulated by much modern theory in favor of a socially and linguistically decentered and fragmented subject” (3-4). Postmodernism implies a criticism of the typical modernist concept of self based on a Cartesian split, “a mind/body dualism” (Underwood 282).

There is, however, another manner in which *Buffy*’s dialogue suggests the postmodern. The question posed above—if Jesse’s being consoled, then who’s consoling him?—is a variation on one of the central insights of classical Indian philosophy as contained in the Upanishads: “Everyone experiences this, but no one knows the experiencer” (Easwaran 18). The Upanishads, inasmuch as they contain the crux of Indian philosophy, point to what we might call a postmodern view of the self, a “nonduality” elaborated by Buddhism. The “postmodern dialogue” of *Buffy*, then, is postmodern both in the sense of coming after modernism and critiquing modernist epistemology, but also in the sense that it suggests a concept of identity typically associated with non-Western cultures. Indeed, a variety of scholars have argued that concepts of identity outside the West, especially among Buddhists, have in some sense always been postmodern.<sup>13</sup> Rey Chow, for example, argues that “postmodernism (call it a periodizing concept, a cultural dominant, if you will, after Jameson) is only a belated articulation of what the West’s ‘others’ have lived all along” (56).

The language of BtVS, then, whether intentionally or not, subtly points to a

potential and radical shift in the concept of American identity. It begs the question of who, exactly, the subject is, and as such, suggests the West's "others." It points to contemporary postmodern theory, as well as ancient and mystical postmodernism that looks inward toward consciousness rather than outward toward the natural world (Easwaran 13). Indeed, if one of postmodernism's achievements has been to challenge the subject/object dichotomy, then the language of *Buffy*, even if only played for laughs, suggests the possibility of dramatic epistemological and cultural change.

### ***Diegesis, Fantasy, and Reality***

One additional aspect of language bears mentioning: along with the music in *Buffy*, the language existed to an unusually large degree within the show's narrative structure. As is common in television shows, it was diegetic, occurring within the narrative structure of the show. But, it was uncommon in that it rarely reached an extra-diegetic level. In this, it was similar to the music of the unsigned bands that played at The Bronze. The background music, or the musical score, is extra-diegetic: it exists outside the narrative, and does not interact with the characters. But in *Buffy*, the music was often diegetic: it was played by "live" bands, or was the house music, at The Bronze. The innovation in *Buffy*, then, was that the background music was frequently not merely for the benefit of the viewer, but was rather part of the action, something the characters interacted with. This diegetic music, then, wasn't the background music for the show; it was the background music for the character's lives.

Indeed, much of the action would not have been possible without the diegetic nature of the music. In "When She Was Bad," for example, Xander mentions that the

band Cibo Matto is playing at The Bronze that evening. The gang goes to The Bronze, and Buffy does a “sexy dance” with Xander to make Angel jealous. They dance while Cibo Matto plays “Sugar Water,” a silky-smooth downbeat trip-hop song that’s the perfect accompaniment to Buffy’s bad-girl behavior. But the song isn’t merely accompaniment; it’s necessary for the plot to develop, and in fact drives the plot development.

Similarly, the dialogue itself was, in a sense, diegetic. Inasmuch as the dialogue was contained within the narrative and was part of the plot—rather than uttered as narration for the audience—it was extremely “diegetic.” Dramatic television evolved as an extension of radio—radio with pictures—which itself evolved from theater and other forms of real-time live-action communication and performance. As such, it retains many of the elements of its formative years, even though those elements are no longer necessary. For example, situation comedies (sit-coms) typically involve jokes embedded in dialogue. Originally filmed with live audiences, much as late-night comedy shows still are, the performers would halt their dialogue while the audience laughed at their jokes, even though the laughter itself was not part of the performance. In other words, the humor was meant for the audience, not the other characters; but the other characters were nonetheless forced to adjust their performances based on the audience reaction. This pattern continues to this day, with actors and comedians delivering their jokes “straight” (or deadpan) as part of the dialogue, and halting their performance while the humor sinks in and the audience laughs. Hence, dialogue in a typical TV show is diegetic, but also reaches the extra-diegetic level inasmuch as it is designed for audiences to interact with and characters to ignore.

This is not the case with *Buffy*. The characters in *Buffy* speak to each other, not to the audience. There is no laugh track, and the timing and pacing does not wait for the audience. On the contrary, the world of *Buffy* is self-contained, and the characters interact with each other as humans, rather than as performers acting for an audience. Thus, for example, when Xander cracks a joke—he's the joker of the bunch—the other characters will react as they might in real life: they laugh, or roll their eyes, or look puzzled, or ignore him, or tell him this is no time for jokes. But what they don't do is wait for the audience. For example, in the episode "Out of Mind, Out of Sight," the gang discovers that a boy is beaten with a baseball bat, but there is no sign that anyone was wielding the bat. Giles says, "I've never actually heard of anyone attacked by a lone baseball bat before." Xander's rejoinder is, "Maybe it's a vampire bat." This draws blank stares from his friends, to which he responds, "I'm alone on that one, huh?"

Thus, *Buffy* challenged the standard use of diegetic and extra-diegetic music and language. Paradoxically, the result was that it blurred the boundary between performers and audiences. By creating a self-contained world with rules similar to those of the real world, the characters could be humans, rather than performers. This, I think, allowed audiences to get sucked in to the show, because the performers weren't communicating to the audience, but were rather inviting the audience into their world. However, this is also what made *Buffy* dense and opaque; there were relatively few audience cues to let viewers know what was going on. Instead, the audience was expected to keep up, just as it would in a real life social situation. Hence, while viewers who were willing to put forth the effort to follow the dialogue might get sucked in, most viewers would likely feel removed or distanced from the action, and find it harder to "break in" to the show than

they would with a “reality” show with simple, clear-cut rules, such as the top-rated American Idol. To put it in slightly different terms: the Buffyverse functions well as a fantasy world, precisely because it is largely self-contained, with little need to refer to an external (to itself) reality.

This might explain *Buffy*’s popularity with critics, as well as with a small but intense fan base (its cult following). Even after completing its original run, *Buffy* continues to be regarded as “authentic” or “genuine” due to its non-formulaic narrative and its ability to capture emotional intensity. And it is still considered “smart” television because of its depth: an allegory, rich with metaphor, with themes and storylines that could continue for several episodes or even several seasons. Metaphorical and allusive, *Buffy* forced its audience to put forth some effort to follow along. The dialogue was hard to follow because it was a conversation, rather than narration or punch lines; it was up to the viewer to ponder it, put the pieces together, find meaning in it. The show required the audience to learn to think like the characters, rather than as passive observers. To an unusual degree, *Buffy* requires viewers to learn about the characters as if they’re real people.

The language of *Buffy*, then, was funny and clever and witty. It was also extremely expressive and decentering. Furthermore, it was part of a compelling fantasy world. And it was apparently captivating to a broad audience regardless of any personal connection the viewer might feel (as did I) to various aspects of the show. But the language of *Buffy* also had a third quality: it was subversive. The significance of this third quality is discussed in the next section.

## The Postmodern and the Gothic

### *The Gothic Aesthetic*

While the dialogue and the language are what got me hooked on *Buffy*, another characteristic of BtVS emerged as I continued to watch: this show inverted everything at every possible opportunity, and somehow, in the process, cut through the layers of socialization and assumptions that characterize life. Set in the fictional, perfect, and largely homogeneous “one-Starbucks town” of Sunnydale, California, this show pierced the veneer of the vapid suburban American dream and laid bare the “nuts and bolts that hold the surface of reality together.”<sup>14</sup> This, then, is the third factor (along with the SoCal slang and decentering language) that drew me to *Buffy*: it was cultural criticism.

This cultural criticism was accomplished by creating a particular aesthetic, one that I shall refer to as *Buffy*’s “gothic aesthetic.” This was a postmodern aesthetic, one that embraced both the modern and the traditional, the cutting edge and the classic. BtVS was epic, yet focused on the particular and the quotidian. It was emotionally charged, but took place primarily in a library. It was ironic, almost campy, speaking in a non-dominant voice. Like the alternative rock of the post-punk era, it was “alternative.” And like the Dark Romanticism that popularized gothic fiction in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it featured a world of mystery, uncertainty, and underlying gloom; our heroes were introspective misfits and outcasts who privileged emotion over reason. This “gothic aesthetic,” then, was gothic both in the literary sense of Romantic horror fiction, and in the popular culture sense of representing a contemporary underground and alternative counterculture. But unlike gothic rock music, *Buffy* didn’t come from dark, dank, post-Thatcher, post-punk, post-industrial Northern England. On the contrary, *Buffy* was from sunny, flammable,

drought-stricken, post-Reagan, post-punk, post-industrial Southern California, which would experience a few more boom years before all hell broke loose.

*Buffy* is a very postmodern show. It's about shaking up standard notions and ideas, about slamming together a diversity of beliefs, and then waiting until the dust settles to see which of them are left standing. It is about the multiplicity and fluidity of ideas, meanings, and personalities, and how mixing them up allows us to deconstruct our own hidden assumptions. In Sunnydale, life is figuratively but also literally an illusion: unbeknownst to all but a few of its (living) inhabitants, it's sitting on top of the mouth of hell. Buffy and a few of her friends see the world for what it really is, and because of this, they are ostracized and alienated. And, even worse, they are also constantly getting blamed for the violence and mayhem that they spend their nights trying to stop, which results in a constant string of detentions, bad grades, groundings by confused parents, dead bodies on school grounds, and even suspensions and arrests. Plus they are almost killed on a regular basis.

Michael Silverblatt, in a 1999 edition of his radio program Bookworm, interviewed, in turn, Marina Warner and Joss Whedon. Warner is a writer, mythographer, and literature professor; Whedon, *Buffy*'s creator and producer, also wrote and directed many episodes. Silverblatt asked Whedon about "the dark side of fairy tales," saying, "it seems to me this mixture that Marina Warner was talking about, of horror, mockery, and beauty are all true of the show. How do you define the show's tone to the crew? What is it that you want from them?" Whedon answered as follows:

The show's tone is everything all at once. It has that sort of pop culture blender, [. . .] that pomo thing. But at the same time the one thing we always stress is drama, and is the truth of things. Which is not to say we don't like the funny, or the scary, but that we take the show very seriously;



it's not sort of winking at itself. And we try to combine as many strange and often disparate elements as we can, but in a framework where they all make sense, and they all feel real.

Furthermore, in *Buffy*, the heterogeneity that results from combining horror, humor, action, beauty, and drama serves as a vehicle for uncovering truth and reality:

I also think there's a group of parents out there, you know, and a lot of people out there, who say we must not have horror in any form, we must not say scary things to children because it will make them evil and disturbed [. . .] and that offends me deeply because the world is a scary and horrifying place, and everybody's going to get old and die, if they're that lucky, and to set people up, to set children up to think that everything is, you know, sunshine and roses and Care Bears in the world I think is doing them a great disservice. Children need horror because there are things they don't understand and it helps them to codify if it's mythologized if it's put into the context of a story, whether there's a happy ending or not. If it scares them, if it shows them a little bit of the dark side of the world that is there and always will be, it's helping them out when they end up facing it as adults. (Whedon Interview)

This struck me as a somewhat pessimistic point of view. I never particularly enjoyed being scared, and was never a fan of the horror genre. I didn't understand the appeal of violence or gore, and I especially didn't understand fake violence. Simply reading the newspaper was enough to fill my head with more than enough violence and misery; I certainly didn't get much joy from adding invented horrors to real ones. And, frankly, I wasn't so sure that children, or anyone else, needed horror to make sense of the world, or that it wouldn't, in fact, make them "evil and disturbed."

But Whedon's perspective was about more than just wallowing in misery. He was quite right that everyone would get old and die, and I had often wondered why it was that death—the one certainty in life—was also the one thing that nobody wanted to talk about. But Whedon, and his fans, did want to talk about it. The Buffyverse was a rarity for Hollywood: it was a world that was scary, without perfect happy endings, but with

nuanced and complicated endings. This, no doubt, was one reason that *Buffy* was critically acclaimed as a “smart” TV show.

On a more personal level, Joss says of his interest in horror: “I’ve always been interested in vampires, I think, because of the isolation they feel. They’re in the world, but not of it. As a child I always felt the same way, and *Buffy* deals with that kind of alienation” (Whedon, “Angel”). Indeed, the show’s one good vampire, Angel, is not the traditional monstrous creature that represents a scary “other” on which society can displace its racial anxieties or other cultural phobias. On the contrary, Angel is a tragic loner, one of the first—perhaps the very first—vampire who is frightful not because of what he does to humans, but because he is both immortal and miserable. The horror isn’t just about what Angel might do to others; it’s about being stuck in this miserable state, on this miserable planet, for eternity.<sup>15</sup>

According to the official *Buffy* fan magazine:

“If Joss Whedon had had one good day in high school, we wouldn’t be here,” says *Buffy* co-executive producer David Greenwalt.

“I went through rejection, alienation, frustration, and more,” says *Buffy* creator Whedon of his high school years. “I experienced each and every one of those things. I wasn’t abused, I was just miserable and whiny. I had a harsh time. A great deal of what I write about I experienced.” (Springer 18)

I could totally relate to that, especially the part about being miserable and whiny. But more importantly, here was a TV guy who was actually trying to say something, to make a point, to give people something helpful to think about, to think with. Here was a guy who wasn’t propagandizing his audience with absurd stories about how everything will be okay, and the sun will come out tomorrow, and the good guys always win, because this is America, the Land of the Free, the most exceptional nation ever in the

entire history of nations, the home of freedom and liberty, and the City on the Hill, and Horatio Alger, and the American Dream, and besides, there's nothing that can't be resolved in 60 minutes (42 without commercials).<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, Whedon seems to have a poststructuralist view of authorial intent. In a post at The Bronze "introducing the topic of backstory and continuity," he wrote the following<sup>17</sup>:

People seem distraught over gaps in continuity and backstory. Understandable. First of all, any info you get from non-me type people may be false. Mostly you should trust me. But first and foremost you should trust only what you have seen ON THE AIR.

Even I change my mind or leave gaps. See, the show's narrative is fluid. It changes. I could lose a great story idea if I adhere slavishly to a backstory that I thought up years ago and that hasn't even been mentioned on the show.

A story arc is like an actor—until it hits the screen we could go a lot of different ways but once it does we're stuck with it and will stick by it. So I am purposely vague about the gaps. It keeps it fresh for me to be expanding on backstory and relationships. So you can't even completely trust ME. Like they say, trust the tale, not the teller. (3 Jan. 1998)

Similarly, when asked about his intention regarding the final episode of 1998, he replied, "trust the tale, not the teller. Art exists beyond it's creator" (15 Dec. 1998).<sup>18</sup>

Whedon therefore offers the ostensibly paradoxical notion that "the truth of things" can be apprehended through the use of fantasy—specifically horror—in ways that may not be possible otherwise. Indeed, taken together, his comments argue for the importance of art: it allows us to think about it, and think with it, to arrive at truths that would be otherwise less apparent.

### ***Fantasy and Truth***

Whether television shows should be considered art is something of an open

question. But TV is undoubtedly an element of mass culture. As such, it has drawn the same criticism—and typically attendant moral panic—directed at media forms since at least the advent of the mass-market novel. Put simply, that criticism is that mass-produced cultural products don't encourage thoughtfulness, but rather encourage escapism, and hence make for unengaged, uninformed, and credulous citizens. Furthermore, as the inimitable Neil Postman showed, even in the absence of escapism, our media train us to think in particular ways; TV, as it happens, trains us in ways that probably make us stupid.<sup>19</sup> Or stupider.

The idea that media can be bad for society because it leads to atrophy of people's critical faculties may be seen as something of a left-wing criticism, especially in the current era of corporate control of mass media, and of poll-tested, focus-grouped political messaging. There is also a right-wing criticism, however, one that insists that the problem with media isn't that it makes people think too little, but rather too much. This argument is that media teach people to engage in dangerous or undesirable activities that they would not otherwise think to engage in, and often takes the form of questions regarding censorship (and seem to attract much political opportunism). Hence, Janet Jackson's Super Bowl "wardrobe malfunction," or Bono's "fucking brilliant" Golden Globe award, become the focus of attention from this perspective. Similarly, the video game habits of Seung Hui Cho (the perpetrator of the Virginia Tech massacre), and the music and TV preferences of the perpetrators of the Columbine high school massacre, become the source of much speculation. And, most recently, the Supreme Court ruled that it is illegal to ban the sale to minors of video games that allow virtual sexual assault, on the grounds that such games are (unlike pornography) "non-obscene speech" that is

constitutionally protected (Holland; de Vogue).

Television, therefore, has been assailed—and legitimately so—as, on the one hand, creating vacuous corporate drones, while on the other, teaching people how to become violent sociopaths. Given this context, it was unusual indeed to hear a TV producer talking about “the truth of things.” The question remains, however: might TV also allow at least some individuals to become better citizens, and better thinkers? Is TV merely mind-numbing escapism, or is it possible for people to use TV to arrive at truths?<sup>20</sup>

Rosalind Williams suggests an answer to these questions by distinguishing between types of fantasies. In describing how the World’s Fair of 1900 helped create the necessary cultural and ideological conditions for the rise of mass consumer culture, Williams shows how consumerism came to dominate people’s mental landscapes and eventually subsume fantasy worlds that were not in the service of capitalism. Her analysis of a section of the World’s Fair called the Tracadéro, which was devoted to fantasy worlds featuring colonialism’s exotic “others,” also applies to contemporary fantasy worlds.

Williams writes that the “Trocadéro was the section of the exposition on the Right Bank of the Seine, directly across the river from the Eiffel Tower, where all the colonial exhibits were gathered.” She describes the exhibit as a “gaudy and incoherent jumble,” a tacky racist paean to “imperial adventurism” (61). She draws from the work of Maurice Talmeyr, a journalist who attended and reported on the exhibit in 1900, who noted that in the Trocadéro exhibit, the entirety of India had been reduced to an absurd spectacle:

Talmeyr finds the same vice of inherent and pervasive trickery in the rest of the Indian exhibit, which consisted of stacks of merchandise [. . .]. The

spectacle of India as a land of overflowing treasure chests was as enticing and exciting a vision of the exotic as any child could imagine. But that vision hides what is ‘serious and adult’ about India, the reality of India as a subjugated English colony. (62)

According to Williams, Talmeyr describes the exhibit disapprovingly as “the universe in a garden” (61).

In contemporary terms, the Trocadéro offered something like “the world at your fingertips.” And this is exactly what communications technology—telephone, television, computer, Internet, smartphones—have been promising for decades. And, as with the Trocadéro, that promise is rarely fulfilled. The universe may be in a garden, but that garden will never be the whole universe. The world may be at our fingertips, but our eyes are still staring at images on a screen. The trickery offered up as fantasy may be an amusing distraction, but it’s still just trickery.

Williams writes that “Talmeyr concludes that behind the ‘ornamental delirium’ of the Trocadéro, behind its seemingly mad disorder, behind its silly and serious deceptions alike, lies a strictly logical and consistent ordering principle: the submission of truth, of coherence, of taste, of all other considerations to the ends of business” (63-64). That may seem obvious to a 21<sup>st</sup> century American, but the parallels to our own culture are likely less so. For example, it may be reasonable to assume that most Americans realize that their television shows are funded by advertisements; but they may not have considered the implication that the “buyers” of TV shows are not viewers, but rather advertisers. In other words, broadcasts are designed to attract audiences for advertisements. The nature and quality of broadcasts is secondary, if not incidental, to this concern. Similarly, Web-based services such as Facebook and Google make money not because they provide a service to users, but because they aggregate and sell user data.

Williams argues that what was new about the 1900 World's Fair is not the rampant commercialism, but rather that this commercialism was propagated "by appealing to the fantasies of the consumer." According to Williams:

The conjunction of banking and dreaming, of sales pitch and seduction, of publicity and pleasure, is [. . .] inherently deceptive. Fantasy which openly presents itself as such keeps its integrity and may claim to point to truth beyond everyday experience, what the poet Keats called the 'truth of the imagination.' At the Trocadéro, on the contrary, reveries were passed off as reality, thereby losing their independent status to become the alluring handmaidens of commerce. When they assume concrete form and masquerade as objective fact, dreams lose their liberating possibilities as alternatives to daylight reality. What is involved here is not a casual level of fantasy, a kind of mild and transient wishful thinking, but a far more thoroughgoing substitution of subjective images for external reality. [. . .] People are duped. Seeking a pleasurable escape from the workaday world, they find it in a deceptive dream world which is no dream at all but a sales pitch in disguise. (65)

Keeping in mind the distinction between fantasy that "openly presents itself as such" and fantasy that is "passed off as reality," Whedon's comment regarding the "truth of things," reminiscent of Keats' "truth of the imagination," would seem to fall into the former category, especially in comparison to soap operas, situation comedies, or so-called reality television.

Asking whether TV is good or bad for humanity, or whether TV shows are art or commerce, or whether they're mind-numbing escapism or the stuff of dreams, is not to claim that there are definitive answers to any of these questions. On the contrary, it's to acknowledge that, even if television is ultimately shown to be, in the aggregate, bad for humanity, it is nonetheless possible that some people use some television shows for "good," as tools to think with, to fire the imagination with, to make meaning with. It is my contention that BtVS had qualities that did, in fact, encourage users to think about "the truth of things," at least more than we might expect (as discussed in more detail in

the following chapters). By eschewing realism, *Buffy* accomplished something that realistic television could not: it pointed to the reality that televised realism had coopted. In a world of absurdity, in which people can rationalize away anything that doesn't fit their worldview, *Buffy* created an unreal world that felt real because it pointed to the lived emotional experiences of human beings. Furthermore, *Buffy* foregrounded the lived emotional experiences of people who were aware of the disjuncture between reality and our constructions of it. Or, to quote Joss, "Buffy is a show by losers, for losers. Be PROUD. Losers rule."<sup>21</sup>

It is perhaps ironic, then, that *Buffy*'s departure from realism is what allowed it to "feel real." Indeed, it is precisely because *Buffy* "openly presents itself" as fantasy that it evokes an underlying reality. Because it is openly fantastical, it creates the very subtext against which that fantasy is defined. Thus, while the reality of painful human experiences were foregrounded, the background was necessarily satirical and absurdist.

Buffy and her friends discover a fundamental truth: there is evil in the world, and a lot of it lives in Sunnydale. More important, however, is that Buffy and her friends can't tell anyone about this. Most people refuse to believe in vampires regardless of the evidence, and instead cling to ad hoc explanations for whatever doesn't fit their worldviews. In the Buffyverse, most people would rather blame the messenger than hear to the message.

In other words, *Buffy* was just like real life. Sunnydale was like a dramatized version of Richard Hofstadter's paranoid anti-intellectual Middle America, a made-for-TV suburb in which people latch on to the latest fads for lack of anything else to latch on to, are consumed by the trumped-up fears of the moment—gangs, drugs, immigrants—



but fail to notice the genuinely scary things that, if they did notice, they might have to actually do something about other than just become hysterical.<sup>22</sup> *Buffy* was about people dealing with absurd situations that they had to pretend were somehow not absurd so that they could deal with them and move on. In *Buffy*, people's habits of mind, their rationalizations, lead them to believe that absurdities are normal. Put slightly differently: in *Buffy*, people live within their social constructions.

Buffy and her friends see the constructedness of everyday life, but can't do anything about it, because no matter how absurd the situation, most people aren't likely to look beyond what their constructions have normalized. For example, the pressure on high school students to conform to gender identity stereotypes is repeatedly shown as overwhelming and ridiculous—brutal to the point of driving kids to suicide—but nonetheless inescapable. That high school is hell (literally) is taken for granted, as is the notion that schools are perpetually underfunded (except for sports), teachers are chronically underpaid, and intellectuals are widely considered (despite the fact that they regularly save the world) losers. Hence, the absurdity of real life is de-normalized in *Buffy*.

Indeed, it's one of the running jokes on *Buffy* that most people are deluded, and despite all available evidence, will rationalize away whatever doesn't fit with their pre-existing worldviews. Hence, even though Sunnydale is on a hellmouth, most people are completely oblivious to the demonic activity it engenders. We see an example of this rationalizing process in the first episode, in which many of Buffy's peers have just survived a vampire attack. Cordelia's explanation is that they got caught in the middle of a turf war between rival gangs whose members "were an ugly way of looking." At the

end of that episode, when Xander expresses surprise that Cordelia has so completely misunderstood what happened, Giles says: “People have a tendency to rationalize what they can and forget what they can’t” (“The Harvest”).

It continues on this way throughout the series. Buffy’s mother, Joyce, doesn’t even notice that Buffy is a vampire slayer until the end of the second season, at which point Buffy has been patrolling the streets for vampires for at least two years. When Spike’s vampire gang attacks Buffy at the high school in plain view of students and parents (including Joyce), their vampiric faces and super-strength are attributed to PCP (“School Hard”). When a ghost turns the lunch room’s spaghetti into snakes in, the principal blames the snakes on a sewer backup (“I Only Have Eyes For You”). And when a creature called a bezoar takes over the bodies of several high school students, their memory loss is subsequently blamed on a gas leak (“Bad Eggs”). Thus, in many an episode, Buffy and her friends explain away supernatural occurrences with feeble rationalizations that are nonetheless more plausible than the truth.<sup>23</sup>

The gothic aesthetic in *Buffy*, then, is an intangible sense of gothic and ironic bleakness, accomplished by combining death and beauty and humor into an ineffable whole. As Michael Silverblatt suggests in his interview with Joss Whedon, there is something about the combination of “funny and scary and beautiful,” that seems to draw people together at some intuitive but inexpressible level. It’s as if the ambience and the atmosphere, suggesting a state of uncertainty and incompleteness, points to something mystical and magical. It’s as if many people need the sense of depth, that there’s more to a story, that what they’re seeing is just the tip of a sublime iceberg.

But it’s important to note that this depth is not the pretentious depth of modern

commercial culture (the depth of fantasy that's the "handmaiden of commerce"), with its continuous insistence that every new product is revolutionary and will change the world as we know it. It is, rather, the depth that comes from fantasy that exists for the sake of—and for the joy of engaging—the imagination. And, indeed, modern neuroscience indicates that there may be something in the human brain that craves unseen depths of imagination: it seems that filling in the gaps, the backstories, and the missing parts of stories is something that feels good because it actually is good for our brains in that it literally causes them to grow.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the esoteric nature of the Buffyverse, often suggesting the existence of the numinous but rarely explaining it, would seem to appeal to individuals who wish to plumb the depths of sublime mysteries and discover hidden realities, to—as Whedon once said—bring their own subtext.<sup>25</sup> It would be ironic indeed if the appeal of *Buffy*'s glib superficiality was that it posed an intellectual challenge to its viewers.

Thus, *Buffy*'s gothic aesthetic, that weird combination of death and beauty and humor, along with the juxtaposition of the sublime and the quotidian, allowed for self-awareness that remained serious, that didn't devolve into campy or self-referential silliness. It was a product of creative visual and aural elements, combined with original dialogue. And it was this gothic aesthetic that emerges as the common element—inasmuch as any such commonality can be identified—that attracted Bronzers to *Buffy*. As discussed in subsequent chapters, most of the Bronzers with whom I discussed *Buffy*'s appeal mentioned that the show captured bleakness and impermanence, and it did so with irony and humor. It captured something akin to the negative or opposite of what's usually on TV; it spoke in an alternative, or anti-dominant, voice. It spoke to literary-

minded and pop-culture-minded individuals, people who appreciated the intertextuality, who understood the context well enough to understand the referentiality. It spoke to bookworms in an age of manufactured media stars. It was for the people who didn't quite fit in, who could see the meaning in what was presented as superficial, unserious, pop-culture silliness. It was for people who could appreciate the "ironic voice." It was for people who didn't want stultifying escapism, but rather something that inspired creativity that was worth thinking about and talking about.

### ***Inversions and Satire***

The de-normalizing of social constructions, of taken-for-granted-absurdities, is accomplished in *Buffy* by inverting standard plot devices, and by using the character's dialogue to subvert their own tropes. This leads to satire and cultural criticism, bred of irony and a self-awareness that borders on campiness.

It begins with the very first scene of the first episode, in which two people—a "college-aged boy" and a "timid girl" he's trying to impress—break into Sunnydale High School in the middle of the night ("Welcome to the Hellmouth" Shooting script). The boy wants to take the girl to the top of the gym, ostensibly for its view of the town. The girl, however, is scared and hesitant, and wants to leave. The boy assures her that it's safe, that they are alone, and that nobody will know they were there. Thus comforted, the girl reveals her vampire visage, and kills the boy.

This was the typical horror-movie set-up. I imagine that viewers everyone were thinking the same thing I was, which was: "Don't do it! Don't go up there with him! I can tell by the creepy music that he's evil!" But, as it happens, the girl—a vampire

named Darla—wasn't just another blonde horror-show fatality. On the contrary, she was simply playing the victim, playing with the boy's sexism, as part of her "hunt."

Analogously, the show used the horror trope to create a plot twist that also highlighted how deeply ingrained this trope is.

Film tropes—especially those in horror films—are central to an intra-cultural understanding of film narratives. They make possible a general understanding of a film's meaning; but they also reiterate narrative elements that can become negative stereotypes or propaganda. Greg Smith, in his "Teaching Essay," shows how audiences are trained to expect certain types of narratives. He also provides a succinct explanation of the rules that movies are implicitly assumed to follow:

Picture yourself watching a horror film in which a group of teenagers are staying at a spooky cabin deep in the woods. It is midnight. A couple sneaks off to a back bedroom and has sex. The attractive young woman then gets up, decides that she is going to take a shower, and says that she will be right back.

You know that this woman will be toast in a matter of minutes.

But how do you know? There is nothing in the film itself that says this woman will die. The same incident (romantic rural location, sexy couple) could take place in a romantic film, and the shower would not raise any hackles. No, the knowledge of her imminent death comes from you, the experienced horror film viewer. (131)

Inverting these tropes also inverts the set of meanings associated with them, potentially upsetting the viewer's expectations and broadening the set of narrative possibilities.

This type of inversion continues throughout *Buffy*. At its most basic level, *Buffy* is the story of the girl who isn't the victim, but who fights back. She has no choice but to see the big picture; and in that big picture, very little stands between humanity and untold suffering. She's the only one who can do anything about it, but this makes her conspicuous. Although she goes to absurd lengths to conform, she is nonetheless

considered a freak. She's always questioning her peers about strange occurrences, shows an unseemly interest in murder victims, hangs out with the weird British librarian, is regularly getting into fights (although rarely with humans), and acts as if she has more important things to do (which she does) than go to class. Everyday concerns, when juxtaposed with the notion that the mouth of hell might open up just below the school library, can seem trivial, if not completely absurd.

Certainly, the casual sexism of everyday life seems absurd when one's savior is a slight 16-year-old girl. And yet, every time Buffy tried to discretely save the world, or even just save someone's life, she's confronted with the fact that her actions don't fit anyone's unexamined assumptions about life; to her peers, this makes her hopelessly, intolerably weird. Additional examples of inversions that suggest unexamined constructions of everyday life are given in the following section.

### ***Subverting and Punning***

Inversions, such as the role-reversal of the horror-movie-blondie into Buffy, are one aspect of *Buffy*'s gothic aesthetic. Another aspect is *Buffy*'s subversive dialogue. Indeed, *Buffy* was not what one might expect of fantasy or horror, because the dialogue also subverted its own narrative. As one example, we might consider the arch-villain of Season 1, an ancient vampire known as The Master. In the second episode, we learn that in the 1930s The Master attempted to open the Hellmouth, which is a portal between our earthly dimension and a hell dimension. The Hellmouth is located in Sunnydale, directly under the Sunnydale High School library ("The Harvest").

In the first episode of *Buffy*, The Master's vampire disciples attempt to bring him

back into the human dimension (“Welcome to the Hellmouth”). Amid the ruins of a long-buried church that now forms an underground cavern—this, presumably, is the spot where The Master was originally trapped, upon which Sunnydale High has been overbuilt—The Master’s minions use ancient demonic rituals to pull The Master back into the earthly dimension. The macabre scene includes ominous religious chanting, hundreds of lit candles, and a pool of blood where the church’s altar should be. The Master rises headfirst out of the pool of blood; he is fully part of the earthly dimension, but still trapped by the mystical energy of the Hellmouth, and is therefore unable to stray far from the pool.

The church, decaying and littered with the ruins of Christian accoutrement, including a large cross that terrifies its undead denizens, becomes The Master’s lair. Ironically, even though the Christian cross infuses vampires with existential dread, they must leave it in place, since touching it would burn them. The cavernous lair forms a cave, and is connected to underground sewers, which are used by vampires to move about the city during the day. The only light is the flickering glow of distant candles, casting long shadows and occasionally reflecting in the pool of blood.

The Master himself is a most impressive villain. He is dignified, almost regal, clad in black leather vaguely suggestive of a Nazi uniform, and prone to giving poetic speeches and reading prophecies from ancient and dusty leather-bound books. His visage is grotesque, never appearing human, as he “has grown past the curse of human features” (“Darla” transcript). And, as with most arch-villains, it’s easy to imagine oneself trapped in his lair, with no escape. Indeed, we see more than one situation in which humans are hunted, trapped, and killed in this subterranean nightmare. And yet, as if to prove that

he's not a typical villain—the kind who wears a black hat and twirls a mustache—he regularly subverts the mood he creates. The Master never, for example, laughs maniacally at the end of a soliloquy. Instead, he ends his monologues with quips that, while creepy, nonetheless disrupt the horror of the moment, and replace it with a horror that's more pedestrian and realistic, and hence more genuinely horrifying.

In the first episode, when The Master first rises, his manner is old-fashioned, his enunciation reminiscent of a previous era's English. He is weak, hungry, and trapped, but nonetheless, when he's told that his servants have gone to bring him food—live humans—he responds by dropping his accent and saying plaintively, “bring me something...young” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth”). It's simultaneously not at all horrifying, and yet unexpectedly creepy.

As another example, when The Master is on the verge of making his escape from his underground prison—an event adumbrated by an earthquake—he gushes with evil delight. His arms raised in triumph while the extra-diegetic music (the score) rises to a crescendo, The Master, barely able to contain himself, exclaims to his minion: “Yes! YES! Shake, Earth! This is a sign! We are in the final days! My time has come! Glory! GLORY!” (“Prophesy Girl” transcript). But when the earthquake ends, the music suddenly stops; at the same instant, the Master interrupts his maniacal gloating and asks dryly, “What do you think? 5.1?”

Thus, the Master “breaks character,” interrupting his apocalyptic delight to wryly express his petty desire for a high number on the Richter scale. But he breaks character not in that he speaks as the actor, Mark Metcalf, who plays the part of the Master; nor does he appear to be aware of the camera. It is not Metcalf, but instead the Master, who



breaks character; he breaks character only within the scene, not beyond the scene. His break is only a break in the sense of switching voices within the existing narrative structure (dietetically). His break is only with one performance, or one aspect, of his character. He breaks character only inasmuch as he switches to another character, one that is consistent with the first, but more mundane and far less theatrical. The mood is disrupted, but the audience is not returned to its own world, but rather to another of the character's worlds.

The audience is shown, in effect, that the melodrama and intensity required to suck the viewer into the horror of a horror show is itself artifice. Rather than continue that artifice, and end with the standard trope of a black-clad villain laughing maniacally as his evil plans come to fruition, in this case the arch-villain is shown ending his “performance” of evil, and returning to his “normal” evil self. And his “normal” evil self, inasmuch as it disrupts the standard story-line, points to an evil that's less horrifying, because it disrupts the trope of which it is a part. However, it may also be seen as more frightening in that it depicts “realistic,” rather than stereotypical, evilness. Hence, the one-liners, funny as they are due to their unexpected delivery, are also a signal to the viewer that there's more to the story. Furthermore, they're a signal that there may be something that's missing from the typical Hollywood fare, something deeper that's worth thinking about.

To put it in slightly different terms: the characters in *Buffy* were not two-dimensional caricatures. Even when the characters were behaving in typical ways—there are, after all, only so many ways to act evil—they comprised different aspects that they would shift between, in effect “performing” different aspects of their identities. In

behaving in this layered manner, the characters, through their dialogue, required a relatively high level of audience engagement. These were complex personalities in complicated situations, and their complexity subverted the standard televisual tropes, pointing the viewer to a reality typically obscured by cultural norms and myths. Indeed, to the degree that the viewer was unwilling to think outside standard mythic elements—the American dream, the triumph of good over evil, the exalted position of humans in the natural world, a benign and orderly universe in which everything will ultimately “be okay”—the show itself might make little sense.

This atypical dialogue—language that subverted the narrative from which it emanated—was characteristic of *Buffy* throughout the show, and was used by a variety of characters. As a second example of this subversive dialogue, we might consider another arch-villain, The Mayor. Mayor Richard Wilkins III is the “big bad” of Season Three, and stands in sharp contrast to The Master. The Master is bald, never reveals his human face, has long pointy fingernails, wears black gothic attire, and clings to the long shadows of his candelabra-lit ruins. In contrast, The Mayor has a sunny and infectious disposition. He is a relatively young and cheerful fellow, appearing to be in his 40s. He is quick to smile and offer an encouraging word, and generally seems friendly and innocuous. He is clean cut, secular, fastidious, and bland, suggesting nothing so much as sartorial conformity. Dressed as he usually is in khaki pants and a button-down shirt, he looks the part of the typical small-town mayor.

Mayor Wilkins is conventional in the extreme, with a predilection for golf, low-calorie mints, and moist towelettes.<sup>26</sup> He frequently intones on the need for order, waxes nostalgic about his deceased wife Edna Mae, and often chides “kids today” for their

manners.<sup>27</sup> He is, in a word, old-fashioned. This is in large part because he's actually over 100 years old.

Apparently realizing the power of the Hellmouth, Wilkins "built this town for demons to feed on" ("Enemies" script). He founded Sunnydale, and made the proverbial deal with the devil—literally, several deals with various demons—to maintain his power and achieve immortality. His goal is to "ascend," or become a "pure" demon. ("Graduation Day, Part 2"). Wilkin's ascension will require him to feed a great deal (on humans) upon his transformation. Fortunately for the Mayor, the Ascension will occur at the same time as the commencement address—which Wilkins will deliver—at the Sunnydale High School graduation ceremony, thus providing him with a conveniently large audience of students and parents to eat.

Mayor Wilkins, then, may reasonably be considered to be evil. But, like The Master of Season One, he repeatedly subverts his own evilness. In his first appearance, in a Season Three episode entitled "Homecoming," he is depicted as "unassuming" and "mild enough in demeanor" ("Homecoming" script). Toward the end of Season Three, in the penultimate episode, Mayor Wilkins visits Sunnydale High School to prepare for graduation and thank the Principal for his hard work in maintaining order in Sunnydale. As he's leaving, he stops by the school library, where he sees the Scooby Gang as they pore over ancient books in the hope of discovering some method of preventing the Ascension.

The Mayor saunters into the library, causing the gang to recoil visibly and become suddenly silent. The Mayor says to them: "So, this is the inner sanctum. Faith tells me this is where you folks like to hang out, concoct your little schemes. I tell you, it's just

nice to see that some young people are still interested in reading in this modern era. So, what are kids reading nowadays?” The Mayor walks over to the table of open books, and reads aloud from the first open book he sees, saying, “The Beast will walk upon the Earth, and Darkness will follow. The several races of man will be as one in their terror and destruction.” Then, apparently touched, he says, “Say, that’s kind of sweet, different races coming together!” (“Graduation Day, Part 1” transcript).

It is, of course, not at all sweet, since it describes what the Mayor will do to Sunnydale’s human population upon his ascension. On the contrary, The Mayor’s cheerful reading mostly just incites fear in our heroes. Giles, thus taunted and unnerved, reaches his wit’s end, and (rather dramatically) stabs the Mayor through the heart with a sword. But the Mayor is invincible, and is uninjured, albeit taken aback by Giles’ outburst. Looking down at the sword sticking out of his torso, the Mayor seems suddenly bereft of the folksy eloquence that so uniquely defines him, and yells, “whoa!” He looks down, removes the sword, wipes the blood off, and hands it back to Giles, saying, “Well now, that was a little thoughtless. Violent outburst like that, in front of the children. You know, Mr. Giles, they look to you to see how to behave” (“Graduation Day, Part 1”).

Wilkins is correct on both counts. Not only is it unlike Giles to act without thinking, much less to act violently, but he does throughout the show attempt to model good behavior for Buffy and the Scooby Gang. The viewer is left with the odd juxtaposition of the Mayor announcing his intention to eat the students on graduation day while chiding Giles for his thoughtlessness. The paradox arises because Wilkins is attempting to operate simultaneously on two planes. On the one hand, as a human and local leader, he values what most of us are likely to consider good manners:

thoughtfulness, courtesy, and other such behaviors that allow for humans to better get along with each other. On the other hand, as an incipient demon, a species that predates humanity on Earth, Wilkins operates with an entirely different set of values. These values are certainly detrimental to humans, but are not unequivocally evil. Indeed, Wilkins often seems to think of humans much like humans think of other animals: as food, or annoyances, or pets; but inasmuch as they're thought of at all, they're generally thought to undeserving of rights, but also not to be wantonly abused, as that would be unseemly.

By the end of Season Three, Mayor Wilkins' acts as something of a father figure to a rogue Slayer named Faith. In the episode "Enemies," Faith informs Wilkins of an encounter she had with a demon who was selling books that could be used to stop the Mayor's Ascension. Wilkins responds by saying, "You worry too much for a girl your age. That's unnecessary stress. Luckily, I have just the thing." He then pours Faith a glass of milk and says, "First, load up on calcium. Then, find this demon, kill the heck out of him, and bring the books to me." Faith looks at the milk with disdain and expresses reservations about this plan, prompting Wilkins to say, "Oh, don't worry. And drink up. There's nothing 'uncool' about healthy teeth and bones."

Similarly, in the episode "Graduation Day, Part 2," the Mayor gives his vampire henchmen—a fierce-looking gang of undead killers—their final instructions. He is more commanding than usual, although still fatherly, as he briefs his troops, telling them to position themselves outside the graduation ceremony such that the humans can't escape, thus allowing him to eat them upon transforming. In his final marching orders, he says: "This is how it's going to lay out. The transformation should begin at exactly 3:28. I'll

just be finishing my speech.” Then, tangentially, he adds: “You know, it’s too bad you fellows have to miss that, because I think it speaks to every one of us.” He then returns to his point:

They’ll try to run, of course, and this is when I’ll need you boys in flanking position. [. . .] The important thing is containment. I’ll need to feed. It’s crucial in the first few minutes to sustain the change. What does that mean? No snacking! I see blood on your lips, it’s a visit to the wood shed for you boys. Kill. Don’t feed.

Having thus rallied (and forewarned) the troops, Mayor Wilkins wraps up the meeting by saying: “And boys? Let’s watch the swearing” (“Graduation Day, Part 2” transcript).

The Mayor does end up Ascending; in the midst of his graduation speech, he transforms into an “unholy big-ass snake thing” (“Graduation Day, Part 2” script). The adults in the audience, of course, are completely unprepared for this, and freak out. Principal Snyder, like his predecessor Principal Flutie, is eaten. The students, on the other hand, have a plan: Buffy and her friends have organized and armed the graduating class, and rigged the school library with explosives. In a scene that led The WB to postpone this episode—scheduled as it was to air about a month after the Columbine Massacre—Buffy goads the Mayor-Snake into giving chase. She leads him into the school library, and then leaps out a back window; The Mayor-Snake follows, but when he gets his enormous head through the library doors, he realizes it’s a trap: the books have been removed, and in their place is a huge quantity of homemade fertilizer-based explosives. Giles then blows up the library—and with it The Mayor-Snake’s head—just as The Mayor utters his final words: “well, gosh!”

The Mayor, then, certainly is evil, but his evilness is of a curious sort. Ultimately, Wilkins becomes not just evil, but (literally) monstrously so. His evilness, however, is

largely mundane, even banal. Indeed, in some ways Mayor Wilkins exhibits “the banality of evil” described by Hannah Arendt in her description of Nazi evil during the trial of the Nazi Adolf Eichmann (Edgar & Sedgwick 5). Wilkins an agreeable and sociable small-town functionary who attempts to maintain order and model good behavior while pursuing his own agenda. In these respects he is quite banal. He also isn’t all that bad compared to many other evil things. As Xander notes in retrospect, ultimately his behavior simply boils down to “I just want to be a big snake” (“Primeval”).

Mayor Wilkins therefore exhibits a nuanced evilness. He is in some ways downright decent, but his decency is overshadowed by his plans to eat the townspeople. As with *The Master*, Wilkins’ unexpectedly not-evil quips may have been written for effect, for laughs. But the reason these quips are funny is that they are unexpected. And the reason they are unexpected is that the audience is, apparently, assumed to be expecting something else. This “something else” is probably a more familiar type of evil than the affable Mayor who plans to Ascend to immortal snake-dom. One might presume that this familiar type is the larger-than-life villain common in Hollywood productions, the cackling, maniacal, black-hatted, moustache-twirling, dark-eyed—and typically dark-complexioned and dark-haired—fiend who is evil because that’s his essential nature. Indeed, this essential nature is typically, or stereotypically, obvious even to the casual observer, because the evil fiend is clearly not one of “us,” but rather one of “them,” where “them” is part of a long line of “others” dating back to the first contact between European colonists and the indigenous Indians whose very existence undermined the colonial self-image.<sup>28</sup>

Language that subverts its own narrative is common throughout *Buffy*. The two main villains discussed above, however, are notable examples. The Master began as a stereotypical villain, almost a caricature, and then proceeded to undermine the notion of stereotypical evil. The Mayor, on the other hand, ended as a purely evil being, but in the process, complicated the trope of an essential evil. These two are notable because a clichéd notion of essential evil is so deeply rooted in American cultural forms that their divergence from the norm was unexpected. Indeed, it was often shocking, so much so that it was humorous. Thus we have part of *Buffy*'s combination of humor and death and beauty.

The examples above focused on two arch-villains whose *raison d'être* was evil, but who nonetheless complicated their own self-narratives, who caricatured the caricatures that defined that characters. Their deviation from the meta-narrative of uncomplicated evil was perhaps the most striking of any characters in *Buffy*. This was partly due to the rigidity of the American stereotype of evil, a stereotype so deeply-rooted and so two-dimensional that any variation provokes surprise.

The stereotype of the Hollywood good-guy is perhaps less clichéd than the bad-guy. The good guys wear white hats, but seem to be less narrowly defined than bad guys. This is arguably both a result and a cause of our American obsession with caricatures of evil "others" who are, as it were, static background characters in the drama of American exceptionalism, whether as savage indigenes, degraded slaves, or passive foreigners awaiting rescue or salvation. But whatever the reason for on-screen caricatures of essential evil, the bad guys in *Buffy*, while regularly accused of being essentially evil, frequently turn out not to be.



This is sometimes a problem for Buffy and her friends. For example, in the episode “Lie to Me,” Buffy finds herself betrayed by a friend. Giles attempts to console her, saying with weary humor, “The good guys are stalwart and true, the bad guys are easily distinguished by their pointy horns or black hats, and we always defeat them and save the day. Nobody ever dies, and everybody lives happily ever after.” Similarly, in the episode “Pangs,” Buffy is forced to fight a vengeance spirit that has been accidentally awakened by an anthropologist who is studying the ruins of a Spanish mission. The spirit intends to exact revenge for the atrocities visited upon the indigenous Chumash people by Spanish colonists. Buffy is sympathetic to the vengeance spirit, and finds herself conflicted, telling Giles, “I like my evil like I like my men: evil. You know, straight-up, black-hat, tie-you-to-the-train-tracks-soon-my-electro-ray-will-destroy-Metropolis bad, not all mixed up with guilt and the destruction of an indigenous culture.”

Despite Buffy’s desire for a clear-cut definition of evil, the bad guys are rarely so. But the good guys are also prone to using subversive language, and like the bad guys, a great many of them turn out to be much more complicated figures than the viewer might expect.

As but one example, we might consider the title character, Buffy. She is glib, witty, talkative, sarcastic, moody, sardonic, , and very easily distracted. As is often the case with teenagers, her intelligence is overshadowed by her cleverness. At her best, this cleverness allows her to come across as a bright teen who deftly negotiates her various roles, one of which is her secret identity. But when not at her best, she’s easily dismissed as being either a morbidly anti-social freak or a superficial chatterbox.

Buffy's constant yammering initially struck me as amusing enough, and indeed, as mentioned above, annoyingly realistic. Her sarcasm was brilliant, albeit sometimes more rude than clever. But, one aspect of her dialogue was incongruous: her witticisms never let up, not even in the midst of fighting evil. Given the need for stealth, and the difficulty of employing one's superhuman fighting skills while conjuring puns, silence—indicating concentration—would seem more appropriate. Silence, however, doesn't always play well on TV. And so *Buffy* contained a constant stream of narration, thinly disguised as witty banter. Or so I thought.

While witty banter certainly fulfilled the necessary dialogic function, it also functioned as something akin to a speech act. It served the contemporary function of allowing people to constitute themselves linguistically. It was something like the “self-talk” of psychology. Talking wasn't just narration. It was sometimes an act of defiance, as in “talking back”; or, an attempt at self-induced courage, as in “talking up” oneself to create self-confidence in the face of danger. It was also sometimes a performance of identity: an act to enliven the otherwise alienating and traumatic life of a Slayer. It foreshadowed the constant self-narration of the digital age, in which atomized individuals constitute themselves through the written word, narrating their lives in dialog boxes, comment boxes, instant messaging, blogs, text messages, Facebook status updates, and Twitter feeds. (Interestingly, Twitter, the most recent and hi-tech of these, is essentially a means by which individuals make 140-character announcements to which there is no way to respond directly, and hence it is literally self-narration, as there is no possibility of interactive feedback). And, it was an act of constructionism: it was the manner in which Buffy and friends framed their actions.

Throughout *Buffy*, Giles chides Buffy for her inability to shut up and focus, especially in light of her inefficient and overly-verbal slaying technique. For example, in the episode “Never Kill a Boy on the First Date,” we see Buffy in the midst of a protracted fight with a vampire, a fight that ends when Buffy knocks the vampire to the ground and quips, “We haven’t been properly introduced. I’m Buffy, and you’re”—and at this point she drives a stake through the vampire’s heart—“history.” Both the dialogue and the fighting establish that the viewer is watching a show about a girl named Buffy who kills vampires, and would be unremarkable if it ended there. Indeed, if it had ended there, Buffy’s quip would be extra-diegetic in the sense that it would exist for the benefit of the audience. But the dialogue continues, with Giles popping up from behind a gravestone, taking notes and looking unimpressed, as if he has just witnessed an impudent child more intent on showing off—on performing her identity when she knows someone is watching—than fulfilling her sacred duty. Giles is Buffy’s Watcher, and was, in fact, watching. He remarks dourly that Buffy is wasting “far too much time and energy” when staking vampires, and that she should simply “plunge and move on.”

At the beginning of Season Three, in the episode “Anne,” we learn that Buffy has been missing for months, and her friends have been trying to fill in by killing vampires in her stead. In the opening scene, we see Willow coolly awaiting a newly undead vampire’s rise from the grave. As the vampire claws his way out of the ground, Willow says tauntingly, “That’s right big boy. Come and get it.” Xander and Oz then jump the vampire, but he gets away with relative ease, whereupon Xander looks quizzically at Willow and paraphrases her words in the form of a question: “Come and get it big boy?” Willow, somewhat embarrassed about her uncool one-liner, says defensively, “Well, the

Slayer always says a pun or a witty play on words, and I think it throws the vampires off and it makes them frightened because I'm wisecracking. Okay, I didn't really have a chance to work on that one, but you try it every time!" Thus chastened, Xander says, "I was always amazed by the way Buffy fought, but in a way I feel like we took her punning for granted" ("Anne" transcript).

In the Season Three episode "Helpless," Buffy loses her slayer strength, and experiences the horror of being a normal girl in a world dominated by men. Tellingly, the episode opens with Giles attempting to teach Buffy mental discipline, with Buffy barely able to go three seconds without quipping about something irrelevant. Giles, with barely concealed irritation, tells Buffy that he would "appreciate your glib-free attention," and goes on to say, "if it's not entirely beyond your capabilities, try to concentrate." Later in the episode, Buffy loses her Slayer powers, but nonetheless manages to slay a vampire who has kidnapped her mother. She slays the vampire by tricking him into drinking holy water, causing him to slowly burn up from inside. As the vampire combusts, a bloodied and exhausted Buffy says wearily, "If I was at full Slayer power, I'd be punning right about now" ("Helpless" transcript).

And finally, in the Season Four episode "Wild At Heart," Buffy says, while fighting a vampire on the UC Sunnydale campus: "You were thinking what, a little helpless co-ed before bed? You know very well: you eat this late, you're gonna get"—and at this point the vampire charges Buffy, and she drives a stake into his heart—"heartburn." As the vampire clutches his punctured chest, Buffy says, "Get it? Heartburn?" Without another word, the vampire dies and turns to dust, while Buffy whines out loud, only partially in jest, to the world in general: "That's it? That's all I

get? One lame-ass vamp with no appreciation for my painstakingly thought out puns? I don't even think the forces of darkness are trying. I mean, you could make a little effort here, you know? Give me something to work with" ("Wild at Heart" transcript).

### **The Scenes That Set Scenes**

As discussed above, there were a variety of elements in *Buffy* that were unusual or groundbreaking. Some of the elements that were of particular interest to me, as well as the elements in *Buffy* that gave it a postmodern sensibility and a "gothic aesthetic" were discussed. These elements, when placed in the context of authorial and production decisions, tended to give the show an unprecedented emotional realism and depth. They also provided an imaginative truthfulness—the truth of fantasy—that allowed the Buffyverse to maintain a high degree of integrity as an "imaginary social world." For the relatively small contingent of viewers who were willing to put forth the effort to comprehend the Buffyverse, the show could be extremely compelling. (In subsequent chapters, the discussion will turn to the questions of who these fans were, and what drew them to *Buffy*).<sup>29</sup>

In the previous sections, the focus was on the elements of *Buffy* that might explain its appeal to certain types of viewers. In other words, the focus was on the nature of *Buffy* and its context. Next, I turn to the content of the show, its overall message. In what follows, I discuss not how *Buffy* functioned aesthetically, but rather how it functioned substantively, as cultural criticism.

Below I identify several scenes which exemplify the alienation, fragmentation, diversity, and confusion—in short, *Buffy*'s postmodern and deconstructionist appeal—

that characterize the show. In these scenes, life is more complicated than many of us would like. In BtVS, social institutions create the very divisiveness and exclusion they are designed to prevent. Concepts like “family” and “religion” become suspect in a world in which adults are more likely to believe that their kids are in gangs and on drugs than that they roam the streets at night stopping the evil whose very existence calls into question their parents’ belief in a benevolent God. Notions of identity and individuality are similarly complicated as characters cycle through different personas as they move between home, school, hellmouth, and hell.<sup>30</sup> And beliefs regarding acceptable levels of violence and coercion are repeatedly confused and challenged in a world of soulless demons in which politicians and the police are just as likely to hinder as to help in the fight against evil.

In discussing *Buffy*, I will focus mainly on the first few seasons of the show, in which the main characters are in high school. It was the first two seasons of the show that led me to The Bronze, and then to conduct ethnographic research with Bronzers. Therefore, I will focus on themes that appeared in the first two seasons, during the “formative” years of the show, since they laid the foundation for the remainder of the series. Since many of these themes were reiterated and received their full expression in later episodes, however, I will to some degree address later episodes. I will also focus on those characters who were most important to the show, either because they were main characters, or because they embodied particular allegories.

### ***Alienation in the Buffyverse***

In the episode “Never Kill a Boy on the First Date,” Buffy has a date. Giles

disapproves of this, telling Buffy that “having a normal social life as a Slayer is problematic at best.” Giles says this because Buffy—and everyone she knows—is safer if her identity as the Slayer is secret. But what Giles says to Buffy because she is the Slayer might well apply to all high school students. From the perspective of an adult, having a “normal” social life is certainly problematic in the context of high school. High schools are highly structured institutions in which students have little control over their own lives. Teenagers are considered too immature to exercise good judgment and too uninformed to learn on their own, and for this reason are crowded into close quarters with peers at various stages of emotional development. But the only available adults who might guide student development—primarily teachers and counselors—are typically outnumbered, overwhelmed, and underpaid.

Indeed, as a nation, we devote far fewer resources to education than do other industrialized countries. Our culture disdains academic achievement, distrusts expertise, values competition, and glamorizes aggression and violence. We insist that being an American means being a rugged individualist, but then expect conformity from our students. Hence, our public schools and universities depend on athletics programs in order to maintain their academic programs. It’s perhaps not surprising that high school students have learned their lessons so well that they gang up on each other, torment each other for even minor differences, and all the while feel like school is a waste of time and nobody cares about them (Bauer; Maran). The result is what many of us take for granted: kids are cruel to each other. They’re pack animals with over-sized bodies and under-developed brains, acting out their emotions by preying on the weak and helpless.

In high school, the cool kids are the jocks and the cheerleaders. But despite their

presumed popularity, they are rarely portrayed positively in *Buffy*. In fact, members of virtually any well-established group seem suspect. For example, in “The Pack,” Xander is inhabited by a hyena-spirit, after which he starts hanging with the school’s “mean kids,” and joins in their bullying behavior. Interestingly, Willow assumes that Xander’s newfound malice is directed at her because he finds her unattractive, while Giles is dismissive of it, saying: “boys can be cruel. They tease, they prey on the weak. It’s a natural teen behavior pattern.”

Athletes exemplify pack behavior. In order to hide his homosexuality, football player Larry is constantly doing manly things like trying to beat up Xander (“Halloween”) and look up Buffy’s skirt (“Phases”). In “Go Fish,” when a member of the swim team attempts to sexually assault Buffy, she responds by giving him a bloody nose, for which she is reprimanded by the principal, and told by the swim team’s coach to dress less provocatively. When Buffy discovers that the swim team coach—who, of course, turns out to be evil—has been feeding his swimmers drugs that enhance their swimming ability but have the unfortunate side effect of turning them into sea monsters, Buffy confronts him. The coach, realizing he’s been discovered, decides to eliminate Buffy, forcing her at gunpoint into the sewer entrance he uses to feed the swimmers who are now monsters. Buffy is both horrified and indignant, shrieking, “So, what, you’re just gonna feed me to ‘em?” The coach explains that his “boys” have already eaten—they’ve eaten the school nurse, in fact—but that “boys have other needs,” and leaves Buffy at their mercy, prompting her to mutter sardonically that just what her reputation needs is that she “did it with the entire swim team” (“Go Fish” transcript).

Similarly, fraternity boys are natural representatives of invidiousness and



abusiveness: they are rich, well-connected, experience safety in numbers, and receive de facto institutional support. At an exclusive fraternity party in “Reptile Boy,” Buffy ends up drugged and unconscious, bringing to mind numerous reported instances of sexual abuse on college campuses. Fortunately, no such abuse occurs; unfortunately, this is because she is being “saved” as a sacrifice to the fraternity’s benefactor, a giant reptile demon who lives in the basement. The theme of fraternities as sites of evil continues into the college years, at one point prompting Xander to exclaim: “Is every frat on this campus haunted? And if so, why do people keep coming to these parties, cause it’s not the snacks” (“Where The Wild Things Are”).

Adults—and parents in particular—being guardians of the status quo, are rarely cognizant of harmful social structures. Buffy’s mother is a fairly typical parent in the Buffyverse: she’s a wonderful person, but she’s also clueless, conventional, and often ineffectual. Even after learning of Buffy’s secret identity, Joyce is hopeful that Buffy may be able to go to college and be a “normal” girl. For example, in “Lovers Walk,” which takes place in Buffy’s senior year of high school, over a year after the “Reptile Boy” incident, she says to Buffy: “It’s just you belong at a good old-fashioned college with keg parties and boys, not here with hellmouths and vampires.” To which Buffy responds: “not really seeing the distinction.”

### ***Losers Who Save the World—With Knowledge and Feeling***

In contrast to the thuggish behavior of jocks, cheerleaders, frat guys, and just about anyone with either money or looks, our heroes are decidedly individualistic. They are not nonconformists, and certainly not rugged individualists. They are not even

particularly heroic, courageous, or articulate. But they have learned to question dominant paradigms. They are people who act without relying on the learned assumptions, or “recipe knowledge,” that characterize group behaviors.<sup>31</sup>

According to Xander, Giles is “like super-librarian,” and as such is assumed to be able to take care of himself when there’s a killer on the loose (“Never Kill a Boy on the First Date,” “Puppet Show”). Jenny, the computer science teacher, is a self-proclaimed technopagan (“I Robot...You Jane”). Buffy’s first date in Sunnydale was with Owen, an attractive, intelligent classmate who carried Emily Dickenson with him at all times, and who, according to Willow, had been known to “brood for 40 minutes straight” (“Never Kill a Boy on the First Date”). Willow is sufficiently computer literate that she becomes the computer science teacher when Jenny is killed, and is crushed when she finds out she scored only 740 on the verbal SAT (“Lovers Walk”). Oz, the unflappable, sensitive, and incisive guitarist, is brilliant but unmotivated; he must repeat 12<sup>th</sup> grade in order to graduate, which prompts Willow to refer to him as “the smartest person never to graduate” from high school (“Beauty and the Beasts”).

Xander spends much of his time obsessing about what it takes to be cool, and why he’s not. Xander does notice, however, that whatever it is that makes one cool is something that Oz has, and he doesn’t (“The Zeppo”). At first, Oz’s putative coolness is even a source of suspicion for Xander; when Willow and Oz begin dating, he says about Willow: “I just don’t trust Oz with her. I mean, he’s a senior, he’s attractive—okay, maybe not to me, but—and he’s in a band. And we know what kind of element that attracts” (“Phases”).

Ironically, Buffy would undoubtedly be cool were it not for the fact that she was

associated with bizarre happenings at school, and spent much of her time hanging around the “creepy librarian in that creepy library” (“Out of Mind, Out of Sight”). But instead of being one of the cool kids, Buffy’s calling makes her an outcast. Indeed, although Buffy scored 1430 on the SAT, she is nonetheless the brawn of the gang, while the rest of the group is the brains, spending much of its spare time in the library conducting research on the forces of evil (“Lovers Walk”).

Members of traditionally male institutions—athletes, frat boys, businessmen, policemen, politicians—are typically self-centered, feckless, and often just plain evil. This is perhaps not surprising for a horror show whose setting is The Hellmouth; one might expect a disproportionate number of evil persons regardless. However, the good guys rarely associate themselves with such institutions, and rarely succeed in conforming to their norms even when they do. On the contrary, they tend to be bookish and artistic. Rather than conform, their efforts are devoted to practical skills: research and fighting.

Perhaps *Buffy*’s most endearing quality is that—despite being a show about vampires—it is realistic. More often than not, it is knowledge, gleaned from painstaking research, that is necessary to save the day. The gang regularly spends hours in the school library, perusing all manner of mythology, searching for clues in historical and literary tomes that might explain what supernatural menace they are facing, and how to stop it. They sift through historical, literary, and religious documents—as well as, on occasion, other academic sources—to interpret metaphorical texts and symbols in the hope of finding historical antecedents that might offer clues to the hidden structure of reality. And they also pore over contemporary records of all kinds—city plans, vital statistics, architectural records, newspapers accounts—to help them devise plans to stop demonic

activity.

So important is research, in fact, that in the episode “Gingerbread,” fear of occult behavior in the wake of a double murder turns to hysteria. This is followed by a crackdown on “acceptable” reading for students, a book-burning, and an unsuccessful witch-burning. Much as in real life, this hysteria is focused primarily on teenagers who wear black clothing, listen to certain types of music, or appear “goth” in any way.<sup>32</sup> In the episode, Principal Snyder, at the behest of a new parents’ association led by Buffy’s mother, has police search the school, including students’ lockers and the school library, for offensive materials, and end up confiscating many books. The gang finds itself suddenly helpless without Giles’ reference books, and Buffy, feeling lost and angry, tells Joyce what a grave mistake it is to “weed out offensive material” from a library, saying “maybe next time that the world is getting sucked into hell, I won’t be able to stop it because the anti-hell-sucking book isn’t on the approved reading list!” (“Gingerbread” transcript).

### ***Normativity and Interpersonal Relationships***

Family and personal relationships, whether intentionally or not, are constantly being deconstructed in BtVS, calling into question the ease with which certain arbitrary norms become reified. Age differences are one example. Angel is approximately 225 years older than Buffy, and is a “vampire in love with a Slayer” (“Out of Mind, Out of Sight” Transcript). He became a vampire when he was 26 years old, at which point he stopped aging. Not only is he more worldly than most teenagers, but he has lots of baggage, especially in the form of Drusilla, who he (as Angelus) tortured into insanity

before making a vampire. Furthermore, not only can Angel and Buffy not have kids—or any kind of relationship in the daylight—but Angel is cursed to lose his soul should he ever achieve true happiness. Nonetheless, Buffy and Angel are dating throughout much of the first three seasons of *Buffy*, and spend a great deal of time and effort dealing with the consequences of their fraught relationship.

The other characters also have complicated relationships. In Season Three of *Buffy*, Willow is dating Oz, a werewolf. When Willow expresses concern about this to Buffy, Buffy suggests that this is well within the realm of acceptable behavior, saying “please! My boyfriend had a bicentennial” (“Phases”). Indeed, by the end of the third season, Xander finds himself dating Anya, a centuries-old former vengeance demon who became trapped in a teenager’s body. When Buffy discovers that she, Willow, and Xander all have demon-dates to the Prom, she says, “well, at least we all have someone to go with now. Some of us are going with demons, but I think that’s a valid lifestyle choice” (“The Prom” Transcript).

Giles, being almost 30 years older than Buffy, is at one point accused of being a dirty old man (“Phases”), while Buffy is scorned by her peers for hanging out with the librarian (“Out of Mind, Out of Sight”). Giles is like a parent, simultaneously sending Buffy into battle, and making excuses for her behavior to her mother and teachers. They are extremely close, but are not really friends, and certainly not intimate. Their relationship crosses traditional boundaries: how does one distinguish between categories such as parent, friend, lover, peer, and teacher, when these categories are constantly changing in a rapidly changing world?

The point is made emphatically in the Season Five episode “Family.” In this

episode, Buffy and Willow are in their second year of college, and Willow has been dating a female college student named Tara for about a year. When Tara's family visits from out of town, they insist Tara return home with them against Tara's wishes. The Scooby Gang, however, intervenes, insisting that Tara should be allowed to stay in Sunnydale because, as Buffy says, they are her family. Thus, the gang not only validates Tara's same-sex relationship with Willow, but insists that familial bonds transcend blood ties.

### ***Human Exceptionalism***

The use of violence leads to several boundary crossings as well. While its use is fairly well codified among humans, the question of when it is acceptable against other-than-humans calls into question our current conceptions of legitimate violence. For example, in "Phases," Buffy tries to capture and protect a werewolf from a werewolf poacher named Cain. Cain assures Buffy that he's no mere hunter, saying he would never hunt for sport, at least not as long as there's a black market for werewolf parts. Buffy objects to Cain's hunting, not through any desire to help werewolves, but rather on the grounds that the werewolf is also a human most of the time. This prompts Cain to mutter "First they tell me I can't hunt an elephant for its ivory. Now I've got to deal with People for the Ethical Treatment of Werewolves."

The relationship between food and violence is a subtle and recurring undercurrent in BtVS. This is not surprising given that Buffy defines herself as the antithesis of vampirism. Her *raison d'être* is to oppose those who would kill humans for food, who might be inclined to think of them, as does the vampire Spike, as "Happy Meals with

legs” (“Becoming, Part Two”). Whether intentional or not, the message is that humanity is not singular. Indeed, we rarely see the good guys eating anything that might have blood in it. The idea that the world is full of blood-suckers in human guise complicates the logic of conceiving of non-human animals in terms of human consumption. And, it relativizes the place of humans in the universe.

For example, in “Faith, Hope, and Trick,” we see a drive-through burger joint, with a grotesque, part Big Boy, part Jack-in-the-Box icon in front, it’s teeth bared, mouth wide open, and dark stuff—perhaps blood or ketchup—all over it’s mouth, slovenly gorging itself on a hamburger. An African American named Mr. Trick pulls into the drive-through lane, orders a soda, and then turns to the person in the car with him and says of Sunnydale, “admittedly, it’s not a haven for the brothers, strictly the Caucasian persuasion here at the Dale, but you know you just gotta stand up and salute that death rate . . . makes DC look like Mayberry.” When he gets to the pick-up window, he decides he’s hungry, so he reveals himself to be a vampire and eats the cashier.

In “The Wish,” we see an alternate universe in which vampires are the dominant species, and humans are food animals, connected to milking machines that extract blood. In this reality, vampires have discovered what they call the “truly demonic” concept of mass production. This alternate universe is hardly the happy place that the dairy industry advertises, although it is functionally identical. In this universe, Buffy never came to Sunnydale, and vampires subsequently overran the town. Here, humans fight a losing rearguard battle against vampires. Humans are free to move about only in the daytime, and are sequestered in their homes at night, while vampires are largely free to do as they like after dark.

That humans are erroneous in seeing themselves as exceptional in the animal kingdom becomes clear in BtVS's fourth season. In this season, we're introduced to The Initiative, a covert military organization with connections to the scientific community at UC Sunnydale. The Initiative's activities are chillingly reminiscent of Dr. Moreau's, a demonic modern-day analog to his grotesque and disturbingly ill-informed experiments. The Initiative's experiments are supported by its troops, whose mission is to capture demons for vivisection. When one of its members, Riley Finn, expresses doubts about the morality of his mission, he is told that his concern is misplaced, because demons are "just animals" ("Doomed"). As it happens, Riley's concerns are justified, and The Initiative eventually collapses under the weight of its own faulty and hubristic assumptions.

The relationship between violence and human consumption of animals becomes explicit in *Buffy*'s sixth season, in which Buffy gets a job in a fast-food restaurant called The DoubleMeat Palace, which satirizes fast food in general, and McDonald's in particular. Buffy finds herself disgusted by the meat-production process, and can barely stomach the food herself. Indeed, so foul does she find the entire environment that she becomes convinced that there's a demonic presence at work. But it turns out that there's nothing supernatural going on; it's just that having to work in fast-food is sucking the life out of the employees. So poignant was this episode, in fact, that the fast food industry threatened to pull its advertising if Buffy didn't find a new job.

These examples indicate that violence that is acceptable when the victim is sufficiently otherized and dehumanized is not qualitatively different from currently unacceptable uses of violence. It is within the context of violence between humans,



however, that *Buffy* has provided its most controversial cultural criticism. In “Earshot,” Buffy becomes temporarily telepathic, and learns that someone on campus is planning a mass murder. In searching for the murderer, she discovers a student, Jonathan, attempting to commit suicide. The dialog that results from Buffy’s attempts to prevent Jonathan’s suicide is remarkable for its incisive and dramatic explication of the factors that lead people to feel so despondent that they become suicidal. Unfortunately, these scenes were overshadowed by the real-life drama surrounding the episode: filmed months in advance and originally scheduled to air on the Tuesday following the mass murder at Columbine High School, the episode was pulled because of its depiction of high school violence. A Bronzer affiliated with the show told me that the offending material was the following dialog:

Xander: I’m still having trouble with the fact that one of us is just gonna  
gun everybody down for no reason.  
Cordelia: Yeah, because *that* never happens in American high schools.  
Oz: It’s bordering on trendy at this point.

The implication is that high school violence has been an ongoing problem that mainstream American society has refused to acknowledge. Indeed, I believe that “Earshot” exemplified exactly the kind of discourse that can help identify and prevent the anomie that results in teenage suicide and Columbine-type violence. Ironically, The WB did exactly what “Earshot” so elegantly criticized: in what seemed like a convoluted case of blaming the messenger, The WB, rather than acknowledge BtVS’s implication that teen violence has been a longtime problem worthy of discussion, instead refused to air “Earshot” until September.<sup>33</sup> Apparently, Columbine was an anomaly that would have to be further in the past before “Earshot” could be shown.

## *Religion in the Buffyverse*

*Buffy*'s creator, Joss Whedon, is an atheist, and the Buffyverse, to some degree, reflects this (Whedon, Online Posting, 15 Dec. 1998). Occasionally, *Buffy* will explicitly mock religion. But for the most part, *Buffy* is not anti-religious; it simply has little place for religion. One reason for this might be found in social constructionism. The Buffyverse is an alternate universe. We might reasonably ask why someone who was vested in a religious institution would be interested in exploring alternative constructions of reality? After all, once institutions are created, their maintenance requires continual protection against external threats (Berger and Luckmann 106-107). This is not to say that religious people don't find much of interest in *Buffy*. However, *Buffy* consistently ignores religious worldviews in favor of its own mythology, which is decidedly secular.

In the series premier, written by Joss Whedon, Giles explains the nature of the world to Buffy, telling her that what most of us believe is nonsense.<sup>34</sup> He says:

This world is older than any of you know. Contrary to popular mythology, it did not begin as a paradise. For untold aeons, demons walked the earth and made it their home, their hell. And in time they lost their purchase on this reality. The way was made for mortal animals, for man. All that remains of the old ones are vestiges, certain magicks, certain creatures.

Giles goes on to proffer a decidedly unbiblical view of history:

The books tell the last demon to leave this reality fed off a human, mixed their blood. He was a human form possessed, infected by the demon's soul. He bit another, and another, and so they walk the Earth, feeding. Killing some, mixing their blood with others to make more of their kind. Waiting for the animals to die out, and the old ones to return. ("The Harvest")

Thus it becomes clear from the beginning that the founding mythology of the Buffyverse contradicts Christianity. BtVS, in implicitly ignoring the relevance of divine

inspiration and guidance in fighting the forces of evil, not only indicates the constructedness of religious beliefs, but also the importance of personal responsibility in a world where membership in groups and institutions leads to personal irresponsibility.

This is not to say that the Buffyverse is not based on Western/Christian mythology. To the degree that it is based on a dichotomization of good and evil, it is very much so. The *Buffy* version of vampirism is an extreme example of this: a vampire is not a human transformed, but rather an inherently evil being. Becoming a vampire means that the human soul is replaced by one that is demonic. And yet, despite the assumptions of the Buffyverse, life in Sunnydale is rarely reducible to a simple binary. Virtually every character in “Buffy” lies somewhere between good and evil. Their lives are complicated enough that often there is no clear right answer, no obviously good solution. And the characters are complicated enough that they sometimes inadvertently aid the forces of evil, doing the right thing for the wrong reasons, or the wrong thing for the right reasons. Several characters, such as Angel, have crossed the line between good and evil; some have done so several times in both directions. Furthermore, the notion that there are higher powers of good and evil, that the “powers that be” are conscious agents, or even that there is any particular order to the universe, has been largely absent.

BtVS, then, takes a relatively simplistic and binary universe and continually complicates it. For example, in “Earshot,” the realization that Buffy can hear his thoughts leads Oz to a minor existential crisis as he contemplates the validity of self/other binaries (his thoughts are in italics): *“I am my thoughts. If they exist in her, Buffy contains everything that is me and she becomes me. I cease to exist. Huh. [ . . . ] No one else exists either. Buffy is all of us. We think, therefore she is.”*

On occasion, however, *Buffy* does overtly mock religion. Consider Buffy's reaction to private schooling: "You mean like jackets and kilts? You want me to get field hockey knees? [. . .] What about home schooling? You know, it's not just for scary religious people anymore" ("Dead Man's Party"). The role of religion in the Buffyverse is perhaps best summarized in the episode "What's My Line?" In that episode, Buffy and Giles enter a mausoleum in order to examine a reliquary. From an insider's point of view, the rituals and artifacts of Catholicism are no doubt familiar, but to an outsider, may seem completely illogical. Buffy, upon learning of the function of reliquaries, offers this pithy assessment of religion: "Note to self: Religion. Freaky."

## **Conclusion**

As a television show, *Buffy* was critically acclaimed, especially for its smart writing, snappy dialogue, emotionally powerful stories, and endearingly complex characters. Never among even the top half of TV shows by viewership, *Buffy* nonetheless was successful enough to complete its entire seven-season run and, in the process, turn its creator, Joss Whedon, into perhaps the most influential and revered figure in television.

In this chapter, I began with the language of Buffy from the perspective of auto-ethnography. I then expanded both aspects of this perspective to address the dialogue in *Buffy* more generally. I then expanded further, to discuss the "aesthetic" of the show from the perspective of a community (as will be discussed subsequently). And finally, I took a broad perspective, analyzing the show's overall message from the point of view of a broadcast audience. As will be discussed in the following chapters, my own participant observation and interviews indicate that what drew people to The Bronze was intangible

and nebulous; it was, more so than any other single factor, *Buffy*'s aesthetic, it's commitment to the truth of fantasy, to what would "feel real." It was, however, *Buffy*'s language and dialogue analogous to *Buffy*'s that was the key to The Bronze community. What appealed most to me about *Buffy*—its cultural criticism—turned out (with a few important exceptions) not to be of prime importance to the community's formation.

In other words, the primary focus has not been on *Buffy* as a television show per se, but rather as a cultural phenomenon with which people engage and interact.

Beginning with my own engagement with the show, I discussed a variety of elements that provide the context—and help explain—how a long-running fan community might come into being as a result. Using self-ethnography, I began by discussing the appeal of *Buffy* to me, an erstwhile high school student in Southern California. I then discussed one of the most alienating aspects of the American experience: high school. The notion that high school is literally hell is apparently not only commonplace, but so completely overlooked, that millions of people were willing to tune in to see that horror exposed.

Expanding that perspective, I described the peculiar use of language in *Buffy*, and how it suggested a postmodern perspective, one of uncertainty and instability, that suggested a shifting conception of self and a highly-constructed but ultimately untenable notion of reality. Whether this shifting conception of self represents a widespread ontological change, or is merely an artifact of a particular TV producer's creative vision—or something else entirely—remains to be seen. Nonetheless, the fact that it could be shown on prime-time television suggests that, at the least, *Buffy* informed or reflected the willingness of a minority of American viewers to engage atypically decentering dialogue in this particular cultural moment.

Turning then to the overall aesthetic of *Buffy*, I argued that it created a “gothic aesthetic” that allowed fans to be drawn in to a largely self-contained universe—the Buffyverse—if they were willing to put forth the effort to engage with *Buffy*’s narrative and aesthetic. Hence, the peculiar elements used in *Buffy* had the overall effect of pointing to hidden depths of imagination, to the “truth of fantasy,” in a manner both compelling and atypical. The result was, not surprisingly, a TV show that was a “cult hit” with a cult following.

In a final section, I discussed various recurring themes from *Buffy*’s early seasons in order to provide the background for the fan community. Inasmuch as any community exists within the context of the stories it tells itself, and within the physical locales its members inhabit, this background informs it and is crucial to understanding it. Hence, this final section describes the mental environment within which The Bronze, a virtual community, formed. Moreover, as above, this section shows that the limits of what is possible to show on primetime television are expanding to include subtly trenchant cultural criticism; even if this failed to register with viewers, the fact that it could be shown on TV suggests the possibility of a subtle ontological shift occurring in this cultural context.

The following chapters turn to the fan community itself. The Bronze community is analyzed using standard ethnographic methods (participant observation and in-depth interviews). Through the course of the study, I return to the question of why the community formed, as well as the questions of what meanings community members ascribe to it, and what functions it serves. As will be addressed, community members attribute varying degrees of importance to specific aspects of *Buffy*, but generally

suggested or articulated the intangible importance of *Buffy* as a cultural phenomenon that formed the foundation of the community.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Sol Tax, "Action Anthropology."

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Jay Rosen, "Audience Atomization," for a comparison of television's relatively authoritarian mode of distribution of information, especially in contrast to internet-based communication.

<sup>3</sup> In saying that perhaps there was something that I intuited as meaningful in *Buffy*, I mean to suggest two possibilities. The first is that perhaps something in the show "struck a nerve" with me, either by evoking reminiscences, or appealing to aesthetic preferences. The second possibility is based on the Myth and Symbol school of thought in American Studies, from which it follows that perhaps *Buffy* evoked in me--as well as other fans--some elemental truth that resides in our collective consciousness.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Miles Klee's "Prime Time's New Age of Crudeness" for a brief description of the current state of televised raunch.

<sup>5</sup> According to Joss Whedon, "Sunnydale is in fact near Santa Barbara" (Online posting 22 Nov. 1998).

<sup>6</sup> As Ian Haney Lopez demonstrates, I was at this time considered Caucasian and non-white: "Asian Indians were 'white persons' in 1910, 1913, 1919, and 1920, but not in 1909 or 1917, or after 1923" (67).

<sup>7</sup> Only later would I learn that there were many generations of non-whites living in America, including Hispanic and Latino Spanish-speaking students I went to school with, and Chinese Americans in San Francisco's Chinatown. Many did not speak English, despite their families having been in the US for generations, because they were segregated and barred from attending public schools. I don't recall ever interacting with



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non-whites who were not recent immigrants, however. This may have been due to my solidly middle-class socio-economic status, or perhaps because I had been taught that non-whites must be immigrants (Haney Lopez 35).

<sup>8</sup> See Lowe's Immigrant Acts regarding the significance of the 1965 change in immigration law (6-22).

<sup>9</sup> George Lipsitz writes that "all subsequent immigrants to North America have come to an already racialized society" (Possessive Investment 2).

<sup>10</sup> Any discussion of high school *per se* would be far beyond the scope of this study. For scholarship on the causes (and effects on society) of spectacular violence, see Baudrillard, Glassner, Hewitt, and Juergensmeyer. Perhaps the most thorough reporting on Columbine was conducted by Salon reporter Dave Cullen. Also relevant are articles by Bauer, Dickerson, Fraser, Maran, Poniewozik, and Lee and Vedantam.

<sup>11</sup> Agar, Michael. Language Shock.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Noxon wrote "I Only Have Eyes For You"; Espenson wrote "Earshot," "Gingerbread," "Pangs," and "Doublemeat Palace"; and Whedon typically wrote the season premieres and finales.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Walter Truett Anderson often suggests an epistemological gulf between the postmodern East and modernist West. Robert Thurman offers a direct criticism of Descartes' theory of knowledge in the introduction to his translation of the Tibetan Book of the Dead (Thurman 48).

<sup>14</sup> Much of my description of *Buffy* invokes social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann). The first quotation in this passage, referring to Sunnydale as a "one-Starbucks town," is from a comment made by Xander in "Welcome to the Hellmouth."

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The second quotation is from Stone (182). Stone uses the vampire's gaze as an intellectual exercise, using the example of the vampire Lestat of Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*. Stone suggests that if Lestat were to become an anthropologist, he might see through the constructedness of everyday life. Similarly, Joss Whedon's vampires are liminal characters for which the social construction cannot account; hence, most Sunnydale residents rationalize away the town's supernatural occurrences (Whedon, "Angel"). Furthermore, it is the vampire's gaze that sees through the social construction: Sunnydale seems like an idyllic version of small-town middle America, but it sits atop the mouth of hell, and so it is at its core, literally, evil. Stone (as does as Turkle) also focuses on technology as containing the potential--the new tools that humans can use to think with--to allow individuals to see beyond the constructions and assumptions of everyday life, thus connecting vampires, technology, and social constructionism. Similarly, *The Bronze* connects these three elements, but does so in a virtual space.

<sup>15</sup> It's perhaps not surprising that in an age in which Americans are long-lived, but must also face economic insecurity (especially in the form of rapidly rising health care costs and a social safety net under attack), and a looming environmental catastrophe, that the vampire might represent a fear of old age, a fear of outliving friends and family and living past the point of being able to take care of oneself. In contrast, the vampire, and the monster in general, has traditionally represented some "other," especially a racial "other." Subsequent to *Buffy*, vampires similar to Angel--those who are tragic not because they kill, but because they can't die--have appeared in *Twilight* and *True Blood*.

<sup>16</sup> Postman discusses the propagandizing effects of television as well as the fact that TV trains us to think in pre-fabricated increments of time (107, 113).

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<sup>17</sup> This is the full text of Whedon's post, with no corrections. Artifacts added by the posting board--the date/time stamp, URL, line breaks and spaces, and intervening posts--have been removed. Joss wrote that he lost his original post, so he was posting in increments to prevent this from happening again; these are denoted by paragraph breaks in the block quote.

<sup>18</sup> Rather than use *sic* repeatedly, I will simply note here that direct quotes of online posts, emails, or other electronic communications have not been corrected by me.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, [Amusing Ourselves to Death](#). Much the same argument has been made regarding the use of the Web, notably by Nicholas Carr.

<sup>20</sup> See Radway's [Reading the Romance](#), pages 11-12 and Chapter 3, on escapism. See also Radway's "Reception Study," page 463.

<sup>21</sup> The quotation is from a post at The Bronze, archived at the VIP archives site. Whedon, Online Posting, 2 Jan. 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Hofstadter, "Paranoid Style." In actuality, this describes our entire mainstream political and media environment quite well.

<sup>23</sup> The same theme continues into *Buffy*'s spin-off series, *Angel*. For example, when Detective Kate Lockley sees Angel kill a demon in "The Prodigal," she mentions that she is having trouble understanding this "otherworldly stuff," to which Angel replies that demons aren't otherworldly, but in fact are of this world, and were here first. When Kate mentions that she doesn't know what to do in a case like this, Angel says that she has seen this many times, but simply hasn't realized it, because "people have a way of seeing what they need to."

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<sup>24</sup> As but one recent example of such research, see “Age Proofing Your Brain.” According to that article, human brains thrive and grow more connections--a “cognitive reserve”--in accordance with intellectual and social stimulation. However, humans also have a tendency to take the path of least resistance in their intellectual endeavors. Thus, “[e]ducation and intellectual inquisitiveness help build cognitive reserve. Women who wrote grammatically complex, idea-rich essays in their early 20s, for example, were much more likely than others to be mentally sharp five or six decades later.” There is, however, an important caveat: “Passive activities, such as watching television, don’t count. In fact, people who watch it 7 hours a day or longer run a greater risk of memory loss.” The article quotes professor of neurological surgery Paul D. Nussbaum: “‘Human nature gravitates toward what’s rote and passive,’ Nussbaum says. ‘But to enrich your mind, you need to find activities that are new to you and reasonably challenging.’” The implication for Bronzers is fascinating: on the one hand, simply by watching TV, they might be decreasing their brains’ capacities. But, by virtue of thinking about what they’re watching, and writing about it, and discussing it in a social (albeit on-line) setting, they may be more than offsetting the stultifying effects of TV.

<sup>25</sup> Whedon wrote the following in a post at The Bronze on December 3, 1998:

Okay, so I guess I must apologize, Brad. I just read the piece on Buffy and Faith that Buffynerd linked and By God, I think she's right! I can't believe I never saw it! (Actually, despite my facetious tone, it's a pretty damn convincing argument. But then, I think that's part of the attraction of the Buffyverse. It lends itself to polymorphously perverse subtext. It encourages it. I personally find romance in every relationship [with exceptions], I love all the characters, so I say B.Y.O.Subtext!)

<sup>26</sup> The Mayor’s golf game and low-calorie mints appear in “Enemies.” The moist towelettes appear in “Homecoming.”

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<sup>27</sup> The Mayor's chocolate milk appears in "Enemies." His comments on swearing are in "Graduation Day" part 2, he speaks of his wife in "Choices," and complains about "kids today" in "Enemies."

<sup>28</sup> This lineage of "otherizing" is well-documented from a variety of historical and cultural perspectives. For example, see: Cubitt and Sardar; Davies and Sardar; Davies, Nandy, and Sardar; Fredrickson; Morgan; Said; West; Zinn.

<sup>29</sup> As will be discussed in chapters four and five, Bronzers were inclined to take an active, rather than passive, approach to watching TV. See note 24 above.

<sup>30</sup> There is an interesting parallel between *Buffy's* characters cycling between social worlds and Bronzers doing so (Caughey, *Negotiating* 50).

<sup>31</sup> Berger and Luckmann (41-43) use the phrase "recipe knowledge" to describe the "common sense" assumptions to which people hold--even though they might be contradicted by reality--in order to avoid reevaluating their worldviews.

<sup>32</sup> For example, much of the writing on the Columbine shooters focused on whether the two teens were "goths." Another example, one that "Gingerbread" closely mirrors, is of the so-called West Memphis Three, who were three teenagers sentenced for the murder of three children in 1993. All three were in jail--and one was on death row--until 2011, when DNA evidence was used to exonerate them. According to ABC News:

A defense attorney for the newly freed "West Memphis Three" said that the men were originally convicted because at the time they were "easy targets."

"They were convicted in a sort of speedy case back in 1993--part of a satanic panic in small town community," Stephen Braga, one of the defense attorneys for Damien Echols told *Nightline*. "They were the unusual kids in town. . . . They dressed in black. They listened to heavy metal music. They were goths before goths were fashionable, so they were easy targets." (Dorning and Effron)

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<sup>33</sup> Although “Earshot” did not air in the U.S. until September 21, 1999, rather than its originally scheduled air date of April 27, 1999, I did see the episode only a few weeks after its original air date, thanks to a Canadian Bronzer who sent a tape of the episode to a Mayberry Bronzer.

<sup>34</sup> The series premiere consisted of the first two episodes, which aired back-to-back. The first episode was “Welcome to the Hellmouth,” and the second was “The Harvest.”

## **Chapter 4: Buffnography, Part I: Community, Language, and Postmodernism at the Mouth of Hell**

### ***A Note on Tense***

In what follows I refer to The Bronze and Bronzers in both the past and present tenses. The reason is that much of my discussion of The Bronze involves the official WB site at [www.buffy.com](http://www.buffy.com) from 1998 until the site was shut down in 2001. However, the official UPN Bronze was created in 2001 and subsequently eliminated, while the Bronze Beta was also created in 2001 and remains active to this day. Thus, I often refer to The Bronze and Bronzers in the present tense, since they continue to exist in much the same form. However, I also refer to both in the past tense, especially in reference to aspects of the community that no longer exist.

### **The Bronze**

I chose the Bronze as a subject for ethnographic study for several reasons. The most important of these was that I simply could not understand the link between *Buffy* and the on-line community to which it gave rise. I was a *Buffy* fan, and, as indicated above, had given a fair amount of thought to the show, and had in fact found it useful in understanding my own life. I would welcome the opportunity to talk with people about *Buffy*, and yet it never occurred to me to go on line to do so. In fact, even after I found The Bronze, I had no desire to communicate on line.

There were practical reasons as well. The idea that anyone would willingly sit at a computer in order to be a part of a community seemed bizarre to me. But I figured that

anyone with enough time to do so would probably have time to be interviewed by me. Furthermore, since *Buffy* was obviously aimed at teens, I saw an opportunity to interview teenagers, a group with which I have little contact. I thought that teenagers, being part of a different demographic group than my own, might force me get outside of my own “comfort zone,” as it were, and learn to suspend my own worldview long enough to see the world from someone else’s perspective. And I also figured that most teenagers probably had nothing better to do than spend time being interviewed by people like me. As it turns out, I repeatedly figured wrong.

Fortunately, I didn’t realize at the time just how wrong I would be in my assumptions about the kind of individuals who would spend their free time at a computer (nerds!) talking about a TV show (losers!). As previously alluded to, I had already internalized several assumptions about the kind of people I would likely encounter at The Bronze, and I wasn’t even particularly conscious that I had done so. I fully expected that anyone who would willingly spend time at a computer was either very creepy, or a huge nerd, or both. And I expected that anyone talking about TV was superficial, young, and stupid. In other words, I expected to encounter people who were too nerdy to be able to interact with real people, or people who were too stupid to be able to interact with real people. But, since this was all for a good cause—me—I figured I’d suck it up and interview some of these putative loser-nerd people. After all, if they were really creepy, like child molesters, or really introverted, like computer programmers, they probably wouldn’t want to talk to me anyway. So, I’d probably just end up interviewing vacuous teenage girls who could barely speak in complete sentences and chewed their gum too loud. And, of course, I’d try not to be too judgmental about it.



So, I went back to the Bronze Welcome page. In addition to the welcome message, there was a list of 11 points to read to learn how to participate. The page looked like this<sup>1</sup>:



Fig. 1. The Bronze Welcome Page.

Following the links on that page led to a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page, on which I found the following question rather telling: “Why do Regulars get mad at newbies/newcomers?” The FAQ page also provided code for the *Buffy* logo, and discussed spoiler warnings, the PBP, and archived boards (see below).<sup>2</sup>

**Frequently Asked Questions**

[Back to the Bronze Entrance](#)


Q: How do I write to one of the stars?

A: Their Name  
c/o Buffy the Vampire Slayer  
c/o The Warner Brothers Television Network  
4000 Warner Blvd.  
Burbank, CA 91522

Q: Can I link to this site? How?

A: Sure, you can link to this site. If you want, you can even use the button below. Use your right mouse button (or just hold the button down on the Mac) and select "Save Picture..." to save a copy of the image onto your computer, or use this code to link, using the button on our server:

```
<a href="http://www.buffy.com/">img  
src="http://www.buffy.com/images/buffy_official.gif"  
width=115 height=77 alt="Visit The Buffy the Vampire  
Slayer Official Web Site" border=1 />/a>
```



Remember, if you take any other images besides this one and place them on your own site, you need to include the copyright shown below.

Q: Who are the VIPs who post in color here who seem to be connected to the show?

Screen Name	Identity
joss	Joss Whedon - Creator of Buffy
Ty King	Ty King - writer
Jeff Pruitt	Jeff Pruitt - stunt coordinator
RD	secret guy from David Greenwalt's office
Seth Green	Seth Green (Oz) - actor
Alyson (Willow)	Alyson Hannigan - actress
Apollo - Buffy Web Support Team	Webmaster of the site
Erika Amato (Velvet Chain)	Lead singer of a band appearing in Buffy
SCOUT	Secret person from the show

Q: How do I report problem users in the posting boards or chat? What about general problems with chat?

A: Contact Apollo Interactive via email at [buffy@apollointeractive.com](mailto:buffy@apollointeractive.com) anytime.

Q: Are you accepting submissions for the season?

A: Due to legal reasons, Buffy the Vampire Slayer cannot accept any outside submissions. Unfortunately, you may have a great idea that might not make it onto Buffy, but as Joss would tell you, keep writing.

Q: I want to use pictures from this site on my unofficial site... can I?

A: Yes, as long as you include the following HTML code on every page that you have images from this site:

```
Pictures are copyright ©copy; 1998 The WB  
Television Network and are from  
the <a href="http://web.archive.org/web/20010615022701/http://www.buffy.com/">Official  
Buffy the Vampire Slayer Site</a>.</font>
```

Q: Why do Regulars get mad at newbies/newcomers?

A: Regular posting board members don't all hate "newbies" but they often get tired of hearing the same questions again and again and this irritation will sometimes show in their answers to these questions. You're reading this FAQ so you obviously care enough to help try to solve this problem! Since being polite doesn't seem to stop the questions since new people are posting daily, some posters have found that snapping at people gets markedly better results at stopping repetitive questions. This may seem rude, but remember that they are trying to carry on their own conversations. It is okay to ask questions; just make sure the answer isn't in this FAQ, already posted, or obvious if you look at the rest of the official site. Some questions have no answers, and can lead to great arguments. Often, though, the argument has led to an impasse in the past, and regulars don't want to go into, for example, how Angel got all of his money, for the 14th time. As a newbie, you are not expected to know this, but be warned that some things that you find VERY interesting may have been discussed to death.

Q: How do I figure out what are the titles to the episodes?

A: Check out The Mortuary by [clicking here](#) There are links to detailed descriptions\* for every episode.

Q: Help, someone just yelled at me about a SPOILER! I don't know what that is. Aren't we here to talk about the show?

A: Spoiler is a warning we give when we are about to talk about the latest Buffy episode or future episodes. This is done so that some people who haven't yet seen the episode (many people in Canada don't see it till Friday) do not read your post and accidentally spoil the episode for themselves. When posting a spoiler you should clearly state it above (and sometimes below) the portion of your post that contains information about the episode. Try to state it so it can be easily seen i.e., capitalized and in bold. For example:

BEGIN SPOILER  
5  
4  
3  
2  
1  
The exciting thing about this episode was the role-reversal.  
Willow had to be strong and assertive because Buffy was weak  
and cowardly. (include 5 spaces before and after spoiler)  
1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
END SPOILER

Q: What if I truly, honestly and deeply feel that Angel is a hottie? or What if I truly, honestly and deeply feel that Buffy is da bomb?

A: Have you considered help? :- ) These are the two phrases most likely to cause posters to ignore what you have to say. Most people here agree with you, and it's very similar to pointing out that the sky is blue, or that the sun rises. If you feel that you MUST declare these two sentences, please put something else of substance in your post.

Q: What is the PBP that everyone seems to be talking about?

A: PBP stands for Posting Board Party. The first one took place in Santa Monica, California on February 14, 1998. Approximately 100 Bronzers made the trip to California to party with the friends they had made online. Crew in attendance included: Ty King (writer), Marti Noxon (script editor and writer), Todd MacIntosh (make up supervisor), Jeff Pruitt (stunt coordinator) and Sophia Crawford (stunt person). A good portion of the cast also appeared, including: David Boreanaz, Alyson Hannigan, Nicholas Brendon, Seth Green, and Anthony Stewart Head.

As a result of the success of the PBP, many Bronzers have planned parties in their own cities. If you're interested in your city or region, post a question about that area, and someone is likely to point you in the right direction. Also, think about planning your own party for the Bronzers in your area. Other area Bronzers are more than likely to help you out with it. You can find out more about PBP's in The Bronze Community Page by [clicking here](#).

Q: How can I tell what someone said last night / week?

A: The board archives posts from the past week. If you look at the top of the posting board, you will see the archive links, listed according to day of the week. The 'day' begins and ends at 12:00 AM Pacific Standard Time. Each day is divided into six 4 hour segments.

[Back to the Top](#)

\*Special Thanks to Anime Nut for providing Episode Synopses

Fig. 2. The Bronze Frequently Asked Questions Page.

The Bronze Welcome page also led to a variety of other web sites, which led to additional web sites, all of which provided me with a great deal of information about the best way to participate at The Bronze. These web sites were all created by members of the Bronze community—regular members, or Regulars, known to each other as “Bronzers”—for the benefit of new community members (“newbies”). Perusing these web sites seemed like a never-ending process; they seemed to appear faster than I could read them. But, after much clicking of links, a consensus seemed to emerge: to participate at The Bronze, one must spend some time, typically two weeks, simply observing The Bronze. And since I needed to interview people, as well as engage in participant observation, I thought I should follow the directions for learning how to participate.

Thus, the first order of business was to “lurk,” which is to observe an interactive internet site without participating or announcing one’s own presence. The greeting mentioned above, which suggested that the Bronze “can seem confusing,” was something of an understatement. The Bronze itself looked like this<sup>3</sup>:

the bronze

Please try to limit yourself to four posts per hour unless a VIP is posting.

Your Name:

Your Email Address:

V

Your Comments:

(Please do not press RETURN unless you are ending a paragraph...)

Add View

Clear View

[Back to the Bronze Entrance](#) | [No Frames!](#) | [Bronze Community Page](#)

[Report A Bad Post](#)

Archives:

[Sunday](#) | [Monday](#) | [Tuesday](#) | [Wednesday](#) | [Thursday](#) | [Friday](#) | [Saturday](#)

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^

**Bullseye** says:

(Thu Mar 8 11:39:15 2001 193.132.126.129)

Dang gang, gotta go, see yall next time

GRIFTER Got to go man, take care of yourself, and Ill talk to you next time!

Later

---

^

**Safarigirl** says:

(Thu Mar 8 11:39:10 2001 209.87.232.2)

Aethelaf Awww, but it's such *fun*! Besides, I encourage everyone else's delusions (hi elusio!) Why should I make an exception for Narrator? Particularly since she continues to insist (WRONG!ly) that the BBS is alive.

---

Fig. 3. The Bronze Posting Board.

The Bronze was, basically, a bulletin board, or posting board. To post something on the posting board, one would enter one's name—never a real name, according to the FAQ—and text in the boxes. Clicking the *Add View* button would cause the name and text to appear at the top of the posting board. In this example, the post by Bullseye was the most recent post; it was preceded by the post by Safarigirl. According to the time stamp below the names, both posts were submitted on March 8, 2001, at 11:39 a.m.; Bullseye's post followed Safarigirl's by five seconds. Previous posts appeared below, separated by grey lines. Posts would be added by posters and appear with each reload of the board on one's computer. Every four hours, the board would be archived, and a new board would appear. The board would change at 4 a.m., 8 a.m., 12 noon, 4 p.m., 8 p.m., and 12 midnight Pacific time; previous boards would be archived for one week.

A typical screen would contain a series of posts, and might look something like the following example. These posts were the first four on the 8 a.m. board of February 22, 1999. For legibility, only the text has been reproduced (and scaled down) here:<sup>4</sup>

^

Closet Buffyholic says:

(Mon Feb 22 08:01:25 1999 [ . . . ])

krypticon Somehow I think that my pontificating about the mating habits of farm animals involved less slurring of words than yours did. But you probably had more fun than me. C'est la vie. woo, check out that furin' language! And I still liked your other pick up line: "I may not be the most good looking guy in here, but I'm the only one talking to you." hee hee hee. But I think it could get you assaulted.

FSMCDman Hello! Wow, you picked up a siggy awful fast, didn't you? Welcome! How goes the band scene?

fenric hola, how was down south? Warmer than here, I'll bet.

Doc I am NOT either slacking, slacker.

CB

^

Megdalen says:  
(Mon Feb 22 08:00:55 [ . . . ])  
Chrissy! Nice first!

\*poof\*

Megdalen

^

Peanut says:  
(Mon Feb 22 08:00:23 1999 [ . . . ])  
nah...

^

Chrissy says:  
(Mon Feb 22 08:00:19 1999 [ . . . ])  
Hey all! Not on vacation anymore so I can't be here for too long, but I thought I'd stop by anyway 'cause otherwise I'd missers y'all..

TO PBers- Saturday night was a blast! Hope we can do it again sometime :)

SOs to all my Bronzer buds, including but not limited to: AKA Becker, Angle Man, Angela, angelgazer, ANGELofMUSIC, Anya, Arcadia, Asanti-momlet, banana, belmont, Big Al, Buffy13, BuffyBrazil, Cate, CharlieX, CHRIS, Circe, Closet Buffyholic, Cosmic Bob, Doc, DeMoriel, devil, Erestor, Erika Amato, EverDawn, Mr. EverDawn, Fatima, fenric, Godeater, goldspike, greengirl, Gryphon, gypsyrat, Heliconia, IMMORTAL, Jade, Jan, Jeff Pruitt, Jennifer Lynn, KAM, Lena, Little Willow, Macho Macho Man, Manx, Margot, Medusa2306, MeeB, -mere-, Night Owl, OzFan, Pippin, Princesscloud, Raven, ~sara~, Sarah W., SarahNicole, Savannah, StGermain, Taster's Choice, Tisiphone, TouroGal, TV James, VT, Willa, Mr. Willa and all the people my list is still missing 'cause I constructed it during one of my off-the-board-due-to-whup phases.....

Chrissy

~~Slave to~~ Owner and creator of the Who's Who of the Bronze page  
WPWP #313  
XDC #243  
JP Gang #43  
B/F in '99 #44  
Proud member of Buffy, Eh?  
Black sheep of the BWGDC  
UB \*SbAM\*  
First Mate of the Shameless Hussy Boat  
Asanti is my momlet  
- mere- is my kickboxing (and evilty) guru (and I am her \*willing\* Scott Evil)  
Night Owl is my Uber Bud  
SarahNicole is my Psychic Wonder Twin  
Non-slavish CHRIS devotee

This series of posts captures several unique aspects of The Bronze, the most obvious of which is that The Bronze is confusing. Each post appears as it is submitted at



the top of the page; the posts are therefore in backwards chronological order from top to bottom, creating the sense of a never-ending stream of comments.<sup>5</sup> Second, there is nothing inherent in posts that indicate what they refer to. Whereas in live conversation there are physical clues that provide the context for the spoken word, at The Bronze, the context depends on the content. While the first two of the posts here are addressed to specific persons, the fourth is addressed to everyone, and the third has no meaning except in the context of this particular poster's previous (over the course of many months) posts. Furthermore, of these four posts, only one (Megdalen's) addresses the other posts; the other three address something that's not on the screen, and may not even be on the posting board. Third, even posts addressed to specific persons may never be read in their intended context, because there's no way to know whether the addressee is still present. Thus, The Bronze has a postmodern—poststructuralist, in fact—quality: these signifiers are not printed on a physical medium, and their content depends as much on the reader as the author.<sup>6</sup>

There are two ways that communicating at The Bronze might be made less confusing. The first is to “chat” online instead of “post.” In a chat room, one can enter the virtual space, and communicate directly with others in real time. Chat rooms may be seen as extensions of e-mail or instant messaging, rather than as bulletin boards. Indeed, during the time it was on line, the official *Buffy* site contained a chat room.<sup>7</sup> Bronzers at the posting board, however, strongly preferred the posting board to the chat room, and often drew a sharp distinction between the two. In fact, Bronzers would frequently explain to “newbies”—people new to the site—that the posting board was not a chat room, and that people should not expect immediate replies to their posts. Also, the

fact that every site for newbies—of which there are at least three in addition to the official site—mentioned that The Bronze was not a chat room indicates Bronzer’s preference for the posting board format. Furthermore, at The Bronze itself, there was an element of disdain for the style of communication prevalent in chat rooms (and now common in SMS text messages), to the degree that newbies who insisted on using the abbreviations and incorrect grammar common in chat rooms came to be known as “chat lice.”

The second possibility is also one that Bronzers roundly rejected. Apparently, many posting boards are “threaded,” meaning that posters can either join an existing “thread,” or topic, of conversation, or they can start their own thread. The thread thus mediates topics of conversation, keeping them focused, and allowing the poster to stay “on topic” without having to scroll through hours of posts. Just as there was an official *Buffy* chat room, there was also an official threaded posting board.<sup>8</sup> However, very few Linear Posting Board regulars seemed to have any interest in the threaded board. In fact, as two of my informants mention below, Warner Brothers met with such strong resistance when it announced plans to discontinue the Linear Posting Board that it dropped those plans for fear of alienating its fan base.

It is not only the structure of the Linear Posting Board that causes confusion. There are also a great many words and conventions that are specific to The Bronze. Several are captured in the above posts. For example, it is common for people to write their posts in both the first and third persons. Often, an individual’s post is punctuated with narration written in italic type, thus making it possible for the individual to describe his/her actions, the (fictitious) physical environment, or any other aspect of The Bronze

from an “objective” viewpoint. Often, this is done so as to create a context in which the posting Bronzer’s actions occur. Furthermore, some posts are written from the point of view of the Bronzer’s online persona, and some are written from the point of view of the real life (RL) person. It is not unusual for both points of view to be present in a single post.<sup>9</sup> Finally, there is a great deal of Bronzer-speak. Some of this, like most emoticons and many abbreviations, are commonplace on the Internet. But a large amount is not. There are, in fact, several unofficial websites dedicated to defining Bronze terms, including *The Bronze Welcome Wagon*, *The Posting Board Lingo Page*, and the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer Posting Board - Frequently Asked Questions* page mentioned above.

I lurked over the course of a few weeks, during which time I began to understand slightly more than I had when I first started lurking. I learned, for example, that the small type that follows a poster’s name is her signature, or “siggy.” It contains a variety of information, such as a list of clubs in which one is a member, names of other posters to whom one is “slavishly” or “non-slavishly” devoted, relationships to other posters (a “momlet,” for example, being the rough equivalent of a mom at The Bronze), and a variety of quotes (usually from *Buffy*) and references (often to past conversations). It is not unlike a handwritten signature, or the signature that appears at the bottom of a personal email. Its function is basically the same: to describe the identity of the writer. It simultaneously connotes individuality and conformity. Like a handwritten signature, everyone has one, but everyone’s is different. Similarly, a Bronze siggy is unique, highlighting accomplishments and a specific set of identifications. But it is also a marker of membership, evidence that one is a Bronzer.

An “SO” is a shout out, a personal acknowledgement of other posters, often kept on one’s “shout list,” which enables posters to say “hi” without having to post to a large number of people individually, by name. This relatively simple device, the shout list, is one of the most important inventions at The Bronze. It allows an individual to communicate with many others, but without putting forth more effort than simply copying and pasting a shout list. Hence, one can interact with many more people than would be possible in real life, and do so even if one has nothing to say specifically to any other individual. Thus, every shout list is, in effect, one’s social circle, written down. It’s the physical representation of community. The entire set of shout lists is, in a sense, the entire community.

Anything that keeps people away from The Bronze, like work, is “whup.” Hence, in the shout list above, the last line is simultaneously an anticipatory apology for forgetting to shout to certain people, and an explanation for why this list may be incomplete. The poster, Chrissy, is greeting her friends, but also apologizing for missing anyone, and explaining that her shout list is incomplete because it was constructed from memory when she was away from the board. The implication is that shout lists typically form incrementally. This would presumably happen accidentally at first. Bronzers who composed their posts directly in the text box would create ever-longer lists of people to greet, and at some point be inclined to save the list of names as a separate file. Those who composed their posts in a separate document would likely have a growing list of names of people they shouted to, and that document would become their permanent shout list.

Posts appear one on top of another; in the excerpt above, the latest post is the one

on top. The second and third posts (from the bottom) are referring to the fact that the board changes every four hours: a new, blank board appears, and the old one is archived for a week. Many Bronzers will “try for first,” meaning that they will submit their posts such that they are first on the new board. The second post refers to a try for first that the poster thought would be unsuccessful. She was right; the previous poster beat her by four seconds. The third post serves two functions: to congratulate the first poster on her “first,” and to mark the poster’s departure.

Asterisks denote action, as opposed to conversation; therefore “\*poof\*” is a way of saying “I’m not just saying that I’m leaving, but I’ve really left.” This is significant because a great many Bronzers have trouble leaving, despite their repeated assertions that they are doing so. This is not unlike standing up to leave at a party, and then becoming engaged in conversation and staying for another hour. Since actions speak louder than words, “poofing” is a way of signaling that one really has left.

The posts above are also instructive in providing a sense of the pace and volume of interactions at The Bronze. These posts were copied from the 8 a.m. board of February 22, 1999; they were the first four posts to appear on the board. I copied them because they provided a concise and typical example of Bronze posts. Unfortunately, I saved only the text; at The Bronze, these posts would appear as in the screenshot above. According to the time stamps in each post, these posts appeared over the course of one minute and six seconds.

This particular board likely represents a busy time at The Bronze: a Monday morning at 8 a.m. Pacific Time (11 a.m. Eastern) was a time that many Bronzers would be awake and in front of a computer. Furthermore, this was a Monday six days after a

new *Buffy* episode (“Consequences”), and one day before another new episode (“Doppelgangland”). Thus, the board at this time was about as busy as it would get. At a rate of four posts in a minute and 25 seconds, the board would receive 169 posts per hour, for a total of 678 posts on a four-hour board. Even if posts took less space when placed into a word processor than the posts above—say, one page—each board would still generate 169 pages of text (double-spaced, with one-inch margins, and 12-point font). That’s a lot of reading.

Of course, the number of posts, and their length, varied widely. Boards were busiest immediately after new episodes aired; hence, Tuesday nights after new *Buffy* episodes, and Wednesdays during business hours in the U.S., were the busiest. The next busiest boards were during the week—again, during U.S. business hours—of new episodes. There was less board activity when there weren’t new episodes to discuss, and activity dropped off even more after the end of TV season (the summer months). It is therefore impossible to find any meaningful measure of how “active” The Bronze was. However, in my rough estimation, a typical board during the week of new *Buffy* episodes could receive 250-300 posts. In a word processor, this translates to around 100 pages of text per board.

Despite the fact that lurking had allowed me to figure out much of what was going on at The Bronze, most of the insider-speak was still bewildering enough that I found it unfathomable that anyone could actually be having a conversation in this way. In retrospect, it seems that I could have lurked indefinitely without ever understanding what was going on. Fortunately, I didn’t have to.

## **Bronzers**

I was scared to look for informants. Not only did I not know what people at The Bronze were talking about (or how they were doing so), I had no desire to draw the attention of these strangers to myself, and certainly not in writing. So, after procrastinating for several days—possibly weeks—I finally got around to finding the webmaster of The Bronze. The webmaster turned out to be a webgod by the name of Apollo. I had no idea what this meant, but this “webgod” thing sounded important, like this might be someone in charge, or with some degree of (presumably not godlike) power. I wrote to him, asking if I could post a message asking for informants. He responded 10 minutes later, saying he didn’t mind as long as it didn’t happen more than a few times.<sup>10</sup> I was surprised at how easy that was: I wasn’t expecting a positive or timely response, much less an immediate and congenial one. So I posted a message to The Bronze. I was still terrified of putting my words in front of a large group of people, but seeing little alternative, I painstakingly constructed a post, proofread it over and over and over again in hopes of assuaging my virtual stage fright, and finally posted the following:

Bronzers,  
Hello. My name is Asim Ali, and I’m a doctoral student in American Studies at the University of Maryland. I’m currently conducting research into on-line communities and the ways in which they are important and/or meaningful to their members. I’m interested in talking--both on-line and in-person--with a few Bronzers. (Since I’m a “Buffy” fan, I’m particularly interested in this community!) If you’re at all interested, please contact me at [asimali@wam.umd.edu](mailto:asimali@wam.umd.edu). I’m in the Washington, D.C. area (and occasionally in SoCal), so if you’re anywhere nearby, I’d be especially interested in talking with you in person. Thanks very much for your time,  
Asim<sup>11</sup>

By the next day I had received three e-mail responses, from Patrick in California, Sally in New Jersey, and Destiny in D.C.<sup>12</sup>

The first response I received was from Patrick, which immediately threw me into a tizzy, because not only had I not yet figured out what I wanted to ask him, but he had already begun to volunteer information that I didn't know what to do with. According to James Spradley in The Ethnographic Interview, this is to be expected (55-60). The ethnographer should not elicit simple answers to questions, since doing so will likely lead informants to simply say what the ethnographer wants to hear. On the contrary, the ethnographer should fully expect and encourage—and be encouraged by—informants who respond not simply to the questions as posed, but by sharing information that they think is important to themselves and other community members. The ethnographic interview, then, is not merely about getting answers, but about discerning the questions to which informants are responding based on the information that they volunteer.

Nonetheless, until receiving Patrick's e-mail, it hadn't even occurred to me to consider what to do if someone actually responded to my post. Perhaps some part of my assumed that nobody really would respond. Or perhaps it was one thing to send out an anonymous post asking for volunteers, but a completely other thing to actually conduct the interviews. Regardless, when I saw the e-mail from Patrick, I did the only reasonable thing I could think of: I panicked. After all, I had never done this before, and here I was, an interloper in the secret on-line society of *Buffy* fans, brazenly trying to use and abuse them for my own selfish purposes (Spradley 34-39). I was sure that if Patrick didn't already think I was an enormous dork, he probably would soon enough.

I sat in my office, convinced that it would soon be clear to everyone that I had no idea what I was doing, that I was soon to be discovered as an academic imposter, and probably banned from all things *Buffy* because of it. My office walls stared back at me,



offering no helpful advice, mocking me with their stony silence. Fortunately, just around the corner from my windowless office were two graduate students who had conducted ethnographic research. So, I took the opportunity to leave the isolation of my office and panic at them.

This turned out to be an excellent strategy, because unlike me, both of my coworkers had thought through the ethnographic interview process, and knew what to do. So, following their advice, I wrote back to Patrick and thanked him for his email, and asked him to respond to a few questions, which he did.

In retrospect, my panic was probably wholly unnecessary. In his emails, Patrick was gracious and helpful, giving me his home and office e-mail addresses, and even offering a phone number at which I could call him. Patrick's first email to me is as follows<sup>13</sup>:

Hi Asim--  
You can call or e-mail me. [ . . . ] I've been on this board since inception, been a Buffy fan from show 1, helped with the Posting Board party in February, attended it, just had dinner with [six Bronzers] last week. It's very unusual, the most genuine online community I've seen in seven years of Internet surfing. You may know that at least two engagements have resulted from people who've met on this board, and who knows how many relationships.

Patrick was clearly impressed with The Bronze. Indeed, I had yet to even ask him any questions, but Patrick had already made it clear to me that The Bronze was a community, and a unique one at that, and a much more complicated community than I could have previously imagined. Furthermore, without any prompting, Patrick had told me that this community was “genuine,” and suggested that this was due to the face-to-face interaction of community members. Indeed, while Patrick mentioned both *Buffy* and The Bronze Posting Board, he did so by way of introduction, almost in passing. It was

the face-to-face aspect of the community, the interpersonal relationships—the Posting Board Party, the Bronzers he recently had dinner with, the community—that he initially honed in on. It was as if he had a better idea than I did of what information I should be looking for.

Since Patrick had already begun to volunteer helpful information, I tried in my first set of e-mail questions to follow up on some of the points he made. I was surprised at how quickly he responded—in all of our communications, he usually replied within a day—and how informed his responses were. I was immediately disabused of the notion that this was a teen slacker with nothing better to do than surf the ‘net; indeed, I was surprised that someone would be so articulate in composing an email on short notice. I found the following responses particularly illuminating.<sup>14</sup> (My questions are italicized; otherwise, no changes have been made).

*Please tell me a bit (or a lot, if you're up for it) about the following:  
What is it about the show (BtVS) that captures your interest?*

Above all, the writing. The show is actually an allegory of the traumas, travails and emotional highs and lows of growing up and being a human. Except that the traumas, travails and emotions are literally demons, vampires and forces of evil. It's a nice, literary conceit for TV. A normal, 17-year-old girl thinks the world will end if her mother doesn't let her out of the house that evening. In "Buffy," the world literally will end. In real life, a young girl who has premature sex with her older boyfriend may discover that he's turned into a creep afterwards. In "Buffy," the boyfriend literally turns into a devil demon. In real life, a young person may feel like the world is on their shoulders. In "Buffy," it really is. In real life, a young runaway may feel like they're no one, and that they could disappear for years without anyone noticing. IN "Buffy," young runaways literally become No One, and they literally disappear for years without anyone noticing. The strength of the writing is that the writers, Joss Whedon foremost, seem to recall with uncanny accuracy what it feels like to be 17, and are true to their characters without being condescending or smarmy.

But all of this is done very knowingly, and ironically, and with great wit. The jokes and one-liners, which are all character-based and situational, come fast and furious, and sometimes it's hard to keep up. The characters are quirky, yet sympathetic: they stand for the outcast and awkward in all

of us. For anyone who recalls being awkward or out of it, it's nice to see such characters as the saviors of the world.

Lastly, the actors portraying these quirky characters are uniformly appealing and fresh. Sarah Michelle Gellar, who is a veteran of TV, shows the greatest range and depth, and captures every nuance of emotion that Buffy goes through, and conveys it with total honesty. Nicholas Brendon, Alyson Hannigan and Charisma Carpenter similarly invest their characters with many layers, sometimes giddy as teenagers, sometimes poignant as the most experienced adults. And Anthony Stewart Head surprises us by taking a stock, fuddy-duddy Englishman and turning him into a figure with a dark past and barely suppressed longing and rage.

All together, it makes "Buffy" completely original, often delightful, and always surprising. What other TV show can do that?

*What drew you to the Bronze?*

I wanted to share my enthusiasm for the show, but didn't know anyone who actually watched it (or, if they did, would admit to it). I loved the show from the first, but found myself embarrassed to bring it up in mixed company. Knowing that there was a place to discuss it with like minds was immensely attractive.

*Also, you mentioned that it's the most genuine online community. Do you spend a lot of time in other online communities? Can you describe what it is that makes them less genuine?*

Yes, I've met a lot of the original posters. WE had a party in February, and I helped organize some of the food activities. I don't keep in regular touch with any of them, but hear from them from time to time. Just this month, had dinner with a bunch of them on the occasion of a visit from Washington, DC, by Shannah and Occido. But I know they're much tighter back East, especially in the DC area; Shannah, Occido, Blade and others hang out a lot. As for the engagement, I know of at least two: one couple whom I don't recall, and ~mere~ with RD, who happens to be connected with the show (he's David Greenwald's assistant).

It's that connectedness that makes it seem like a real community--that, and the fact that many posters have been on the Bronze for years. Were you aware that a while back the minds at Warner Bros revamped their Buffy Web site? They were going to do away with the Bronze as it existed and substitute a different kind of posting board, threaded like many others. there was a mutiny! People complained; e-mail flew; someone created a dual posting board on a completely separate Web site to substitute for the official one; people threatened to boycott the Web site altogether (though not the show!). In the end, WB and Fox recognized that they had something special here, and acceded to demands that the Bronze remain exactly as it was. And so it is. They even kept the name "The Bronze" (they were going to rename it "The Lounge.")

As for other groups, I'm a regular on an X-Files mailing list, and have

dropped in on a couple of chat rooms and boards elsewhere. The connections on these seem much more tenuous and topic-related, and people drift in and out regularly. Not like the Bronze, where conversations can run for days or weeks.

While I tend to think of “Buffy” as deconstructive, Patrick provided me with an insightful analysis of Buffy as allegory; indeed, this was a distinction to which I would repeatedly return in trying to understand what it was that Bronzers got from *Buffy*.

Patrick also suggested that I wasn’t alone in finding meaning in *Buffy* and not being taken seriously because of it. Furthermore, his answers indicated that, whatever it was that was meaningful about the Bronze, it was a unique phenomenon. And so my focus narrowed from BtVS and on-line communities to the Bronze, and especially the “tight” DC community. I followed up with some more questions<sup>15</sup>:

*What was it that got you posting/chatting? What kinds of things were you wanting to talk about? Can you give me an example of what you usually say/do when you enter the PB?*

Boredom, mostly, and a desire to talk about the show with like minds. Haven't posted much lately; when I do, it's mostly my thoughts about how the show worked, or didn't, character interactions, favorite stuff, etc.

*I'm also still thinking about the "genuine community" you mentioned. What I find interesting is that there's a whole bunch of conversation that I wouldn't have a clue how to make sense of. A lot of it seems to have absolutely nothing to do with the show. There are all sorts of different script, words and abbreviations and titles I've never heard of. How did you end up getting so into these conversations? How are newbies usually received (or not)? The few times I've lurked it seems like newbies are really conscious of their newbie status.*

Best way is to address your comments directly to a person. Respond to a question, amplify a comment, etc. As for the abbreviations, etc., you pick 'em up by just hanging out and lurking. Titles of the eps are listed on the home page. Newbies are welcomed except when they're violating the rules (which are also listed on the buffy site), such as posting, "Angel is a hottie!" or "Buffy Rocks!" or asking if anyone has the stars' addresses, etc. Best way to work your way into the community is to lurk for a while, follow the ebb and flow of the conversation, then jump in with relevant posts to actual people. You'll be surprised how accomodating people can be, especially if you have something to contribute. As for the lack of on-

topic conversations, well, that's the nature of these things. The more people get to know each other, the more they have to talk about that doesn't have much to do with Buffy.

*How do you conceive of the Bronze posting board? I mean, if people boycotted over a name change, it sounds like more than just a web site...? Plus, it seems like a totally different thing than the chat-room or threaded posting board, but I'm not really sure how...*

It's less like a chat room because you can only post three times an hour. And it's not like a threaded board because the entire conversation can be scanned at once. The ebb and flow is more like that of a bunch of people sitting around a table; some talking to everyone, some talking to a few people at a time. Some just talking to the person sitting (metaphorically) next to them. But you can switch back and forth at any time. In a threaded board, you must be on topic and are forced to talk to a small group, not to the whole group at a time.

*You also mentioned Buffy-as-allegory, which I hadn't really thought of. What about that allegory struck a chord with you? What do you relate to?*

Allegory in the sense that the action reflects inner states, emotionally or intellectually. A demon isn't just a demon; it's the external manifestation of some problem, or an emotion, or a personal crisis on the part of Buffy or her friends. How she deals with the demon is a metaphor or allegory for how she deals with her problem.

Apparently, the Bronze is unique because it is more like a community than other on-line communities. This begs the question: what makes it more like a community, and why? One answer to this lies in the fact that it's a Linear Posting Board. It's confusing, and therefore requires some effort and forethought to become a Bronzer. Furthermore, there's nothing regulating the discussions, nothing keeping people on topic, which means that all of the rough edges of conversation that are circumscribed on the threaded board are allowed to seep in at the linear posting board. Whereas the threaded board organizes people by topic, the linear board organizes them according to who they want to talk to. In other words—and this will be addressed in more detail below—part of what makes this community genuine is the flexibility people have in conversing and interacting with one another.

A number of other themes, all of which were echoed by other informants and community members, emerged from Patrick's responses to my questions. First, Patrick got it. Whatever it was that I got from *Buffy*, Patrick got it, too. Whatever "it" was that compelled me for the first time in my life to record every episode, to watch every episode more than once, to make sure I was home by 8 p.m. on Tuesdays, and to be somewhat embarrassed about the fact that I kept talking about *Buffy*, I wasn't the only one with it.

Second, while I had given much thought to *Buffy*, it seemed that I hadn't given much thought to it in the way that Patrick had. I liked the stories and the characters in a general sense. But Patrick was talking about *Buffy* not just as something viewed, experienced, or consumed; he was talking not just about the stories and the characters, but also the writing and the acting. Patrick was talking about how the stories were told, how the part were acted, what the various elements in the stories represented. He was also speaking in somewhat academic terms: *Buffy* as allegory, as knowing and ironic. As Patrick mentioned, the characters "stand for the outcast and awkward in all of us," and for those of us who don't identify with the dominant culture, "it's nice to see such characters as the saviors of the world."

Third, Patrick had apparently thought about how television shows are actually created, and was familiar with background information I had never even considered. He mentioned, for example, "RD, who happens to be connected with the show (he's David Greenwald's assistant)." And he understood the relationships between companies like Warner Brothers and Fox, and how their interaction created *Buffy* and The Bronze.

Fourth, the culture of the Bronze is tied to the communication. Conversations were not moderated or threaded. In the absence of any rules, however, a set of norms and

conventions quickly emerged. By the time I delurked, these norms and conventions had become a codified set of generally-agreed-upon rules. Hence, from the libertarian ethos of the early days of the Web arose a community with rules but no rulers. In other words, inasmuch as it had a political structure, The Bronze was largely anarchistic. The Bronze itself, of course, had an owner, and hence was part of a hierarchical corporate system that was itself a product of post-industrial capitalism. But the community per se, like many informally organized communities, was characterized by anarchism. The relative freedom of the community members to define their own conversations is what allowed for conversations to run for days or weeks, as Patrick mentioned. It is also what allowed Bronzers to create the real life connections that made the Bronze “a real community.”

Fifth, and related to the fourth point, is that The Bronze was neither a chat room nor a threaded board, and hence to some degree required rules to prevent it from becoming incomprehensible. One of these, as Patrick mentioned, is that to communicate, one had to address comments directly to a person. It was assumed that everyone could read; but without addressing a comment to a specific individual, there was not enough context for anyone to respond. There were too many disparate comments, all piling up one atop another, for Bronzers to read them all and recall what conversation they were engaging. Hence, somewhat ironically, in order to communicate at the Bronze, one had to address a specific comment to a specific individual, which would alert an individual—who presumably remembered what she had recently written—to the fact that a comment was written in the context of that individual’s existing conversation. By adding to a conversation, a newbie was likely to get a response, and allow everyone else to understand the comment well enough—because they knew the perspective of the person

who had written the original conversation—to converse with the newbie. This process, combined with learning the rules and lurking for weeks beforehand, was a significant enough barrier that it created both exclusivity and “genuine” community.

Hence, The Bronze was able to become a community in part simply because it required effort to join. Becoming a Bronzer required adapting oneself to the rules and norms of existing Bronzers; anyone who could do that would probably be warmly welcomed, but anyone who couldn’t or wouldn’t would likely be ignored. And because the community required first learning the perspective of others—reading their words, addressing oneself to their conversation—newbies were forced to accommodate themselves to others to get along with them. This, then, partly accounts for what made the community “genuine”: people who were willing to get along with other community members would likely join in and become friends with individuals just as they would in real life.

Sixth, the mutiny that Patrick referred to was, as I would learn later, and important aspect of Bronzer lore. It was a founding myth, and also, I suspect, a point of pride among the Bronze’s Old Guard. They did, after all, stand up to the WB and Fox, and won. It initially seemed strange to me that a simple change to the format of a Web site would elicit a letter-writing campaign and mutiny. It was understandable, but to me it seemed like an overreaction. Indeed, much as I had initially assumed that the Bronze was inhabited by slackers with too much time on their hands, so too did a “mutiny” seem like the overreaction of people with nothing better to do. I had originally thought that this was a mutiny because people didn’t want to the board to change; but I was wrong. It’s because they don’t want their friends to change, they don’t want their relationships to



change. Therefore, they don't want their community to change. They're not just resisting change to *Buffy*, or to their fandom. They're resisting change to their friends and relationships. This, I suspect, is why Facebook's frequent changes create such an uproar. And this is why Western liberalism is so problematic; sometimes the relevant unit of analysis is not the individual body, but rather the community, and only through the lens of community do the needs of the individual become apparent.<sup>16</sup>

My only other on-line informant was Sally, with whom I had only one "interview" (Sally, E-mail). In our e-mail conversation, Sally echoed Patrick's sentiments. Following are her (excerpted) responses:

*What is it about the show (BtVS) that captures your interest?*

It has lots of everything in it... satisfying my desire for different types of entertainment all at once. The writing is so incredibly intelligent, too, so it's not a zone-out time for me. I'm pulled completely into this other world for an hour, but some of it stays with me afterwards...for days and months.

*How long have you been posting/lurking at the Bronze?*

I first posted in mid-August '97. I was off for the month, living at home in between working in NYC and going to graduate school; thus, I was bored. I had finally started watching *Buffy* in July, and so came upon the site while I was developing an Internet addiction. During the next few weeks, I posted a lot and exchanged e-mails with a bunch of people. At this point, I posted a lot more on-topic, and often the e-mails were information (re: the show). School soon overwhelmed me, so I stopped posting mid-September. Then, a few months later, I was visiting home on my birthday and had some free time. I checked the board, and saw that all these people were wishing me a happy birthday! I haven't left since.

*What drew you to the Bronze?*

The tail end of my previous response started to address that. This is a place people come to and remain at by choice. Even in RL extracurricular activities, you usually have some sort of commitment for a certain amount of time, or, at least, know that others will see you around, so you can't bail too easily. So, here is a place where people stay because they really want to be there. Since we're not doing much together- like a project- there aren't too many political struggles and major conflicts. When they do occur, they are about clashes of opinions and personalities when those opinions have been expressed. We're still all united in our passion for

Buffy.

The people are extremely supportive. Sure, it doesn't take much to write <<< good vibes>>> to someone when they say they have an exam or job interview, but somehow you don't think about that when you read the stuff like that when it's addressed to you... or anyone. Things have gone beyond this one "gathering place". People send presents/goodies to one another. People e-mail and IM... and meet in person. We don't, by any means, always talk about Buffy. We have a lot of other things in common, similar tastes. Solid friendships and romances have started here. Back to supportiveness. When Seth Green comes on-line (I'm a bit smitten with him), people post to him, asking him to post to me, people e-mail me, people CALL me to tell me he's there. This place simply rocks.

As was the case with Patrick, nothing about Sally's comments indicated that I was interviewing a vacuous teen slacker. Quite the opposite, Sally was (and still is) both smart and professional. At the time, she was a graduate student at a prestigious university; but, despite being busy with her studies, she made the time to discuss *Buffy* and *The Bronze* with me via e-mail. Like Patrick, Sally stressed that *Buffy* was intellectually stimulating; like me, it was something she found herself continuing to think about after watching a new episode. Like Patrick, Sally also stressed that the community was a "real" or "genuine" community, as indicated (per her final paragraph above) by the prevalence of in-person ("real life") interactions among Bronzers.

It did occur to me that perhaps Patrick and Sally were overstating the brilliance of *Buffy*, or the development and intensity of the Bronze community. Most of us, I think, would tend to focus on the positive aspects of our communities (especially when discussing them with outsiders); the positive aspects are, after all, presumably why we're still part of those communities. Furthermore, there may be a tendency to argue for the legitimacy of our extracurricular activities, especially when they're likely to be considered unimportant or unserious. And what could be more unserious than an online community based on a fluffy pop culture TV show? Nonetheless, I can discern no reason

to think that any of my informants were being anything other than completely honest and unbiased. While there certainly may have been an underlying desire to be taken seriously, I believe that the people I spoke with—and many Bronzers in general, myself included—were all genuinely surprised at how close-knit and supportive the Bronze community became. As Sally indicated, what began as a low-effort on-line friendships soon became much more intense and high-maintenance. And, despite the extra effort required to maintain those relationships, it was worth remaining in the community.

Apparently, then, there's something unique happening at The Bronze, which makes me wonder: what does it do for people that they get so hooked?

### **The Mayberry Bronzers**

#### ***Destiny***

When I first met her, Destiny, like Sally, was a college graduate in her 20s. She was not a grad student like Sally, but was working full time while taking classes in preparation for post-graduate schooling. The first time we met in person was in the Plant Biology building on campus. I had e-mailed earlier in the day to confirm our meeting and to let Destiny know what I looked like. She had replied in the affirmative, saying “I’m wearing a sort of Sumatran batik-y long dress with no waist. And I’ve got my Drusilla hair on today” (Destiny, e-mail). I had no idea what this meant. Fortunately, she was the only person in the building’s lobby when I came in.

Unlike me, she was very down-to-business, which confused me a bit, because my conversational style tends to be indirect, emphasizing common courtesies and niceties that, I’ve been told, can drag on to the point of annoyance. I attribute this not just to my

personality, but to cultural factors as well: the son of Indian immigrants, I was born in California, having lived most recently in Berkeley; I was still more comfortable there than here in the D.C. area. Destiny, I would learn later, grew up in New York, and her conversational style reflected that. As it happens, Destiny and I were a textbook example of how differences in local ethnomethods between Californians and New Yorkers can lead to really awkward conversations which, by dint of their awkwardness, indicate rich points. In this case, the textbook was Language Shock, in which Michael Agar gives examples of differences in the communication styles of people from Berkeley and New York City, California and New York, and the west and east coasts in general (171).

I suspect the first conversation was more awkward for me than for Destiny, since she might have assumed that I knew what I was doing, whereas I knew that I didn't. My first clue that this was the case was the look on her face when we first met. She had the same expression on her face that my students typically do on the first day of class: they look at me like I'm supposed to know what's going on, which usually prompts me to stifle a laugh. Which I did.

After some chit-chat about the batik-y dress, during which I tried not to act like I had no idea what we were talking about, I gave her a spiel about my project, and mentioned how most grad students were big goobers and would probably not see the value of *Buffy*. This comment is what seems to have gotten us past the initial awkwardness of never having met. (Note to self: the word *goober* puts informants at ease).

Once we started talking about the Bronze, I found Destiny to be a font of information. She immediately started telling me what a great community this was. It

was, in fact, clear from the way she spoke that she assumed that I knew it was a community. I don't think it occurred to her that I might have thought otherwise.

I greatly enjoyed our first conversation, so much so that I made a remark about gushing with enthusiasm, which somehow became alliteratively conflated with my previous statement about being a goober—I don't recall exactly, but it may have had something to do with me being a gushing goober—at which point she said “quote!” She went on to explain that Bronzers, in real life gatherings, tend to write down what others are saying for the sole purpose of taking it out of context and using it against each other. As it happens, this ritual would come back to haunt me. A lot.

In talking with Destiny, it became clear that she is comfortable with computers. Although her college education was decidedly humanistic—she attended an all-female liberal arts college, from which she has a degree in opera—she was at the time working in a tech-support/system-administrator capacity. Unlike me, she seemed comfortable with the idea that one can surf the ‘net in search of information that’s otherwise not readily available, or for like-minded individuals who one wouldn’t be likely to meet in real life. Like Patrick, she had visited other sites, but The Bronze is where she got hooked. When I asked her how she started posting, she replied, “I was so afraid of ~mere~ that I wouldn’t post.” Destiny was quite intimidated by Bronzers, and in particular by a Bronzer by the name of ~mere~ who, despite (as I would find out later) being completely agreeable, had acquired a reputation for being mean to newbies. But, one day after Destiny had been lurking for a while, a topic of conversation arose—Indian food—that she felt she could respond to. So she delurked.

She first started posting when, having moved to the Washington, D.C. (Mayberry)

area after graduating from college, she found herself feeling increasingly isolated as a result of her difficulty in keeping in touch with old friends. Since she was good with computers, and loved BtVS, she started posting. Ironically, what started out as a low-maintenance quasi-cyber social life became a set of high-maintenance real life friendships.

One reason that Bronzers develop such friendships is that most of the members are not viewing The Bronze as a substitute for real life, but rather as a vehicle to enriching real life. Through The Bronze, one could meet people with common interests in an increasingly fragmented society in which geography, occupation, and even family ties may not be enough to keep people connected. In retrospect, given Destiny's time commitments, I'm surprised that she ever bothered to respond to my call for interviewees. But the fact that she did is the crux of the matter: The Bronze, for some reason, attracted a critical mass of people who were inclined to look out for each other. Destiny was even willing to look after me, a stranger. Regardless of the structural factors that enabled the Bronze to become a community, this critical mass of individuals like Destiny who were willing to interact, volunteer helpful information, and look out for each other, was necessary for the Bronze to take on a life of its own and become a unique community.

Destiny mentioned to me that it's not unusual for people to be intimidated by The Bronze. In fact, her sister, who actually knows some of the Bronze regulars in real life, is intimidated enough that she refused to post. I said I could relate, that I had a lot of trouble following what was happening on the board, and wouldn't have a clue as to how or why I might start posting. I didn't realize at the time that this last statement would

also come back to haunt me.

Destiny described Bronzers as a caring, sympathetic group of people, as in any close-knit community. She was quite clear, however, that this community, just like any other, had its problems, including a stalker and a few relationships that didn't translate—or translated badly—from The Bronze to real life. But, on the other hand, there were relationships at the Bronze that translated quite well to RL. For example, Destiny told me that “Booky and Skull were the first to get married.” I believe Destiny meant this as a straightforward remark about two individuals who met at The Bronze and got married. But there was something striking in this statement: the names *Booky* and *Skull* were, I surmised, the spoken-word diminutives of the names *Bookish Girl* and *Skullkraker*, which were the written-word board names of two Bronzers who, presumably, had given names. These two persons, who I had never met and whose real names I didn't know, were identified by translating real life names into written board names that were translated into spoken nicknames. This struck me as highly abstract. And yet, Booky and Skull provided concrete evidence that this was a real community with real relationships. It was as if their marriage indicated that there could be no denying that The Bronze was neither real nor virtual, but firmly lodged somewhere in between, that there could be no going back to the simplistic view of RL and VR as distinct worlds.

A few days after the first interview with Destiny, at which I expressed my confusion about the appeal of The Bronze and my trepidation at the thought of posting, she called me to tell me about an interesting argument occurring at The Bronze. During that conversation, she also told me she thought I should delurk. Feeling self-conscious,

especially since I was studying this community, I said that I thought it best if I remained a lurker. Destiny persisted, casually asking me if I had a board name in mind. She mentioned this so casually, in fact, that I didn't think twice about it. I merely replied that I didn't have a name in mind, and mentioned in passing—or so I thought—that if I ever did delurk, I might use the board name *Quidam*, since I had just seen the Cirque du Soleil production of the same name.<sup>17</sup> The next day, while I was at the library—and therefore unable to answer the phone—Destiny left messages for me both at home and at work to tell me that people were posting to me “all over the place.”

I had been delurked.

Apparently, Destiny had (rather mischievously, I think) decided that I had self-esteem issues that I should deal with by facing my fear of writing to a few hundred strangers who didn't know me from Adam and would probably think I was an enormous dork. She had mentioned on the board that day that she was in the midst of a series of off-line interviews conducted by an ethnographer by the name of *Quidam* who was afraid to post. This was true. And also, apparently, hilarious. Not hilarious to me, of course, but to a few Bronzers who seemed to find it quite amusing that someone might be afraid of them, and so took it upon themselves to post to me by name in order to encourage (or taunt) me to post.<sup>18</sup>

As Destiny would tell me later, she knew that I was probably lurking—and I probably would have been if I'd been in my office or at home—and she thought that I would fit right in at The Bronze. She was, of course, correct. Which was a little unnerving, because what with her incisive comments about my psychological state and her occasional quotes of my words, I found myself feeling less and less like the observer,



and more and more like the one being observed.<sup>19</sup>

The gauntlet having thus been thrown, I had no choice but to post. So, the next day, I did so. I introduced myself to The Bronze, and implored Bronzers not to hurt me. My exact words were, in fact, “please don’t hurt me.” Just as I had been instructed by Patrick (and by several Bronze-related sites), in my post I replied to the individuals who had posted to me, addressing my comments to them by name. I also included some general comments in response to a *Buffy*-related topic that was being discussed. And soon—much sooner than I expected—several people had posted with a reply to my post.

I was quickly overwhelmed. I simply could not keep up with the pace of conversation. People were posting to me faster than I could post back. I would read the board, and write a post (in a word processor) in response, and then reload the board to see the latest posts and submit my own. But I repeatedly found that in the time it took me to compose a post, someone else had posted to me, and I would therefore have to go back and re-write my post with an appropriate reply. This was much harder than it I thought it would be. In fact, I did nothing other than post during this entire workday. I could only hope I’d get better at it over time.

It took a few weeks, but I did get somewhat better at posting. I kept posting after that first overwhelming day, on most weekdays, and many weekend days. After a few days, I found it no longer took me the whole day just to keep up with posts. But, I could easily spend an hour every morning reading the previous day’s boards and composing my first post of the day. And I could easily spend another hour over the course of the remainder of the day checking the Bronze and posting. And, just like other Bronzers, I soon found myself addicted, sometimes getting stuck at The Bronze for hours after I had

intended to leave. But, if I was becoming addicted to The Bronze, it was an addiction I didn't mind: I really liked the people I was talking to. And, unlike the people I worked with—who were university staff, professors, and graduate students who all kept different office hours and often worked at home—the Bronzers I talked to were there every morning to engage in so-called “water cooler conversation.” In fact, the people I primarily communicated with were called “Coffee Clubbers,” because they tended to post during standard nine-to-five business hours. In only a few weeks, The Bronze would become the social structure that I didn't have in my everyday life. I imagine that The Bronze served a similar function for many Bronzers, especially the Coffee Clubbers: it was the social structure for their workaday lives, the water cooler, coffee break, lunch hour, bar, and all-ages club that never closed.

Thus, under Destiny's gentle tutelage and mockery, I had made the leap from lurker to poster, from observer to participant. I was fortunate to have a guide who seemingly understood better than I did what I should do to understand this community. I'm not sure how—or if—I could have done this without her help, but if I had, the result surely would have been quite different. I'm still not sure how so many Bronzers became Bronzers given that they didn't have a Destiny to help them through the process. And it speaks to a larger issue in ethnographic research: I would not have become a participant without the help of someone willing to serve as an intermediary between insiders and outsiders. But what of those communities with no such intermediaries? How can anyone ever break into a community when that community is defined by the barrier to breaking into it? Can we ever know what we don't know? Without someone willing to stand at the border between observer and observed, not only would the ethnographic project be

unsuccessful, but the community in question may not even be recognized as such. After all, if a community is characterized by insiders who are members, and outsiders who are unaware of the community, it's possible that the vast majority of human endeavor is unrecognized by the vast majority of humans because they are, by definition, outsiders.

Over the course of my interviews with Destiny, I discovered that her parents are highly educated, and that she's very close to them, especially her father, because her mother was in graduate school during her formative years. Destiny grew up in New York, which is where her immediate family lives. Her mother is Puerto Rican, and her extended family on her mother's side lives in Puerto Rico. Destiny speaks Spanish with native fluency, presumably because of her connection to Puerto Rico. One of the first non-*Buffy* things Destiny mentioned is that she's a Unitarian. In retrospect, she may have done so not only because religion is an important aspect of identity, but to contrast her own Unitarianism to the Catholicism that is typical of the vast majority of Puerto Ricans.

Destiny also mentioned that she identifies with minorities in the U.S. because her mother is Puerto Rican. I would later discover that Destiny—as a result of her liberal arts education, and her exposure to the humanities through her professor mother—is familiar with feminist theory, as seems particularly interested in the idea of borderlands as theorized by Gloria Anzaldúa. As one example, she said she's fascinated by—possibly obsessed with—lycanthropy. When I asked her why, she said she's very interested in “involuntary transformation.” For her, the werewolf—an important element in *Buffy*'s second and third seasons—speaks to the margins, the borderlands, in which humans can find themselves because of their race, gender, and sexuality.

My first interview with Destiny that didn't take place in the Plant Biology building happened over lunch in a downtown Thai restaurant.<sup>20</sup> The interview had a bit of a surreal quality, mainly because the hostess kept yelling at me to hurry up and decide what I wanted, because I was trying really hard to pay close attention to what Destiny was saying, and hence wasn't reading the menu. So, ironically, my attempt to be mindful of rich points left me feeling quite distracted.<sup>21</sup> I can only hope that, if I came across as scatterbrained or indecisive or incompetent, it was at least in a way that seemed harmless enough that informants felt comfortable talking to me. Certainly, the restaurant staff seemed comfortable enough scolding me. Although, on second thought, that might have more to do with the attitude of Washingtonians than with me. As Destiny would jokingly say to me in a later conversation, that's the thing about DC: it's got all the charm of the North, and all the efficiency of the South.

So there I was, conducting an interview right smack in the middle of the worst of both worlds, doing my best to not be too non-linear in my interviewing, when, seemingly out of the blue, Destiny asked me if I was going to be there tomorrow. Specifically, what she said was, "are you going to be there tomorrow?" I had no idea what she was talking about. Then she reminded me that the Mayberry Bronzers were going to dinner at Café Atlántico, and I should join them, and bring Mrs. Quidam also. I was extremely reluctant to accept the invitation. It was only two weeks ago that I had first posted at The Bronze, and although I was now feeling comfortable with the idea of posting at The Bronze, I still felt like a newbie, and also, because I was writing about this community, like something of an interloper. So I hesitated, saying I didn't want to intrude, at which point Destiny said to me, "you're not getting how this works." She was right: I wasn't.

As it turns out, Bronzers tend to assume that persons who watch *Buffy* are pretty cool until proven otherwise.

Having been set straight, I decided to join the local Bronzers for dinner. In retrospect, this may seem like a much less significant decision than it did at the time. With the advent of the so-called Web 2.0, most Americans have likely become familiar with computer-mediated communication. Many, if not most, Americans probably find it unsurprising that people who meet on line also meet in real life. At the time I first met the Mayberry Bronzers, however, I thought it highly unusual to join people for dinner simply because we used the same web site, or watched the same TV show, or lived near the same city. In fact, I would still find that unusual: I wouldn't have much interest in meeting people just because they used Facebook, or lived near D.C., or regularly watched *Buffy* on DVD.

Furthermore, at The Bronze, there were no pictures, no background information, no option for sending private messages; the text that was posted publicly was the entirety of what I knew about any given poster. The board was active enough that I had never even seen posts by most of the people I would meet at dinner; indeed, some of them may not have posted recently. And I was still new enough that they probably wouldn't know who I was, either. I felt like we had about as much connection to each other as I would to a driver in the baggage claim area of the airport holding up a sign with my name on it. Except nobody ever held up a sign with my name on it, because I wasn't one of those fancy jet-set people who merited a guy with a sign. I was one of those people who didn't really go anywhere.

So, despite feeling very much outside my own comfort zone, I went to dinner at

Café Atlántico, not sure what to expect, but wondering if these people—there were 16 of us all together, three of whom were from out of town—would be dressed like goths, or punks, or vampires, or witches, or something else occultish or supernatural. It turns out they were a pretty normal-looking, diverse, sociable bunch. My sense was that this was a college-educated, upper-middle class, left-of-center group of people. Interestingly, this real life gathering matched Patrick's description of The Bronze: a bunch of people sitting around a huge table, with everybody fading in and out of everybody else's conversations.

There was, however, one ritual that I was not at all prepared for. This ritual apparently involved deciding at the beginning of the gathering—or perhaps beforehand—who would be the “quote girl” for the day. I wasn't privy to this process, and so knew not that there would be someone there who would, every time I said something stupid, be writing it down. This “quote” process, while certainly hilarious, was also something like the evil twin of ethnography. It was exactly the kind of ritual that ethnographers are attuned to. But, whereas I was struggling to contextualize the words and ideas of community members, they were taking each other's words (as well as mine) out of context, just because it was funny. I was writing down their words to put them in context; they were writing down mine to take them out of context. The ethnographer studies the community using his methods and ritualized behaviors; the community “studies,” as it were, the ethnographer, using its own methods and ritualized behaviors. And in this case, the ethnographer, upon checking The Bronze later, felt dubiously honored to discover how many of the stupid things he said would later be “quoted” on the board.

It wasn't until after this dinner that I realized how grossly erroneous my thinking

was. I had exactly the assumptions about these Bronzers—with whom I would remain friends for years—that *Buffy* implored me not to. I had failed to learn the lesson of my favorite show, and proceeded to otherize the Mayberry Bronzers, who nonetheless took me in as a welcome addition to their community. Clearly, I had a lot to learn.

### ***Writing a Better World***

As mentioned above, there are several RL relationships that originated at The Bronze. But what I find even more interesting is that several non-RL relationships originated there as well. One of these was a wedding, which marked the first time I had ever seen the Whedon Improvisational Theater Troupe (WITT) in action. Much to my amazement, virtually everyone who posted during this event contributed to its creation. Furthermore, there seemed to be no objection to the fact that three people got married (to each other). Writing mostly in italics to indicate third person narrative rather than the usual direct speech, Bronzers came in, sat down, and enjoyed the wedding. Destiny spent most of the afternoon frantically running around (in italics, of course), making sure the flowers were in place, the cake was ordered, and so on. For the better part of four hours, Bronzers posted as if a real time wedding was taking place, literally writing the wedding into existence. Posters described themselves entering The Bronze, and then proceeded to write detailed descriptions of their wedding attire, where they sat, what they drank, even how often they fell asleep during the ceremony. Their personas, their physical selves, and the physical space that they inhabited were all created in vivid, and generally humorous, detail.

The wedding serves to highlight several themes. First, Bronzers tend to be

extremely imaginative and literate. Second, Bronzers are literally writing the Bronze into existence. Third, as alluded to above, The Bronze is a close-knit community brought together by a love of *Buffy*. Apparently, *Buffy*, boredom, or something else draws people to The Bronze, and once here, its regulars devote large blocks of time to events such as the WITT wedding mentioned above. In my experience, just keeping up with normal conversations requires a fair amount of time and attention. Indeed, Destiny said that her first post of the day typically took one hour of her morning; once I became a regular poster, I found the same to be true of me. Since most of the people I communicate with are posting from work, being a regular would seem to require extraordinary parallel processing and logical compartmentalization. And it would also require a certain willingness to use technology to subvert its own function as a productivity-enhancing, labor-saving device. In this sense, the computer, that symbol of white-collar alienation and atomization, is like the Sony Walkman as in Rey Chow's description: a technology used to some degree to subvert and resist the cultural and economic hegemony that it was created to solidify (145).

The second of these themes strikes me as being particularly relevant to understanding how it is that The Bronze has become such a “genuine” community. Bronzers are, in effect, using language to objectify themselves, to make subjective experiences more objective (Berger and Luckmann 61). Language is what allows them to think outside themselves, to make less subjective what’s in their heads. Just as the characters in *Buffy* are self-reflexive, using language to think out loud, to think outside themselves, so too are Bronzers. This is not to say that Bronzers are a self-selecting group of people who are actually similar to the characters in *Buffy*. But there is a



connection: Bronzers use language in a fashion similar to that of the Scooby Gang. Since much of this language is either adopted or adapted from the show, or is a result of discussing it, it is not surprising that there are similarities. The difference is one of intent, rather than outcome: whereas the Scooby Gang uses language to engage its audience, Bronzers do it to write their worlds. They also use this unique language to engage their audience—as some Bronzers did when they knew I was lurking and observing—and to perform their identities, especially during WITT performances. But the identities that Bronzers perform are largely their own identities, although they may be stylized or idealized versions.

In social constructionist parlance, language is used to objectify knowledge, which can then become institutionalized. Institutions, once codified, then become taken for granted by individuals and become the common sense order of the universe that “coerces” individuals into behaving according to institutional norms. Language creates institutions that, once objectified, are external forces acting upon the individual (Berger and Luckmann). However, *The Bronze* is able to resist the reification of its constructs. One reason for this is that Bronzer language exists between written language and spoken language. In our Anglo cultural tradition, the written word is considered permanent, whereas the spoken word is considered fleeting, and it is in this tradition that both *Buffy* and *The Bronze* operate. But Bronzer language is neither as permanent as words on paper, nor as impermanent as vocal language. Words can be chosen more carefully than in real time conversations. But, they disappear after one week unless someone bothers to copy them. *The Bronze* is therefore characterized by change, but not by the pace of

change in real time. There is, however, a downside to this: posts stay on line for a week. This means that utterances can not be retracted as easily as they can in oral speech. In oral speech, when one misspeaks or speaks provocatively, the original words will fade away; furthermore, an immediate retraction, explanation, or apology is possible, and will often suffice to undo whatever damage was done. But at The Bronze, the best one can do is submit a subsequent post to retract, explain, or apologize. The original words will remain, available to re-provoking subsequent readers, even if those words are followed by mitigating posts.

Because Bronzers don't interact face to face, there is also greater latitude in being true to oneself. At The Bronze, I needn't respond to anyone who I don't like. And, I can write in as evocative or sensual a manner as I want—within certain limits—because the thoughts that are conveyed are not easily backed up with actions. For example, expressions such as {{{hugs}}} or *\*smooch\** are signs of affection that denote physical contact; in real life, the appropriateness of such actions is dependent on the physical context. But at The Bronze, there is little physical context, and so such expressions can convey the emotions they signify without risking inappropriate behavior. Furthermore, Bronzers can reinscribe themselves via their on-line personas. They can be any imaginable physical entity, or they can get married in threesomes, or wear clothes they would never wear in public (even though they might own them in real life). They can, in effect, be more like their idealized selves.

There are other ways in which The Bronze resists ossification. For example, even though Bronzers write themselves and their physical environments into existence, The Bronze is not a physical space. There can be as many doors, bars, tables, closets, or

rooms as anyone cares to imagine. Many of these physical creations are eventually forgotten, but some—like the Font of Employment, in which Bronzers are ritually dunked for good luck in their job-search endeavors—are popular enough that they become a regular part of the imagined physicality of The Bronze. Since no individuals' construct need necessarily conflict with anyone else's, one source of conflict—that over physical space—is transformed into a collaborative creative effort to manipulate an ever-changing imagined physical space.

As with all institutions, new blood shakes up the mix. While there are certainly people who do not pay much attention to newbies, there are many who do: there are at least four sites that provide information for newbies. And, much to my surprise, I've rarely seen a "newbie drive-by"—a hastily prepared post by someone who is not a Bronzer and has not bothered to learn the rules—that did not result in helpful posts, usually with links to the "Bronze Welcome Wagon," an unofficial site with a great deal of information on how to become a Bronzer. While inconsiderate newbie posts will sometimes elicit angry responses from Bronze regulars, for the most part Bronzers welcome newbies as long as they are not malicious. Newbies who are malicious—called *trolls* in internet parlance—are called *bezoars*, and are typically ignored. Bezoars, named after the demonic creature of the episode "Bad Eggs," usually go away on their own once they realize that nobody's paying attention to them. However, there have been cases in which bezoars have persistently disrupted the board, in which case someone will usually track down their location and report them to their ISP.

Thus, newbies elicit a wide range of reactions, depending on who is at The Bronze and how crowded it is. But, in the case of newbies who carefully delurk and

announce their newbie status, most Bronzers are downright warm and friendly. Indeed, the prevalence of sites with helpful hints for newbies, usually maintained by subgroups (“clubs”) of The Bronze—such as the Pathetically Helpful Bronzers Anonymous club and the Newbie Welcoming Committee—indicates that a good number of Bronzers have continually devoted substantial effort to keeping The Bronze inclusive. This is not to say that cliques don’t form; quite the contrary, several Bronzers mentioned that The Bronze was known among web-savvy *Buffy* fans as being the most cliquish of *Buffy*-related internet forums. In fact, at least one Bronze club has become an invitation-only club for which new members must be sponsored. However, I would argue that any cliquishness or aloofness was not due to hostility to outsiders, but rather due to the specificity of The Bronze and its rules, and the relative closeness of community members. Both of these factors made it difficult for outsiders to become community members. But, anyone willing to put forth the effort to communicate with Bronzers on their own terms, using their own rules, would likely be able to join in despite the existence of firmly-established relationships among Bronzers. Hence, despite any tendency toward exclusivity, The Bronze *per se* largely resisted stratification.

Finally, and most importantly, the very language that can become institutionalized and restrictive is used to disrupt institutional tendencies at The Bronze. This is accomplished through the use of slang. Language can objectify by providing a common basis for understanding meaning. But Bronzers use the process in reverse: slang is prevalent to the point where precise word choice seems more the exception than the rule. It allows Bronzers to create a richness and connotation that would not exist if they used precise, and hence strictly denotative, language. Just as music is characterized not merely

by particular frequency vibrations, but also by the extraneous sounds that give it tone, so too Bronzer language is much more than straightforward definitions of words. Similar to the manner in which an electric guitarist uses distortion—sometimes barely audible, sometimes overwhelming the fundamental note—meaning is conveyed not only in the words, but in the “noise” surrounding the words. Indeed, at times the meanings of words are precisely not as those words are defined; in this case, the reader must know that the point of the word is not the definition, but the extraneous meaning attached to it. The result is a swirling mass of coded phrases, layered meanings, and double entendres. This becomes especially apparent in cases in which Bronzers are discussing topics that they deem inappropriate for this “family board.” For example, rather than not talk about topics of a sexual nature, Bronzers instead do so with various degrees of opacity by “piggybacking” additional meanings onto standard words for the benefit of those in the know.

It is this slang that I initially found so bewildering about The Bronze, and is partly what made it so difficult to break into the community. But in retrospect, it is this connotative use of language that simultaneously encourages creativity, encourages new posters to learn about the people they’re posting to before jumping into a conversation, and allows for conversations that create a feeling of community. I believe that it is this messy, imprecise, and unstable language that makes The Bronze a community; without it, The Bronze would likely become just another sterile, topical, denotative, well-defined, and efficient medium of communication.

### ***Blade-The Vampire Hunter***

I had been posting for several months when I first interviewed Blade-The Vampire Hunter. We had met once before, briefly, but our first interview was really the first time I had talked with him. While I still felt like a relative newbie, I don't know if I was seen that way. I had, after all, by this time joined a couple of clubs: I was the 27th member of BAD (Bronzers Adoring Darla), and the 12th member of the PBPk (Posting Board Porch Kitties). I was also a member of MacWatchers, a group of posters who used Macs, and shared information regarding them.

I had also by this time become a groupie. I so enjoyed one particular Bronzer's posts that she allowed me to become the seventh of her groupies. It was through groupiedom that I got my first taste of firsthand WITT: several Bronzers, on the occasion of the birthday of she-to-whom-we-group, each took turns grabbing the microphone and praising the day that she was born. In retrospect, I'm not sure why we did this. But it was fun, and very funny, too, as we each took turns waxing melodramatic off the top of our heads. And from work, no less.

I had also witnessed some negative events at the Bronze. One of these involved a cyberstalker; the other, a suicide. Both of these events were interesting to me because of the confusion surrounding them. The suicide, for example, was an eloquent and elaborate description of a Bronzer entering The Bronze and killing herself. I don't why she did this; I can only speculate that she felt alienated enough to make it clear that her persona would not return. The frightening thing, however, was that nobody seemed to know at the time whether this online suicide would be accompanied by a real life suicide. Fortunately, that situation seems to have resolved itself with no loss of life.

The cyberstalker issue was similarly confusing. At one extreme were Bronzers who felt that persons who repeatedly violated another's personal (electronic) space should not be allowed to continue posting. One Bronzer, with the support of a number of other Bronzers (all women), accused another Bronzer of cyberstalking her, and told him clearly and publicly that he must not attempt any further communication with her. Most of these individuals were friends of mine, and so even though I had no idea what had happened, I was reflexively inclined to agree with them. At the other extreme, however, were a number of Bronzers who supported the alleged stalker; they felt that there was a clique that was trying to control who could and couldn't post, and were looking for flimsy excuses to ostracize others. I doubt that I will ever know exactly what happened, as every version of the stalking that I've heard has been different. But the situation points to one of the contradictions faced by Bronzers: an open and tolerant community, if it is to remain that way, must grapple with the limits of what will be tolerated, and it may have to tolerate antithetical or abhorrent views.

Despite the fact that I was primarily a bystander, I nonetheless managed to create a painfully awkward coda to the cyberstalker story. Some months after the aforementioned cyberstalker incident at The Bronze, I posted a draft of this ethnography on my university web site in the interest of being true to the open ethos of the digital age. The alleged stalker had read it, including the previous paragraph, and sent me an email asking if I was referring to him. On seeing this, I had that sinking feeling, the one that I get when I fear a confrontation is imminent, and I'm unprepared for it, and it might be my fault. I suddenly found myself remembering the strong words I had posted in support of my stalked friend, and the associated antagonistic words I had posted regarding the

stalker (whose identity I didn't know at the time). I also suddenly felt awful that I had written about this incident and posted it on line without first consulting any of the involved parties. I wondered what gave me that right, and whether it was selfish or arrogant to write about other people behind their backs and justify it on the grounds of academic interest. The only mitigating aspect was that I had been careful to avoid mentioning anyone's identifying information. Indeed, since The Bronze was a public forum that did not reveal individual's identities, it would not violate ethnics guidelines to use information posted there, even without prior permission. But somehow, it just felt wrong to be writing about people without telling them first.

So, feeling like a jerk, I wrote back, and told my correspondent that yes, he was the stalker I had written about. Much to my surprise, he didn't threaten to hunt me down and kill me. He didn't even accuse me of being a crappy ethnographer. In fact, he said that he thought I had been fair. I really wasn't expecting that. But I was greatly relieved to read it. I continued to communicate with this individual by email, and in doing so, learned that he was unaware that he had crossed the boundary of what others considered appropriate electronic communication. In my estimation, he saw himself as reaching out to new people. Perhaps in doing so he was too forward, or came across as too needy, or persistent, or creepy, or whatever. But however he came across to others, in his emails to me he came across as chastened. And while I never learned what he did or wrote that was inappropriate, my hunch was that he was, like most of us, in need of human contact. It's possible that he wasn't doing anything different than what every other Bronzer was doing—reaching out to other humans—but that the way he did it was problematic, or perhaps merely misunderstood. Regardless, my new correspondent always struck me as



thoughtful and considerate.

But this realization created, in my mind, another conundrum. On the one hand, I didn't want to seem like I wasn't siding with my friends; in a society with a long history of dismissing violence against women, the last thing I wanted was to be seen as a guy siding with another guy against aggrieved women. And not only did I not want to be seen that way, but more importantly, I didn't want to be that way. But I also didn't want to be the kind of person who would ostracize someone based on hearsay, especially if what happened was just a misunderstanding. Fortunately for me, nobody forced me to take sides, and the matter was largely forgotten, or at least unmentioned, by most everyone.

Blade is what Destiny refers to as one of the "old guard," meaning that he has been posting pretty much from the beginning. He is a most atypical person. When I first met him, he was an Air Force Captain working as a trial lawyer in the office of the Judge Advocate General, where his job title was "Chief of Military Justice." He holds a B.A. in philosophy, a J.D., and a black belt in Tang Su Do. He is also the President of the Whole Wide World, a title that he acquired after he organized the first Posting Board Party, held in 1998 in Los Angeles, at which someone commented that, judging by his ability to throw a gala event and graciously mingle with the guests, he would make a good politician. Apparently, as often happens at The Bronze, things got "out of hand," and the next thing he knew, he was President of the Whole Wide World.

Blade's an interesting, and interested, person. He negotiates several dramatically different worlds, and he does so very conscientiously, on a regular basis. Like the comic

book character from whom he takes his name, he is an African-American man. He talks easily about racial issues, describing, for example, his less-than-ideal childhood in a stereotypical “black neighborhood,” or arguments he would have with fellow African-American law students about what it meant to be a “race traitor.” He says that he is often described as “a nice guy, but not what you’d expect.”

He’s definitely not what I expected, and I suspect Blade wouldn’t want it any other way. He’s a firm believer in the benefits of multiplicity, saying that if there’s one thing he learned as a philosophy major, it’s that there’s never a single right answer. And so he consciously tries to take the best of whatever world he’s in, and leaves the rest behind. He sees himself as a liminal individual; in fact, he rather seems to enjoy deconstructing other people’s assumptions. He specifically mentioned how interesting are the expressions on people’s faces when they walk into his office and see it decorated not with the trappings of military success, but with action figures.

Blade is much more optimistic than I am, particularly with regard to technology. Whereas I tend to view technology as another means by which capital and capitalists exert their influence over individuals, Blade sees in technology the possibility that the next generation might inherit a more tolerant world than the one in which we grew up.<sup>22</sup> For Blade, *The Bronze* exemplifies this possibility: it bridges gaps between people, potentially allowing Bronzers to move beyond differences in race, gender, sexuality, geography, physical appearance, or whatever. Blade admits that it’s not a perfect virtual world, but because it brings together people who would probably never communicate in real life, it’s a thoroughly enjoyable exercise in tolerance and diversity.

Perhaps the strangest thing about Blade is that he’s so affable and thoughtful that

it's easy to overlook the fact that he's also ridiculously competent, to the point of seeming larger than life. From humble beginnings, he became a highly educated and successful lawyer. By itself, this is quite an accomplishment: despite our cultural tropes regarding the American dream, the fact is that upward mobility is severely restricted by race and class (Lipsitz Possessive Investment). But Blade's also sort of a superhero: not only does he have the badass fighting skills and the military background, but he's also insanely athletic. Add to that his movie-star good looks—oft-noted by Bronzers—and it's not so surprising that he became the President of the Whole Wide World. And he did so a full decade before the United States would elect its first black president.

A few days after my first interview with Blade, he posted his first State of the Bronze address. Many of the issues he addressed humorously in that post were issues that we discussed quite seriously in our conversation. Whether our conversation had anything to do with this address I don't know. However, when I thanked him for his inspirational words the next day at The Bronze, he mentioned that he hoped this gave me something more to work with.

It did. Not only was I glad to read the words of someone who had such high hopes for the future, but I was happy to know that someone else was thinking about issues that concern me, and was even of a like mind regarding some of them. And his words also served as a reminder of just how artificial subject/object distinctions are: until my work on The Bronze is complete, I'll always feel at least a little like an outsider, a voyeur, turning my fellow Bronzers into a self-serving research project. But at the same time, I can't deny the possibility that the experimenter is affecting the experiment, or even that the experimenter is being experimented on himself.

What follows is excerpted from the first State of the Bronze address. I've included it here because it's Blade in his own words, and his own words capture something about him, and his role in this community, in a way that's uniquely his own.

Madame Vice President, members of the Cabinet, Apollo Interactive, the Honorable Joss Whedon, the Honorable RD, distinguished VIPs, honored guests, my fellow Bronzers. Today I have the honor of reporting to you the State of the Bronze. Today I stand before you to report that the Bronze is the single greatest, most diverse, open minded, forward thinking cyber community in history. For the first time in our history, people from all walks of life, social & economic backgrounds, ages, cultural backgrounds, religions, political views, and from every corner of the globe have come together in a community which has demonstrated these lines can be crossed and we as a community can unite for the good of all. My fellow Bronzers, I stand before you to report that the state of our Bronze is strong [ . . . ].

The Bronze must continue to build bridges which bring people together along racial, economic, cultural, religious gender, and political backgrounds. America's journey down this road, has been a long one. For the Bronze, we are the pioneers that will keep this truly free community alive. Free of hatred, bigotry, racism, sexism, and discrimination [ . . . ].

The Bronze may have begun as a fan based community, centered around genius writing, superb acting, excellent special effects, and incredible stunts, but now we are so much more. Although we can never forget the Sunnydale roots from which we sprung, let us now realize that it is not this which holds us together. For now the bond we share as a community is stronger than ever before, with a power not seen anywhere else on the Internet. It is time for us to see this is our time, we are on the cusp of a new dawn for America. Several seasons from now, another President of the Whole Wide World will post in this place and report on the State of the Bronze. She or he will look back on a 21st century bronze shaped in so many ways by the decisions we make here and now, by the promises we make. So let it be said of us then that we were thinking not only of our time, but of our future. Of continuing the forward thinking, high ideal, creative momentum, and the putting aside of divisions to find the true strength we know we are capable of [ . . . ].

Thank you and good afternoon.

Blade-The Vampire Hunter

President of the Whole Wide World

### *Taster's Choice*

Like Blade, Taster's Choice (TC) was a Bronzer since the board's inception. In our first interview, he told me about the uproar that was caused by Warner Brothers' attempt to modify the web site. In fact, he still had the letter he wrote to The WB urging it not to make changes to the board or eliminate it. His reasoning was twofold. First, a remarkable community had sprung up because of *Buffy*, and it would be churlish and imperious to make unwanted changes to the community space. Second, The Bronze was home to the WB's most active fan base, and atomizing it would be a really lousy marketing strategy.

This resistance is one of the keys to understanding The Bronze community. It was, in one sense, a defining aspect of the community: perhaps more so than at any other time, Bronzers spoke with one coherent voice, and did so to protect their friendships and to lay claim to the space that defined their human interactions, their community. It would likely be overly romantic to frame this event as a mass mobilization against corporate hegemony. However, just the fact that community members were willing to agitate for control of a virtual space that was owned by someone else is telling. In effect, Bronzers claimed that a corporation's property right over a web site did not supersede that corporation's obligations to the individuals affected by that property right. The companies in charge of The Bronze, Apollo Interactive—which had created the site for Warner Brothers—obviously had the right to change the site as they wished; but Bronzers focused not on their rights, but on their responsibilities. In this case, The Bronze was a marketing gimmick; Bronzers in effect argued that, once they had become engaged in that marketing campaign, they, too, had rights to the space defined by it. Or, put another

way: Bronzers argued that their right to human interaction mediated simple property rights. And in doing so, Bronzers insisted on their own agency, rather than accept the role of passive consumers of broadcast media. It was a claim to interactivity in a world defined by one-way broadcasts, and in which the Web was not yet interactive enough to be called Web 2.0.

This event spurred Bronzers to coalesce into community, and as such, helped define the community, and provide it with a founding myth. But the reason for the strong reaction is also important. At this time, there were few, if any, other linear posting boards. In the years since The Bronze first went on line, threaded posting boards have become commonplace. Furthermore, even social networking sites such as Facebook are basically threaded: individuals can post comments or replies to an article, or status update, or tweet, or whatever; or, they can write something of their own, and others can comment or reply. But in each case, there is a thread. Indeed, I have never actually seen a posting board other than The Bronze that was linear, not threaded. And this, I believe, is one important reason that Bronzers still miss The Bronze.

Bronzers regularly say they miss the Bronze, and they say so in Web forums that are populated by Bronzers. Therefore, it is not simply the virtual presence of Bronzers they miss; they also miss the way they used to communicate. While this is surely due in part to the newness and intensity of the experience of being a Bronzers, it is also due to the fact that The Bronze itself was a far more open forum than anything comparable. Virtually every Web site is compartmentalized according to topic threads; this format reflects the needs of the site owner, primarily the need to make money by selling advertising and user information. But this was never the case at The Bronze. Hence, The

Bronze was an open space, defined by community members, with rules written by community members.

At the time, there was no reason for it to be any different. Online environments that came before The Bronze were constrained by their technological limitations, while those that came after were constricting because they were designed to sell advertising and monetize the user. Hence, The Bronzer rebellion was more than just a community-defining fuss over formatting. It was one of the few times—perhaps the only time—that Web users argued *en masse* that their community was more important than their market value. And it was an argument they actually won.

Like Patrick, TC told me the story of this first Bronzer rebellion without being asked about it. That this event was the first thing they mentioned indicates that it was a defining event for the community. Indeed, it seems to me that this was the single most important event in transforming The Bronze from a promotion for *Buffy* to a self-sustained community. On the one hand, this rebellion was hardly subversive, since keeping the fans happy was of great benefit to The WB in promoting *Buffy*. But on the other hand, there was something radical about the manner in which the fans insisted on their own agency: in effect, the fans extracted a *quid pro quo* from The WB by insisting that they would be fans only as long as they had a voice in defining the fandom. In this sense, the Bronzer rebellion functioned as a founding myth not only because it signified the coalescence of the community, and not only because the fans stood up to the corporation and won, but because it solidified the democratization of fandom that began with the first letter-writing campaign that brought the original *Star Trek* series back on the air (Jenkins 28). No longer could producers simply take for granted a passive

audience. For better or for worse—or both—the audience insisted on being part of the cultural production process.

TC, like my other informants, is hardly a teen slacker. When I first met him, he had recently completed his Master's degree in Early Christian Theology, after which he worked on a congressional campaign in Iowa. When the campaign was over, he came to Mayberry from Dubuque to look for a job. I met him through Destiny, who had met him at The Bronze; he was staying with her while looking for a place to live in the area. His decision to move to Mayberry was based on two factors: his occupational background made the nation's capital a likely place for him to find a job; and he knew people (Bronzers) here. Since I was in the midst of a series of in-person interviews with Destiny, I took the opportunity to interview TC at the same time as my follow-up interviews with Destiny.

In many ways, TC is a typical old-fashioned midwestern liberal. He grew up in a lower-middle class suburban environment, what he calls a “blue-collar ethnic” community. He's comfortable talking about his socialist leanings, his Irish Catholic roots, his strong Christian beliefs, and the fact that his mother was the first person in his family to go to college. About the only thing we haven't discussed in detail is his graduate school experience, which, although perhaps not atypical, was certainly unpleasant, even by graduate student standards. (I felt it would be stark violation of the graduate student code of conduct to broach the subject before several more years had passed, by which time hopefully we would both have forgotten all about it).

TC has two “wifettes”—the WITT wedding referred to above was his. When I



asked him whether polygyny, even in virtual form, wasn't somewhat un-Christian, he seemed a bit surprised that I should ask the question. I don't actually recall whether he ever answered my question, mostly because it led to a lengthy and fascinating discussion about Christianity. TC went to graduate school to find out for himself what "real" Christianity was, and one of the things he found out was that modern Christianity's obsession with sexual relationships is at best overwrought, and at worst completely misplaced and irrelevant to modern humans. For example, TC doesn't have a problem with gay marriage—in fact, he supports it—and my impression is that this is based not only on his personal values, but on his detailed and nuanced understanding of Christianity. Indeed, philosophically, TC seems rooted in classical Greece. Not only is TC completely unconvinced by the "postmodern turn," but for him, authorial intent is paramount, reader response theory is bogus, and the Self—his Christian self—inheres firmly in his body.

TC is hardly what I would call a cultural relativist. For example, where I saw cultural criticism in *Buffy*, TC saw the classical Greek heroes journey. And yet, as with most of the Bronzers I've met, he seems perfectly comfortable with the idea that his views are not shared by his fellow Mayberrians. Indeed, Destiny captured my view of religion quite well when she spoke of her own religious upbringing: "I associate religion with this hidebound Catholicism that my parents practice, or practiced, which was always kind of, you know, no partying, no carousing, no drinking." At this, TC replied with a laugh: "You hung out with the wrong bunch of Catholics!"

### ***Postmodern Community: Who Did This?***

I have been hesitant to identify links between *Buffy* and The Bronze lest I overstate those connections. Still, I believe that much of what makes The Bronze unique is the same thing that makes *Buffy* unique: a postmodern view of society that lends itself to a use of language that is used to simultaneously deconstruct assumptions about society and reconstruct new types of community. How much of The Bronze can be explained by this postmodern view, however, is beyond me, and I suspect it always will be. My explanation is undoubtedly one among many, but it does suggest the importance of alternative communities, not as “other” communities, but as communities built along non-traditional lines that coexist with traditional communities and that fill some important human need, what Howard Rheingold refers to as the “hunger for community” (xx).

The Bronze is a function of BtVS, and throughout its existence has exhibited a great deal of institutional flexibility. But the question remains: how did it get this way? The fact that The Bronze comprises *Buffy* fans suggests its current characteristics, but does not necessitate them. Similarly, the fact that The Bronze—in all its incarnations, but especially during *Buffy*’s original run—was relatively tolerant and flexible doesn’t mean it couldn’t have turned out otherwise. How is it that the necessary conditions for a community give rise to an actual community? What is that turns the elements that enabled this community to take its unique form—elements like Bronzer language, a love of *Buffy*, the format of the posting board—into an actual community? What is it that turns this possibility of a flexible, open, and “genuine” community into a reality?

When I first met Destiny, she had been posting for about six months. She posted

from work, and it quickly became clear to me that her work environment was far from ideal. I was therefore thrilled when I read her post to The Bronze that she had found a new job. I was saddened, though, when she announced about two weeks later that this was her last day at The Bronze, because it wouldn't be possible for her to post from her new job.

I was overwhelmed by the posts she received in response. As I sat in my windowless office, staring at my laptop's computer screen (I had long since given up trying to work on the desktop computer that my office provided), I found myself getting choked up as I read the heartfelt goodbyes and well-wishes of my fellow Bronzers. And I was surprised: even though we live barely 10 miles apart and keep in touch outside of The Bronze, I found myself missing her.

It was at this point that I realized that I may have mistaken the institutional qualities of The Bronze for many of its individuals, that by focusing on the structure of The Bronze, I failed to take account of the individuals there.<sup>23</sup> I realized that The Bronze's potential as an open and tolerant community would not have been realized were it not for a few particular individuals. This is not to say that everybody would find The Bronze as open as I do. But that's not for lack of trying on the part of several key Bronzers.

These persons, like Destiny, are not merely members of the community—they are shapers of it. They are, basically, thoughtful people. They respond to people's posts in a positive manner, and they always respond, even if it takes a few days. They don't disrespect people, even obnoxious newbies. And, most importantly, they respond to posts in kind, always taking them seriously. Destiny, for example, has always

apprehended the seriousness of certain posts, or the playfulness of other posts, and responded accordingly. Rather than merely post messages about herself for others to read, her messages also take into account what other people want to hear. She doesn't just talk about herself; she draws out others. She doesn't just put her thoughts out there; she interacts with other people's. Furthermore, she does something that many people aren't willing to do: she talks to newbies, knowing full well that most of them will soon disappear for good.

When Destiny announced that she would be leaving The Bronze, I had been posting for less than a year. I no longer felt like a newbie, but rather like I had found a place where I belonged. That's why it gave me a bizarre sense of closure when Destiny disappeared. I knew she was still out there, and that even though she wasn't posting, that huge conversation called The Bronze would seamlessly continue (Rosaldo 102-105).

At that point I found myself compelled, more than ever, to welcome new people, to provide the sort of environment that others provided for me. Interestingly, it was an environment that reminded me more of dorm life than anything else: The Bronze had that same feeling of being exciting and new, and the same intense energy of lots of strangers thrown together in a common environment. And if The Bronze was a dorm, then the PBPs were perhaps like cast parties: they were the big fun at the end of an intense artistic endeavor. In retrospect, this makes speculative sense: in my qualitative estimation, the Bronze consisted of a disproportionately large number of relatively well-educated young women of a literary bent. Someone with a humanities degree, perhaps only a few years removed from college, but currently stuck in a white-collar world of cubicle farms, might recall the years of dorms and performances and cast parties and intense communities with

some fondness. I certainly did, and still do; perhaps this is why The Bronze reminded me of those environments.

Regardless, at The Bronze, people actually noticed when I wasn't there, and I could talk to the same people every day, creating a sense of both intensity and normalcy that didn't occur in my real life work environment, where students and faculty were constantly coming and going according the hours they set for themselves, and where the routines and familiar faces changed every semester. And, like most of the Bronzers I talked to every day, I loved it.

### **Conclusions**

In the course of my interviews of Bronzers, and of my increasing addiction to The Bronze, three themes emerged. They are: community; language; and Bronzer slang, or the postmodern use of language.

The first of these themes is the concept of community. Is The Bronze a community? I think that it definitely is. Whether or not The Bronze is a community, of course, depends on how the concept of community is defined. As mentioned in Chapter 1, there are a variety of scholarly definitions of community; The Bronze certainly meets the standard definitions of community discussed therein. Furthermore, community members have their own implicit definitions of community. While none of the individuals I interviewed offered an explicit definition, they were all nonetheless quite clear that they believed The Bronze to be a community. Whatever it is that Bronzers mean by *community*, they think The Bronze is an example of it.

The Bronzers I interviewed all either mentioned that The Bronze is a community,

or simply talked about it as a community, without being prompted by me to consider whether it is, or why. Moreover, Bronzers regularly referred to themselves as being part of The Bronze community in their on line conversations. And, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the welcome page at The Bronze, as well as the various FAQ and information pages, all explicitly referred to The Bronze as a community. Thus, it is clear that Bronzers believed that they were part of a community, and saw no need to explain that any further. Indeed, I believe that one reason that so many Bronzers were so willing to talk to me so openly was precisely because they did see themselves as part of a community that enhanced their lives. This was obvious to them, so much so that they never bothered to elaborate to themselves what exactly that meant. But they recognized that it was not obvious to outsiders, and generally appreciated the opportunity to be taken seriously, and to explain that their community was not based on frivolous or low-maintenance relationships, but on relationships and interactions that could be just as real and meaningful as in real life.

To Bronzers, then, The Bronze is a community. And, as Bronzers regularly pointed out, it is also a unique community. I, too, was soon convinced that this was the case. In fact, I believe that the reason The Bronze is a unique community is that it resists stagnation. One reason for this is BtVS itself: because the show challenges the audience to question accepted norms, it encourages thoughtful, critical, and lengthy discussion. Furthermore, this discussion became possible because of the nature of The Bronze: if the posting board hadn't allowed for long conversations that could meander far from their starting point, it's doubtful the community would be as close-knit.

A second reason that The Bronze resists stagnation is that, as Sally alluded to, it

brings people together based on a very specific context (*Buffy*) but does not necessarily lend itself to any other contexts. This means that there is very little I can assume about persons with whom I'm speaking: categories such as age, nationality, gender, sexuality, race, or occupation become largely irrelevant until more information is provided. This first occurred to me when I was at The Bronze on a cold winter day, and people were talking about the weather. Just the fact that I was talking to someone who was about to go shovel snow at the same time as I was talking to someone who was sitting on her balcony in 70-degree weather indicated to me the problem with falling back on "common sense" assumptions about other Bronzers. It's not that I didn't realize that my weather wasn't the same as other people's weather. On the contrary, what surprised me was that I was so immersed in The Bronze—or, more precisely, my own headspace, my own mental construct of The Bronze—that I temporarily forgot this basic fact, and found it jarring to be reminded of it. Forgetting about weather differentials is a relatively innocuous mental lapse; however, it's not hard to imagine more serious mental errors involving erroneous assumptions about the unseen people with whom we communicate (as will be discussed further in the chapter on race in cyberspace).

As Blade mentioned in his presidential address, many Bronzers initially feel they are freed from the constraints of bigotry, since bigotry tends to focus on physical characteristics, on the body. To some degree, this is certainly true. However, it is important not to overstate the relevance of interacting in the virtual world while leaving one's physical self in the real world. As Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman show, people bring the same subjectivity, the same biases and assumptions, into cyberspace that they have in real life (1-4). In the case of Bronzers, I would estimate that a majority are white,

middle-class, white-collar professional women; overall, there is considerably less ethnic diversity than in real life. Furthermore, regular members would require a computer, internet access, and the time to post. In other words, the resources required to be a Bronzer would be a serious obstacle for anyone who was not at least middle-class, and since minorities are disproportionately lower/working-class, it would be reasonable to expect The Bronze to be more homogeneous than real life.<sup>24</sup> Hence, inasmuch as The Bronze was a more tolerant environment than the real world—and I believe that overall, despite some countervailing tendencies, it probably was—this may be less a result of being on line and more the result of exclusivity, homogeneity, or self-selection of Bronzers.

The second theme is the importance of language. What originally drew me to *Buffy* was the dialog. The uniquely constitutive discourse that characterizes *Buffy* is used by Bronzers to constitute the Bronze in a unique way, allowing Bronzers to push their Bronze reality into more meaningful and relevant (to themselves) directions. Furthermore, the reality that is The Bronze can be transformed to be applicable to RL much faster than real life institutions, and hence it's a safe haven, a place where the conflicts of real life can be dealt with by writing into existence a world that can handle them. In this sense The Bronze is more real than reality, because its institutional structure matches more closely the subjective lived experiences—the reality that people actually think and feel and experience internally—of its members. This is not to say that people are consciously constituting The Bronze, or that they're aware that it's being done, or even that they're not engaged in pure escapism. But, as both Turkle and Stone argue regarding virtual life generally, The Bronze can be extremely beneficial for persons



who use it to engage real life more effectively, because it allows them to retake control of words and concepts and frames of reference—the signifier, as it were—and use it to make a community that’s more in keeping with their ideal worlds.<sup>25</sup>

The Bronze is, of course, still performative, and Bronzer communication is pre-edited and self-censored. Indeed, it is probably more so than in real life, since it involves writing and posting. But this is also what allows Bronzers, to some degree, to exist at The Bronze in a way that more closely matches their own mental images of themselves.

This is not to say that an on-line individual can be reduced to words on a screen; it is only to say that going on line allows a different kind of latitude in one’s self-presentation. In real life, individuals interacting in real time apprehend each other using their senses: they see a body, hear a voice, and so on.<sup>26</sup> In real life, sensory information is conveyed whether one wants to convey it or not, and may or may not be relevant. At The Bronze, the only relevant sense is sight, but the only thing that can be seen is what in real life would be heard. Sensory information is thus narrowed, but also made abstract; there is initially less to go on, but it may become quite expansive when unpacked. Thus, The Bronze may be more real than reality in the sense that irrelevant sensory information can be de-emphasized; but it’s narrower than reality inasmuch as relevant information is missed. As will be discussed in chapter 5, this can have serious negative consequences, including the oft-noted tendency toward hostility in on-line communication.

This suggests one reason that arguments are prevalent on line. If people’s mental images of a person don’t match the reality of that person, they will probably have erroneous expectations of that person. Furthermore, the mismatch between mental pictures and actual people might explain why people seem to be so easily angered on line.

Humans, being social animals, are “wired” to get along with other humans. But on line, other humans are just an abstraction. This means that even while we’re creating a more accurate self on line—one based more on performance and pre-editing than in real life—we’re also likely to treat other people less like we would in real life, because we’re not engaged in the self-censorship that would happen automatically in real life. Thus, the idea of being more real than reality is not unequivocally a good thing: the downside is that we lose the stimuli that would encourage empathy and filter out anti-social behavior.

In fact, in Web 2.0, we’re replicating anti-social behavior that might be considered pathological in real life. That’s because we tend to either know everyone, as on websites like Facebook, or don’t know them at all, as in the comments section of a news site. In contrast, at The Bronze, people knew each other because they went on line to meet them, not because they already knew them. So at The Bronze, the tendency toward flaming was, in my estimation, much less so than at a website where, as in the comments of a news article, the other people are mere abstractions, with no mental image being put forth by individuals, and where it’s much easier to make assumptions about who’s reading, where it’s easy to create “imagined audiences.” (The tendency toward hostility on line, and the idea of “imagined audiences,” will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5).

Obviously, this use of language at The Bronze wouldn’t work if Bronzers weren’t predisposed to being literary. But, like Joss Whedon, who is known for his liberal arts background and literary styling, Bronzers seem to relish both text and intertextuality, and this comes through at The Bronze. Indeed, among Bronzers, there appear to be an inordinate number of lawyers, editors, and members with degrees in the humanities.

Furthermore, many Bronzers write fan fiction. But, even if this was not the case, a cursory examination of typical posts indicates a creative and literate group of people who are able to use the flexible linear structure of The Bronze to let loose their creative and community-building impulses.

The third theme is the use of Bronzer-speak. The Bronze use of slang is of interest in ways that relate to the concepts of language and community as mentioned above. Slang has the effect of denoting less precisely: inventive use of language can create a vagueness that in turn lends a depth of meaning to words. Use of slang and non-standard terms allows the speaker to connote more and denote less, thereby allowing the listener or reader to fill in more of the gaps with his or her own imagination, to understand the content in a more meaningful way. In a sense, this type of connotative language contains an implicit admission that language is at best an imperfect substitute for meaning. Therefore, rather than inflate the importance of language, which would merely be pretending that it's more useful than it is, many Bronzers write in a way that points to the limitations of language, focusing instead on imagery, which, because it doesn't even try to convey specific meaning, conveys it better than precise and denotative verbiage.

One example of this can be seen in the mistakes people make in their posts. Typically, upon noticing a mistake, a Bronzer will post again with corrections, which will often be followed by a statement such as "eye=suck." This is a clever way of saying "I suck"; for some reason, this caught on. But "I suck" is simply a clever and abbreviated way to say "I realize I messed up my last post and I'm sorry but there's nothing I can do about it now so I guess I suck." Such a statement is an enormous generalization to make

based on a misspelling. But in a culture that prides itself on being strong and righteous—and in fact conflates them into a macho nationalistic exceptionalism—such an apology, especially where an apology really isn’t even needed, is quite disarming. More than an apology, it’s not only not a projection of strength, but an admission of defeat that’s both impish and self-aware. It’s irony that’s subversive because it uses the language of a particular frame of reference to point to something outside itself, to a larger truth of things. It’s an apology that points out that the context in which apologies occur—or, more importantly, don’t occur—is often characterized by defensiveness bred of machismo.

But it indicates not only a certain reflexiveness, but also an unwillingness to argue semantics. To say “I suck” is to overstate one’s apology to the degree that it leaves little room for discussion, as if to say “I admitted I suck for screwing up my post, so deal with it.” Furthermore, it indicates a lack of attachment to the subject at hand. To say that something “sucks” is to have so unreasoned an opinion that all debate on the issue is forestalled. It’s an indication that I’m not willing to get into a big discussion to justify my views because I’m not too attached to them, and that I’m willing to open myself up to other people’s unreasoned criticism. It’s like admitting that “I hate this but you probably don’t so we’ve got our opinions and we’ll never convince each other because language is too imperfect and maybe there’s no absolute truth anyway, so let’s agree to disagree.”

As another example, consider three non-standard words that are frequently used—in my experience more so than any others—at The Bronze: *tag*, *bezoar*, and *whup*. A “tag” is an HTML tag, and is usually referred to in the context of a “dropped tag.” Tags are used to change the style of posts, but when tags are “dropped” at the end—when

someone forgets to use a closing tag—the whole post retains the special characteristic. So, for example, if I forget to put a closing italics tag at the end of a word, then the computer won't know to stop italicizing, and everything I type will be italicized. Tags have taken on mythical qualities at The Bronze: not only is there a club to save and feed them, but there is also one devoted to slaying runaway tags. Why devote so much energy to giving life to something that makes posts look funny? Why call attention to a mistake not of content, or even grammar, but merely typeface? Perhaps because typeface is one of few means of conveying tone. Hence, dropped tags are the ultimate symbol of miscommunication. For example, a State of the Bronze address would probably lack the appropriate gravitas and be much less impressive if the whole thing alternated between superscript and italics.

Similarly, bezoars and whup have taken on mythic qualities. Many people actively fight them, ascribing to them fierce beast-like qualities. There is a club for bezoar killers, and a product called “whup-b-gone.” What exactly are these creatures? Bezoars are people who flame, non-regular posters whose purpose is to antagonize. Whup is work. Interestingly, many Bronzers have “demon-omorphized”—as opposed to “anthropomorphized”—the concepts of miscommunication, annoying people, and work, ascribing to them free will and vile characteristics, which they then fight in their third-person Bronzer incarnations.

Generally, the Bronzer perspective is one of multiplicity. My informants, while obviously not a random sample, all focused on diversity, on difference, and on the importance of meeting new and interesting people. They vary greatly, at least ostensibly, in their beliefs. But, they all seem to accept the existence of a wide variety of beliefs, and

this, I believe, is what enables them to maintain their community.

The Bronze, then, is unique to me because it takes a group of people who can identify with marginalization, and turns them into a community, allowing them to write into existence the world as it would be if it was a better place. This is not to say that Bronzers are outcasts from society. On the contrary, they seem to generally be very social, and sociable people. But *Buffy* speaks to the outcast in all of us, and that explains the attraction of the Bronze, as well as the ability of its members to be a community: because we're all outcasts, it behooves is to be inclusive. Indeed, more than one Bronzer has speculated that The Bronze is a community of outcasts, a group of people who know how to fit into the real world, but who may not feel comfortable doing so. One Mayberrian, in relaying her high school experiences to me, exclaimed that she had made a recent discovery of which she was still incredulous: "I was one of the *cool* people in high school!" I can't help but wonder how she would've turned out had she known this as a teenager.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The URL of The Bronze Welcome Page was  
<<http://board.buffy.com/bronze/bufferpage.html>>. The citation for this screenshot is:  
The Bronze, “Welcome to The Bronze.”

<sup>2</sup> The URL of the FAQ page was  
<<http://board.buffy.com/bronze/loungefaq.html>>. The citation for this screenshot is: The  
Bronze, “Frequently Asked Questions.”

<sup>3</sup> The URL of The Bronze was  
<<http://board.buffy.com/bronze/postingboard.shtml>>. The citation for this screenshot is:  
The Bronze, Posting Board.

<sup>4</sup> The URL of The Bronze was  
<<http://board.buffy.com/bronze/postingboard.shtml>>. This text is unaltered, except that  
IP addresses have been replaced with bracketed ellipses, and some names have been  
changed. Since The Bronze was a public site with no restrictions on the ability to view  
posts, the copying and pasting of text, as I have done, poses no ethical problems.  
However, where possible, I asked posters for their permission to use their posts, and  
changed their names if they preferred that I do so. This particular set of posts is copied  
verbatim; at The Bronze, most of the text would be white, and the background would be  
black.

<sup>5</sup> The Bronze exemplifies a postmodern view of language. According to Rosaldo:  
“Burke’s parable of the endless conversation with no known beginning or ending departs  
from the monumentalist’s preoccupation with permanence and puts the unchanging

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foundation of classic norms into perpetual motion. You arrive, and the conversation is already in progress; you depart, and it continues without you” (104).

<sup>6</sup> For an explanation of poststructuralism and postmodernism as they apply in this instance, see, for example, Hawkes’ Structuralism and Semiotics and Best and Kellner’s Postmodern Theory.

<sup>7</sup> The official Buffy chat room was at  
<<http://chatsrv.warnerbros.com:4080/chat/world/html/loginbuffy.html>>, accessible via  
<<http://www.Buffy.com>>.

<sup>8</sup> The official threaded posting board was at  
<[http://www.buffy.com/slow/index\\_bronzetpb.html](http://www.buffy.com/slow/index_bronzetpb.html)>.

<sup>9</sup> It is for this reason that this ethnography is written from more than one point of view. I have intentionally attempted to reflect the community under study by allowing the writing to take on the “voice” of the subject being discussed. Hence, I have tended to drift out of my academic voice and into my fan voice. I believe that one positive result of doing so is that the community under study has been foregrounded. It is possible, however, that theoretical and methodological issues seem de-emphasized in contrast.

<sup>10</sup> My e-mail is cited as: Ali, “Buffy research.” The response is: The WB’s Buffy The Vampire Slayer, “Re: Buffy research.”

<sup>11</sup> This posting is cited as: Ali, “Research Boy.”

<sup>12</sup> The names of all persons I interviewed are used by permission. If a Bronzer preferred not to be identified by either real name or Posting Board name, I used a different fictitious name of the individual’s choosing.



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<sup>13</sup> This is the complete message, except that two changes have been made (Patrick, 9 Oct.). First, the second sentence, which contains identifying information, has been removed. Second, the names of the Bronzers with whom Patrick had dinner have been replaced by the phrase *six Bronzers*.

<sup>14</sup> For reasons unknown, I did not keep the e-mail message to Patrick, or his response to me.

<sup>15</sup> The messages are cited as: Ali, E-mail to Patrick, 18 Oct.; Patrick, E-mail to author, 19 October.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, George Lipsitz's The Possessive Investment in Whiteness, in which Lipsitz makes a useful distinction between group behavior and rights and individual behavior and rights (20-25).

<sup>17</sup> I chose the name "Quidam," because I had just seen the Cirque du Soleil performance of the same name, and the name seemed to suit me. In the Cirque du Soleil program was the following blurb:

*Quidam,*  
a nameless passerby,  
a solitary figure lingering on a street corner,  
a person rushing past,  
a person who lives lost amidst the crowd in an all-too-anonymous society,  
A soul that cries out, dreams and sings within us all.

For some reason that I now don't recall, I really wanted a first name, too. So I picked "Jaan," a childhood nickname. This Hindi/Urdu word is a homonym of "John," and therefore seemed to fit with the nameless/quidam theme in the sense that it was the first part of the generic descriptor "John Doe." But, in retrospect, it's also indicative of the point of this paper, which is to express what it feels like to be part of this community,

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rather than just explaining what it's like in intellectual terms. In Hindi and Urdu, "jaan" comes from the word "jaanna," meaning "to know." But it also translates as "soul." As such, it is a term of endearment: "jaan" means, roughly, "heart and soul," or "beloved," indicating someone near and dear to one's heart. The word "jaan" is, therefore, to me a powerful indicator of Eastern (specifically Indian) and Western--or postmodern and Modernist--ontological differences. In the European West, knowing is based on thinking, where thinking is separate and distinct from feeling. This is reflected in traditional anthropology's emphasis on writing about communities in an "objective" and intellectual manner. But in the Indian philosophical tradition thinking can not be separated from feeling--thinking *is* feeling--and feeling is therefore requisite to knowing. To put it vernacularly: the English epigram "to know me is to love me" is an unremarkable and generalizable truism in the language of India's philosophical tradition. After all, what better way to know a community than to love it the way its members do?

<sup>18</sup> This took place on Thursday, October 22, 1998. My first post was posted the next day, Friday October 23, 1998.

<sup>19</sup> The idea that the ethnographer simultaneously observes and is observed by his or her informants will be addressed in more detail below. See, for example, Rosaldo, or Berkhofer, for the problems and dangers of maintaining (constructed) boundaries between Self and Other, subject and object, us and them. See also Desmond and Dominguez (477) on the ability of ethnographers, whether unwittingly or not, to maintain power imbalances.

<sup>20</sup> This interview took place on Friday, November 6 1998. Dinner was the next day, Saturday, November 7, 1998.

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<sup>21</sup> See Agar, Language Shock, on rich points (100), and their relationship to frames of reference (161).

<sup>22</sup> Jameson (54-77) discusses both of these views in some detail; Best and Kellner provide a cursory treatment in their first chapter.

<sup>23</sup> For more on this, see Rosaldo's discussion on structure versus agency (Culture and Truth 102-105).

<sup>24</sup> To my knowledge, no demographic information on Bronzers has ever been generated. My estimates are based my own observations. For example, my "shout list" as of April 2000 listed the names of 102 Bronzers with whom I regularly conversed. Of that list, I know the sex of 85; of that 85, 60 are women and 25 men. Of the 36 people whose occupations I know, virtually all are either students or white-collar professionals, including several lawyers, editors, information technology specialists, and even four Bronzers with PhDs. As another example, as of March 2002, valMichael's birthday list, which has since been taken off line, indicates that 1,437 Bronzers sent him their birthdays. Of those, the youngest was 10 years old, the oldest was 61, the average age was 27.1, the median age was 25.6, and the mode was 20.

Based on my own observations, the comments of Bronzers, and the few magazine or newspaper articles written about the fandom, I think it's safe to say it consists disproportionately of white women. My impression is that most Bronzers tend to be white, female, heterosexual, middle- or upper-class (they have computers with internet access from which they can post during the day), and politically liberal. Indeed, it seems that in general Bronzers tend to be older and more highly educated than the advertising and marketing of TV shows would suggest.

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<sup>25</sup> On frames of reference, see, for example, Agar (141-168) and Spradley (96-99).

<sup>26</sup> On the privileging of visual sensory input, see Walter Ong, Orality and Literacy, and Cornel West, Prophesy Deliverance!.

## Chapter 5: Buffnography, Part II: Interstices of Meaning and Absence

### Introduction

Chapter 4 discussed The Bronze as a community, addressing the question of whether it is a community, and why. The conclusion was that it is indeed a community. First, Bronzers themselves consistently refer it as a community and regard it as such. Second, it is driven in large part by something akin to a shared language—one that is eccentric, colorful, ironic, and grammatically correct—that generates and supports a shared culture. This language is similar to the language of *Buffy*—as described in Chapter 3 (in the sections “Words and Culture” and “Language”)—and works particularly well at The Bronze due to the peculiar nature of the linear posting board. It is also well-suited for the creative and imaginative purposes for which Bronzers use it. Hence, the community is built on (and maintained by) language used in a particular postmodern way.

In the first part of this chapter I expand this analysis by addressing the rituals and norms of the Bronze. I also provide a chronological view of changes to the community over time, focusing especially on the years just before and after the closure of the official Bronze site in 2001. The second part of the chapter covers the continuing ethnographic interviews, all of which were conducted after the official Bronze was closed.

A number of themes emerge from these interviews. First, I describe The Bronze as a cultural formation that exists subjacent to real life, and as a community that exists orthogonal to real life communities. This framework is useful in situating The Bronze, and its members’ meanings, relative to real life and everyday lived experiences. One

important implication of this approach is that everyday life has significant and damaging consequences that have become so normalized that they go unnoticed.

A second theme involves the particular meanings that Bronzers take from *Buffy* itself. My initial supposition had been that Bronzers saw *Buffy* as satirical, or as cultural criticism (as discussed in Chapter 3 in the section “Scenes”). However, it was in actuality an intangible set of factors that attracted viewers to *Buffy* and to The Bronze, and in turn supported the development of The Bronze community. These factors, taken together, are the “gothic aesthetic” discussed in Chapter 3.

A third theme, one that was frequently mentioned in light of the ongoing fragmentation of The Bronze community, is the prevalence of conflict at The Bronze. The argument put forth herein is that this is not due to anonymity on line, but is instead due to the manner in which human brains process stimuli. Drawing on new research in neuroscience, I argue that media can interfere with the human instinct toward cooperation, and that this can explain the disproportionate levels of hostility observed on line. Furthermore, I argue that in lieu of empathetic instincts, humans must create and rely on mental models of the individuals with whom they are in contact on line. Thus, it is the nature of our “imagined audiences” that determines how we communicate on line. When our mental models, our imagined audiences, diverge too greatly from reality—as they often will, since they are rooted in predictions based on past experiences—we experience a disjuncture between our expectations and reality. The result is confusion, and if our mental models are based on expectations of conflict, then we will likely re-enact that conflict.

The fourth theme is related to the second, and became clear only in retrospect,

when I realized that there were a number of commonalities among the people I interviewed, and that these commonalities are prevalent among Bronzers as a whole. Of the 14 informants with whom I discussed their personal lives and backgrounds, seven mentioned coming to The Bronze during a time of uncertainty and transition; 10 had moved recently, and all ten had either moved to an unfamiliar part of the country, or had housing-related financial concerns, or both. All had attended college, 11 had completed college, six had undertaken postgraduate study, and three had completed it. Six informants were musicians, and two had continued their musical training through college. Three were artists. Nine specifically mentioned involvement in reading-intensive activities (whether occupational or recreational), and five mentioned that writing was important to them. Most majored in the arts and humanities, and the remainder majored in the social sciences. Most were in occupations (such as graphic design) that required computer skills. At the time they first came to The Bronze, 11 were single and none had children; currently, nine are single and four have children. Taken together, this is a group that is fairly mainstream, but is also on the non-standard or “alternative” end of the mainstream. The majority of my informants, as well as the majority (in my estimate) of Bronzers, are independent college-educated politically left-of-center white women who don’t have a family and a house in the suburbs. But they are creative and literary, and appreciate emotional and imaginative depth. And they are weary of media depictions of, and social pressure on, women. They’re drawn to TV that gives them something to think about and talk about; and they’re drawn to people they can think and talk with.

I turn next to participant observation, beginning with a discussion of how my main informant, Destiny, helped me learn the conventions and rituals at The Bronze.

## **Participant Observation**

### ***There's No Place Like Home Page***

Destiny was quite correct when she had told me that I wouldn't "get" how the community worked until I joined it. When I first started lurking at The Bronze, I was following the recommendation (per the community pages) to follow along for two weeks before attempting to post. But, even after lurking for two weeks, I really couldn't make heads or tails of the conversation. When I did start to post, however, the conversation started to make sense. Still, it was overwhelming. My first attempt to de-lurk took up pretty much my entire day. And the entire next day. Simply keeping up with the conversation those first two days basically meant that, outside of time spent in class, the bulk of my day was spent at The Bronze. It was baffling to me that anyone could keep up with this.

After a few weeks, however, the conversation started to slow down. Or, more correctly, I started to speed up. By the time I had attended my first Bronzer gathering—the dinner at Café Atlántico, which was a few months after I had delurked—I typically spent a few hours a day at The Bronze (rather than the entire day) and was able to keep up with the conversation. The patterns, the rituals, and the flow of conversation started to make sense. I would typically check The Bronze at some point in the morning, usually during the nine o'clock hour, after having done a few hours of work. Just reading the previous day's board (since I last posted or read the board) and then fashioning my first post of the day could easily take an hour. And then, if I started talking to people, I would go back during the course of the day with more posts, although these would take less time.



I imagine that spending two hours a day at the Bronze was common for me. Destiny confirmed this: she said she usually spent an hour just on her first post of the day. In my case, I would usually post, and then go back to work at my desk, and then periodically check the board and post throughout the day. At the end of the workday, around 5 or 6 o'clock, I'd often post my last post of the day and say I was leaving for the day. Thus, I would spend the work day at The Bronze. This made sense for me, since I was, when I started posting, a graduate student in American Studies, working part-time on campus. So, I could work at home in the morning, at the office in the afternoon, be at The Bronze the whole time, and then go home. I would, of course, still check the Bronze at home, but often wouldn't post.

But I often would. And I'd often say I was leaving, and then not leave because in the meantime someone had posted to me and I wanted to respond. And sometimes I might find myself in a big deep conversation that I felt like it would be rude to not reply to in a timely fashion. In other words, I was hooked, just like lots of other Bronzers. We were hooked on communicating with each other. Even when the communication turned into a debate or argument, we were hooked on replying to it. Despite the fact that many Bronzers mentioned being strongly attached to The Bronze—to the point of regularly staying much longer than anticipated—it apparently did not occur to Bronzers to ask why we were so hooked. Much like it was assumed that The Bronze was a community, it was so self-evident that The Bronze was addictive that it didn't seem to occur to anyone to ask why.

There are a number of interrelated factors that explain what it was about The Bronze that got people so hooked. First, I found that once I was in a particular mental

space—particularly a mental space reinforced by people I liked talking to, and with a mental picture of a physical space to go along with it—I didn’t want to go back to the mental space of the real world. Once absorbed in posting at The Bronze, I often didn’t want to log off, gather up my stuff, get in the car, and go home. And I often didn’t want to get back to work. Fortunately, my time spent at The Bronze was, in a sense, research, so I could justify being there. I have no idea how I would’ve found the time to be there if it hadn’t been, in some sense, my “job.”

Second, The Bronze was addictive because it was about being in the present. This is not to say that it was about escapism, although it may well have been for many Bronzers. On the contrary, it was more like the opposite of escapism. For many Bronzers, the posting board punctuated the tedium of workaday life. And in everyday life, the past weighs heavy, and the future looms large. For those of us whose days are spent in front of a computer, survival—although in our genteel language, it is rarely referred to as such—depends on the accumulation and deployment of years of abstract knowledge, all in the service of making a living. And our days are spent planning our days. Our decisions regarding matters both quotidian and monumental—which clothes to wear, roads to avoid, calories to consume, bills to pay, legislation to support—can have far-reaching consequences for our continued survival.

But at The Bronze, all that dwelling and developing, and pondering and planning, could be put aside, even if only for a short time. If individual’s lives, as embodied in their words, are as ripples over time, then taken together, these ripples form a metaphorical river. At The Bronze, rather than feel the full force of everyone’s past and future—especially one’s own—we could engage everyone at once in the present, as if

cutting across that metaphorical river. It was initially overwhelming to be in everyone's present, everyone's words flowing at me out of context; but once accustomed, I found it refreshing to be in the flow of the present moment.

Third, since any individual's presence was cutting across the total flow of discourse, it was possible to communicate with a large number of people at once. Several informants described The Bronze as a real-life gathering in which everyone was privy to—and was jumping in and out of—everyone else's conversations. But in real life, such a gathering is likely to become unwieldy unless the number of participants is small. For example, my first Bronzer gathering consisted of 16 people at dinner. That was small enough that I could meet everyone there, but large enough that I really couldn't see or hear the people at the other end of the table. At The Bronze, we couldn't see or hear each other at all, but we could communicate with everybody at once in a way that wasn't possible if everyone was to sit at the same table. In this sense, we could be in touch with many people, but not be overwhelmed by the quantity of communication required to maintain that contact.

Fourth, as mentioned above, at The Bronze, we weren't dwelling on the past or preoccupied by the future. This was in large part because in leaving behind our baggage, or our contexts, we were leaving behind the elements that defined many of our relationships. For example, friends from work might end up "talking shop"—discussing work plans or office politics—even outside of work. This was only possible to a limited extent at The Bronze, since we could only discuss what would make sense to people outside or everyday environments. Bronzers could certainly talk about work, or complain about it, or ask for help regarding it; but it wasn't possible to ruminate over details, since

those were unfamiliar to everyone else.

Fifth, the responses we would receive at The Bronze were typically appropriate in both their quantity and quality. Since most of us knew each other based only on our words, we could reply to each other based only on our words. It was difficult to reply to each other based on our assumptions of what someone else was saying, or what emotional baggage we thought they were carrying around. In other words, we didn't know each other well enough to annoy each other, at least in the early years. But, inasmuch as our annoying habits weren't present in our words, we were able to reply to each other's words based on what was written, rather than based on the conclusions we might otherwise leap to.

Furthermore, when Bronzers had news to share, it took only one comment to share it. A Bronzer might post about good news, such as a new job or other accomplishment, or bad news, such as a death in the family. As in real life, this would lead to many supportive comments on the board. People who had never posted directly to the original Bronzer might post simple messages, while people who had communicated with this person would reply with more detailed messages. Furthermore, Bronzers who communicated with the original poster using other channels might respond in more personal ways. Hence, one comment at The Bronze could lead to many helpful replies at The Bronze, as well as more detailed replies by email, phone, mail, and in person.

While this would likely happen in any community, the difference at The Bronze was that in real life, the person with the news would have the responsibility to keep everyone informed; in the case of bad news, such as illness or injury, this would be a daunting task. Friends who were not part of one's everyday life would have to be told—

for example, by phone—that something had happened. Thus, the person with the bad news would also have to initiate many of the same awkward conversation about bad news. At The Bronze, however, someone with life-changing news could simply maintain a running explanation through one's regular posts. Therefore, rather than repeatedly explaining to one's friends on an individual basis that something had happened, Bronzers could post as they normally would, but with updates. In the case of a death in the family, one might mention it one day, then mention needing to be off line for a few days while visiting family, then come back and announce that one was back from the funeral, and so on. In this sense, The Bronze could be as supportive as any other community, but without the repeated and awkward in-person conversations that would be necessary to keep one's disparate networks of in-person friends apprised of one's own dramatic life changes.

Thus, The Bronze let us live in the present. We could interact with people based on who we were, rather than their mental pictures of who we were, which were based on the past. We could get the appropriate response based on what we said, rather than our whole past history. This could be a problem, too, because our words lacked much context. But sometimes we want responses that are just to our words, not to the context or the subtext or to someone else's idea of who we are and why we're the way we are.

In addition to these factors, however, was something else that was driving the intensity of The Bronze. It was, as will be described later in this chapter, something ineffable that had to do with belonging and emotional connection.

Bronzers were a literate bunch, but not necessarily academically so. They were cheeky and hilarious, but not unserious. They did, however, tend to tread lightly over

serious issues, with appropriate gravitas, but also with enough humor to avoid wallowing. And since there were no hierarchies—for example, no employers, and therefore no office politics—most of us could say most anything, because the people we had come to know in person could be trusted with personal information, but there was no way for anyone else to use it against us, since we were using board names and did not reveal personal information. So, there could be negative consequences within the community, but these were unlikely to affect our lives outside of The Bronze community.

The Bronze was a place where we could speak in a large group without having to have the entire group there. We could speak in a group, but to individuals, too. We could get 20 of our favorite people all around a table, with all of us having time to listen and talk. For those of us who were shy, or introverted, or for whatever reason not likely to communicate as we wished in a large gathering, it was a welcome alternative to a real-time in-person group. But it was also a place of never-ending festivity, world-weary irony, pop culture literacy, inappropriate humor, and running jokes that lasted for months as they accreted layers of meaning. And the one thing it lacked was the competitive, aggro, macho language that seemed to pop up in so many other online forums. Indeed, for all its flaws, it was about warmth. It was about warmth in a cold world. It was about community in the midst of horror.

These factors have been discussed in terms of their positive consequences: they are what Bronzers treated as positive such. They explain what Bronzers liked about the Bronze, what got them hooked, and what kept them posting at The Bronze. But there were also negative consequences that emerged over time; these will be discussed subsequently, especially in the sections on “Internet hostility” and “imagined audiences.”

### ***Things Bronzers Do and the Rules by Which They Do Them***

After a few weeks of posting, the rituals started to make sense, even if I didn't know where they came from, or what they meant. Because I relegated my Bronzing to workday hours, I was posting with the Coffee Clubbers, which was the informal group of Bronzers, mostly on the east coast, who were primarily posting during business hours in the eastern standard time zone. I never did figure out if *Coffee Clubber* referred to a specific group of posters, or if it just referred to anyone who posted regularly at a particular time. According to the PB Lingo page, *Coffee Clubbers* were defined as follows: "Working professional posters who began posting in the morning (starting 6 a.m. EST, while having their morning coffee) and post throughout the business day. The club began with veterans Occido, RTBS and Blade, but since expanded to include east and west coast posters."<sup>1</sup>

Coffee Clubbers were posting from work, but perhaps not so much from home. For me, and for many Coffee Clubbers, The Bronze was their water-cooler conversation at the beginning of the day. This was especially the case for those of us who didn't have actual water coolers, or people we wanted to talk to at the start off the day. Sometimes Coffee Clubbers would make a point of posting from home before going to work, as might be the case if they thought they may not be able to post from work. Thus, for some people, posting from work was a way to fill time, to make work more palatable; but it could also become not the secondary thing they did after work, but the primary thing that had to be done despite work. Indeed, for some Bronzers, the relationship between working and posting occasionally became inverted: instead of posting because they had to be at the office, some of us occasionally would end up at the office because it was

more convenient to post from there. This was especially the case when residential broadband internet access was less common.

Indeed, by the time I had been posting for a few months, it was becoming clear to me that The Bronze was the structure of my daily life. Other elements of real life provided structure: things like family, friends, work, and school all gave me things to do that had to be done—that I wanted to do—in particular ways. But The Bronze didn't just provide structure; it was structure. If there was a rhythm to everyday life, The Bronze was the single biggest factor providing it. To see how this is the case, I turn next to a few of the key elements—rituals, as it were—of The Bronze.

The Coffee Clubbers' generally started posting for the day on the board that began at 4 a.m. Pacific Standard Time, which was his was 7 a.m. Eastern Standard Time. A typical board might begin much like the following board did. This board, from May 1, 2000, begins with a post by a Bronzer by the name of "deadguy," who was a regular on the east coast. In this post, submitted two seconds after 4 a.m. (7 a.m. Eastern time), deadguy did two things that he had done every day since before I delurked at The Bronze, and that he would continue to do for years afterward: he posted what came to be known as the "Yay of the Day" and the "Question of the Day" (QOD).



**944 awaiting the new ep to start says:**

(Mon May 1 04:00:50 2000 203.134.2.92)

Happy Birthday **KUGELMASS**

Happy Birthday **MABB**

**Sue** - must talk again, I will try and think of some history related stuff

*Anti You Reign*

Good Night Everyone have to go.

Running away before anti discovers i don't have IM working and am too lazy for a reinstall.  
I volunteer to milk the goats.

Someone else can look after the Billy's

Remember a Hat is a sensible choice. so choose a sensible hat.

\*POOF\*

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**Kenickie** says:

(Mon May 1 04:00:34 2000 194.82.103.42)

Bugger. and look, she gets bloody shouted out AGAIN. \*g\* Bloody Swiss.

Kenix

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**Kenickie** says:

(Mon May 1 04:00:05 2000 194.82.103.44)

Attempted first as it is my posting anniversary? I am one year old, Board time.

And I dedicate it to the wondrous **Mabb**.

Kenix

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**deadguy** says:

(Mon May 1 04:00:02 2000 204.5.104.30)

let's hear a great big bronze cheer for **elusio**! yay **elusio**!

today's question is sponsored in part by the footnote gnomes. hire some little people to help with the little stuff!

what's been your favorite subtext in the series?

hey **tana**!

#)

buffyatric, spaghetti, tourogal and cate groupie, and jp gang member #58 in BAH room 501, cordelia floor.

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[Previous Posts](#)

Fig. 4. The deadguy yay and question of the day.

Every morning, deadguy would post a “great big bronze cheer” for someone, and pose his Question of the Day. The QOD would be posted along with its sponsor—some entity that was often fictitious, and usually whimsical—along with its clever slogan. In the example below, deadguy’s Yay was: “let’s hear a great big bronze cheer for elusio! yay *elusio*!” The QOD was: “today’s question is sponsored in part by the footnote gnomes. hire some little people to help with the little stuff! what’s been your favorite subtext in the series?”

To me, the amazing thing about this is that deadguy did this every single day, following the same format, but with a different question and sponsor every day. That meant that he had to think of a new topic for discussion, along with a new funny sponsor and slogan, every single day for several years. When I delurked in 1998, deadguy’s posts were already elemental; and his daily posts continued, outlasting The WB’s Bronze, The UPN’s Bronze, and continuing on at The Bronze Beta. Indeed, even though deadguy eventually stopped posting regularly, the daily Yay and Question have been passed on to another regular member. Hence, the Yay of the Day remains a feature of The Bronze Beta.

The QOD no longer appears daily, but is still posted on Tuesdays and Wednesdays in the form of the “deadguy memorial buffy tuesday question” and the “deadguy memorial angel wednesday question.” Just as it did in *Buffy*’s heyday, the QOD provides a convenient topic of discussion for *Buffy* fans. The primary difference is that, when I delurked, the QOD was a good way for a newbie like myself to jump into the conversation. Now, however, there are rarely newbies at The Bronze Beta, and so the QOD mostly allows the regulars at The Bronze Beta to bandy about their ideas about a

larger set of popular culture from the perspective of today. These ideas might be about the Buffyverse (the fictional universe in which *Buffy* takes place), the works of Joss Whedon, new projects involving the cast and crew of *Buffy*, fan fiction, comments on old shows that someone watched, new shows people are watching, personal issues (job, weather, home improvement, relationships), political issues (political campaigns, war, the economy), comments about current events, or just about anything else that anyone wants to talk about. For example, a recent post by the YayoftheDay was:

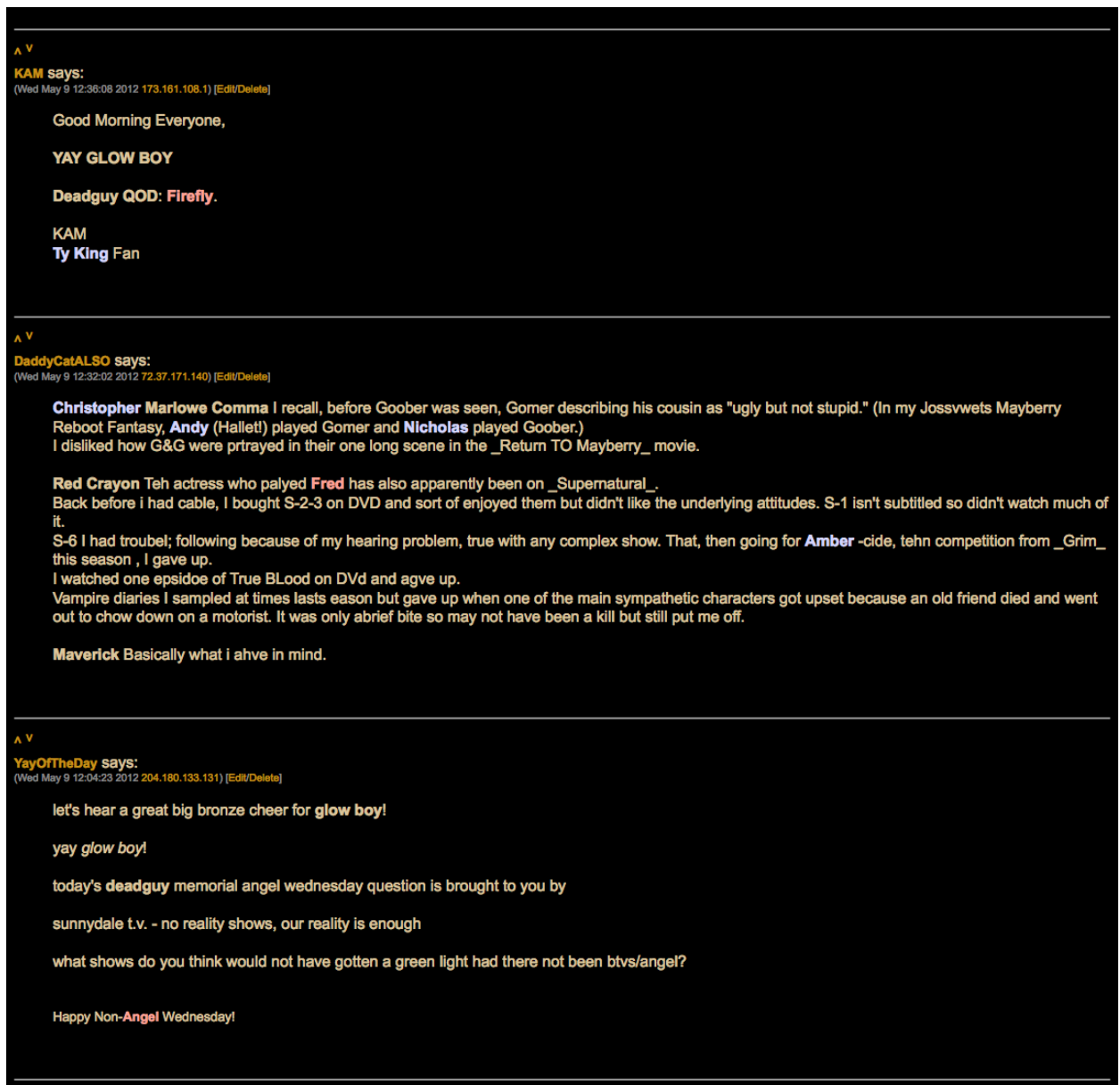


Fig. 5. The yay and question of the day at The Bronze Beta.

Clearly, the QOD now assumes that *Buffy* fans are aware that much has happened since *Buffy* ended in 2003, and conversations now tend to recognize this and consider *Buffy* in context.

Returning to the previous image—the board of May 1, 2000, with deadguy’s post at the bottom—a number of other posts following deadguy’s (appearing above his from

bottom to top) highlight various conventions at The Bronze. The next post, by Kenickie, appeared three seconds later. In it, Kenickie announces that it's his posting anniversary, or "postiversary." Kenickie also tries for "first"—posting the first post on the new board—but deadguy gets there first. Kenickie appears to have noticed his failed attempt at a first, because his next post appears 29 seconds later. This second post contains several British slang terms that indicate (mock) annoyance, as well as a friendly jab at elusio for getting a shout out. The friendliness is indicated by \*g\*, which is short for \*grin\*, which indicates that the post is accompanied by a grin. This post, then, indicates mock annoyance and faux-jealousy through the use of overstatement and a grin. Interestingly, I found Kenickie's meaning fairly clear, even though he uses words (*bugger*, *bloody*) that I wouldn't quite know how to use myself, or uses words (*Swiss*) in ways that can have multiple meanings.

The fourth post is authored by 944, who is apparently so anxiously awaiting the next episode of *Buffy* that 944 has temporarily added this information to his or her name. This poster offers birthday wishes to two Bronzers, addresses two comments to other Bronzers, and then in small type indicates that s/he hasn't yet gotten Instant Messenger (IM) working, and is "running away" before the poster named *anti* learns of this. This likely means that 944 and Anti had intended to communicate via IM, but 944 hasn't fixed IM yet. In this context, the use of small font is used to indicate something like a sheepish confession—similar to muttering under one's breathe as one goes out the door—that 944 hasn't gotten around to fixing IM. The text that follows, however, is not part of this sheepish confession; it seems more like a signature, or "siggy," which consists of key phrases or remembrances or inside jokes that help define one's Bronzer self. And finally,

the last word of this post is *\*POOF\**, indicating the action of leaving—as opposed to claiming one is leaving, but getting sucked back into conversation and staying—and doing so demonstratively (as indicated by the capitalization, which is akin to shouting).

Approximately five minutes later on this board, at the 4:05 mark, there appears another longstanding and iconic element of The Bronze. This is The Birthday Gnome’s daily post:

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**KarenT** says:

(Mon May 1 04:05:43 2000 169.207.29.4)

deadguy: You're making me make a choice again. That wouldn't be so bad, but I drove to Chicago Saturday, back home Sunday, then to Milwaukee and back and I'm still tired! Now that I've killed some time, I still don't have an answer. But I did always like Willow's relationship with Giles with the crush implied. It was nice to see her acknowledge her crush the other night.

Good morning everyone!

KarenT (who's going to think of texts and subs all day)

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**The Birthday Gnome** says:

(Mon May 1 04:05:42 2000 63.23.241.196)

This being Monday, May Day, the first day of April of the year Two Thousand, C. E.

We have **TWO** real birthday celebrators today!!

**Kuglemass  
Mabb**

**Happy Birthday to you,  
Happy Birthday to you,  
Happy Birthday to Kuglemass & Mabb!!  
Happy Birthday to you!**

Would you like birthday wishes from **The Birthday Gnome** on your birthday?  
To get on the birthday list, just e-mail [TheGnome@MikeMcLellan.com](mailto:TheGnome@MikeMcLellan.com) your birthday,

or better yet, follow the link and play [The Age Game](#). It's even more fun!!  
We have **1093** posters and others on the Birthday list!

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**Whitehorse dreams...** says:

(Mon May 1 04:05:13 2000 195.226.46.4)

**Esther Interesting stuff. Is it Saint Bernadettes body who was also found in a preserved state too? There's probably some chemical thing going on but I haven't looked into the possible explanations. \*spooky\* Margot Whitehorse climbs down off her high horse and offers a hand in friendship and sorry. My bad.**

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**wicnic** says:

(Mon May 1 04:04:53 2000 203.166.228.185)

kenix; congratulations on the attempted first and your posting anniversary.

x-lander: good morning (or whatever it is where you are)

Fig. 6. The Birthday Gnome.

Every day, The Birthday Gnome posted a birthday greeting to any Bronzers whose birthday it was on that day. As with most things Bronze, members of the *Buffy* and *Angel* cast and crew were included in the list of Bronzers receiving birthday wishes, as were a small number of non-Bronzers (such as spouses, children, and parents of Bronzers).

Like deadguy's Yay and Question of the Day, The Birthday Gnome was an established part of The Bronze before I lurked; I had seen his posts even when I first started lurking. In my mind, both deadguy and The Birthday Gnome had just always been there. And, like deadguy, The Birthday Gnome continued to post at The WB's Bronze, the UPN Bronze, and the Bronze Beta even after *Buffy* ended its run. The Bronzer whose alter ego was the Birthday Gnome continues to post at The Bronze Beta, but has passed on birthday duties to another Bronzer, who posts birthday news as The Birthday Gnomette.

Not only did The Birthday Gnome maintain the birthday list, but, like deadguy, was quite attentive to the happenings at The Bronze. I never mentioned my birthday, but at some point, someone must have mentioned my birthday, because I ended up on the birthday list, and, much to my surprise, got birthday wishes every year since I lurked. As Sally mentioned in her email to me, it may not seem like a big deal to be wished a happy birthday at The Bronze. However, once I was on the receiving end of those birthday wishes, I realized that it was, in fact, a very big deal. The fact that dozens of people, many of whom I had never met, would be willing to wish me a happy birthday, just because they liked my words, or even if only because that's just what people do because it makes others happy, made birthdays very happy indeed. It may not take much



to say “happy birthday,” but the fact that people were willing to do it was enormously touching.

Indeed, I have yet to meet any Bronzers who didn’t find the birthday wishes, spurred by The Birthday Gnome, enormously gratifying. Similarly, many Bronzers, including me, were thrilled when it was their “Yay Day.” Much like birthdays, most regular Bronzers had a Yay Day during their time at The Bronze. Still, it was wonderful to be able to soak up the love on one’s Yay Day. It might be a little thing, but I’ve yet to meet anyone who wasn’t thrilled to be the Yayee of the Day.

The Birthday Gnome’s post also contains a link to something called “The Age Game.” This was not, in fact, a game, but rather a web page with a list of all Bronzers who had submitted their names and birthdates. It was maintained by a Bronzer named valMichael, who was also The Birthday Gnome. The Age Game remained on line until at least 2002.<sup>2</sup> It looked something like this:

## Play the Age Game:

### Vie for Youngest and Oldest.

Show everyone that we have all different ages of people who take part in the boards! All posters and lurkers are welcome!  
**E-mail me ([here](#) or [here](#)) your PB name & birthdate & I'll add it.**  
If you send your child's/parent's birthday, they'll be added to the special sections at the end  
You can be **Anonymous!** Just tell me & I'll list you that way.

### Age Game Titles

All Females under 20 are **Candidate Slayers** (sorry guys)

The minimum age to be called as the Slayer is 13

Everyone from 36 through 50 is a **Candidate Watcher**

Everyone over 50 is a **Member of the Council**

Everyone else is a **Candidate Scoobie**

\*\*\*\*\*

Current Statistics of Age Game - Bronzers only:

As of June 2, 2002, @ 12:00 PM CDT - Updates Weekly, I hope.

**1,644!** Players = **1,516** Bronzers, 47 show people,

68 children, 8 elders, & 5 characters!

Average = 27.2, Median = 25.6, Mode = 19 & 20 (85 of us), Eldest=62, Youngest=10

\*\*\*\*\*

## The Characters & Stars of Angel & Buffy the Vampire Slayer

Angel/BtVS Character ..... birthday ..... Age

**Angel (Angelus, Master Liam) ..... Last half of April, 1727 ..... 275**

or Angel (Angelus, Master Liam) ..... Last half of April, 1756 ..... 247

**Tara MacLay ..... 11/9/80 ..... 21**

**Buffy Anne Summers ..... 1/19/81 ..... 21**

**Cordelia Chase ..... 5/22/81 ..... 21** (from S1 Ep15 "The Prodigal")

Cordelia Chase ..... 1/14/81 ..... 21 . (from S3 Ep11 "Birthday")

**Anya Christina Emanuella Jenkins ..... 7/4/81 ..... 20** (from S5 Ep12 "Checkpoint")

or Anyanka - The Vengeance Demon ..... 1122 . (from S3 Ep16 "Doppelgangland")

Actor - Current Angel/BtVS Character ..... birthday ..... Age

**James Marsters - "Spike aka William the Bloody" ..... 8/20/62 ..... 39**

**Alexis Denisof - "Wesley Wyndham-Price" ..... 2/25/66 ..... 36**

**David Boreanaz - "Angel/Angelus/Liam" ..... 5/16/69 ..... 33**

**Charisma Carpenter - "Cordelia Chase" ..... 7/23/70 ..... 31**

**Nick Brendon - "Xander Lavelle Harris" ..... 4/12/71 ..... 31**

**Emma Caulfield - "Anyanka/Anya - the ex-vengeance demon" ..... 4/8/73 ..... 29**

**J. August Richards - "Charles Gunn" ..... 8/28/73 ..... 28**

**Alyson Hannigan - "Willow Rosenberg" ..... 3/24/74 ..... 28**

**Amy Acker - "Winifred 'Fred' Burkle" ..... 12/5/76 ..... 25**

**Sarah Michelle Gellar - "Buffy Anne Summers" ..... 4/14/77 ..... 25**

**Michelle Trachtenberg - "Dawn Summers - 'The Key' " ..... 10/11/85 ..... 16**

Fig. 7. The Age Game.

The apparent rationale for maintaining The Age Game was, as in the first paragraph above, to “Show everyone that we have all different ages of people who take part in the boards!” Its purpose was ostensibly to show that the *Buffy* fan boards were being used by people of all ages. Perhaps the unspoken assumption that I had once harbored—that *Buffy* fans who would go on line were probably over-privileged teen slackers—was what this sentence was responding to.

More important for my purposes, however, was that this page provides the only statistical data about Bronzers that I have ever seen. This page was last updated on June 2, 2002. As of that date, the numbers, as in the third paragraph of The Age Game page, indicate that 1,516 Bronzers had submitted their birthdates. Those Bronzers had an average age of about 27 years, and a median age is about 26. This means that, in 2002, exactly half of those Bronzers who were on this list were older than 26, and half were younger. The oldest Bronzer was 62, and the youngest was 10. The Bronzers in The Age Game are not exactly the same as the total population of Bronzers. However, they probably represent a reasonable approximation of the entire population of Bronzers. If this is the case, then it’s safe to say that, during *Buffy*’s sixth season, Bronzers ranged in age from 10 to 62, with the highest concentration being in their late 20s. This corresponded to my own observations, which indicated that Bronzers at the time of *Buffy*’s original run were of all ages, but more than anything else seemed to be college-educated professionals—not teen slackers—in their late 20s and early 30s.

Along with deadguy and valMichael, there was a third regular Bronzer whose daily posts became defining features of The Bronze. This Bronzer was fenric, who was Keeper of the List. The list he kept was a shout list, but it was more like a meta-shout

list. This shout list contained the names of all the regular Bronzers. I don't know when fenric started posting, or how his list came to be, but his list was already iconic when I first found The Bronze. Like deadguy and valMichael, fenric continued posting his shout list long after the official Bronzes had been shut down and *Buffy* and *Angel* had ended.

The shout list maintained by fenric was as official a list of regular posters as there was. When Destiny had recommended I delurk, and had asked me what name I would use, she first checked fenric's list to make sure my preferred board name wasn't already taken. And when, months after I started posting regularly, I realized that I, too, had made it onto fenric's list, I was delighted; as much as anything else, this indicated that I was a real Bronzer.

The list was constantly being updated, but continuing with the example of the 4 a.m. board of May 1, 2000, fenric's list looked like this:



Fig. 8. fenric's list, part 4.

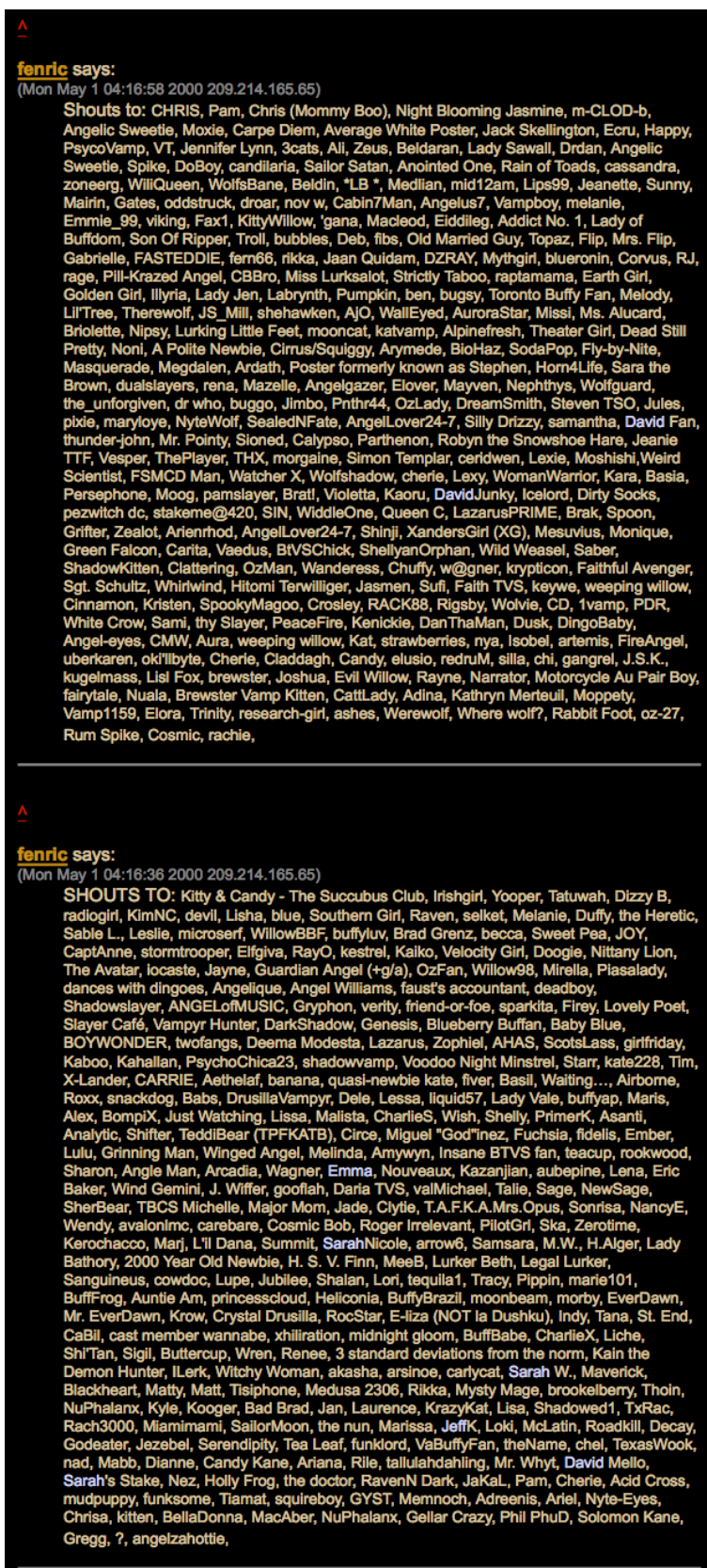


Fig. 9. fenric's list, parts 2 and 3.





Fig. 10. fenric's list, part 1.

The number of Bronzers to whom fenric shouted was large enough that it required, at this point, four separate posts by fenric; otherwise his shout list would exceed the word limit and be cut short. Notice that OzLady posted unintentionally in the middle of fenric's list posts, for which she offers a *mea culpa* after fenric's third post. On this list, 1172 posters got a shout out. Including "special shouts," which were for people associated with the show, some of whom posted occasionally, the number of shoutees was 1220. By the time the official WB Bronze was shut down in 2001, fenric's list had grown slightly; by my count, there were a total of 1224 shoutees on the WB Bronze's last day. It's safe to say, then, that The Bronze community at The WB Bronze consisted of well over 1,000 active regular members. According to fenric's list, this number would be approximately 1,200; according to valMichael's Age Game, this number would be (at least) 1,500.

These numbers represent a conservative estimate of Bronzers, since they count only individuals who were actively posting. There were also, apparently, many lurkers; occasionally, someone would delurk to add a post or two, but then return to lurkdom. On several such occasions, the lurker would have such a detailed familiarity with The Bronze that it was clear that this person had been following the conversation for months or years. In the flame war that followed the episode "New Moon Rising" (discussed below), one such individual delurked to make a couple of posts, and then returned to lurkdom. After delurking, he remained in contact with many Bronzers, and was a regular at many real life Bronzer events. He would certainly be considered a regular Bronzer, and would doubtless identify as such; however, he never did post again.

It was therefore possible to be a member of the Bronze community without



actually posting at The Bronze. It is impossible to know how many such individuals there are who would identify as Bronzers. However, given that I have met several such people both on line and in real life, there many have been dozens, or hundreds, or thousands of such people. Thus, The Bronze community was probably similar to any community, in that there was a group of members who were visible and active—such as those who have been mentioned by name above—as well as a number who were regular members, but less visibly so. These Bronzers account for the roughly 1,200 on fenric’s list. But there was additional number, perhaps a much greater number, who identified with the Bronze but were intermittent posters, or lurkers, or more interested in the real life aspects of the community, and these individuals account for much of the breadth, the intangible network, of the Bronze community.

Additional examples that indicate how the community functions can be found on this board as well. These are, for the most part, less formal examples of the rituals/norms of The Bronze than the QoD, the Birthday Gnome, or the List. For example, The Birthday Gnome’s post is followed by a post by KarenT, who was also something of a Bronze icon. Like deadguy, KarenT posted early in the morning, and tended not to post throughout the day. However, her answers to deadguy’s question were usually posted soon after the QOD, and in fact I don’t recall her ever missing a morning post, at least at the WB Bronze.

A few minutes after fenric’s posting of the list is WireGhost’s post of the Quote Game:

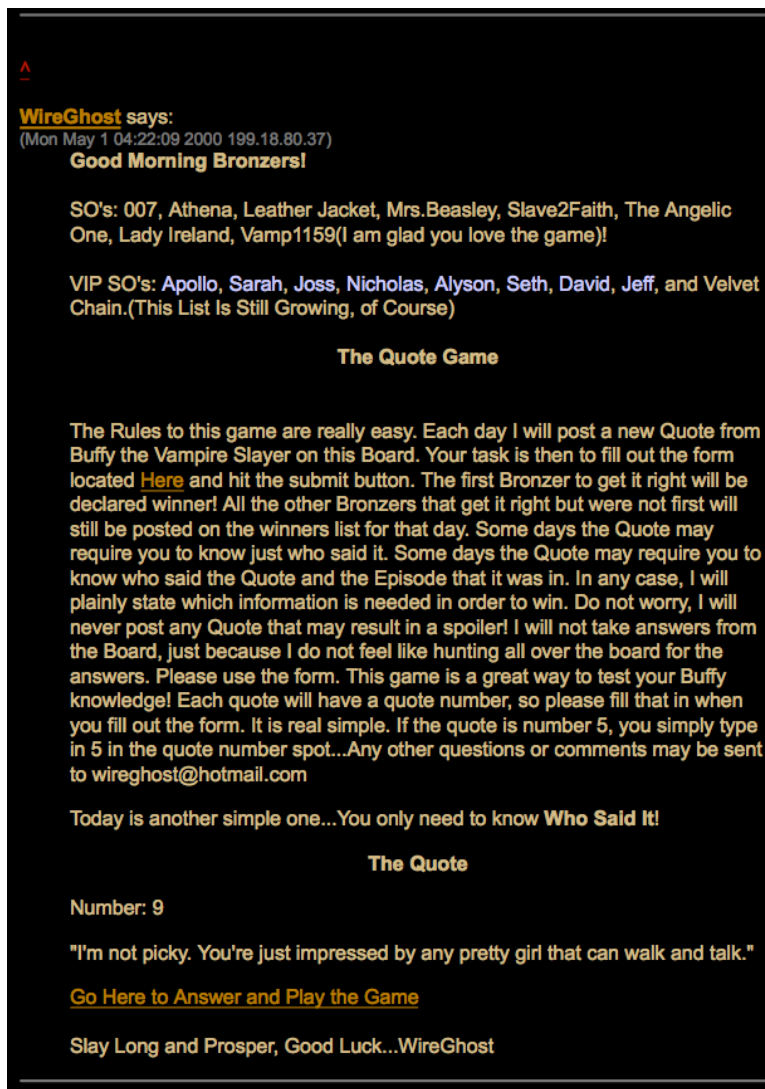


Fig. 11. The Quote Game.

A few minutes after that, valMichael posted as himself (as opposed to The Birthday Gnome), with a somewhat complicated “siggy,” or signature, that includes a special “SO” to his “daughterlets,” as well as links to his “famlet,” his “home page,” and his “siggy.” Interestingly, I never did figure out what exactly a “famlet” or a “daughterlet” are: I assumed they were the Bronzer version of daughters and families, the words used to describe people who were considered family, but were not blood relatives.

Also on this page are an announcement about a PBFP, or Posting Board Fan

Party. In this case, it's the Toronto PBFP Committee announcing its "Summer Bash," with a link to another website where one could sign up for the event:



Fig. 12. Toronto PBFP.

Later on this board, another long-time poster, St.Germain, posts one of her signature birthday cakes.

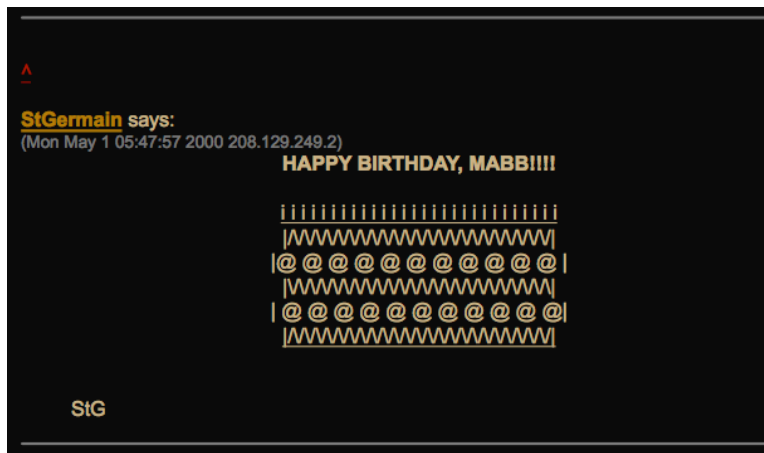


Fig. 13. StGermain posts a birthday cake.

There are also posts from two Bronzers known for being helpful to newbies, Tana and Leather Jacket. Along with their comments to specific persons, they both include several

helpful hints and links for newbies in their posts. Tana in particular somehow always managed to appear whenever there were newbies on the board, and would post her standard “welcome” post.

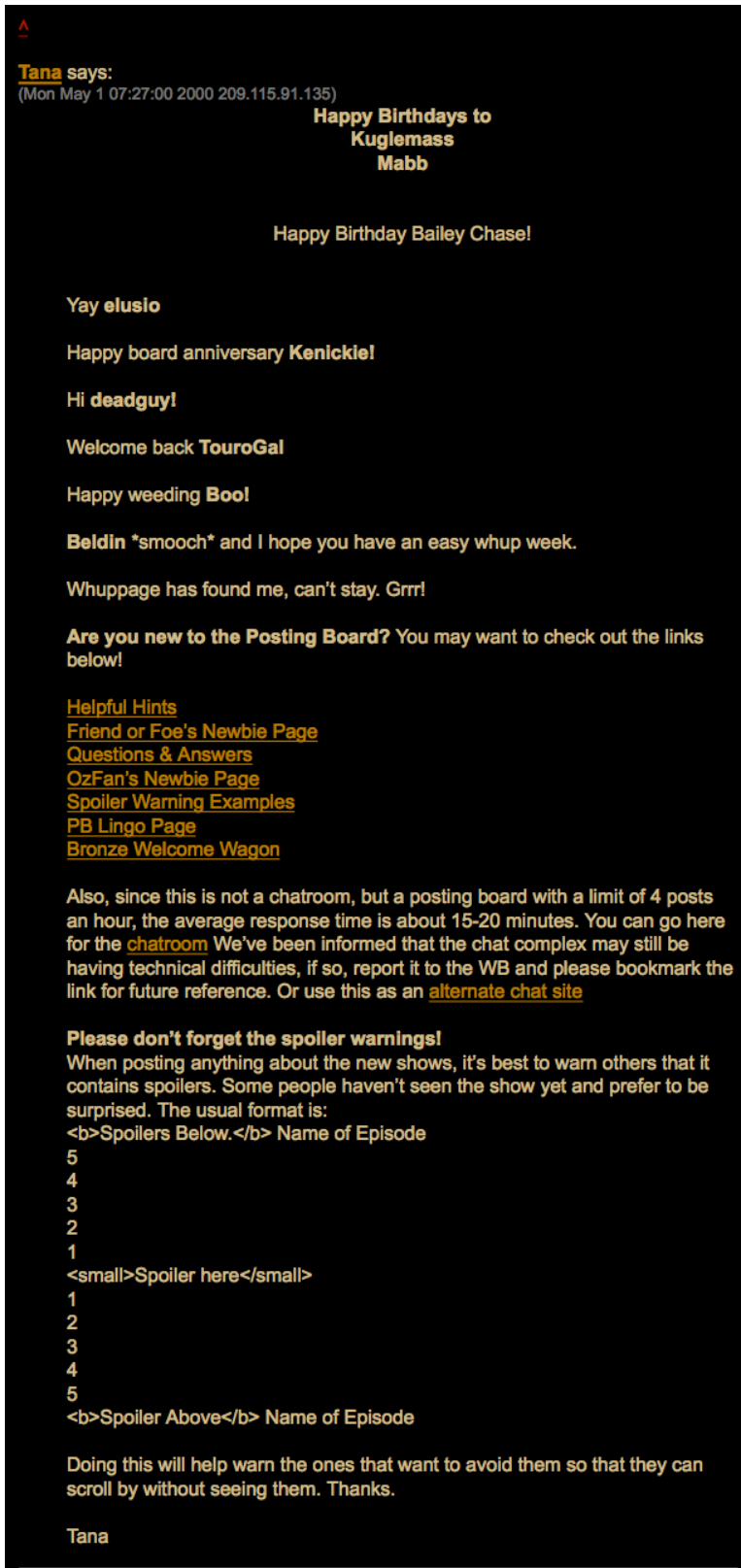


Fig. 14. Tana posts newbie links and Bronze rules.

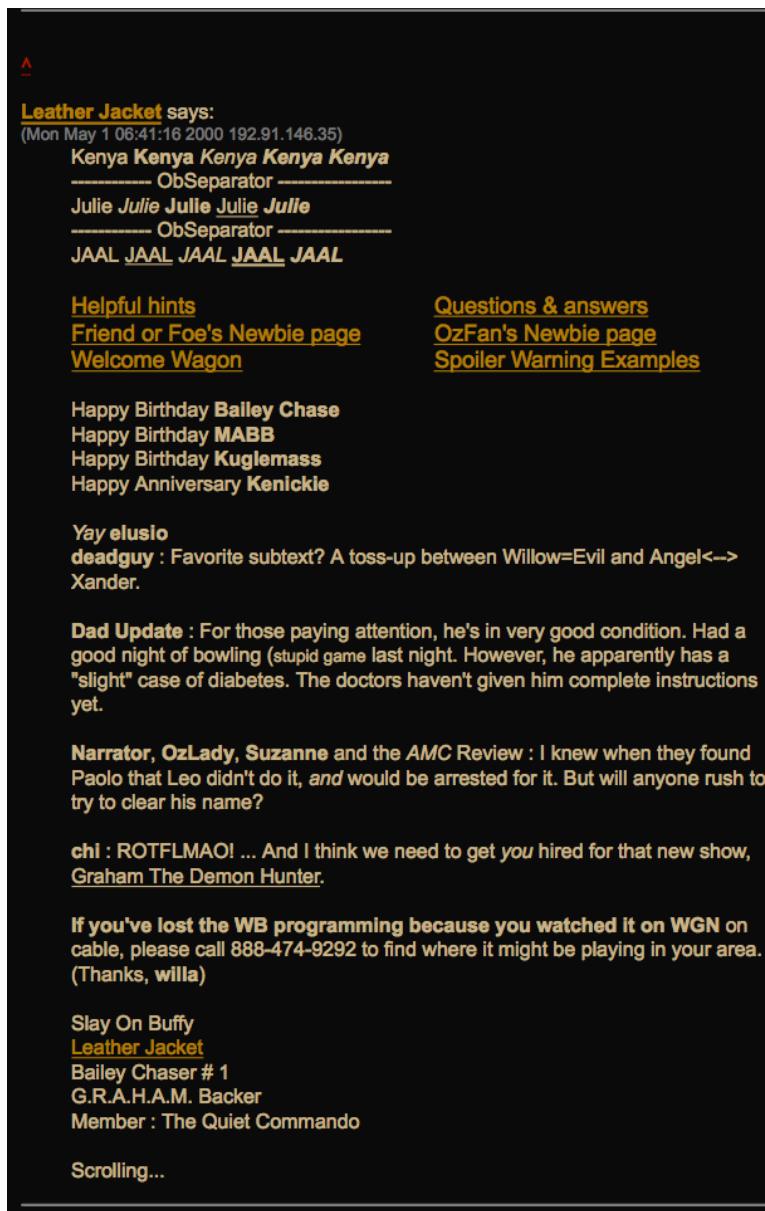


Fig. 15. Leather Jacket's helpful hints for newbies.

Another example of a standard but notable post is the announcement of what appears to be a new club called The Bronze Bezoar Big Game Hunters Club. The club, while presumably new—hence the announcement—already has 150 members. From the announcement, it's not clear what, if anything, the club does. Some clubs had regular gatherings and newsletters; others did nothing beyond posting announcements to join.

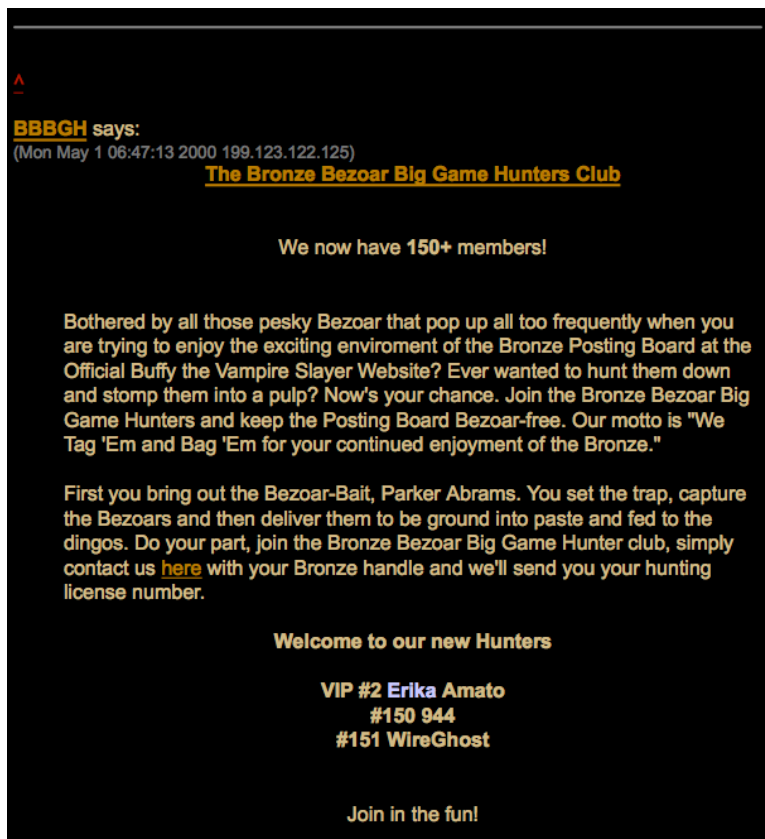


Fig. 16. The Bronze Bezoar Big Game Hunters Club.

The last post on the previous board provides another example of the proliferation of clubs: X-Lander's post has a siggy replete with clubs, many of which contain links to web pages. Thus, at the very least, many clubs represented the effort to create and maintain a web page.

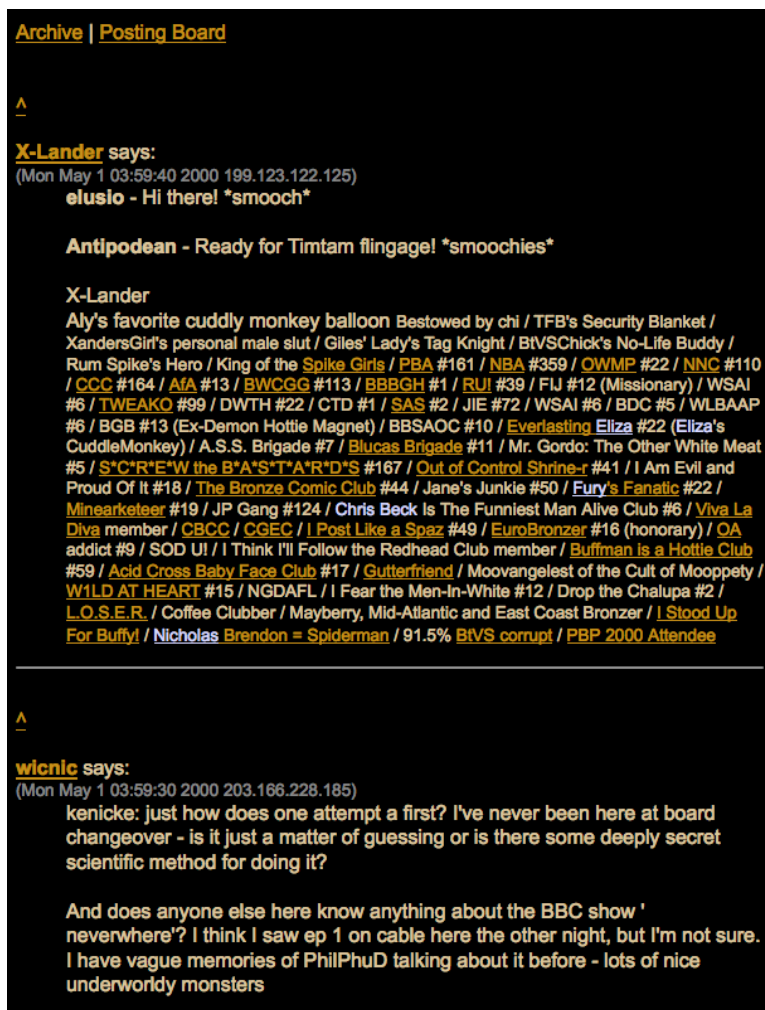


Fig. 17. X-Lander's signature.

Also of note on this, the midnight-4 a.m. board, is the post before X-Lander's, asking about how one would attempt a first. This board is the L.O.S.E.R.s board, which was populated by Bronzers who I had little interaction with, since they were posting between 3 a.m. and 7 a.m. Eastern time. Indeed, many of these Bronzers were people I met in real life before I had ever talked to them at The Bronze. One such person, Claris, posts at the beginning of this board, "announcing" the L.O.S.E.R.s board. Claris goes on to explain in subsequent posts that she is in the midst of finals week, and that at the moment she is at work. Interestingly, Claris is the 89th member of a club entitled



Bronzers Who Can't Get Gone, indicating the endemic problem of getting hooked at The Bronze at the expense of real life.

^

**Claris** says:

(Mon May 1 00:14:19 2000 192.94.94.33)

**L.O.S.E.R.s!**

**Claris**

**STILL WAITING FOR ENTRY #500 FROM Joss! What has Buffy taught YOU?**

**Lemming #4**

**Worshipper of the Evil Triumvirate**

"Every now and then me and her (Marti) and Greenwalt just sit back and say hey, it's nice to be a triumvirate of evil." ~ Joss Whedon

**Willing to apply for the job of "Bitch" should Greenwalt decide to try for a new image - I've been told I'm very good at it. "Heinous" is usually proceeding it, actually.** Does that make me overqualified?

*"Nothing is final until you're dead. Even then, I'm sure God negotiates."* - Angelica Houston, Ever After.

**I am Evil # 15 - Ain't it great?**

**"Deliver."**

**CGEC Give the man an episode, for Joss' sake!** We call for it, even if he never actually asked us to!

**S\*C\*R\*E\*W T\*H\*E B\*A\*S\*T\*A\*R\*D\*S - Member #59**

**Bronzers Who Can't Get Gone - Member # 89**

**WHAA - We Hate Angel Assembly Member #012 - it's a funny site - joined it on a lark ~ but the owner shut it down - he got tired of the death threats.** (people out there think David is cute - who knew? \*g\*)

**University of Sunnydale Student ID #12**

Major in Demonology with a Minor in Underwater Basketweaving

**Ramblers Unite #39**

We just keep going, and going and going and - stopping now, really I am. Any second I'll just stop typ-

*I have gained the valuable personal motto 'If it's blue, don't drink it' - which I would urge you all to live by...* - PDR

*"Back off polygrip! You think you're bad? All mean and haunty, picking on poor, pathetic Cordy. Well, get ready to haul your wrinkly, translucent ass out of this place because lady, the bitch is back!"* - Cordella

*"I don't care, kill Joss, I want Doyle!"* - OzLady

**Bronze Drinks Club #18 -The Claris ~ Killian's Red.**

*I'm at Rum Spike's Table - Where do you sit?*

**Keeper of Willow's furry-collared Jacket from "Harsh Light of Day"**

**Becker blew the WU! - 1/7/2000**

*"It feels good to conquer, doesn't it?"* - Blueronin

*"I really don't like it when people shoot me."* - Angel

**Fury's Fanatics #43**

OhmyJoss, I managed to join a club before Little Willow!

*"I can kill demons. I can crash cars. Things are looking up!"* - never-shown Spike from "A New Man"

*"Hmm, y'know, I think Claris may be right"* - Chris Golden

**Night Owl #11 Sleep? I don't need no stinkin' sleep!**

Fig. 18. Claris, L.O.S.E.R.s, and Bronzers Who Can't Get Gone.

As a final example, the following post by Disappointed is telling not because it represents The Bronze, but because it represents what The Bronze is not.

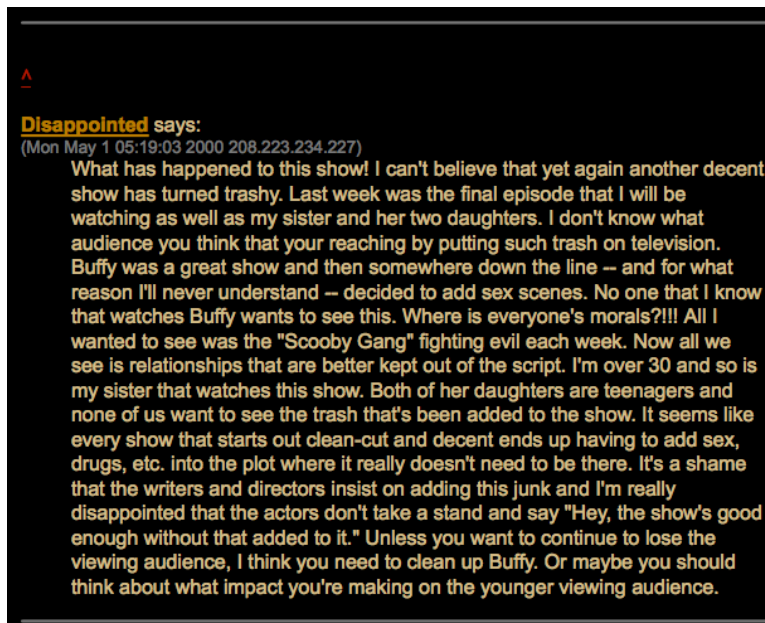


Fig. 19. Disappointed in *Buffy*.

This post is what Destiny would have referred to as a “newbie drive-by,” and is apparently written by someone who has a very different concept—a different headspace, as it were—of The Bronze. The post is written as if there is someone in charge *Buffy* who has somehow failed to realize that viewers—and perhaps even actors—want to see teenagers fighting evil, but find it morally objectionable to see them in sexual relationships. The post reads as if Joss Whedon himself is reading, and simply needs a reminder about morals. It reads like a product review, and is clearly written by someone who did not bother to read or understand any of the introductory matter—such as all those websites I spent weeks perusing before I delurked—that explained how to communicate at The Bronze. It is a telling post, then, because it’s not written to interact, but rather to declaim.

The flow of conversation at The Bronze was fairly regularly broken up by such posts, but this one in particular is interesting for two reasons. First, it's of interest because it received a reply by a few Bronzers, and Disappointed subsequently engaged those Bronzers in a (somewhat) more conversational and less sermonizing manner. Second, this post appeared after the episode "Where the Wild Things Are" (WTWTA) aired, and before the episode "New Moon Rising" aired, and is therefore relevant to the flame war that erupted after the latter episode aired; this will be discussed in more detail below.

In reviewing these examples, I was reminded of something Destiny said in one of our initial interviews: she had mentioned that although The Bronze is intimidating, once someone finds a "niche," it's easy to fit in. At the time, I found this an odd statement. A community, to me, was something that existed because the people liked each other, not because they fulfilled a "niche." The use of that word, *niche*, reminded me of how Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer wasn't allowed to join in the other reindeer's games until he proved his worth to them. But this wasn't what Destiny meant. What she meant, I think, was that once Bronzers get to know someone as a specific individual—a process made much easier if there's something specific or recognizable about someone's posts—it's easy to become a permanent member who will be noticed when present, and missed when absent.

### ***Scale and Scope of the Community***

One indication of the breadth of the community is the extraordinary degree of activity that took place on line but outside the Bronze. Such Bronze-related activity was,

at its most basic level, communication among Bronzers. It might be email communications, or posting of fan fiction, or the creation or use of Web sites for a variety of purposes. My attempt to understand the scope of such activity began by simply following the links that Bronzers would post at The Bronze. If The Bronze represented a center, or core, of activity, then following the posted links would seem to be the most immediate means to expand this core to its next layer. However, my attempt to understand even this degree of expanded activity proved an impossibly large task. Bronze-related Web sites proliferated, and were constantly being created, changed, and removed. Furthermore, hypertext made it possible for many sites to link to many other sites. Attempting to follow all such links resulted in a perpetual loop of websites, many of which I would be visiting more than once. In retrospect, this is perhaps not surprising, since the number of permutations for visiting each site is enormous. For example, even if there were only 10 Bronzer-related sites, and each one linked to every other Bronzer Web site, the result would be  $10! = 3,628,800$  different paths to reaching each Web site. Hence, without some means of indexing sites, it becomes impossible, even with fairly small numbers, to keep track of them.

Nonetheless, my attempts at following as many Bronzer-related links as possible led in the following results. Links that had been posted at The Bronze led to a large number of sites, most of which were no longer active. There are currently 68 different active Bronze-related Web sites (Appendix A). Many of these contain dozens of subsections or additional pages; one site, the *Bronze VIP Posting Board Archives*, contains 832 pages of archived Bronze posts by VIPs. Furthermore, some of these sites are alternatives to The Bronze—interactive sites that Bronzers used when the official site

was closed for repairs, or moving, or shut down—and therefore may represent activity comparable in scope to (although probably smaller in scale than) the original Bronze.

In addition, there are 248 Bronzer-related sites that are no longer on line, but that have been archived and made available via the *Internet Archive Wayback Machine* (Appendix B).<sup>3</sup> Several of these are sites to help newbies. These include: the *Bronze Safety 'Net Page*; the *Bronze Welcome Wagon* (with links to 9 similar pages); the *Bronzer's Links* page (with 25 links on the links page of the site); the Bronze's own (fan-written) *Frequently Asked Questions*; *LJ's Helpful Hints for New Posters*; *Pathetically Helpful Bronzers Anonymous* (PHBA, a club with 60 members, and 81 links on its “Bookmarks of the Bronze” page); and *WITT Rules*.

These Web sites are by no means the totality of Bronzer's Bronze-related Web activity. They are primarily the first layer—the most accessible layer—of Bronzer's activity. There is also a distinction, albeit with much overlap, between a Bronzer's website, a Bronze-related website, and a *Buffy*-related website. For example, some Bronzer's websites had nothing to do with The Bronze or *Buffy* (I generally did not include these in the above counts). On the other hand, some Bronzer's websites began as fan sites, but then became the official website for someone associated with the show; in this case, the Bronzer's site had nothing to do with The Bronze, but was nonetheless a product of The Bronze.

Hence, my attempt to discern an answer to even a seemingly-simple question—what other Bronze-related things do Bronzers do on line?—yielded a result that was both impossibly large and incorrigibly imprecise. Still, it provides a sense of the scale and

scope of what Bronzers do, and therefore, recalling Gene Wise, a sense of “how much of this experience is shared by how many” (333).

While the scale and scope of The Bronze were significant, and probably greater, than they would initially seem, the key to understanding The Bronze lies less in questions of “how much” or “how many,” but rather in recognizing its qualitative aspects within the context of its scale and scope. The Bronze was not merely a place, or a location; it was not simply a place to go. It was a place—at least in terms of mental frameworks—Bronzers already were. It was the manifestation of their headspaces, one that was consciously and intentionally socially constructed. It wasn’t merely the place that provided the structure, or the rhythm, of life; it was itself the structure and rhythm of life for Bronzers. It was where Bronzers did the things they do; it was where they wanted to do those things, and it comprised the people with whom they wanted to do them.

### ***“New Moon Rising”***

I used the Bronze boards above as examples because when I started saving boards, the earliest available boards were from May 1, 2000. The reason I started saving boards during this week was that the *Buffy* episode “New Moon Rising” aired on May 2, 2000, and this led to the most extensive flame wars I witnessed at The Bronze. I was unable to keep up with the boards, and so I saved them for future perusal (and continued to save boards thereafter).

At this point in *Buffy*, the Scooby gang was in its freshman year of college, and both Buffy and Willow were in new relationships. Buffy was dating an older student named Riley, whereas Willow had broken up with Oz (her boyfriend since 11th grade),

and was now in a relationship with a woman. Willow's same-sex relationship wasn't obvious at this point: she had not come out to anyone in the show, but the audience had received many clues over several previous episodes that Willow was dating another female college student.

The episode preceding "New Moon Rising" (NMR) was "Where The Wild Things Are" (WTWTA). In WTWTA, the gang discovers (another) haunted fraternity house; this time, it is Riley's frat house that is haunted. The house is haunted by poltergeists, created from the repressed emotional energy of the children who lived there years ago, when the house was a children's home. The erstwhile children's home was run by a harshly repressive Christian zealot who would punish the children, sometimes to the point of abuse, for their "sinful" thoughts and actions. That repression has become manifest, activated by Buffy's energy. Buffy spends much of her time with Riley at the frat house, and the poltergeists feed on Buffy and Riley's sexual energy. Xander hypothesizes that "with Buffy and Riley having, you know, acts of nakedness around the clock lately, maybe they set something free." Giles concurs, saying that "now the poltergeists are drawing more and more energy out of them, feeding on them" (WTWTA transcript).

At The Bronze, the result was several posts such as the aforementioned post by Disappointed; most of these posts complained about too much sex on *Buffy*. For the most part, I took these complaints as general statements that masked more specific complaints that may have been too difficult, or perhaps too ideological, to articulate directly. For example, several such posters, when pressed, replied that it was not, in fact, the depiction of sexual activity that bothered them, but rather the depiction of Buffy's relationship with



someone who wasn't her first and only true love, Angel. But this was not merely a preference of one storyline over another. It was a complaint that *Buffy*'s relationships in college simultaneously subverted the fairy tale of love being a single monogamous relationship, while also undermining the message that girls shouldn't have sex. In effect, these were complaints that *Buffy* didn't, to put it in the vernacular, "slut-shame" its characters. Furthermore, the only character who disapproved of the supposedly sinful behavior of our heroes turned out to be a crazy Christian lady whose condemnation led to repression, misery, and poltergeists.

Until this point, complaints were often similar to that of Disappointed, which merely groused of "too much" sex or lack of "family values," rather than actually complaining that *Buffy* wasn't conforming to the poster's Christian ideals or retrograde notions of gender and sexuality. I imagine such subtlety existed for good reason: not only were generic objections less confrontational, but even the most die-hard religionist would likely not expect to convince anyone with the argument that *Buffy* was bad because it wasn't sexist enough.

The episode that aired after "Where the Wild Things Are" was "New Moon Rising" (NMR). In NMR, Willow's boyfriend returns to Sunnydale, and Willow is forced to choose between him and her new partner, Tara. She chooses Tara, but in doing so comes out to Buffy, as well the audience. At this point, the trickle of posts complaining about sex became a torrent. Furthermore, any subtlety in such complaints gave way to open bigotry.

When it became clear that Willow was in a same-sex relationship, complaints from people who weren't regular Bronzers overwhelmed the posting board. Most of

these posts complained that there was too much sex on *Buffy*, or that the show was no longer “family-friendly” or appropriate for children, or that Willow just wouldn’t behave that way. There were also many vague (and often incoherent) posts about God and the Bible. Ironically, all this was despite that fact that: Willow and Tara had never so much as kissed, while heterosexual sex was regularly depicted on *Buffy* with virtually no complaint; that the “family-friendly” posters typically wanted the show to focus more on the killing of demons; or that Willow had met her doppelganger in the previous season, and found her “kind of gay”; and that Joss and his characters were often ridiculing religion. Thus, these drive-by posts were in actuality thinly-veiled justifications for homophobia, and were generally treated by Bronzers as such. Regardless, virtually all such posts came down to the simple fact that the poster didn’t approve of the Willow/Tara relationship. Even though it was a fictitious same-sex relationship in a fictional town on a low-rated TV show about killing vampires.

But at least the thinly-veiled bigotry was thinly-veiled. Unfortunately, there was also plenty of homophobia that was openly vile. Most Bronzers who spoke of it said they were shocked by it. It was, of course, a cardinal rule of The Bronze that we “don’t feed the bezoar”; in other words, don’t engage the trolls, because they feed on attention. But this rule was difficult to adhere to for many people who didn’t want their silence to be taken as a sign of assent.

The vitriol grew to such a degree over the course of the week after NMR aired that even the actress who played Tara, Amber Benson, was personally subject to surprisingly ugly invective. Indeed, it seems that she was lurking at The Bronze after NMR aired, and was, like many of us Bronzers, shocked and appalled. She posted for the

first time on May 4, 2000, with the following, taken verbatim from the midnight-4 a.m.

board:

I've been thinking a lot about what people said about Tara on the internet after the last episode aired. At first, I was very hurt. I tried to disassociate myself from feeling bad by saying: This is Tara that they are talking about, not me.

But I couldn't. I guess it hurts when someone calls you ugly or makes nasty comments about your weight whether or not it is really YOU they are referring to. I am just a human being and I feel like I deserve to be treated as such. I also feel that Tara deserves to be treated with a little more kindness and compassion. Yes, I am not a STICK. I am a NORMAL, HEALTHY (I was gonna say Girl, but...) WOMAN. I have breasts and hips and I am very happy that they are part of me. I weigh 118 and I am 5'4". If you saw me in real life, you would think I was on the thin side. But on tv, next to my very petite costars, I do like heavier. I am PROUD to be NORMAL. A body is a beautiful thing to waste. Believe me, I have seen enough of my friends and peers waste away to NOTHING so that they could work in this industry. So that they could perpetuate the LIE that ANOREXIA is Beautiful. IT IS NOT. YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL. ALL OF YOU. Just for being. You all can judge me and Tara for being 'fat', 'gay' and 'shy'. I suppose that my being on tv gives you that right. But I DO NOT have to read what you say. I have enjoyed being a lurker. But my feelings just can't take the criticism. Those of you (you know who you are) with sensitivity will understand. Thank you for sticking up for us. Tara and I both appreciate it. I think that being a beautiful, heavy, lesbian witch rocks! No matter what happens I'm glad I get the chance to walk in Tara's shoes. All you girls and guys out there who think that starving, binging and purging and exercising yourself to DEATH is gonna change how you feel inside-- It's NOT. Don't buy into all the media crap. Love yourself for who you are, not what others THINK you should look like. It's DEFINITELY more important in this life to love each other despite our imperfections. I hope this works. Still not sure how to do this whole posting thing...

After a few more posts during the next 76 minutes, Benson went on to explain why she had been reading the Bronze in the first place. In her final post before signing off, she wrote:

Thank you guys sooooo much. I feel a lot better. I talked to Joss today and he told me about the whole sexual preference CONTROVERSY thing, but neglected to mention the tara bashing stuff. I went online to see what was up and was just flabbergasted, ya know? I guess I'm still a big kid 'cause it

stung. thanks for the cheer up Kenickie and Crimson and the rest of you guys. I guess I needed a little drool. Well, i'm gonna hit the hay. Thanks again. You late night babes (all of you!) are definitely my type.

Amber had apparently been reading *The Bronze* at Joss's suggestion, to see for herself the reaction to her work. Much like most regular Bronzers, she was horrified at the ugliness of the bigotry on display. But while Bronzers were generally disgusted by the homophobic drive-by posts and afraid that those posts would be taken as representing the community, Amber was also understandably hurt by the vituperation directed at her personally. Interestingly, although she was the star and Bronzers were her fans, their roles were somewhat reversed in this case. It was Bronzers who argued against bigotry—as they had been for days—and made the case for compassion, and consoled the star they looked up to. Just as our heroes inspire and motivate us, so too Bronzers tried to inspire the heroine who inspired them. It was this outpouring of support that led to Amber's words of gratitude.

Approximately four hours after Amber's first post, on the following board—the 4-8 am board of May 5, 2000—Joss Whedon himself posted, also on the subject of the Willow/Tara relationship:

Is it safe? Can I come out?

Okay. Let's be frank. Last Tuesday's episode was pretty controversial, and a real eye-opener for me. And despite my fervent hatred of criticism, I do understand when I've made a mistake. I thought the Willow arc made sense for her character, but the fact is, most people AREN'T like that, and it's hard for most normal people to understand a lifestyle that less than 10% of the population embrace. I don't want to be about issues -- I just want to tell a story I think will engage and challenge, and this time I think I missed the mark. So I'm just hoping people understand we're feeling our way along here. We ARE listening. So we're going to shift away from this whole lifestyle choice Willow has made. Just wipe the slate. From now on, Willow will no longer be a Jew. And I think we can all breathe easier.

Joss's mea culpa was a hit. Over the following weeks, it went viral, and this at a time when the word *viral* still referred to biology, not information. His Bronze post was picked up by various news sources, and his words were repeatedly copied and emailed and forwarded. Amusingly enough, friends of mine who knew I was a Bronzer, but didn't realize that Joss had posted this at The Bronze, helpfully forwarded emails to me with this post, thus using the awesome power of the Internet to ensure that I received exactly the same information over and over again.

On the same board, Joss followed up this post with another that addressed the complaint, posted in many a drive-by posting, that it was out of character for Willow to have a girlfriend so soon after her boyfriend, Oz (played by Seth Green), left Sunnydale (and the show):

Amber lovely. She and Aly sweet chemistry. Plus, GUYS, Seth leave show! Do movies! Oz not gone forever, but Seth leave show! Some of you may say that's not reason enough for Willow's change, but as a matter of fact when Seth left I turned gay too, and so did most of the camera crew, so in your face.

As I would learn later, Joss here is referring to the fact that the Willow/Tara storyline was not originally planned as such. But, Seth Green left the show to do movies, and Joss found that the two actresses had "chemistry," and so the writing staff reworked the Season Four story arc in accord with the character's "autonomous" development.

In his third post on this board, Joss adopts a somewhat more serious tone:

Okay, let's do this.

For real: how @#\$%&ing disappointed was I in the American public after tuesday night? Of course I realize the rabidly homophobic posting contingent represents a smaller percentage of americans than the EVIL GAYS they were posting about, but that's not it. It's the fact that everyone went nuts about it THIS WEEK, when this has clearly been going on for MONTHS? Did anyone see the spell scene in episode 16? Hello? It's the not the bigotry that offends me, it's the lack of filmic insight.

Okay, and the bigotry. But of course there were just as many voices raised in support of the arc as against, which was swell. Plus one post from a gay or questioning teen saying the show helped them is worth six hundred hate letters.

And the fact is, stirring up controversy is sort of fun. It's just that I never actually set out to do that. To me, jhaving a character that is open to exploring their sexuality is about the same as having a girl hero -- just something natural and cool. Here's the word: Tara not gonna disappear. She's part of the show, part of Willow's life. i'm not saying everything will be sunshine and roses (not on MY show, dammit), but there is more to explore with the two of them. And hopefully, this NONSENSE will die down, because I 'm not TRYING to make a political statement. I NOD OFF during political statements. My show is about emotion. Love is the most powerful, messy, delightful and dangerous emotion. (Although I think envy is kind of the sexiest.) Willow's in love. I think it's cool.

The point of mentioning the posts by Amber and Joss is not that they are representative of the Bronze community. As mentioned, Joss was a regular (albeit infrequent) poster, but Amber was posting for the first time. They were hardly typical Bronzers. But their posts crystallize and reflect the overall attitude of The Bronze quite well. To Bronzers like me, these were our heroes; they were the people who said the things that needed to be said, that got us thinking and talking to each other. We valorized them and valued what they said. But we also recognized, I think, that we were not equals. They were stars, and we were just us. But on the other hand, they needed us. They need us to like their work, and to some degree their livelihood depended on it. If we looked up to them for guidance or inspiration, they looked to us—or perhaps down on us—for feedback or criticism. It was a curious and complicated relationship between two groups of individuals.

The posts by Amber and Joss were quoted above for three reasons. First, they indicate how important NMR and the subsequent flaming was to the community. Second, they point out the interrelationship between Bronzers and VIPs. And third, they

are a telling microcosm of the flame war that took place at The Bronze in the wake of the “New Moon Rising” episode. This flame war was itself but an isolated flare-up in America’s ongoing culture war. At the Bronze, this had previously taken the form of bezoars posting offensive comments, often of a homophobic nature, and Bronzers either ignoring them or reporting them to their ISPs.

The airing of NMR was followed by a rise in the usual puerile homophobia from bezoars. But it also led to the more civil complaints mentioned above. Many such posts, or the responses to them, explicitly mentioned the Bible Belt, or evangelical or fundamentalist Christianity. A few Bronzers argued against the drive-by homophobes by invoking their own evangelical or fundamentalist beliefs to argue against anti-gay posters (although it’s important to note that the argument against bigotry requires a less robust position than the argument in favor of gay rights). And one drive-by poster even mentioned feeling discomfited by the Willow/Tara relationship due to the “conditioning” of the Bible Belt, but that the discomfort had forced her to try to be more open-minded.

But in the main, the volume of homophobic posts overwhelmed The Bronze, and forced many regular Bronzers away from the board. Like many others, I was astonished by the acrimony. But even more amazing to me was the unanimity among Bronzers. Virtually all Bronzers were opposed to the drive-by bigots. This is perhaps not surprising, since such posts were disruptive regardless of whether one agreed with them. But the community as a whole took a much stronger position: those people who talked back, who defended the community in this flame war, typically argued not only for Joss’s right to tell whatever story he wanted, but for the legitimacy of same-sex relationships. A few Bronzers—perhaps two or three—mentioned that they were willing to consider the

possibility of not arguing against the homophobic drive-byes on the grounds that people shouldn't be attacked for their religious beliefs. But this is as far as any Bronzers would go; everyone else either ignored the influx of new posters, or took them to task for their posts.

This flame war continued for roughly two weeks after the airing of "New Moon Rising." Ostensibly a debate over a TV show, it was actually two overlapping debates about something else. To Bronzers, it was a debate over what kind of community The Bronze would be; and to the angry drive-by posters, it was a debate over what kind of culture America should have. In addition, although I don't know that anyone actually said so, it was also a debate over how much homophobic bigotry Bronzers as a group would tolerate. The drive-by attacks at The Bronze were, by themselves, a complicated enough phenomenon to force Bronzers to take a stand, and, by extension, re-define the norms for their community.

Bronzers felt their community attacked, and probably felt defensive about their favorite show. Naturally, the inclination was to defend ourselves as well as Joss and company against such attacks. But this process was complicated by the presence of highly personal vituperation directed at Amber Benson. The cruel words directed at Amber, combined with her anguished delurking, no doubt increased the sense of protectiveness Bronzers felt about "one of their own." It also made viscerally clear that there were a great many people who would happily inflict all manner of abuse on LGBT minorities. Combined with the feedback between producers and consumers in the form of validation from both Joss and Amber, the overall effect was to solidify what was already a relatively pro-gay—or at least anti-homophobia and pro-equal rights—position



on the part of The Bronze as a whole, and to reiterate that position as an underlying norm.

I was surprised by the willingness of Bronzers to not only argue against homophobia, but to forcefully argue for the legitimacy of same-sex relationships. As a group, they seemed far more progressive in this regard than I would have expected from Americans in general. This begs the question: why? Were Bronzers for some reason predisposed to being in favor of LGBT rights? Or perhaps the positive depiction of a lesbian relationship on *Buffy* convinced them? Or maybe they were simply following the ideological lead of their heroes, Joss and Amber? Or perhaps the influx of hate-mongers at The Bronze had forced Bronzers to clarify their own positions, and they had decided not to be on the same side of the issue as were homophobes.

It occurred to me at the time that many Bronzers, when confronting bezoars, used a somewhat standard set of language that seemed almost like “talking points.” The standard response to homophobia was something along the lines of “these are two people in love, so who cares what their gender is?” In retrospect, it was similar to the pro-gay marriage talking points of a decade later, in which the argument was that “two people in a loving, stable, relationship should be allowed to get married.” While I could appreciate the attempt to put the “two people” in question in a positive light, I was discomfited by the insistence on the “loving” and “stable” relationship, since no such conditions existed for any other consenting adults. This argument, which was essentially was that “it’s okay because they’re in love,” implied that it’s also okay to judge other people’s relationships and deny them if they’re not in love. I found it odd that this argument, based on an exception (love) that proves the rule (controlling other’s private lives), would catch on.

Perhaps, I thought, it wasn’t that Bronzers were independently pro-gay, but were

following the lead of their hero, or being defensive of their favorite show. Or, maybe they really were independently pro-gay, but just didn't know how else to articulate it except using the standard verbiage. Indeed, one Bronzer mentioned to me that many people took a stand merely because it was "trendy" to be pro-gay. Another Bronzer suggested that some people liked being able to deploy their "liberal credentials" and play the cutting-edge progressive heroes to people like Amber and Joss.

In retrospect, however, I believe my initial suspicions were exaggerated, if not unfounded. Much of the anti-homophobia that came to define the community really was genuine concern for people being attacked. And, as I would learn later, The Bronze had been considered an accepting venue well before I had delurked. For example, one regular Bronzer had come out to the Bronze even before he had to his family, while another was an openly transgender woman. Both of these individuals had been posting regularly since before I delurked, and continue posting at The Bronze Beta, indicating both that the community is comfortable with them, and that their presence has encouraged acceptance of LGBT minorities. Thus, even if Bronzers were only being pro-gay because Joss told them to and they wanted to seem cool, it's nonetheless an indication of how strongly these attacks were felt, how much the community felt attacked, and how it helped the community understand and perhaps better identify with the plight of LGBT minorities.

### ***The Beginning of the End***

The flaming after the airing of "New Moon Rising" was the single most important thing I have witnessed at The Bronze. Other Bronzers may not feel this way, since the drive-by posters who took over the board had little permanent effect on the existing

relationships between Bronzers. However, from my perspective, the post-NMR flame war was singular because it forced the community as a whole to define its boundaries. It was forced to clarify what it was and what it was not.

“New Moon Rising” aired at the end of Season 4 of *Buffy*. Unbeknownst at the time was that just one year later, everything would change. Season 5 began in the fall of 2000, and when it ended in May 2001, *Buffy* was dead. She died fighting a god—a hellgod from another dimension—who was attempting to open a portal between dimensions that would unleash hell on earth. She killed the god, but died in the process.

Fortunately, *Buffy* got better. Unfortunately, The WB did not renew *Buffy* for its sixth season. And The WB owned The Bronze.

The WB had distributed the first five seasons of *Buffy* for Fox Studios. When it announced that it would no longer distribute the show, it also said that The Bronze would stay on line as long as *Buffy* remained on The WB. When UPN announced that it would distribute *Buffy* (which it did for the show’s sixth and seventh seasons), Joss Whedon stated in interviews as well as at The Bronze that part of the move to UPN included an agreement wherein The Bronze would continue to exist.

Given The WB’s statement that The Bronze would continue to exist as long as it was airing *Buffy*, I expected that The Bronze might be shuttered after the last new episode of Season 5 had aired in May, or after the last *Buffy* rerun aired at the end of the summer. This was not, however, the case. Instead, The Bronze was unceremoniously shut down on July 10, 2001, and no alternative site was announced. Word had gotten out that The Bronze was about to be shut down, and so many regulars were able to be at The Bronze on its last day; still, it seemed somehow sneaky that the board would close with no

official announcement—at least none that I knew of—to that effect. Admittedly, from The WB’s perspective, The Bronze was probably a trivial part of *Buffy*, and its closure merited little concern. But from the Bronzer perspective, The WB was closing the site where our friends lived; it was the only Internet home many of us had ever known. Closing it was, at the very least, insensitive. Closing it without warning in July seemed duplicitous, if not downright churlish.

The closing of The Bronze led to a series of fascinating events, including: a flurry of emails among fans notifying each other of its closing; several formerly missing Bronzers appearing to say their goodbyes; a large number of tearful farewell speeches; the flaunting of virtually every community rule, such as the use of HTML to post in color and thwart the board censors; and virtual rioting, looting, and the destruction of The Bronze.

In other words, it was a really good day at The Bronze. Unfortunately, it was also the last day at The Bronze. The board suddenly ceased functioning a few minutes after 8 p.m. For reasons I’ve long since forgotten, the last sentence I wrote was the first line of the song “Barbie Girl” by the band Aqua: “I’m a Barbie girl in a Barbie world”. The last words that were posted directly to me came from tiggy3323; they were “i’m afraid.” The very last post on the board appeared at 8:16 p.m. It was from a bezoar who was complaining that nobody was paying attention to him.

It was a most undignified, albeit appropriate, end of an era.

Given the apparent importance of The Bronze to both Bronzers and to *Buffy*’s writing staff, there seemed good reason to expect that a UPN version of The Bronze would appear after the closure of The WB Bronze. Indeed, one *Angel* crewmember had

told me that the writing staff in particular was fascinated by fan discussions of their work, and lurked at The Bronze daily. Thus, Bronzers had every reason to expect that they would soon have a new Bronze to call home. Unfortunately, this is not quite what happened.

In fact, for several months, nothing happened. With no old Bronze, and no new official Bronze, the community had no means of maintaining its cohesion. Bronzers retreated to a variety of other sites, including two semi-official fan-operated sites known as the Emergency Bronzing System and The Bronze Beta. The former has since been shut down as well, but the latter, a replica of the original fan site, continues to operate. Several Bronzers began agitating for a new home, and started the Bring Back the Bronze (BBTB) campaign, which organized petitions, raised money, and even held talks with UPN executives to convince them to create a new Bronze. Their efforts met with some success; by the time the first episode of *Buffy*'s season six aired on October 2, 2001, there was an official UPN Bronze.

There were, however, several problems with the new Bronze. First, it was a threaded board. This meant that Bronzers couldn't find other Bronzers unless they scoured every topic thread looking for their friends. But the whole point of a linear posting board was that all the posts would appear one after another, and every poster would be in the same place. A threaded board defeated the purpose of such a board. Furthermore, the new Bronze required registration: for the first time, Bronzers had to give their personal information. But despite this, the login and registration didn't work well; many Bronzers were unable to post under their Bronze names. Again, this defeated the purpose of having a Bronze. Bronzers wanted a space where their friends were, but

both the threaded structure of the board, and the inability to maintain the same online identity, meant that the Bronze was organized by topic, not by where one's friends were.

Eventually, after much feedback from Bronzers, UPN did create a linear board. However, a variety of problems continued to plague the UPN Bronze. Posts were limited to fewer characters than before, and didn't allow for HTML tags. The website itself was slow, and boards would not change every four hours as they would in the past, but rather at seemingly arbitrary times. Furthermore, as new posts were added to a board, old posts would "fall off" the other end onto an archived board. This meant that there was no way to know which previous board any particular post was on. And since the boards began and ended at arbitrary times, there was no way to maintain any of the time-dependent rituals described above.

Although Bronzers did flock to the new board, and immediately continued the same rituals and conversations as on The WB Bronze, their new home simply could not accommodate them. The inability to post spoiler warnings, or a siggy, or any of the other conventions of the old board as described above, made it impossible for Bronzers to communicate as they once had. All told, the result was a new Bronze that was unable to sustain the community. Despite having flooded the new site, Bronzers retreated back to their old temporary and alternative sites. The official UPN linear Bronze remained on line until some time in 2002 when, according to one Bronzer familiar with the situation, "UPN, annoyed that their board wasn't as successful as the WB's board, shut it down in a fit of pique."

For The Bronze, this was the beginning of the end. But *Buffy* was still on the air, and Bronzers continued to function as a community, albeit a splintered one. There were

still PBPs and PBfPs, and the community cohered through informal networks more than so than in the past. The infighting, always present but usually subtle, became more obvious as various individuals and groups—often derided as “cliques” by Bronzers who felt there were people being ganged up on—debated and argued in various forums whether there was any “official” home for Bronzers, and where it should be.

The Bronze Beta ultimately became something of an official Bronzer home, especially after VIPs such as Joss Whedon discovered it and posted there. It looked almost identical to The Bronze, and functioned in exactly the same way. But many regulars resisted posting at the Beta, for a variety of reasons, none of which were ever entirely clear to me. Several people said they didn’t like the idea of the official Bronze being a privately-run board. Of course, all the Bronzes had been owned by private companies, but these owners had functioned as absentee landlords. The Beta was run by a Bronzer—perhaps more than one at first, although this was also unclear to me—and apparently this was enough to create trepidation among several Bronzers. Some people said it was due to existing personality conflicts; several said that the fact that the board was run by an individual meant they felt like they were a guest in someone else’s home. Some people said they feared that now some Bronzers would become banned for personal reasons. Others were annoyed that The Bronze Beta appeared to be speaking for the entire Bronze community by claiming to be the official board.

To me, none of these reasons seemed compelling; they all seemed to assume that future conflict was imminent, and so it was best to leave now. And, indeed, they seemed like minor grievances, so much so that it occurred to me that they might be masking some deeper issue. However, inasmuch as minor grievances could grow into major conflicts at

The Bronze—and, indeed, in Web-based communication in general—perhaps there really wasn't anything deeper going on.

Indeed, the arguments over the new official home were similar to the arguments over the PBPs. Every year that there was a PBP, there were complaints about it at The Bronze. Most of these complaints were immediately before and after the PBP, which always took place in February. But the criticisms occurred throughout the year. Much of the conversation seemed, from my perspective, to be harshly critical of the PBPs. To me, the PBPs were big parties that Blade, along with several other Bronzers, organized. I never had cause to complain, and even if I did, I imagine I wouldn't have said anything at The Bronze. To me, this seemed like complaining to the host of a party about his party. Nonetheless, the debates were extensive, including much discussion of the price, the venue, the volume level, the nametags, and many other details. By the time I had delurked, there was a PBP committee that organized the party, and at some point, there was even a PBP liaison to The Bronze who coordinated feedback to the party planners.

All of this surprised me. Most of the criticisms I heard about the PBP were accurate; for example, during the years I attended, it was indeed somewhat difficult to read people's nametags. However, none of these issues rose in my mind to the level of problems that needed fixing; to me, none of them justified a second thought, much less a confrontation. Indeed, at one point I noticed that Bronzers who had not even attended a PBP were complaining about it. Hence, it is possible that, like the highly detailed complaints about the PBP, general complaints about The Bronze Beta did not in fact reflect deeper issues, but were merely overstated complaints.

Regardless, The Bronze Beta was the only open and linear board I knew of, and



that's where I ended up, as did many other Bronzers. I still don't know how it happened, but on July 14, 2001, I received an email from someone I didn't recognize, informing me that "there is a great new site that mimics the original Bronze." And so I started posting at The Beta. It was never as heavily populated as The WB Bronze, as much of the community moved on to different boards, or to none at all. But the Beta was certainly very active, and continued to attract new members as well as VIPs. Nonetheless, we never did get a new official Bronze, and the community would remain dispersed from this point on.

Meanwhile, *Buffy* went to the new United Paramount Network, UPN, to begin its sixth season. And I went to Toronto, and then Los Angeles, to continue my interviews with Bronzers.

## **Ethnographic Interviews and Systems of Meaning**

### ***The Toronto Bronzers***

By the time *Buffy*'s sixth season aired, I had been a Bronzer for over three years. I had started out with the intention of being a researcher, not a Bronzer. However, somewhere along the way, I had become a Bronzer; if research was what I did, then a Bronzer was who I was. I didn't quite feel like a "real" member of the community, but Bronzers assured me that in their eyes I was, and so I tried, despite my doubts, to take their word for it, and get past the feeling of being an interloper.

I had also started out with the intention of using standard ethnographic techniques—participant observation and in-depth interviews—to write about the culture of The Bronze. Since The Bronze was on line, however, those techniques required some

modification. Some of this was serendipitous: for example, observation involved sitting at a computer and reading—two activities that were well within my comfort zone—rather than actually going somewhere and living among people whose language I didn't speak. But some of this was less convenient: for example, participation meant that I had to learn to communicate on line, a process that initially seemed superfluous given that I had already devoted substantial effort during my life to learning to communicate off line. Nonetheless, participant observation took place in a manner not unlike as in traditional ethnography.

Interviews also required modification. My first two informants were interviewed by email. The next three were interviewed in person, and each of those interviews took place in arbitrary public locations, such as the lobby of a university building, or a local restaurant. They were very informative, but they nonetheless lacked context. For the interviews to be comparable to those of a traditional ethnography, to contain the same depth and breadth as they would in a traditional ethnography, it seemed to me that I would need to broaden the interview techniques. Thus, I decided that I should leave the familiarity of the Greater Mayberry metropolitan area and attempt to observe Bronzers in their natural habitats.

Fortunately, Bronzers were not too difficult to find. I had heard that, like DC, Toronto had an active Bronzer community. And one person with whom I spoke quite often on line, a Torontonians named Melanie, had mentioned that there were many Bronzers in Toronto, and that they'd probably be amenable to being interviewed. So, since there was a conference coming up in Toronto, I decided to extend my visit past the conference date, and interview Torontonians.

Melanie, as it turns, is something of an organizational maven. Like Destiny, she had a remarkable intuition—probably better than I did—for what I was trying to accomplish and guiding me toward that goal. Indeed, as will be discussed further below, my interviews with Melanie provided a structure of sorts—one that began forming with my interviews of Destiny—for understanding the points of view of my informants. It was through my conversations with Melanie that I became cognizant of a number of commonalities that Bronzers shared in real life.

Along with serving as an informant, Melanie also agreed to serve as a tour guide of sorts, and arranged for me to interview two other long-time Toronto Bronzers, Chrissy and Petar. After an initial visit to Toronto, during which I conducted in-person interviews with Melanie, Chrissy, and Petar, I returned for a longer visit during which I was able to conduct follow-up interviews, and also spend time with both Melanie and Chrissy as they went about their everyday activities, accompanying them at work and at some of their local haunts. I also conducted in-person interviews with two additional Bronzers, Karl and Philip. Karl is an American who lived just across the border in New York, and was visiting Toronto Bronzers at the same time as I was. Philip is a U.K. Bronzer who was visiting Karl and came with him to Toronto.

Between the three of them, Chrissy, Melanie, and Petar cover a fair amount of the Canadian demographic spectrum. Melanie and Petar grew up in working class households; both started but did not complete college. Melanie is a trained singer. Petar majored in political science while in college. Chrissy grew up in a well-to-do family and completed college with a major in fine arts. Politically, Melanie and Chrissy (both white women) are both on the left, while Petar (the child of immigrants) identifies himself as

strongly conservative. In the US, I imagine Melanie would be on the far or radical left, Chrissy would be on the far mainstream left, and Petar would be a centrist. They also represent three distinct economic classes, although both Melanie and Petar have been quick to point out that class distinctions are not as permanent in Canada as in the U.S. Despite their backgrounds and political views, there is one thing they all agree on: they love Canada.

All three follow American politics and popular culture very closely. Indeed, Torontonians in general seem very well-informed. It occurred to me that this outlook—one of knowing, cosmopolitan internationalism—might be merely an affectation, a point of national pride. This was not, however, the case. Every Torontonian I talked to seemed genuinely well-informed, not only about Toronto, but about Washington, the US, and the rest of the world. There are several reasons for this, which all of my informants, especially Melanie and Petar, touched upon. First, Canada's population is mostly clustered along its border with the US; about a third of Canada's population lives in Southern Ontario (which includes the Toronto area). The US population, on the other hand, is approximately nine times larger, is more evenly distributed, and is clustered on the coasts. Thus, a majority of Canada's population lives relatively close to the US—close enough to receive American broadcasts—while a much smaller percentage of the US population lives close to Canada.

Second, since the US—in terms of its population, economy, and military—is so much larger than Canada, American activity is more likely to affect Canadians than vice versa, creating a strong incentive for Canadians to keep abreast of US affairs. Third, Canada's media laws and its public broadcasting system ensure less media concentration

than in the US; hence, no single outlet or owner can control media content, which is therefore more diverse than in the US. Fourth, Canada is more “wired” than is the US, due to the Canadian government’s efforts to provide Internet access to its far-flung citizens. Taken together, these factors fit well with my own observations, which indicate a notable degree of awareness among Torontonians regarding public affairs.

My other two Toronto informants, Karl and Philip, are both white males. Karl lives in upstate New York, is politically conservative, and is highly religious. He is an actor, and was regularly acting in stage productions at the time I interviewed him. Since then, he completed graduate training and is currently employed as a school teacher. Philip is British, and was in the US visiting Bronzers when I interviewed him. He credits The Bronze community with helping him survive his late teen years. Philip is a college graduate, with degrees in history and math. When I interviewed him, he was working for IBM. He has since gone back to school to work on his master’s degree in history.

Except for the second set of interviews with Chrissy, which were conducted at Chrissy’s apartment, all of these interviews took place in Melanie’s house. I was initially wary of this plan, as I felt like I would be imposing, since not only was I staying in Melanie’s extra room, but she had also arranged for other people to visit on my account. But, as I would later discover, Melanie’s house was in a perpetual state of Bronzer “visitage.” Not only was I there, but so were my informants, and a variety of other people—some family, some friends, some Bronzers—to impose along with me.

## *Melanie*

When I first interviewed Melanie, the Bronze community was in a state of flux. The official Bronze was gone, and the community had fractured into several different forums, none of which were similar enough to The Bronze to be considered an official home. Furthermore, Melanie and I had recently been discussing what would happen to the community. Hence, there was a vague sense of impending doom hovering over our conversation. Although the community would happily live on for years, there was nonetheless a sense of finality in our conversation, the sense that we were discussing the beginning of the end. Curiously, the sense of loss was palpable despite the fact that we weren't quite sure what it was that was being lost. If this was the beginning of the end, the question remained: the end of what? To answer that, we went back to the beginning of the beginning.

Melanie started watching *Buffy* in Season 1. She wasn't sure what the first episode was that she saw, but suspects it was "Teacher's Pet," which was the third episode of the series. Like many Bronzers, she was already tuned in to popular films: when she was growing up, her parents regularly rented movies, and Melanie became fond of movies as well. When the original *Buffy* movie was released in 1992, she went to see it, in large part because she was a fan of the actor Rutger Hauer, who played the Vampire King in the movie. Thus, when she happened across the *Buffy* series some five years later, she was to some degree already familiar with it.

At the time, she was living in Waterloo, where *Buffy* (the TV series) aired irregularly. Furthermore, her housemates at the time were two mothers with two little girls, and so her TV-watching tended to be age-appropriate, which *Buffy* was not.

Nonetheless, Melanie found herself intrigued by the happenings on *Buffy*. Like many Bronzers, she recognized the actor who played Buffy's Watcher, Anthony Stewart Head, as the Coffee Guy from the series of 13 Taster's Choice commercials that aired in the late 1980s and early 90s. But even more important than a passing familiarity with the show, Melanie said that, despite the fact that she wouldn't typically go to any effort to catch a TV show, there was something about *Buffy* that made her want to watch.

When I asked Melanie how she ended up at The Bronze, she described a confluence of factors that guided her to the Bronze. First, her life was in a state of flux at the time. Melanie was in her early 20s and working full time. She had started college upon graduating from high school, but despite wanting to complete her college education, she had left school and was working full time. She had recently switched from a temporary job to a permanent position, one that would presumably provide a greater sense of economic security. In retrospect, however, this may have been a difficult transition: not only did it indicate Melanie's incorporation into the world of work—as sure a sign as any of being a grown-up—but it also diminished the likelihood that she would complete her college education or that she would find a suitable outlet for her musical talent.

Second, the media landscape had dramatically changed: Melanie told me that everything about the Internet at the time was fairly new. She had become familiar with chat rooms and instant messaging, but was largely unimpressed, in no small part due to the extremely poor grammar used in these media. Third, Melanie's sister had mentioned that a friend by the name of Chrissy was going to Los Angeles for a *Buffy* party. Coincidentally, this was the same Chrissy who I had previously contacted to ask

permission to use her post (the example in Chapter 4), and who I would interview in Toronto; we had met in person for the first time at the 2001 PBP, by which time Melanie and Chrissy had also become friends.

Fourth, and probably most important, Melanie was in a long-distance relationship: her fiancée was in the military, and as such regularly served as a member of U.N. peacekeeping forces in dangerous locales. Hence, it was a stressful relationship to begin with; it ended with her boyfriend breaking up with her. It was the second (and final) time they would break up.

It was on that day, December 8, 1998, that the episode “The Wish” aired. Melanie said that on that day *Buffy* had been moved back from its usual 8 p.m. time slot to 9 p.m. There was something about the fact that it was airing at the wrong time, combined with “the absolute despair and desolation” of that particular episode, that perfectly matched her mood. She felt that maybe, just maybe, there was someone out there who understood how she felt.

The next day, Melanie went to The Bronze. She said that on that day, two regular Bronzers, Blade and St.Germain, were experiencing difficulties, and that other Bronzers were being extremely comforting. Melanie said that “there was an aura about the thing that made me want to spill my guts.” The Bronze, she said, “seemed very much full of warmth, and I was desperately seeking warmth.”

I would eventually discover that these factors, taken together, were in fact recurring themes among Bronzers. On top of (1) their love of *Buffy*, many Bronzers indicated that they became Bronzers because (2) they were stuck in front of a computer, (3) they were looking for something or someone to interact with, perhaps because (4)



their lives were in transition, which caused them to feel isolated or lonely, and (5) the Web was an exciting new thing that could be used to meet people. Curiously, it had not occurred to me that I had much more in common with Bronzers—all but the fifth of these factors applied to me as well—than I had initially realized.

I would also eventually realize that Melanie was one of the very few Bronzers who could identify why she watched *Buffy* or why she went to The Bronze. Most Bronzers could tell me how it happened, but not why. The five factors above explain how Bronzers ended up at The Bronze. But, why go to The Bronze when stuck in front of a computer? Why not, say, the New York Times site? Why not call someone or send email? One reason, I suspect, that most Bronzers did not answer the “why” question is that, in our everyday lives, the minor activities that will become consequential—changing the channel to find *Buffy*, or clicking here rather than there to find The Bronze—are rarely recognizable as such ahead of time. And a second reason is that the importance of those activities are rarely articulable or even identifiable. How many of us, I wonder, can explain even our major decisions? As Spradley writes, our purpose is to discover the “organization of cultural knowledge. We especially want to avoid imposing categories from the outside that *create* order and pattern rather than discover it. *Ethnographic analysis* is the search for the parts of a culture and their relationships *as conceptualized by informants*. Most of the time this internal structure as it is known to informants remains tacit, outside their awareness” (93).

In Melanie’s case, the need to talk to someone, combined with curiosity sparked by her sister’s mention of the PBP, provided the immediate impetus toward The Bronze. But in a more general sense, what drew her was an emotional connection. The episode

“The Wish”—set in a post-apocalyptic alternate universe in which The Master has risen and vampires rule Sunnydale—captured the bleakness of Melanie’s mental landscape at the time. And The Bronze provided just the opposite. Melanie first posted at The Bronze the day after “The Wish” aired. Blade was the first person she talked to, during Coffee Clubbers. The Bronze, she said, “was an ideal atmosphere to be able to participate in while you were at work.” But, more importantly, she said that everyone who spoke to her on that first day exhibited such wit, intelligence, and humor that she thought, “wow, you’re not freaks.”

Melanie never did post “on topic”: she never posted specifically about *Buffy*. But, since “The Wish” was the first episode she saw, I asked her whether she saw it as cultural criticism. As mentioned in Chapter 3, I saw this episode in particular as cultural criticism. To me, it was an obvious attack on industrial food production. The Master, in this episode, has learned to harness the “truly demonic concept” of “mass production.” In this reality, terrified humans are hunted and tortured and killed for fun and food. They are also crammed into cages, and rolled out one at a time on a conveyer belt onto a newly-invented “milking” machine that cleanly and effortlessly drains their blood for consumption. To me, the message was clear: mass production had turned the lives of millions of non-human animals into horrors so brutal that even our horror shows could barely capture the savagery.

Melanie, however, did not see it that way. On the contrary, she focused not at all on what were to me the obvious parallels. She, instead, was taken with the overall sense of misery that so uniquely spoke to her. In this sense, she was probably much more typical of Bronzers than was I: when I posted after “The Wish” aired, I had mentioned in

one post that I thought it was a criticism of mass production and capitalism and industrial food production and our treatment of animals, but I received no replies to that particular post. Still, the fact that Melanie, an environmentalist and vegetarian, did not see that particular message, indicated not only that her mind was probably focused on more personal matters, but that most people tend not to see TV shows as offering cultural criticism that may be applied to real-world issues. Indeed, this is about the time that I, too, stopped posting on topic, as it became increasingly clear that the counter-culture messages that I would often find so interesting were not (at least not directly) what other Bronzers were getting from *Buffy*.

Melanie had obviously given some thought to why she was drawn to *Buffy* and The Bronze. Like most Bronzers, she had been talking about “this community” before I had asked if it really was a community in the first place. When I did ask her what made it a “real” community, she responded much like many Bronzers did: by challenging the premise of the question. She said that there’s no reason to assume that relationships are “artificial” just because they’re on line; just because it happens at The Bronze doesn’t mean it’s not real.

This did, however, lead to a discussion of something that Melanie considered “artificial” about The Bronze: the VIP whores. According to Melanie, VIP whores are people who attempt to inflate their own importance, and their egos, by association to various VIPs. To some degree, I imagine this is hard to avoid on an official fan site. But in this case, there was a tendency toward behaving like a “cult of personality” among some Bronzers, especially regarding personalities such as Joss and the writers, that many Bronzers found cliquish and unpleasant.

When I asked Melanie about the messages people were taking from the show, and whether this tendency toward a cult of personality affected their beliefs, I was somewhat surprised by her answers. Regarding race, Melanie said that the lack of racial diversity on TV could be a result of writers being taught to write what they know about. Regarding race at The Bronze, she said of Bronzers that “the majority of people there don’t feel that race is an issue,” because it’s not an issue for them. Bronzers who can afford to have computers and fly to LA for Posting Board Parties are probably unaffected by race. When I asked why Bronzers were so receptive to gay rights issues—as happened when the character Willow came out as a lesbian—rather than race issues, Melanie said that it was, basically, trendy. It was the cause of the moment, and it was considered cool and cutting-edge to have a gay cast member. Unlike racial equality, which people see as a fight that as already been fought, they see LGBT equality as a fight still being fought. And, Melanie said, it’s considered cool to stick up for your gay friend.

The implication is that Hollywood remains segregated by race, but less so by sexuality. Furthermore, the fact that gay rights issues were important to people who tended to have a “cult of personality” made it easier for Bronzers to take a cutting-edge position on the issue. In other words, because LGBT equality was an issue that Bronzers were already receptive to, they were able, as a group, to adopt a pro-gay (or at least strongly anti-homophobic) position when that was the message put forth by Joss Whedon and *Buffy*.

This struck me as a somewhat jaded—but not incorrect—perspective. From Melanie’s description, it almost sounded as if viewers were largely mentally disengaged, falling in line with what they were viewing if it was easy enough, but otherwise missing

the point. But this didn't quite fit with my view of Bronzers as viewers who seemed highly attuned to what they were watching, and creative and literate in expressing it.

One reason for this seeming disjuncture is, according to Melanie, related to being an American. Melanie pointed out that the majority of Canadians live close enough to the US border that they receive American broadcasts. However, at the same distance from the border on the US side, Canada is virtually ignored. Furthermore, as a rule, US television shows depict Americans in American locales, while international news in the US tends to focus on American wars. Canadian TV, on the other hand, shows both US and Canadian TV shows; and the lack of Canadian wars allows international news to cover a broader range of issues, and from a less self-interested perspective than in the US. Melanie spoke from personal experience, since her parents lived at the time in Ohio, saying "watching television in the States is a very insular experience because you don't have any sense of anything outside of where you are." Melanie told me that it's impossible to watch TV in Canada and not know what's going on in the world, but it's very possible in the US. And it didn't take much channel-surfing for me to become convinced that she was right.

This, then, is one answer to the question (put forth in Chapter 3) of why people liked and understood *Buffy* even if they had no idea what Southern California was like. It turns out much of what SoCal is (supposedly) like is broadcast to people around the world whether they want to see it or not. And so many viewers, both within and outside the US, are accustomed to seeing depictions of localisms to which they have no personal connection. In other words, I felt something of a personal connection to the teens on *Buffy*. But even viewers who didn't feel any such connection probably saw enough in

*Buffy* to relate to, and had enough practice decoding Hollywood's broadcasts, that it probably mattered little to most viewers.

But even more importantly, Melanie rather incisively identified the curious disjuncture of fans being generally unreceptive to the messages in *Buffy*—what I referred to as the cultural criticism of *Buffy* in Chapter 3—but nonetheless willing to take on the “cause of the moment” because it happened to be Joss's cause. It had less to do with the media itself, and more to do with Americans. From Melanie's perspective, the worldview of the average American is characterized by extreme myopia. It is a myopia based on individualism run amok, individualism reduced to self-centeredness, or perhaps to mere selfishness and egotism. Hence, Bronzers (being mostly Americans) might be willing to take on the “cause of the moment” if it is something that is obviously about them. Gay rights is such an issue, since it is about Bronzers and their friends and families, and was dramatically brought to the attention of Bronzers via the “New Moon Rising” episode and subsequent hysterics. Issues such as racial equality or mass production, however, are less immediate to Bronzers and therefore go largely unnoticed.

Melanie explained by saying:

It is just completely incomprehensible about how little Americans want to know about what isn't pertaining to their everyday life in their world. What happens on the other side of the world is important to me, because it will affect my everyday life in some way somehow. But I understand that. The average American does not. And that's where it becomes so frustrating. Because you see, you have these conversations with people that are so intelligent on so many other levels, yet they look at what happened on September 11th and have no idea how it could have happened.

Melanie went on to describe how her relationship with a close (American) friend changed soon after September 11, 2001:

And while I am very sympathetic as to what happened, and that, that's the main thing that happened between [us], that is what broke us into two as, as friends, was that she didn't understand that I cared, but I also cared about more than just what happened that day. I cared about what led up to what happened, and I cared about what was going to happen afterwards. While she, as a caring person that she is, could only see what happened in that moment, and that's how Americans are taught. They live in such a small bubble of things, it's just the here and now, which is, which is...an okay way to live for some people but I can't live that way, because everything effects everything else.

Melanie also offered an interesting outsider's view of 9-11. The DC Bronzers and NY Bronzers were among the largest and most active of the local Bronzer groups; there were many regular posters from those areas, and this gave Melanie an excellent perspective on people's reactions that day. She said that the people who were actually in the DC and New York areas had a much calmer sense of things than the people who watched it on TV. She said it was the people outside of the affected areas who were calling for revenge—since nobody knew who the hijackers were, it's telling who was calling for revenge against whom—while the people in DC and New York were ready to move on, but the rest of the country wouldn't let them. Indeed, this comports with my perspective, as well as the perspectives of virtually all of the DC, NY, and Canadian Bronzers with whom I talked.

My interviews with Melanie were among the least cheerful overall, but also provided a template of sorts for the remaining interviews. One reason for this is that Melanie happened to be the person I interviewed the most, and the person I hung around the most. She was also the first person I interviewed after The Bronze had lost its official home and had been seemingly forgotten and had become permanently splintered. Hence,

the community's dissolution was much on her mind. Furthermore, not only was there no official Bronzer home, but discussions about 9-11 and other such matters also caused rifts between community members and intensified online arguments. And all this occurred before social networking sites like Facebook went on line, so for Bronzers, many of whom talked to one another every day, there was no longer any way to get in touch with each other. At the time, it wasn't clear whether The Bronze as a community would disappear completely, or whether community members would somehow stick together even without a home. Melanie likened The Bronze to her friends from high school: she said they'll always be that group of people, but they're never going to be the same, because there's always change and growth, and in fact she may not even want things to stay the same if there was no growth. And then she added, "maybe what's happened in the last year is a malignant growth."

### ***Chrissy***

Chrissy is a college-educated white woman with a degree in fine arts and a minor in English literature. Fine arts, she told me, is the opposite of commercial art, or "postmodern exploring-issues-kind-of art." She focused on photography, video, and film, and is employed as a graphic designer. It hadn't occurred to me at the time, but many, if not most, of the Bronzers I met were white woman with humanities degrees who worked in graphic design. This, perhaps, reflects a degree of self-selection among Bronzers, since an arguably feminist show about a strong young suburban high school girl would likely appeal to young, independent-minded women. And women with computer skills might be comfortable going on line to talk about *Buffy*. In other words, those two factors



are non-causal: they don't explain why people like Chrissy would become Bronzers, but they do explain why we might expect Bronzers to be people like Chrissy.

Chrissy has a curious ability to draw out the flaws in my questions. The first thing I asked her was why she felt comfortable interacting with people on line even though she knew nothing about them. This was the case when I first emailed her, out of the blue, to ask if I could use her post as an example, and she readily agreed. She said The Bronze as an institution functioned as something of a gatekeeper, and after having spent about a year there, she learned that there was a consensus about certain individuals to be avoided. But was it not strange for her to talk to someone like me, who she didn't know until I wrote to ask to use her words? She said, "I know Melly, and you know Melly, so it starts to feel a little it less scary."

She followed this statement by explaining that I could ask the same questions about real life: we go to bars, talk to friends of friends, meet people in college, and all this is considered completely normal even though, in actuality, we know nothing about these real life people, either. In other words, the real question was: why am I asking about scary people on line instead of scary people in general? Indeed, Chrissy's response indicated an important point, especially in the context of hysteria about "internet predators": people who are scary on line also exist in person. It applies also to issues such as race in cyberspace: just because we can't see skin color on line doesn't mean that racists aren't still racists when they go on line (Kolko 1-5).

This idea, that asking about life on line as if it was different from real life was based on unexamined assumptions that I should examine, became something of a recurring theme with Bronzers, enough so that Chrissy was the last person I asked about

it. But it did raise an excellent point: in my questions about living on line, Chrissy, Destiny, and a few others had turned my question about virtuality into an implicit criticism of the real. I was repeatedly left thinking that real life is very weird, not only because it's just like all the things that I had assumed would be weird about virtual life, but because I didn't even realize that in the first place.

When I asked Chrissy why she started watching *Buffy*, she said it was because she was in college, and bored, and “vegging” in front of the TV, when she came across a blonde girl fighting. She said to herself, “look, it's Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” and then realized that it really was *Buffy*, and that the movie had been made into a TV show. She said she started watching because likes “crappy TV”; in this case, the show turned out to be good, and she kept watching. The first episode she saw was “Nightmares,” which was the third-to-last episode of the first season.

Chrissy told me she first found the Bronze during Season 2 of *Buffy*. She had been working at a summer job for her father's company, and (much as happened to me during the summer after season 2), she found she had little work, but a fast internet connection. She started out reading fan fiction on line, but was soon bored by it; fan fiction sites were, for her, far too static. She also tried out some chat rooms, but found those too and transient. Furthermore, she says that chat rooms were all about meeting a guy, and she had little interest in meeting a guy on line. Chrissy said that because people live in real life, she ultimately needs to know people in real life to consider them friends.

Chrissy told me that it wasn't long before she had had enough of fan fiction sites and chat rooms. The former were not interactive at all, and the latter, while interactive, were too superficial. Before finding The Bronze, Chrissy had been reading Swans

Crossing fan fiction, and realized that Sarah Michelle Gellar had also played Sydney on Swans Crossing. It was at this point that she started looking for more information online. She thought a posting board with a theme to it might be less superficial.

When she found The Bronze, Chrissy jumped in without hesitation, which was something I still had difficulty comprehending. She responded by saying that she's a very social person: her favorite thing to do is to round up some friends, get dinner or coffee or a pint, and talk all night. For Chrissy, The Bronze worked well because it allowed people to get to know each other better than was possible through either chat rooms, or through the Usenet type of threaded discussion forum that required people to stay on topic. Those formats were too shallow or too rigid (or both), and therefore made it impossible to get to know anything substantive about other people. Furthermore, since *Buffy* was "literary" and laden with metaphors, it gave her something to talk about, and something that she wanted to hear other people's thoughts about.

Curiously, Chrissy, like Melanie, was one of the few Bronzers who recalled specifically how she happened upon The Bronze. Her story is similar to Destiny's: a fine arts major with computer skills and some extra time. And, she had enough of a predisposition for popular culture, specifically *Buffy*, that before she even knew that there was a *Buffy* series, she saw a blonde girl fighting and thought "Buffy." Perhaps most interesting was that Chrissy's story hinges on a number of otherwise trivial factors: a summer job, free time, and Swans Crossing fan fiction. I had never even heard of Swans Crossing. And yet, Chrissy and I have been friends for years in part because of a teen drama that aired for 13 weeks in 1992.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Subjacent and Orthogonal: Viewing from Wrong Angles and Right Angles***

The second time I went to Toronto to observe Bronzers in their natural habitats, I decided to try a different approach to “getting inside their heads.” I had been a participant observer for several years; but, participant observation was conducted from my own computers in my own workspaces. I had also conducted several in-person interviews; but those interviews were generally in arbitrary spaces. There was simply no analog to the traditional ethnographic approach of interviewing people in the same locale in which one was a participant observer. I nonetheless decided to approximate this traditional approach as closely as I could. I did so through the invention of something that came to be known as “Natural Habitat Day.”

Natural Habitat Day is not unlike Bring Your Child To Work Day, except that instead of your child, it’s your ethnographer that you bring to work. When I first told Melanie that I’d like to go to work with her, she thought this was a bit strange. I did too, but I didn’t tell her that, because I wanted her to think that I knew what I was doing. I don’t think she bought it. But, she did let me go to work. So, we went to work.

Melanie’s office is in downtown Toronto, next to a subway station. I didn’t mention it at the time, but to me, this was tremendously exciting. The idea of being able to leave the house, walk a few blocks to a subway station, and take it into the heart of a clean, bustling downtown area, was not something I was accustomed to.

Once off the subway, we went next door, and we were in Melanie’s building. Melanie gave me a tour of the office, and then we went to her office. The building itself is a shiny glass office building, the kind of nondescript high-rise that would have fit into most downtown landscapes. Even from inside, I was struck by the quantity of glass. The

outer walls of the outside offices were mostly window; the outer walls of the inside offices were clear glass. Melanie's office was an indoor office, remarkably tidy and functional. I couldn't help but notice that there weren't books and papers overflowing from every horizontal surface, indicating a level of organization that, I noted with ambivalence, had for the most part eluded me.

Melanie's computer faced the inside wall. This meant that everyone in the hallway could see her computer screen over her shoulder. It also meant that everyone in the hallway could see me seated in the corner, facing Melanie facing her computer. This layout apparently had something to do with increased energy efficiency, but I mostly just felt overly visible. I imagine I would've gotten used to it quickly enough, but I didn't like the idea that passers-by could see my every move, or that the clear-glass fishbowl-like office spaces might be a matter of surveillance rather than energy efficiency. I have trouble thinking if I'm not sure I'm alone with my thoughts, and even more so when I'm distracted by thoughts of being under surveillance. Hence, I initially expected this to be quite awkward; but it turned out to be quite comfortable, for me at least. I took notes while Melanie worked, and Melanie occasionally stopped to explain what she was doing.

Melanie typically gets to the office by 8:30 a.m., turns on her computer, checks her voice mail while her computer starts up, and then checks her email. She first checks her work email account, then checks her main personal account, and then other accounts. Then she emails Chrissy, who's like the water cooler person she talks to.

On this particular day, after being in the office for about an hour, Melanie said something half-jokingly about being bored, and decided to see if Chrissy had written back. Chrissy had, in fact, written back, and had also mentioned me in a LiveJournal

post, saying—cheekily, I assume—that now that Melanie and I are able to entertain each other, she hoped we wouldn't forget to entertain her as well.

The use of productivity-enhancing devices, such as computers, to engage in non-productive activities, was something I had considered somewhat subversive, much like the Walkman in Rey Chow's description (145-46). It occurred to me at this point, however, that using a computer for personal communication was probably less a matter of subverting the capitalist work environment, and more a *quid pro quo*. As much as corporate managers might like to prevent employees from doing anything other than working, they also probably realize that it's best for both people and profits to allow people their water-cooler conversations and their personal phone calls. But with the advent of Web communities, both the water cooler and the conversation next to it moved beyond the confines of the workplace.

Hence, water-cooler conversation between coworkers had migrated into imagined communities between people who needn't be coworkers. But these are not Benedict Anderson's imagined communities. These communities are not singular groups, such as a nation that we can imagine, but rather are communities of people we imagine are out there to bolster and support us psychologically. This is good for people, because it keeps them sane, and it's good for business, because people keep working instead of seriously challenging the terms of their employment or the system that institutionalizes those terms. In that sense, virtual communities seem less liberating and subversive, and more like thin gruel that makes bearable an otherwise soulless capitalist life under fluorescent lights with—in this case—uncomfortably cold conditioned air to filter the pollution of a particularly smoggy Toronto day. Interestingly, while Melanie was working and

communicating with friends and wishing for a warmer office, I found myself staring out through the glass hallway and the glass walls of the outer office behind me, staring into the warm smog, wondering how it happened that instead of questioning why the smog exists in the first place, we just fixate on keeping it out of our shiny energy-efficient air-conditioned buildings, and in the process create even more smog.

Fortunately for Chrissy, we had no intention of forgetting to entertain her. A few days after visiting Melanie's office, I visited Chrissy's office. Chrissy had told me that I wouldn't be able to hang out there all day, but that I could come by for a tour. There was less smog, and I went to a different subway station, and I had to walk a few more blocks after exiting, but otherwise, my "commute" was much like it was when I visited Melanie's office. I followed Chrissy's directions, found the correct building, went inside, and asked for Chrissy. The person at the front desk made a phone call, and then Chrissy came down the stairs. I was given a visitor pass, which I carried around with me the whole time because I couldn't figure out how to stick it to my shirt. I wondered if maybe I should have worn a shirt with buttons.

We went back upstairs, into what was essentially a big room. In the middle were a bunch of partitioned spaces—a cubicle farm—but most had only two carpeted dividers. Along the outer wall were manager's offices. Chrissy's cubicle was on the left corner, facing out; this meant that her space faced into the middle of the cubicle farm. Chrissy did graphics and publishing work, which meant that she had a huge computer monitor, and also other equipment (like a scanner and printer) that was also used by other employees. Hence, her work space was not very private.

Chrissy said that at this job, which she had started recently, she couldn't get away with personal computer use as much as she used to, because everyone could see exactly what she was doing. While we were lingering near her cubicle, Chrissy introduced me to a coworker (a manager, I think). We talked briefly, and I noticed at that point that it would indeed have been difficult not to notice what was on Chrissy's screen. Then we continued our tour, and went to the copy room. Chrissy pointed out the paper shredder, which she said she likes to use sometimes, even though she never has anything to shred. I couldn't tell if she was kidding.

Chrissy and I went out to lunch, and she pointed out several local establishments that she frequented. After lunch, she went back to work, and I embarked on a thought experiment: what would it be like to be Chrissy? I went to a coffee shop that Chrissy had mentioned, the Second Cup, and tried to imagine what my life would be like if I was living Chrissy's life. After an hour or so of typing up notes at the Second Cup, I decided to walk, literally, in Chrissy's footsteps. I proceeded farther up Yonge Street to get a sense of what it would be like to live and work in the area, and kept an eye out for some of the places Chrissy had mentioned.

As I was wandering along Yonge Street, taking in the sights and sounds and impressive array of independent record stores, I was reminded that, when I had glanced at Chrissy's monitor, she had several applications open, including an instant messaging window. I hadn't recognized any other window, and wondered whether her coworkers would recognize The Bronze—or any other window to Bronzers—if it was open on her screen. I suspected not: I only recalled what I already recognized, and Chrissy's coworkers may well notice only what they recognize. Looking down at the sidewalk, it



occurred to me that it was possible that just below my feet were the wires that connected Melanie's water cooler conversation, emanating from somewhere off to my left, to Chrissy's window to her community, hidden in plain sight on her screen.

The sidewalk itself was somewhat unusual. It was the wide, urban kind of sidewalk, not the residential kind. It looked to be made of slabs of concrete, each as wide as the sidewalk, and about three feet long. Between each concrete slab, I could just make out the tiniest green blades of grass, poking out in the space between. This image, of grass beneath and between concrete, turned out to be most useful. Melanie's water-cooler conversation had migrated into the aether, courtesy of the wires running below my feet. It was an underground community, subjacent to the dominant, mainstream, bustling city, tucked away below that ultimate symbol of modern civilization, pavement. Viewed from above ground, its denizens were exactly where they should be, in an office building off to my left and another one off to my right. But that's not where they lived; they lived somewhere in between. They were living at once in the mainstream and in a subculture of sorts, one that existed, literally, below.

Indeed, the community itself was strangely offset: it was in plain sight, but somehow still invisible. It was projected onto screens of computers, and it looked nothing like a spreadsheet or a word processor, but there was no reason for anyone to recognize it for what it was. To me, and to many Bronzers, The Bronze, that browser window to the community, looked like my community, my home page—the only home page I've ever had—my home. But most people looking at that screen head-on may as well have been looking at it from the side. Like the grass poking up from beneath, between the concrete slabs, this community existed perpendicular, or, more accurately,

orthogonal to the casual observer.

Orthogonality is a concept much-used in math and statistics, but is nonetheless useful in this case. It means, simply, that something is at a right angle to something else. A piece of paper sitting on a desk has four edges; each edge is orthogonal to the two adjacent edges. A pen sticking straight up is orthogonal to that paper. It exists completely independent of the plane of the paper except at the one point that it touches the paper. So it is with The Bronze, and indeed, to some degree, with many communities: they exist in the mind, in the imagination, interacting with the material world, the plane of physical existence, only at particular points or moments when they become manifest. The Bronze, too, is contained largely in the mind and imagination. However, even in its physical manifestation, it remains orthogonal to the material world. Like the blades of grass, it's there, but to most people, it's invisible. To Bronzers, the community is like big letters on a piece of paper; but to other people, it's as invisible as if they were looking at the same paper edge-on.

But The Bronze's orthogonality is also metaphysical. Inasmuch as it reflects a desire to be connected, it reflects something intersecting the inner self, the body, the material world, and cyberspace. That desire, to be connected, cuts across those four realms. It would, of course, be easier if people could just connect in person. But given the nature of our material existence, the desire for human connection must take the long way: through cyberspace, the space where the mind can go when the body can not.

If the desire for connection, for humanity, is what makes the journey through cyberspace, the question is: do people know that this is what they're doing? And if so, does the process work the other way, too? Can the use of cyberspace allow people to

make a deep connection to their underlying reality, the inner reality from which this desire for community originates? If so—and that’s a big “if”—then people may, in fact, be using cyberspace to reach something deeper than the material.

If cyberspace allows people to think beyond the material, then it has the potential to engender epistemological change. The medium then, might allow people to understand themselves in new ways, in ways orthogonal to materiality. This, indeed, would be subversive and liberating: the use of cyberspace to deconstruct the epistemological validity that sequesters the body in one place while the mind’s desire escapes into the aether, to deconstruct the very notions of labor and work on which capitalism is based.

Thus, Bronzer culture exists subjacent to everyday life: although Bronzers live their lives in offices and dorms and a variety of other settings, they live their Bronzer lives just below the radar of mainstream culture. There is a subculture, one that has no recognizable source of cohesion except to the members who keep their community in their imaginations. Similarly, Bronzer community exists orthogonal to mainstream real life communities. The Bronze community intersects many other communities, cutting across and lying beneath mainstream communities and cultural formations. While they inhabit the physical worlds of work and school and home, Bronzers write their community into existence, often without the full consent or understanding of the persons with whom they occupy other communities.

### ***Petar***

Petar found The Bronze in the summer between the second and third seasons of *Buffy*; before then, he had posted in the chat room at The Bronze. That summer, he had been in Serbia, and when he returned, the chat room was down for maintenance. So, he went to a few other chat rooms, but he found them all boring, so he went back to The Bronze, and decided to try the linear posting board, even though he didn't know what a posting board was. At first, he couldn't figure out how to use it. He said he read it for half a day, and couldn't understand why it didn't change. So, he went back and read the directions; when he came back to the posting board, he saw new posts. There was a WITT event taking place for Lady Bathory's birthday, so he wrote himself into it, and thenceforth became a regular poster.

When I asked Melanie why she posted at The Bronze, her answer was that it was a place of warmth. Chrissy was more concrete: when I asked her why Bronzers became such close friends, she said of Bronzers that there's "something in the way we're wired that makes us want to be communicating all the time." And perhaps not just communicating, but connected. Petar had a similar view, although from a different perspective. For Petar, as with Chrissy, communicating on line was ultimately about meeting people in person. But he had little interest in conversations about everyday or quotidian matters; this might be what holds communities together, but for Petar, the nice thing about The Bronze is that *Buffy* provides a safety net, something to talk about when there's nothing interesting left to say about oneself. Petar said that he used to write quite a bit of fan fiction; so, he still finds plenty to talk about on line. But, aside from fan topics, he has little left to say about his own life.

When I asked him where he got his Bronze name, Petar said it was taken from a William Gibson novel. This led to a conversation about conflict on line: apparently, when Petar was in chat rooms, he'd get hassled by people who found his on line name offensive. This, he believes, is because people feel safe on line, and this makes them feel brave enough to start arguments. When I asked why, he said that "flame wars don't happen in real life; fights happen in real life." He went on to give an example of a Bronzer who was often involved in arguments at The Bronze. Petar pointed out that many people would say unkind things to him on line, but that nobody would say anything to him in real life. The reason is that they know that won't get punched in the face for doing so. Petar went on to say that in real life, if anyone had tried to start an argument with him or spread gossip about him like they had at The Bronze, he'd end up fighting them. Petar said that even if he ended up getting his "ass kicked," sometimes it's necessary to fight to show people that there are consequences to their actions.

Petar continued in that vein, saying that he finds it strange that so many people won't deal with issues in real life that become such a big deal on line. In real life, what "mature adults" do when told "this is what someone said about you" is respond "I don't care." But on line, the gossip and innuendo proliferate. Petar described conflict at The Bronze as follows:

On The Bronze, people get into arguments to change other people's minds, which is totally not the purpose of an argument. An argument is there to make you think about your argument. [...] nobody wants to be proven wrong. Because you're trying to prove somebody wrong, you're of course going—you're surprised when they get angry? Is that the way you win an argument? I've talked to people after these huge rows they've had on the board, and 'I don't even know why they got so upset!' 'Well, because you were telling them they were wrong.' 'Well they were!' 'And you don't know why they got pissed off at you? They didn't think they were wrong.' 'But they were.' 'This is why they got pissed off!' And I'm

getting pissed off trying to explain it to them! It's, you know, people don't know how to argue on the board for the most part.

Petar elaborated by saying:

people talk without knowing what the hell's going on. This is not a board thing, this is a person—people thing. To be heard is, something that—you know, especially in the West, in North America, in Canada, in the U.S.—even if you don't have an opinion, you find one now, and you yell it, louder than everybody else. Why? Because God help you if you're ignored. Because then they don't know you. You don't want to be in the audience. You want to be up front, especially on The Board.

Petar went on to say that at The Bronze, and in western culture in general, people tend to speak louder and louder just to be heard, to get noticed. And, as everyone does this, everything gets louder, and everyone listens less. Petar liked The Bronze because, more often than not, his argument would be the one to cut through the din. This was not, he hastened to add, due to his great debating skills, but rather because he would avoid subjects unless he was confident that he knew what he was talking about. Usually, people would engage his argument, and he would end up learning something, and have a better argument for it. The really good arguments, according to Petar, occur when people really think about what they're saying, and the conversations go on for a really long time, and even if nothing gets resolved, that's okay, because the point is to enjoy the process of honing the argument. Apparently, despite his frustrations with the pettiness and scandalmongering at The Bronze, Petar still found it to be a community he could enjoy learning from and engaging with.

It was less clear to me what Petar thought of arguments, or polemics, put forth by TV. Did Bronzers see *Buffy* as cultural criticism as I did? Would they take ideas from TV shows and use them to challenge themselves, to learn something, to hone their arguments? Petar didn't seem to think so. He said that people take what they want from

TV, and therefore would only absorb messages that they were already inclined to accept. In other words, TV can nudge people's thinking in whatever direction it's already going, but it won't challenge anyone, because people can just change the channel.

I asked Petar about the episode "Doublemeat Palace" (DMP), in which Buffy must find a job, and ends up working in a fast food restaurant, which is more nauseating, and only slightly less horrifying, than anything else she's been forced to deal with on the hellmouth. After that episode, fast food restaurants threatened to pull their advertising if Buffy did not find a different job. Unlike the fast food industry, however, Petar did not see the episode as an attack on fast food. He likened the idea of, for example, becoming a vegetarian after watching DMP to the idea of refusing to wear necklaces (which could be used to cast dangerous love spells) after the episode "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" (BBB).

There is, however, a difference between the two situations: fast food is real, and cursed necklaces are not. The "Doublemeat Palace" is a representation of a real-life fast food restaurant; in fact, some Bronzers even discussed their experiences working in fast food, and several Bronzers mentioned that they actually found it as unpleasant as depicted on *Buffy*. On the other hand, the love spell in BBB is imaginary. Thus, Petar's underlying assumption was apparently that because *Buffy* is fiction, everything in *Buffy* must be make-believe, for entertainment. Hence, the various real-life horrors perpetrated by the fast food industry are put into the same category as love spells gone wrong. The implication is that cultural criticism via TV not only doesn't work, but has the opposite effect: rather than important issues standing out, they get trivialized, downgraded to the status of completely make-believe and irrelevant issues. This matches quite closely Neil

Postman's critique of media: it's disinformation that reduces everything to trivia and irrelevance (107-11). The only possibility that remains in its wake is amusement. Hence, if it's gratifying, it's only so because it has trained us to be gratified by nothing but amusement.

Petar, however, also offered another example: that of the Willow/Tara relationship and the episode "New Moon Rising" (NMR). Petar said that, even for someone who is anti-gay, if "you're honest with yourself, and you question yourself, you can learn something from it, and that's what storytelling is about, to learn from other people's experiences. [. . .] That's the purpose of it, anyway." He continued: "take what you can, from anything you can. [. . .] would it make you feel better if you watched a show for so long, for nothing, and you got nothing from it? [. . .] if it never made you ask anything, why don't you just stare at a wall for all the good it did you?" Of the flame war that raged on The Bronze in the wake of NMR, Petar mentioned that Bronzers were sometimes as harsh as anti-gay bezoars. He attributed this to the fact that ultimately, the argument wasn't about right and wrong, or social justice, or being a better person, but rather simply about defending one's own position.

On the one hand, then, Petar seems dismissive of the idea that something on TV can be applied to real life, to actually challenge one's perspective and change one's view of real things that happen in real life. On the other, however, he insists that it is possible to change one's thinking about something such as same-sex relationships. This may simply be an example of what Petar himself was pointing out: that most people won't be affected by what's on TV (like a critique of fast food) unless they're already predisposed to support it (like a lesbian relationship). Or, it could also be that when Petar talked of



changing one's thinking and honing one's ideas and arguments, that's literally all he meant. Perhaps he did not mean to imply that such thinking and honing would lead to a shift in one's actions. Indeed, this would fit with the description of contemporary life being postmodern in the sense that it is primarily concerned with the manipulation of abstract symbols. In such a situation, the possibility of physical action to implement one's ideas is not possible, and words become the only available actions. The unfortunate consequence is that words and actions may become conflated, and action becomes reducible to lip service.

This is not only similar to what Melanie said regarding race and sexuality, but is also similar to political columnist Adam Serwer's insights regarding race. According to Serwer, most Americans, being white, have never experienced actual racism: "For the most part, most white people's experience with race isn't one of racial discrimination. They can only relate to racial discrimination in the abstract. What white people can relate to is the fear of being unjustly accused of racism. [ . . . ] This is why allegations of racism often provoke more outrage than actual racism." For the majority of Americans, the closest they have come to experiencing racism is being accused of being a racist. Thus, what really matters regarding race isn't actual racism, but the accusation of racism. In public discourse, actual tangible racism is thus reversed and reduced to the question of who called whom a bad name.

One implication of such a situation—in which words implicitly displace actions—is that members of a dominant culture, such as anti-racist white people, may receive their only reinforcement from similar individuals. As Patrick Grzanka argues in his study of white guilt, the result is an anti-racism that is motivated by white people's concerns over

how they will be viewed by other white people. In describing his findings, Grzanka writes that “articulations about White guilt” by his research participants “highlight the self-focused properties of White guilt: namely, that the threat of being called racist is a more salient and predictable motivator of antiracism than genuine concern about social justice” (322). Hence, not only can language isolate itself from action, but it can also isolate white discourse from non-white people.

Similarly, it is possible that for Bronzers, most of whom are unaffected by the material effects of, say, homophobia, the most homophobic thing they can imagine is hate speech. Hence, speech—the abstract symbols we manipulate—becomes the domain in which thinking, learning, honing, and change occur. But the non-symbolic world becomes concurrently opaque. The material effects of, say, the fast food industry will in such circumstances remain unnoticed. Furthermore, returning to Melanie’s comments about racism and homophobia, we might expect that if Bronzers, too, are motivated by how other Bronzers see them, they might be compelled to “perform” their anti-homophobia when confronted by the offensive posts following “New Moon Rising.” However, there would be no such obligation regarding issues of race, since such issues were never as explicit, nor were they as central to either *Buffy* or *The Bronze*.

Oddly enough, the example of fast food and homophobia were hypothetical, at least until the summer of 2012, when a fast food chain became the target of boycotts in response to its president’s vocal and public homophobia. This resulted in a counter-boycott as homophobes flocked to the spend money at Chick-fil-A. Ignored in the culture-war skirmish—which, from what I can tell, consisted mostly of dueling memes on Facebook combined with breathless coverage on Fox News—was the fact that basically

all fast food is bad for everyone who lives on this planet. Indeed, while the Chick-fil-A CEO's bigoted speech was repugnant, the fact remains that there are myriad tangible costs imposed on gay people and the LGBT community in general that have been ignored both before and after the great Chick-fil-A debate (Sirota).

Put another way, the disjuncture between Petar's dismissal of the cultural criticism of DMP versus his acceptance of the message of NMR may indicate that Bronzers were attuned to TV's cultural criticism in some ways but not others. They tended not to be tuned into the cultural criticism unless it was fairly obvious, and either strongly supported their thinking or strongly challenged it. However, they were attuned to the show itself, to the aesthetic, the emotional realism, and emotional connection at *The Bronze*. But they were not attuned to ways of reassessing their own lifestyles based on a TV show. Their creative and literary impulses tended to be very inside-the-box, very Kuhnian in the sense that they were enjoying the depth of the viewing experience, but not necessarily taking it beyond the framework they were given.

### ***How We Watch***

Thus, fans often seem unaware of substantive messages in the show. I've repeatedly asked Bronzers if they noticed various polemical messages in various episodes, and they've repeatedly said they didn't. What they did usually notice, however, is how well each episode was written, produced, directed, and acted. In other words, Bronzers are enormously sophisticated at reading each episode as a text. But, they rarely put the episodes in their cultural contexts; they almost never make a connection between the ideas in *Buffy* and real life.

As mentioned above, one exception to this was the episode “New Moon Rising.” Another was the Season 4 episode “Where The Wild Things Are” (WTWTA). In that episode, Giles and company meet with the former director of an orphanage, Mrs. Holt. They discover that Mrs. Holt is a devout Christian who would abusively punish her orphans for their “impure” thoughts. Mrs. Holt explains her abuse by saying that the orphans “needed to be reborn.” She says: “Without me they would have been shut out of the kingdom. Lost to lust.”

Not too many Bronzers commented on the real-life implications of this episode, but the few that did weren’t happy about it. The two most vocal posters were both politically liberal Christian women. Their comments basically boiled down to one question: why did Mrs. Holt have to be a Christian?<sup>5</sup> One person even suggested that the episode might have been more palatable if the crazy religious lady had been a Muslim instead. My response to these posts was that *Buffy* is a show about challenging dominant beliefs and unexamined assumptions, so of course it’s going to mock the dominant American religion. In fact, I thought the whole point of that episode was to show that unquestioning belief can lead to dangerous outcomes. Additionally, Christianity has a singularly strong pro-abstinence and anti-sex tradition; it’s doubtful that the episode would make sense had Mrs. Hold been a non-denominational follower of a different religion. But I’m not sure my argument convinced anyone.

So the question in my mind became: why would Bronzers be bothered by the depiction of Mrs. Holt, but not any of the other anti-religious themes that I had noticed in *Buffy*? These Bronzers often watched episodes several times, and seemed to know every detail about the show and about Joss. It seemed unlikely that they didn’t know that Joss

was a sardonic atheist, and so it was surprising to me that they saw an anti-Christian message in this episode, but not in anything before this.

The third exception to the general Bronzer disinterest in *Buffy*'s polemics is the Season 6 episode "Seeing Red." In this episode, Willow's girlfriend, Tara, is killed in a manner reminiscent of anti-lesbian morality plays (Russo). As with "New Moon Rising," this led to an uproar. This time, The Bronze Beta was inundated with incendiary posts from newcomers, many of them lesbian activists, who were furious with Joss for killing Tara.

Because of Bronzers' overwhelming support for the Willow/Tara relationship—and by extension gay rights—I had expected that regular Bronzers would agree with the newcomers that killing Tara undermined *Buffy*'s anti-homophobic stance. I was wrong. Most Bronzers displayed as much annoyance with the gay-rights posters as they had with the homophobes of two years ago. I argued at the time that "Seeing Red" reiterated an anti-lesbian trope. But the only Bronzer who agreed with me told me that my arguments were going unheard because I had "challenged the liberal credentials" of my fellow Bronzers. Another person told me that the only reason Bronzers were so supportive of Joss's Willow/Tara storyline was that it was trendy to be favor of gay rights. So my tentative conclusion at that time was that Bronzers had become so attached to Joss that they would support him and his production decisions even when they were contradictory. The problem was that I couldn't reconcile that position with the few notable exceptions in which Bronzers were resistant to Joss's bandwagon.

The close relationship between Bronzers and Joss certainly makes it easier for Bronzers to support the show's polemics. Bronzers are probably less likely to criticize

Joss when they know he might be reading their comments. Furthermore, some fans probably receive validation from supporting the cutting-edge ideas of their hero. But the three episodes I've discussed highlight a more general question about The Bronze community: why are fans so supportive of Joss's ideas in some cases, but resistant in other cases, as in the episode "Where The Wild Things Are"?

The answer lies in the idea that how messages are received by audiences depends on whether those messages relate to individuals or groups. Americans tend to think in highly individualistic terms. We tend to focus on individual rights, but neglect that there are a variety of social and institutional factors that affect our individual rights. This ideology is what George Lipsitz refers to as "liberal individualism" (Possessive Investment 20-21). From this point of view, it's perhaps not surprising that Bronzers would rush to defend the Willow/Tara relationship, but fail to see that killing Tara reiterated a history of institutionalized discrimination. In other words, Bronzers, probably more so than most Americans, oppose bigotry, but fail to see it when it's institutional rather than overt. Hence, it's okay for Willow to be a lesbian, because that's an individual thing. But few people considered that killing Tara might support a long-standing ideology of anti-lesbian bigotry. Similarly, Bronzers were incensed when individual Christians were shown as cruel and dysfunctional. But they generally failed to notice that in the Buffyverse, most institutions, including organized religion, were also shown as cruel and dysfunctional.

The answer, then, to the question of whether fans care what Joss would do, is a qualified yes. Fans are inclined to adopt the messages that Joss is transmitting to them, but there's a limit to what they'll take. If fans are challenged too much, especially by

personal or individualized depictions, they'll resist. And the way we resist what's on TV is by tuning out, whether literally or figuratively. And this, I think, highlights a problem in our mass-mediated society. We're accustomed to appropriating what we need from our media. But the downside of doing so is that we're not really using media in the subversive or democratic fashion posited by some theorists (such as Henry Jenkins). Instead, we're stuck in a sort of feckless relativism, figuring that if it's on TV, we can just take it or leave it. If we're intellectually challenged by what we see, we can just tune out. The result is that we tend to be tuned in only when we're viewing the things that allow us to become further entrenched in our own pre-existing worldviews.

### **Longing and Belonging**

As I continued my interviews with the Torontonians, and subsequently expanded my interviews to include five informants in Southern California, a number of common themes began to emerge. Much of what I had learned through my initial investigations continued to be modified and augmented, but also generally corroborated. Consequently, the later interviews—those with the LA informants in particular—focused less on specificities and more on generalities. Furthermore, when I was interviewing the Toronto Bronzers, *Buffy* had only recently ended, and *Angel* was still on the air. Joss Whedon's TV series *Firefly* had been cancelled after 13 episodes, but its story arc would be concluded in a forthcoming theatrical release, *Serenity*. In other words, the community was frayed and homeless, but it had still been a single community for much longer than it had been dispersing.

By the time I conducted in-person interviews and natural habitat days with the

SoCal Bronzers, the community felt more like it was splintered than merely fraying. Hence, the later interviews not only focus on generalities, but also at times take on a much more negative tone, as Bronzers looked back at what was, or what could have been, from the vantage point of dissolution, of what went wrong. This was in contrast to the early interviews, in which Bronzers primarily focused on the present, in which the community was vibrant and the downsides could be more easily overlooked since they hadn't had any permanent consequences. Perhaps ironically, since completing the last of the interviews, the community has again taken on a positive tone, as old affronts are forgotten and replaced with nostalgia on sites such as Facebook (where, incidentally, a reunion party in LA for the 15th anniversary of the first PBP is in the works).

All of the Southern California Bronzers I interviewed happened to have come from somewhere else. I first met Polgara some years earlier, when she was moving across the country from Boston to Los Angeles; she made a detour through DC to meet up with DC Bronzers. She had a connection to *Buffy*, enough so that she had a demon—the Polgara demon of Season 4—named after her on the show. She has run several *Buffy*-related web sites, including a fan site for one of *Buffy*'s writers, and works in graphic design.

John, a white male, moved to L.A. from New Jersey, and actually worked on *Angel* for a time. He is a musician, and, like Petar, he was a political science major in college, but did not complete his degree. Claris, like Polgara, is a college-educated white woman who moved from New England. She is an artist, and works in graphic design. The two other L.A. Bronzers, Adina and Matthew, met at The Bronze and subsequently got married. Adina moved to LA from Kansas, and Matthew moved from England. Like



John, Matthew has been at The Bronze from the beginning, and had the foresight to save all The Bronze boards through 2001. Adina and Claris were also Bronzers from its early days. Adina and Polgara were the two that convinced me to join LiveJournal so as to keep in touch once the community started fragmenting in 2001.

### ***Why We Fight: Internet Hostility and Imagined Audiences***

Of the Bronzers I interviewed, Melanie was the first to emphasize infighting as a problem at The Bronze. Petar was probably the person who emphasized it the most, and was the most direct in explaining why it happens. But several other Bronzers mentioned that they had grown weary of snippiness, cattiness, cliquishness, and scandalmongering on line. I had certainly seen plenty of this at The Bronze. But for the most part, I did not have the same reaction to people's words that many Bronzers did. More often than not, when I followed an argument back to the initial comments from which it began, I failed to understand why it was considered incendiary, probably because I did not understand the subtext or the context—the relationship between the poster and the persons being offended, for example—that turned those words into barbs.

Overall, The Bronze was still far more civil than most on line forums I have visited. This was a group of people who talked to each other on line for years, and continue to do so. I cannot imagine this happening anywhere else. At the website for my local newspaper, the Washington Post, I don't think I have ever been able to read more than three comments before becoming repulsed. The hatemongering on line has grown so mind-numbingly pointless at virtually every Web site that I now use a comment blocker specifically so that I never need to read the comments following anything on line.

Even though I think of the WB's Bronze as existing in the golden age of Internet discourse, I have to admit, even at The Bronze, there was a significant amount of infighting. What might account for this? Petar was convinced that it was because rude commenters felt safe in the knowledge that they weren't risking a punch in the face. Every Bronzer I asked about this concurred with the basic premise: without physical constraints on people's behavior, they would behave like raging jerks.

I never quite believed this. First, on a personal level, I never felt safe posting comments on line; I thought it much more likely that some creep was reading and would somehow track me down. At least in real life, I knew who I was talking to and who could hear me. More importantly, however, I just could not believe that there were so many people who were angry all the time, biting their tongues for fear of reprisal, waiting for just the right opportunity to anonymously lash out with spectacularly ad hominem childishness. Is that really what people were like? Were there really so many people who were festering cesspools of anti-social behavior just waiting for the chance to vent their spleens through their fingertips? And, really, does anyone find it at all cathartic to sit at a computer and type out insults?

Probably some people do. But for the most part, it's difficult to believe that so many people's natural state is to be coiled up in anger, constantly looking for the perfect opportunity to spew venom. If that was the case, then certainly the millions of internet trolls currently on line would have found some other outlet before the invention of the Web. Perhaps, then, the problem lies not with humans, but instead with the medium. Indeed, the argument here is that recent research in neuroscience indicates that the problem is not with angry people, but rather with the anger-inducing properties of the

Internet.

As humans, we rely on five senses to communicate. When on line—or, in fact, using any electronic medium—those five senses are usually reduced to two, sight and hearing. Generally speaking, our media do not allow us to taste, touch, or smell. At The Bronze, only one of our senses is relevant: sight. Furthermore, our eyes are not seeing anything they have evolved to see. They are seeing abstract symbols on a screen. Thus, at The Bronze, none of our five senses are being used to interact with other people.

This is relevant because of a number of recent discoveries in neuroscience, most notably the discovery of mirror neurons. These are neurons in our brains that mimic, or “mirror,” the perceived experiences of other people.<sup>6</sup> These neurons explain why it is that many of us cry when we see other people cry. Some of us may tear up, in fact, without even realizing it or feeling sad. This is because our brains have evolved to notice other people’s facial expressions, and cause our own faces to mimic the same expression. And our facial expressions have evolved to generate particular feelings in response to particular facial expressions. And these feelings, in turn, lead to an emotional response that spurs us to action by creating the feeling that a particular action is correct.<sup>7</sup>

But feelings are what drive responses to stimuli: they tell us to act, for example, to avoid harm. Feelings are the context in which a person acts, the product of stimuli that we instinctively try to navigate. Our mirroring system allows us to feel some of what another person feels, so we can understand the context in which, and intention with which, that person acts; we can’t know what is driving their actions. Without this empathetic mirroring of other people’s emotions, we don’t know how someone feels, and hence we don’t know what to feel about someone. And without knowing what to feel, we

don't know what to think about a person, and without thoughts, we are unlikely to think about the appropriate action.

In other words, humans are hard-wired to think with our feelings. Furthermore, not only are humans hard-wired for empathy, but there is also evidence that humans are predisposed toward altruism, fairness, and cooperation. Indeed, we are probably not generally inclined toward aggression, greed, hostility, or selfishness.<sup>8</sup>

When we communicate on line, we lack the sensory input available in face-to face interactions, some of which tells us to cooperate, to have empathy, and to generally not be Internet trolls who accuse everyone of being a Nazi.<sup>9</sup> This is, of course, a serious problem, and one that, to my knowledge, has yet to be recognized in either scientific studies or in humanities research. Nonetheless, the implications are several and profound. First, the fact that we think with our feelings undermines Cartesian duality. Second, the fact that we are dependent upon hidden and largely unknown processes in our brains in order to get along with each other suggests that if humanity is to survive for much longer—an unlikely prospect, as mentioned in Chapter 1—a radical reordering of society is required. Otherwise, our everyday activities will increasingly cause us to practice anti-social behavior, while at the same time decreasing our familiarity with—and ability to enact—empathy, cooperation, and fairness.

There is, of course, much more to animals than a subset of brain cells, and it would be absurdly reductionist to argue that human behavior can be reduced to a single type of brain cell. None of this should be taken as an argument that media use causes anti-social behavior. Rather, it is an argument that in online interactions, people lack the sensory input that instinctively generates empathy and allows one person to have a sense

of the other person's situation. In the absence of such an instinct, humans will rely on other knowledge to understand the person's behavior. This other knowledge exists in the memory. In the absence of sensory input—which is immediate, and exists in the present—we rely on previously learned knowledge. Hence, in reacting to someone's written word, we use our own knowledge, memories, and experiences to create a context within which the words are written. In assessing the written word, our understanding depends entirely on creating an imaginary world in which those words may be read. That world is the missing context that allows us to make sense of the words. But that world is entirely a creation of our own minds. Therefore, our reactions to the words will reflect what is dredged up from our own minds and imagined about someone else, not what the mind that wrote them was thinking and feeling.

For our purposes, suffice to say that virtually all of my informants who had an opinion on the matter believed that Internet Hostility Syndrome—my informal term for the prevalence of insults and rudeness on line—was caused by there being something wrong with humans. I would argue, however, that there's something quite right with humans, but something wrong with our machines. Put another way, if there is indeed something wrong with people, it's that we thought we could interact via machines we can barely comprehend without experiencing negative consequences.

Interestingly, Chrissy was the only Bronzer who suspected that something like this might be the case. While she agreed with Petar that online rudeness is caused by anonymity—a lack of face-to-face interaction that might lead to getting punched in the face—she also added that when we can't see people's faces, we also can't see the hurt on their faces. So while Petar was more focused on the ability to get away with aggression,

Chrissy also noted that we might unintentionally get away with causing harm.

Chrissy's comment anticipated a notion I had been developing with regard to race in cyberspace, that of "imagined audiences." Put simply, I had noticed that conversations about race, or minorities in general, were often stamped out by the majority on line. The reason is that, by and large, people writing in online forums had some concept of who their reading audience was. This audience was imagined by the writer, and, in my investigation thus far, the imagined audience was usually similar to the original poster. Hence, when conversations about (for example race) would arise, people in the racial majority (white people) would speak as if they were speaking only to other white people, resulting in a discourse that served to marginalize racial minorities even more than if the conversation had been occurring in real life.

Combined with the above about Internet Hostility Syndrome, the result is that most of us, when posting on line, will have to some degree turned off our basic biological empathetic brain activity. Furthermore, we will have in our imaginations some concept of who is reading our words, and in the case in large open forums, will not know whether the people we are writing to are actually reading, or if the people reading are anything like we imagined. The result is exactly what Petar and many other Bronzers described: a majority tends to drown out competing ideas by, in effect, treating minority voices as if they're not even there in the first place. Minorities feel like they're invisible. And, in fact, they are invisible, at least in the imaginations of many posters. Add to this the likely hostility that will be generated by lack of in-person dialogue, and the result is exactly what we might expect: a bunch of people yelling at each other via their computers.

In this light, then, perhaps the most surprising thing about The Bronze isn't the

hostility, but rather the lack thereof. Not that The Bronze lacked snippiness; there was more than enough. However, it didn't strike me as being unequivocally greater or most hostile than the amount that occurs in real life. And it certainly didn't approach the level of intellectual putrescence that now seems endemic to all manner of websites.

### ***Watching, Posting, Imagining a Better Dream***

As mentioned previously, when I asked Bronzers why they watched *Buffy*, or why they went to The Bronze, or why they decided to post there, their replies were usually specific, but often oblique. Most Bronzers told me how they watched, or how they posted. This seemed like a natural response, so much so that it wasn't until much later that it occurred to me that there was a difference between "how" and "why." Most Bronzers could tell me "how": they could tell me the physical actions, the chronological story, that led them from one point to another. But very few (Destiny and Melanie being exceptions) could tell me why they did this, what compelled them, or why they chose one set of actions over another. As discussed above, this is largely because most people don't know which of their minor actions will lead to any particular outcome, and even fewer make note of their emotional state or psychological needs at the time.

To quote Sherry Turkle quoting Clifford Geertz, "ethnographers collect fragments of memoir from their subjects, approaching, in the words of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, large interpretation and abstract analysis 'from the direction of exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters'" (*Inner History* 3). The fragments I have collected indicate to me that the reasons Bronzers posted at The Bronze had a lot to do with many little things, but also a few bigger things.

As mentioned above in the context of my interview with Petar, Bronzers tended not to view *Buffy* as a critique of American culture. In all of my interactions with Bronzers, they pointed to something intangible as the reason they watched: Melanie's despair, Destiny's involuntary transformation, TC's hero's journey, Chrissy's fondness for bad TV and especially campy TV. It was Karl, however, who perhaps said it best when I asked him what drew him to *Buffy*:

The short answer is the Willow-Xander love. What hooked me was: the very first episode I saw was 'Homecoming' from the third season, and it was just all about how their unrequited love became very real at the absolute worst possible time. But I didn't focus on the absolute worst possible time so much as the best friends who finally realize that the other one was just like them only a little shorter.

This is what Henry Jenkins refers to as the importance to fans of "emotional realism" (107-19). Death and beauty and humor and romanticism, all crammed together, felt more real, more like real life, than actual attempts at depicting reality. Put more broadly, *Buffy* was a show that made us feel like we weren't the only ones, that there was someone out there who understood.

In other words, it was the "gothic aesthetic" described in Chapter 3 that, more than anything, explains the appeal of *Buffy* to Bronzers. That term is something of a catch-all for what is intangible, but is nonetheless not meaningless. It rather refers to the difficulty of expressing that which is inexpressible, of explaining that which is ineffable, and of claiming to value that which is not valued in American society. In a society that privileges reason, science, outcomes, materiality, and money, it is perhaps not surprising that very few Bronzers could give a direct answer to what drew them to *Buffy*. Few of us, I imagine, after chancing upon a TV show and an Internet fan community would, after years of being part of such a community, recall what we were thinking and feeling when



we got hooked.

But the idea that someone “got it,” that someone understood: I wrote about this myself, repeatedly, over many pages, without realizing that this is why I watched *Buffy*. It was the episode “Puppet Show” that got me hooked. It captured the intensity of always being a step behind, of always being not quite in the same mental space as everyone else because there were other secret concerns bleeding in, of always being in between the normal things—like school and family and society—that other people were either in or not. It ended with Buffy and the gang saving the day after much research and cooperation and hard work, only to find that the demon they had finally tracked down and beheaded happened to be on stage in the middle of the high school talent show. That was definitely just like my life, except for the beheading.

Most everyone I talked to pointed to something, or hinted at something, about why they watched *Buffy* that alluded to something not quite mainstream, something alternative, or at least on the alternative end of what was mainstream. Whether the bleakness and despair, or the campiness that was actually literariness, or the myriad other arcane reasons, they all pointed to depth, mystery, romanticism, emotional truth, and the truth of fantasy and imagination. Whereas much TV—and indeed, much of life in general—was characterized by failures of imagination, *Buffy* was about its success. This wasn’t about one man fighting against all odds against the bad guy du jour. It was about something never before seen on TV: a competent female and the people who she thought of as her (chosen, non-biological) family.

This became increasingly clear to me as I interviewed the SoCal Bronzers, and curious aspects of their backstories emerged. Polgara is, like most Bronzers, a single

white female who was something of a bookworm as a kid. She graduated from the University of Massachusetts, and now works in graphic design. Unlike most Bronzers, she grew up poor, and had a very tough childhood; she says she largely withdrew from the world, and remained withdrawn through college. It was when she became a Bronzer, and something of a rock star among Bronzers—she did, after all, become enough of a *Buffy* insider that she had a demon namesake—that she did all that intense socializing that people often do in college. But instead of a dorm, for Polgara, this was with Bronzers.

Philip mentioned similar sentiments to me about The Bronze. He, too, is college-educated, with a humanities degree. But he was a teenager when he found The Bronze, and it provided him with a support network. The Bronze was like his extended family, or perhaps was more like the crazy old uncle of the family, the one who is just removed enough from the everyday drama that he'll understand without judging. When I interviewed him, Philip said that probably most of his friends were Bronzers; at the time, this surprised me, as I had assumed that people with “too many” online friends might have an unhealthy relationship to real life. But Philip didn't think this was strange, even when I pressed him on it, and I was, once again, forced to reexamine my unexamined assumptions.

Clariss, like Polgara, is an upwardly mobile single white woman who grew up working class, and moved from the east coast to Los Angeles. She is an artist—she was drawing at an easel almost the entire time I interviewed her—who works in graphic design. Like Chrissy, she found The Bronze when she was working in college and was bored; she frequently posted on the L.O.S.E.R.s board. She was perhaps the most ready to move past being a Bronzer when I interviewed her; the cliques and the infighting had

gotten to be too much. Once in LA, she threw herself into rowing, which seems to have become, in a sense, an alternative to her alternative community.

Like most of the other Bronzers I talked to, Adina and Matthew were in transition when I interviewed them. They were living outside of LA, and they were preparing to move to Texas. Matthew's family was all in England, and Adina's was, I think, in Texas and Kansas. Indeed, like 13 of the 15 Bronzers I interviewed, transition figured prominently in their stories.

John, too, is something of a transplant. Like Petar, he was a political science major who did not complete his college degree. He moved to LA to work on *Angel*. He is also a musician: when I interviewed him, some six electric guitars and basses were lined up against one wall of his studio apartment. He is not a collector; he plays them, and he plays well. He loves music, he loves TV and movies, and he loves to write. He is constantly working on scripts, and is regularly talking politics with family and friends. He's the guy who's always helping people, fixing what's broken, and consoling who's hurting. In a sense, he's the purest expression of the community: he loves popular culture, and seems to care little for things like money. Unlike Claris and Polgara, with whom I sat in their offices, with John I went on his package delivery route with him all over the Los Angeles area. Even in his worst moments—like when he left his phone at Universal Studios and couldn't get it back due to some bureaucratic nonsense, which made him livid—he always manages to find something to enjoy in every moment. Even when stuck in traffic, he seems to just like being where he is. I imagine that, in another time and place, he might have been a poet, or a mystic, or just one of those people who wanders off into the woods to be literary and artistic. Perhaps the most curious thing

about John is that it came up more than once that he didn't complete his degree. But, the unasked question that seems far more important to me is: what did he do instead?

Indeed, why do we frame the question as one of missing out on education? Why not frame it as gaining something else? There is certainly something to be learned by not always framing people's lives in terms of missing something typical rather than gaining something atypical.

Indeed, in the case of my informants, as well as many other Bronzers I talked to, there is a sense of alternative-ness. If the American dream is rooted in a notion of stages of life—school, college, career, house, children, family—then Bronzers seem to not quite fit. The elements that seem increasingly common the more I talked to Bronzers were: boredom, arts and humanities majors, art and music, literature, working with computers, wanting to interact with people, not finishing college, finishing college and feeling uncertain. Taken together, they add up to longing and belonging. Or, perhaps, a longing for belonging.

But those elements are what Bronzers told me about. What I saw—what it felt like to hang out with Bronzers all day long in their natural habitats—was people making their own way in a world in which “traditional” ways don't work. So, they create their own ways of belonging. Some, like John, follow their longing: he works to make enough money to keep writing scripts and playing music. Some, like Claris, needed to move on, to perhaps be more like a “standard” grown up. Polgara, on the other hand, has an almost academic work environment, but also very much holds on to Bronzers. They're living the individualist part of the American Dream, but didn't get the home, career, and family quite as expected, because the world changed, but people's expectations didn't.

Much more so than is typical of Americans, the Bronzers I've talked to are single, and don't have children. This is to be expected in a wealthy nation of falling incomes and declining opportunity. But many Bronzers complain of the social pressure to get married and have kids. They are living proof that the "traditional" American life is no longer feasible; but most people just haven't gotten the memo. At some level, they're living with the truth of things, as did Buffy, that goes unnoticed by most people around them.

Still, somehow, we manage to stick together. For me, I stick together with Bronzers because, more than anyone else, they get me. They get what I mean when I write on Facebook or LiveJournal or The Beta. Somehow, they get me when we communicate in writing, and since writing is my primary means of communication, I can't help but feel like, more than most people, they get who I am.

This, then, is also why we post at The Bronze. As discussed in Chapter 4, one of the aspects driving the community was the particular use of language (that was discussed in Chapter 3). Another aspect, then, must be the emotional connection created when a group of people, having in common a sense of disjuncture with commonplaces, brought together by the "gothic aesthetic" of *Buffy*, find others who understand their perspectives and who understand what they find meaningful.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The PB Lingo page was at  
<<http://www.geocities.com/tanabtvs/pbinfo/pblingo.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> The URL of The Age Game was  
<<http://home1.gte.net/mlmclell/pages/agegame.html>>. It is currently available via the  
*Internet Archive: Wayback Machine* at <[http://web.archive.org/  
web/20020603074949/http://home1.gte.net/mlmclell/pages/agegame.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20020603074949/http://home1.gte.net/mlmclell/pages/agegame.html)>.

<sup>3</sup> The *Internet Archive: Wayback Machine* is available at  
<http://www.archive.org/web/web.php>.

<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, we now have Wikipedia, and Wikipedia knows about things like  
Swans Crossing. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swans\\_Crossing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swans_Crossing).

<sup>5</sup> A few Bronzers were similarly annoyed by the depiction of the misogynistic  
Southern preacher, Caleb, at the end of Season 7, beginning with the episode “Dirty  
Girls.” The objection was to the stereotyping of Southern preachers as woman-hating  
zealots.

<sup>6</sup> Most of what I know about neuroscience comes from mainstream news sources.  
In particular, The Washington Post’s science journalist, Shankar Vedantam, produced a  
series of articles on the social implications of new research in neuroscience. The Web  
magazine Salon also ran an excellent series of articles and interviews. On mirror  
neurons, see the articles by Burton (“The Dark Lesson Of Bernie Madoff”), Cone, Slack,  
and Vedantam (“How Brain’s ‘Mirrors’ Aid Our Social Understanding”).

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Tepper’s article in Salon discusses both mirror neurons and the idea that  
we think with our emotions. Tepper interviews neuroscientist Richard Davidson, who

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says that

facial expressions are very important for emotion, and recent theories suggest that facial expressions provide feedback to the brain and influence the emotional state of a person through that feedback. [. . .] and this suggests that we use our bodies to help decode the emotions of others by subtly simulating their emotions and mirroring their emotional state with mini-facial expressions of our own. If we can't make those facial expressions because our face is paralyzed, then our ability to understand their emotional state is impaired.

On thinking with our feelings, see the articles by Burton (“The Certainty Epidemic” and “My Candidate, Myself”), Vedantam (“Persistence of Myths Could Alter Public Policy Approach”), and Witt.

<sup>8</sup> On the human tendency toward altruism, fairness, and cooperation—as opposed to aggression, hostility, and selfishness—see Kenneally, Stipp, and Vedantam (“If It Feels Good to Be Good”).

<sup>9</sup> The internet entrepreneur Jason Calcanis suggested in 2009 that perhaps the reason we fight on line is that when on line, we are emulating the disadvantages that people with certain disorders experience. He calls this Internet Asperger’s Syndrome. This is, of course, a highly problematic formulation, particularly due to the comparison between computer use and psychological or psychiatric disorders (which are often themselves problematic). However, the first part of the formulation—the question of what happens to empathy on line—is legitimate, despite the subsequent turn toward pathologization (Calcanis, “We Live In Public”).

## **Chapter 6: And Now, The Exciting Conclusion**

By the time I was approaching the end of this ethnographic project, a funny thing happened: I started having trouble distinguishing my Bronzer voice from my academic voice. It seems I had become immersed enough in the community that I could no longer extract myself at will. This, I assume, indicates a degree of success in achieving the goal of getting into the heads of community members. Now the question is: can I get back out?

The answer's probably "no." As Bronzers have moved around on line, and formed various combinations of new on line communities, many use their real names, and I'm finding that I've started to forget their Bronzer names. Many Bronzers still call me JQ even in real life, but many have also started to forget Bronzer names. In fact, sometimes I can't even remember which Bronzer became which real-named friend. I just have a vague sense of things we talked about before we knew each other's real names. And sometimes I have the wrong vague sense associated with someone. And sometimes I can't even remember why I know someone, Bronzer or not, or if we've even met in real life. All I know for sure is that on Facebook, which is where I know the broadest group of real life people—and where I have joined four Bronzer groups—my single biggest group of friends is Bronzers.

And I also know that, when my words are sarcastic or harsh, my Bronzer friends are the ones who will laugh, because they're the ones who know—even if they've never seen my face in real life—that the horribly rude thing I posted was written with a smile on my face, and I'm posting it not to put anyone down, but to laugh at the absurdity of



real life. In fact, more than any other group I've come across, Bronzers live by the Internet rule of "attack the post, not the poster." The only other group that "gets" my words this way is academics in the humanities; the difference, however, is that my academic friends are people I originally met in person.

This is one of the advantages of communicating in public with a group—even a group with fluid membership and porous borders—for some fourteen years. We got to know each other. We got to know each other's words. And the words, they have an ebb and flow, a rhythm and rhyme. And some words and flows and rhythms start to sound like they go together with certain people. We got to know those words, and we got to know those people. Not that this doesn't take a long time, or that it's preferable to real life interaction. But it's one the advantages of becoming immersed without an exit strategy.

The words, even when artistic and beautiful, are hardly a substitute for real people. But the whole point is that they are, in fact, not a substitute for people. They're something else altogether. Once we realize that, we might still miss the people, but at least we have some lyrical part of them. And, of course, just as we never know how other people see us, we never know how other people see our words.

At one PBP I attended, I was in the hospitality suite, meeting Bronzers in person for the first time, when someone introduced me to a longtime Bronzer who I frequently talked to on line. As we shook hands, he looked baffled, and said "you're not...old." This turned out to be something of a recurring theme. Apparently, at the time, I wrote like someone at least 15 years older and stuffier: a number of people said they expected me to be someone more like a tweed-clad 40-something librarian—like Giles—than

someone like me.

Not that there aren't misunderstandings and arguments among Bronzers. But they were never as venomous or ubiquitous as on any other Web forum I've seen. Even when our politics are radically opposed, most of us still manage to get along on line. We still manage to get each other's words. It's probably a literary thing.

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Bronzers are people who need to write. They need to write not just to communicate, but because they need to be writing. They write to "communicate," not just in the strict sense of conveying information, but also in the sense of writing to be in the process of writing, articulating, introspecting, and reflecting. They write to be in the moment, to channel the moment, to be part of the flow of the moment. They need to be lyrical, and literary, and poetic; but oftentimes, they don't even care about that, and don't seem to mind if nobody's reading, as long as they're writing.

Bronzers "communicate" in the sense of reading, writing, responding, and interacting with the people in their community. It's not always about the content of the communication; it's often just about being in touch. It's about discovering, expressing, and dealing with the slings and arrows of real life. It's about the process of working through feelings, and dealing with problems and confusions, by putting them in words and putting them out there, in public. But this isn't the general public. It's a sequestered public, one that will understand the pop culture metaphors that we use when words otherwise elude us. And it'll probably also understand that the phrase *slings and arrows* is from *Hamlet*.

Every single Bronzer I've met writes. I assume that not every Bronzer writes fan fiction; but every person I've asked about it specifically has answered in the affirmative. When the official Bronze closed, I got a LiveJournal (LJ) account; this is a journal/blog site that allows my journal to be read by specific friends. But virtually all of my LJ friends are Bronzers; nobody else I knew had much interest. The one exception is a student of mine from several years ago. She felt very alienated in her first year of college, and, it turns out, was a huge *Buffy* fan.

Bronzers need to write like I need to play music. If there's no music, my brain will start making it, and then will tell my voice to start singing some tune it just made up, and eventually my brain will start adding words to this tune. I don't know how this happens; it just does.

I'd probably be okay if I had no reason to write. But I'd probably still do it anyway. I am quite sure, however, that a great many Bronzers would write even if they had no reason to. In fact, they already do. They post at The Bronze, and on their LiveJournals, and on Facebook. They do things like participate in the National Novel Writing Month program, and they often say they're doing it to get themselves to write.<sup>1</sup> As a group, they're more into writing than any other group I've ever met. And they don't do it because they have to, or even because they want to; many Bronzers do it because it's good for them, and they want to force themselves to write, to give themselves a reason to write.

Bronzers post on all manner of sites, and write prose, and poetry, and fiction. But it's not just that Bronzers write. They also—many of them, at least—have the same musical thing I do. They have to be musical. Destiny the opera singer, Melanie the

classical and jazz singer, TC the church choir singer, and John and Philip the guitarists, are not unusual among Bronzers. Less unusual, at least, than most people I know. And Bronzers, even more so than being musical, are artistic: many are graphic designers, and many draw, or paint, or do some other kind of art work.

And, of course, most are women; I didn't think anything of this at first, because fan communities—such as Janice Radway's readers, or the original *Star Trek* fans who agitated for it to be brought back after cancellation—usually consist mostly of women. I didn't give this a second thought until I paid specific attention to other shows on TV, and could find no others that featured female lead characters who are strong, nuanced, and emotionally aware. I never thought *Buffy* was particularly feminist, but compared to everything else on TV, *Buffy* is downright radical in its feminism.

### §§§

I began this dissertation with two basic questions: how and why is The Bronze a community? What is the meaning and purpose of The Bronze? These, and several related questions, were posed in Chapter 1. Among the related questions are: what needs does this community meet for members? How do issues of identity and social justice affect the community? What does this community tell us about the current “post-modern” cultural moment? I also indicated that the community's context is itself two media—broadcast and Internet—on which are “written” two forms of mediated content: a television show and a Web site. The community's context, then, is a Web site about a TV show that is itself a product of contemporary American culture. This raised the question of what constitutes a “real life” community, and the ways in which this community may be considered “real,” “virtual,” “material,” or “imaginary.”

The last of these questions, regarding the “real” versus “virtual,” has been addressed by many of the scholars mentioned in Chapter 2, as well as many of my informants over the course of my interviews. Indeed, my own investigations indicate the speciousness of the distinction between “real” and “virtual.” I did regularly ask about such distinctions, but community members themselves unequivocally dismissed their validity. This is perhaps not surprising, since there was nothing un-real about Bronzers, or their community. The community, of course, was not tangible, and not material; it was virtual in the sense that its home was a Web site. However, this is no different from any other community, which is hardly any more tangible or material. The primary difference between The Bronze and so-called “real life” communities was that The Bronze became a community because of the Website, rather than having a Website because it was a community. And, as discussed in Chapter 5, there are certainly important differences between an online community like The Bronze and other communities that have no online component. But these differences do not legitimize the virtual/real dichotomy.

This may seem obvious from our perspective now. However, when The Bronze went on line in 1997, the Web was relatively new; for most people, it had been accessible for less than five years. At the time, it was an exotic new frontier. The idea of finding a community on line was, frankly, weird. Bronzers themselves rarely mentioned that they were part of an online community; most of us still don’t volunteer information about why we know each other. It was so new and different then that nobody would ever put their real life information on line. One of the most important rules of The Bronze was that we should never give out our real names or other personal information (the information that we now refer to as our “wallet ID” that most sites require). But somehow we still

managed to get to know each other in person. Perhaps that's the reason why we got to know each other: we talked to each other as people, not (as social media now requires) as data points to be mined for marketing or surveillance.

The questions of how and why The Bronze is a community is covered primarily in chapters 4 and 5. Both chapters cover the "how" of The Bronze by examining the conversations, norms, rituals, and patterns of behavior. This was done both on line and off line through both in-person interviews and participant observation.

The question of "why" The Bronze is a community hinges on several peculiar aspects of the show, which are discussed in Chapter 3. Among these were the peculiar self-reflexive language of *Buffy*, as well as *Buffy*'s overall dialogue, which created a decentered and postmodern vision of the self. This language was, as discussed in Chapter 4, an important element in maintaining the dynamism of The Bronze.

Another peculiar aspect of *Buffy* is its "gothic aesthetic." This, more than any other single element, accounts for what attracted people to *Buffy* and The Bronze. This is an aesthetic of what Joss Whedon called "the truth of things," and what Rosalind Williams refers to as the "truth of fantasy." It is an aesthetic of mysticism, imaginative depth, emotional intensity, dark romanticism, literary and artistic richness, existential uncertainty, humor, horror, irony, and a strong female lead character. This overall "feeling" about the show emerged as the single most important factor drawing people to *Buffy* and The Bronze.

In the final section of Chapter 3, I discuss *Buffy* as cultural criticism. Interestingly, this aspect of the show did not generally resonate with Bronzers, who tended to want to engage the episodes in depth, rather than apply them to real life

situations. There were, however, a few exceptions to this, including notably the lesbian characters on *Buffy*. Additionally, although Bronzers rarely noted the show's polemics in explaining its attraction, the fact that they nonetheless watched indicates, at the least, that these polemics were not off-putting, and likely also indicates a willingness to engage with relatively countercultural—at least for TV—ideas.

Therefore, The Bronze was a community because it drew like-minded people who valued *Buffy*'s gothic aesthetic. Its purpose, for Bronzers, was to allow them to engage with ideas and to engage their imaginations. And it allowed them to engage with others, and to form emotional connections with others, which are, ultimately, what holds the community together. Furthermore, Bronzers themselves exhibit a discernable “alternative-ness” in their everyday lives that explains their appreciation for *Buffy*, and the reason that they developed deep emotional attachments through the medium of the intensely creative and wordy Bronze posting board. Thus, the meaning of The Bronze was that it was a haven of sorts, a safe space to which the imagination could escape. The Bronze turned the little club in *Buffy* into an adventure in collective imagination, a place where Bronzers could be supportive against the gloom that was always lurking outside; and they could be supportive with a light touch, not a wallow.

There is another aspect of the question of “why” The Bronze was a community, and this relates to the question of the current cultural moment. In Chapter 5, The Bronze was described as being situated subjacent to mainstream culture and orthogonal to the domain of real life communities. As such, it is hidden in plain sight. It is not an escape from real life, but an imaginative respite. It does not subvert the capitalist workplace structure, but it does illuminate the physical, mental, and emotional harm caused by that

environment.

As mentioned above, Bronzers rarely articulated an interest in the cultural criticism (as in Chapter 3) that *Buffy* put forth. However, inasmuch as *Buffy* was overtly mocking what most Americans would consider “normal,” *Buffy* was itself cultural criticism. And given that Bronzers, along with millions of other people, watched *Buffy*, it was apparently cultural criticism that proved to have wide appeal. Much of its appeal was, as discussed in Chapter 3, in its notion of a dark underworld that interrupts and destabilizes the sense of order that characterizes contemporary life. It appealed to people who appreciated irony and absurdity, and who recognized that the vagaries of everyday life can be horrifying.

Joss Whedon once said that *Buffy* was a show about losers for losers. But, in retrospect, it seems more correct to say that *Buffy* is a show about people who feel like losers. It’s for people who feel the loss, who feel the damage, that is caused by modern life. It’s for losers who needed to find each other.

The vagaries of modern life are crystallized in high school. Social pressures, as in *Buffy*, come from every direction. School, family, sports, clubs, cliques, and most every manner of social organization conspires to demand fealty from teenagers. Every advertisement is designed to make teenagers feel insecure enough to buy something, and every product they buy is designed to increase the social pressure on everyone who doesn’t own it. The choice is clear: conformity or humiliation. It’s an environment that surely generates much emotional baggage. Many of us who found each other at The Bronze had no doubt been carrying that baggage around for a long time; that’s probably why we found each other at The Bronze.



That social pressure, of course, never entirely goes away. Indeed, it created something of a plot twist in this study. Throughout this research, I had expected that I would end up focusing more on media, since media technology is changing so rapidly. But media is not the endpoint that this research led to. What I was led to, what I found pressing, is what was pressing on my research participants: the horrors of the real world.

Two mundane moments highlight the pressures that my informants—and probably most of us—take for granted. The first was when I visited Chrissy for the first time. At the time, she was living in a studio apartment. As I entered, she gave me a tour: to the left was the washroom, to the right was the kitchen, and straight ahead was one big room, the left half of which functioned as the bedroom, and the right half of which functioned as the living room. In the middle, dividing the two sides, was a desk with a computer on it, facing the TV in the living room. The back wall was glass—a glass door out to a balcony, I think—that looked down on the city from this high rise apartment. As Chrissy gave me the tour, she motioned to the desk, and quipped that it was in the middle of everything because she likes to stay connected. When she said that, I suddenly found it jarring—bizarre, actually—that we live like this. Tucked away in little cubes high above the ground, walled off on all six sides, with wires running every which way, we find it perfectly normal to speak of being connected. But connected to what? I suddenly found myself wondering why we don't just go outside to be connected. But we couldn't go outside without either standing on a balcony—still unconnected—or going down a hall and taking an elevator. It suddenly seemed the strangest thing in the world, to live alone 17 floors above the ground, and then buy numerous devices and pay numerous companies to stay connected.

The second moment occurred when I was delivering packages with John. We spent the day driving all over the Los Angeles area, talking about anything and everything while zipping around in his car. At one delivery, in an otherwise pleasant but nondescript office building, we were just leaving the building and walking toward the street when John mentioned that this was the koi pond he was telling me about. I hadn't even noticed it; I was, in fact, looking up at the eucalyptus trees, and probably would have walked right by the pond if John hadn't pointed it out. It was a beautiful pond, subtly tucked between the building and the sidewalk under the trees, but small enough that it would've been easy to miss. John mentioned that he tried to spend a few minutes every day at this pond; it provide him with an important moment of quietude in an otherwise hectic day spent driving around all over LA. I was glad that he had found a nice spot for a daily respite. But I also found myself wondering why he had to find a pleasant spot in the first place. When did it happen, I wondered, that we started taking for granted that pleasant spots must be found? How did we end up in a world in which spending five minutes by a pond under shady trees was a luxury available only to people who happened to be making a delivery to the corporate owner of that pleasant spot? Why do we live like this? Who decided that we should live like this?

These were but two minor moments that I found jarring. But they are not merely harmless unnoticed oddities; on the contrary, many of us expend much time and energy simply undoing the harm of being forced to live the way we live. These may seem like minor issues, but considering the actual time and money and effort that Chrissy spent on staying connected, that John spent on getting his five minutes of daily peace, and that all of us spend on our own minor needs, these issues are merely the most minor of myriad

harms that we endure as the price of modern civilization.

Chrissy, John, and many others found The Bronze, and it became a haven of sorts. It was a joyous community, but, like its namesake, it was joyous in the face of—not the absence of—foreboding. We might ask: why do we find it at all reasonable that we create meaningful social spaces out of what are, in effect, corporate billboards? Why do we ruin our metabolisms by sitting in offices all day? Why do we accept the neoliberal logic of “the market” when we’re unable to find employment doing what we really want to do? Why do we accept this when we know, or should know by a quick glance at the federal budget, that our government guarantees, at taxpayer expense, that Wall Street bankers will never be forced to abide by the logic of “the market”? Why do we accept that we have to take whatever jobs we can find, and carve out little Internet niches to prevent their soul-numbing effects? Why do we accept that living so removed from the biological world in which our bodies evolved is the price of being a human? Why do we fill up our many computer screens with pictures of cute animals and natural landscapes?

Returning to the myriad humiliations of high school, captured so exquisitely in *Buffy*, we might also ask: why do our news and entertainment media relentlessly push any story, any storyline, that shows individuals being humiliated? Perhaps it is because we live in a world in which the logic of neoliberalism has become hegemonic: our modus operandi is competition, and nothing adds excitement to competition like humiliation does. Our news media, our entertainment media, and indeed our entire public discourse resembles nothing so much as *American Idol*. Indeed, it seems that nobody even challenges the notion that we should all be competing in rigged games like *American Idol* to be the next big manufactured star. It works for the television industry, as Fox gets rich

off of old songs and desperate contestants; but the only thing that's actually been produced is spectacle. It's a spectacle of humiliated contestants, performing music that has already been written and performed and recorded by someone else. We might ask: is this all that's left of the music industry? Will we even have new music, much less musicians, if the industry devolves into corporations feeding off of other people's creative efforts to foist the spectacle of a zero-sum game onto the viewing public?

The list of everyday injuries and abuses is seemingly endless, especially as the line between marketing and surveillance becomes increasingly blurred. Our political decisions are the subject of billions of marketing dollars deployed to affect our behavior. Our personal decisions are now part of the corporate domain, as thousands of companies and government agencies traffic in every possible type of surveillance, tracking every keystroke on Facebook, every Google search, every web site visited, and even accessing our computer's hard drives, cameras, and microphones remotely. Every email is saved by the NSA, every phone conversation can be monitored, and armed American surveillance drones fly overhead all over the world.

In such a world, it makes sense that we'd find a joyous community in the most unlikely of spaces; after all, the most likely spaces are also the most likely to be colonized by powerful interests. But our joyous community also took for granted the "real world" of horrors pressing down on us, plain as day, right outside our little enclave. It was joyous as far as it went, but looking beyond, and asking why—why does this community exist?—points to the horrors of the real world, the world that humiliates and injures us as children, that wrecks our dreams of self-determination as adults, that makes us choose between the things we love and the things we do to survive. And these horrors

are of our own devising; they are a product of humans and human institutions. They are the stuff of neoliberalism, that hegemonic and oft-unexamined ideology of postindustrial capitalism that has so thoroughly colonized both the real world and the virtual world, that has so thoroughly reduced our lives to accepting corporate discipline and punishment—the clearly visible hand of the market extolled by politicians across the spectrum as their justification for fealty to wealth—that we fail to see that our lives are not reducible to units of labor, that our opportunities should extend beyond the ability to have a job, and that, when we form communities in the strangest places, we may not even stop to wonder why.

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The explorations and findings presented herein offer a number of contributions to the literature discussed in this study. Much of the scholarly literature related to *Buffy* has been focused on the show itself; hence, it has been predominantly literary criticism. Although this study does discuss *Buffy* as a TV show and a text, it does so more from an American studies perspective, drawing connections between producers and consumers and an underlying social context. Nonetheless, it may to some degree be considered a reading of *Buffy* as a whole.

This dissertation is situated more within ethnographic work on fandom and on Internet communities than *Buffy* per se. It differs from such work in a number of ways, however, primarily in the particular ethnographic methods used. Much work on fandom is undertaken from a sociological perspective. The use of surveys are common, and the population of fans must be narrowed down to a manageable and discrete set. Hence, work on fandom typically requires selecting an arbitrary community to study. This

community may be specifically designed by the researcher, or it may not be a community at all; it may simply be a focus group, or an arbitrarily-selected set of individuals. Furthermore, it can be difficult to find a community to study that one is not already a member of. In all these cases, the result is that the researcher creates an artificial environment from which to glean information.

Such an approach can result in the worst of both worlds. On the one hand, the attempt to generate comparable data—for example, from surveys—in order to discern comprehensive (“big picture”) results requires a manageable unbiased population sample. This is probably impossible, since communities experience a great deal of flux among members, and there is no way to quantify the meaning of a person’s membership. However, if one narrows the number of individuals who respond to surveys, then the dataset loses its validity; without a sufficient number of valid responses, one cannot know what, if anything, the survey data represent. Put differently, in many such studies there is no a priori reason to study a particular group of people and expect meaningful results. It is not possible to determine what something is if the method for doing so is to manipulate it until it is something else.

The anthropological approach, which is undertaken herein, solves this problem by focusing on the community as the relevant level of abstraction, and the individual as the relevant unit of analysis, eliminating the need for aggregate responses. It began with The Bronze, and investigated the assertion that it is a community. Without some objective measure—surveys, or even the same questions asked of all informants—it is not possible to measure or quantitatively describe a community. However, even with those objective measures, it is probably still not possible to accurately measure or quantitatively describe

a community. The qualitative approach used here has the advantage of not forcing a particular framework on community members, and simply allowing them to express what they observe and think and feel. This not only provides a window into systems of meaning, but also, ultimately, appears to be better suited for a comprehensive description of a community or other human-related phenomenon anyway.

Situated as this work is in American studies, it offers a window into a phenomenon that may otherwise go unnoticed. Indeed, this is why *The Bronze* is referred to as a subadjacent culture and orthogonal community. For American studies, it indicates the need to continue the careful study of elements that inform and affect American culture. The study of identity and everyday life remains crucial to American studies, while other factors—such as media, fandom, and cyberculture—continue to be important aspects of American culture studies, and should continue to be explored as such. Additional “big picture” ideas, however, should not be overlooked simply because they are too big or unwieldy. For example, as suggested above, the use of statistical methods in cultural studies can be useful, but can also be detrimental if used without regard for the theoretical a priori validity of doing so. Regardless, statistics is no substitute for listening to people.

The ethnographic methods used were designed for traditional ethnographies. They were modified as necessary, with a view to retaining the validity and efficacy of the original methods. This resulted in some unique methodological approaches and contributions. For example, in-person interviews could not be conducted within the community, because the community was not coterminous with a geographic location. Hence, the interviews began in neutral or public locations (on campus, or a restaurant),

and morphed into longer-term “shadowing” of informants in their everyday lives to determine what they were doing when they were mentally engaged at The Bronze.

Furthermore, the fact that this is an on-line community allows for very long-term participant observation: I started observing the community in 1998, and watched it fragment after 2001. The community continues to disperse, but The Bronze Beta is still on line after more than 11 years, and informal social networks of Bronzers continue to reform in new online spaces. Thus, this investigation covers some 14 years of Bronzers being Bronzers. Spending this much time with a community in a specific physical locale would have been untenable; however, very few on line communities have been so long-lived. Indeed, the community has been on line long enough that I have yet to own a computer that did not have its browser’s home page set to The Bronze or The Bronze Beta. These are the only home pages I have ever known.

My ethnographic approach ultimately proved to be quite useful. My initial suspicion was that this work would become much more focused on media than it did. In retrospect, this was because my primary interest was not media, but people. My focus was primarily on people, their imaginations, their mental landscapes, their emotional attachments, their communities, their thoughts, their lives. In retrospect, I believe my informants noticed this, and were willing to speak with me because they wanted to talk about their experiences and be understood, and were aware that I wanted to listen and learn about their experiences and try to understand them. And I wanted to understand them on their own terms, even if it made me uncomfortable, which it frequently did.

I was only vaguely aware of all this when I began interviewing informants. At the time, it simply seemed efficacious to engage in ethnography in as traditional a form as



possible, and then see if and why that didn't work. It was only in retrospect that I realized that my approach was somewhat unusual, especially as I have increasingly come across research and researchers whose emphasis is on what's new. Hence, when it comes to cyberculture or media ethnography, the focus is often on the "cyber" or "media" aspect rather than the "culture" or "ethnography" aspect. This, I suspect, is one reason that media ethnographers may have trouble finding helpful research participants. In my experience, participants have more interest in talking about their ideas and feelings than they do in talking about their machines or consumer choices.

Furthermore, getting inside people's heads is time-consuming and complicated. It does not lend itself to abstractions or reductions. Hence, as useful as surveys, text messages, emails, and other such communications are, there is nonetheless no substitute for trying to live like other people do. It is perhaps ironic that the more mediated people are, the more important it is to walk in their footsteps. As much as I enjoyed talking to Bronzers on line, and in person, and conducting interviews and pondering them, there is simply no substitute for trying to live like someone else. When I first got it in my head to walk around Toronto and try to imagine I was Chrissy, I wasn't sure that I would learn anything, and certain that I would never tell anyone, because I probably looked like a lost tourist, and frankly, I felt like a dork. But looking back, I think that's the key: forcing myself to walk around town like a dork somehow helped me better "get" Chrissy's mediated life.

In a similar vein, as much as I always prepared for my interviews, and always had a long list of questions at the ready, all of my interviews veered off in an unanticipated direction—and into far more interesting terrain than I had expected—within a few

minutes. This, I think, is part of the joy of ethnography, and it's similar to the joy of The Bronze. Despite our best attempts at turning people into well-defined data points, conversations veer off unexpectedly, and that's what's fun and interesting. That's the time to listen and learn, to get a glimpse of the truth of things.

Another aspect of my ethnographic approach was the actual writing. Drawing on both self-ethnography and auto-ethnography, this study is presented in multiple voices. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this was a result of becoming, as much as possible, a community member. It was intended to "write against culture," and to evoke The Bronze community and express it in its own terms. I found this difficult, but also very useful in foregrounding community members—and their ideas, emotions, and experiences—as well as in working through the ideas presented herein with both informants and academics.

This approach to cyberethnography may not work as well in future endeavors as it did in this case. The reason is that media has itself changed dramatically. It is no longer new and unusual; on the contrary, being a member of an online community is relatively commonplace. However, the communities that are now online are often much bigger, and are often far more closely controlled. It is doubtful that a community with as much self-determination as The Bronze will spring up in this particular moment. Websites are now created to monetize user information, rather than simply as empty spaces that encourage fandom. They typically offer greater functionality and ease of use, and hence do not require users to learn community rules the way The Bronze did. Furthermore, users themselves have multiple options for getting in touch with friends on line now; chances are that few people will need to talk to strangers if they want to talk about a TV

show. And if they do want to talk on line about something specific, there are still many threaded boards, much like there was at The Bronze, for specific topics.

Nonetheless, there is no reason to assume that the approach described herein will not work in future research. It may be more difficult to identify online communities than it was to identify the official Bronze as an online community. And there may be few, if any online communities that formed because of a Website (as opposed to a Website being created for a community). But if the goal is to learn about people and learn from people, then this approach remains viable.

Ultimately, this approach provided a window into the structures of a community, and its members, that were otherwise invisible. What was revealed was a community of people who valued imagination, depth, mystery, art, literature, music, emotionality, romanticism, and self-determination. But what began as an investigation into the wonders of an imaginative community also revealed the pitfalls of modern mediated life. The Bronze community itself, when viewed ethnographically, is still a marvel. But its marvelousness can be seen as a symptom, a second-best solution to a primary problem. That problem is the world's overarching institutions—social, economic, and political—that devalue imagination, depth, and mystery, that denigrate art, music, and emotions, that disparage the non-quantitative and non-pecuniary, and that deny people self-determination.

Indeed, some of the arenas that are having the greatest effect on American culture—the worlds of finance, economics, environmental science, politics—are increasingly affecting and distorting our interpersonal relationships and humanistic endeavors. As discussed in Chapter 5, Bronzers have a need to write, to communicate, to

engage mentally and imaginatively with their online friends. Their bodies may be stuck at work, but their minds keep finding roundabout ways to get elsewhere. The question is: why do we take for granted that the body must remain at work? The historian Edmund Morgan estimated that when Europeans first settled in (what is now) Virginia, Native Americans living in the Chesapeake region needed to work two to six hours a day to meet their needs; the amount of time needed to grow enough food for one person was less than a half hour per week (56). How, then, is it possible that as a nation we average well over 40 hours to meet our needs? And yet have needs that remain unmet? These bigger questions that emerge from investigations of culture and community should not be ignored. Such connections between the particular and the very big picture are well-suited to work in American studies. However, they seem relatively uncommon, despite the fact that (as mentioned in Chapter 2), global capitalism's hegemony is like a flag in the breeze, twisting and bending while the ants clinging to its surface attempt to communicate. It distorts our endeavors, undermines our self-determination, and threatens our world. At some point, we may find that we must turn our attention from each other to the unstable surface that we take for granted.

§§§

*I miss my Bronzer buds.*

This is something Bronzers would often say when they missed each other, following Buffy's comment in the second episode, "The Witch," after she is hexed and acts loopy, saying gleefully, "Willow! Xander! My buds are here! I love my buds!" Bronzers would often say, especially after they'd been out of touch for a while, or hadn't seen their Bronzer friends in real life for a while, that "I love my Bronzer buds," or "I

miss my Bronzer buds.”

I miss my Bronzer buds. I’ll always have them, of course, as long as there are computers and electricity and the Internet. And also transportation. But I miss hanging out with my Bronzer buds at The Bronze. That part is probably never coming back.

So, here’s one more shout out to all the good people of The Bronze.

## **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> The website for the National Novel Writing Month program is  
<<http://www.nanowrimo.org/>>.

## Appendix A: Bronzer's Websites

Below is a list of websites that are still active and that were reached via links at The Bronze. Sites are listed in alphabetical order by name. Some sites contain many additional areas or subsections that serve separate functions. Where this is the case, the number of subsections is listed below the site name (e.g. "58 sections"). The URL given is for the main page only. If a subsection was of particular relevance to The Bronze, it is specifically listed by name. Sites that contain the "official" rules of The Bronze—inasmuch as any such rules are official—are in **boldface**.

1. AngelicSlayer.Com

<http://www.angelicslayer.com/>

2. Angle Man's Infamous VIP Bios

<http://www.angelfire.com/mo/LisaPage/vipbios.html>

3. All Things Philosophical on BtVS and AtS

58 sections

<http://www.atpobtvs.com/>

4. Boils and Blinding Torment

<http://www.boilsandblindingtorment.com/>

5. **Bookmarks of the Bronze**

<http://www.angelfire.com/mo/LisaPage/phbalinks.html>

6. Buffy, Eh? Homepage

<http://members.tripod.com/~buffyeh/main.html>

7. Buffyholism (psyche's site): Your BtVS & Angel Appearance News & Info. Site  
8 sections  
<http://buffyholism.tripod.com/>
8. The Bronze Action Theater  
8 sections  
<http://www.angelfire.com/az/mechkitty/index.html>
9. The Bronze Alternative  
8 sections  
<http://www.thebronzealternative.com/>
10. Bronze Camp  
<http://www.modernmuse.com/cgi-bin/ikonboard/ikonboard.cgi>
11. bronze christmas tree  
<http://www.geocities.com/andreanevitt/bigbronzetree.html>
12. bronze george.page  
<http://www.geocities.com/andreanevitt/george.html>
13. Bronzers Reunited Party  
3 sections  
<http://www.whedon.info/Bronzers-Reunited-Party-a-Buffy.html>
14. bronzevalentine  
<http://www.geocities.com/andreanevitt/bronzevalentine.html>
15. The Bronze Jukebox!!  
<http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Studio/1299/bronzetunes.html>



16. The BronzeShelter

<http://web.archive.org/web/20020327111641/www.bronzeshelter.com>

17. bronze wellwishers

<http://www.geocities.com/andreanevitt/wellwishers.html>

**18. Bronze Welcome Wagon**

<http://www.angelfire.com/in/btv jade/newbie.html>

19. Buffy/ Bronze VIP Posting Board Archive

832 sections

a. Buffy: Bronze VIP Posting Board Archive Past VIP

Archives<http://www.cise.ufl.edu/~hsiao/media/tv/buffy/bronze/archives/>

b. Buffy: Bronze VIP Posting Board Archive

<http://www.cise.ufl.edu/~hsiao/media/tv/buffy/bronze/>

20. Candy Kane's Oz Fetish Entrance

<http://www.angelfire.com/tn/ozcandy/>

21. Claris - No Rest for the Wicked

<http://illsleepwhenimdead.blogspot.com/>

22. Clubs

<http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Nova/5852/clubs.html>

23. dark alchemy : Original Fiction by the Writing Crew of ATPoBtVS

<http://ivyweb.com/btvs/fictionary/outline-12.htm>

24. DARLING VIOLETTA's "PARLOUR" || THE NEW ALBUM IS HERE

<http://www.darlingvioletta.com/>

25. Dingo on the Prairie!...

<http://members.tripod.com/~dingochick/main.html>

26. dlfilms | Stevie Tuszynski

<http://www.dlfilms.com/irl/index.html>

27. Extra Flamey\_\_\_\_\_willow and tara forever!

<http://www.extraflamey.com/>

28. Faith Dance Club

<http://edushku.com/fdc/>

29. Fantasma: Ramblings of an Insane Lunatic

7 sections

<http://fantasma713.tripod.com/>

30. gazoo

22 sections

<http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Studio/1299/gazoo.html>

31. Geek of All Trades » Happy Anniversary, Buffy!

<http://www.k8space.com/2012/03/10/happy-anniversary-buffy/>

32. greeneyes daily challenge index

<http://glrs.homestead.com/>

33. HeroineAddict.me

<http://heroineaddict.me/>

34. Impaler General

58 sections

<http://www.geocities.com/impalergeneral/>

35. Jitsudude: Bobert Blog

<http://www.bobertblog.blogspot.com/>

36. Joss Whedon dot Net

<http://www.josswhedon.net/>

37. jossisahottie.com

<http://jossisahottie.com/>

38. Leather Jacket's Home Page

7 sections

<http://home.earthlink.net/~leathrjacket/index.html>

**a. LJ's Helpful Hints for New Posters**

[http://home.earthlink.net/~leathrjacket/new\\_posters.html](http://home.earthlink.net/~leathrjacket/new_posters.html)

**b. Buffy the Vampire Slayer - Frequently Asked Questions**

<http://home.earthlink.net/~leathrjacket/faqsys/newfaq.html>

**c. Buffy the Vampire Slayer Posting Board - Frequently asked questions**

[http://home.earthlink.net/~leathrjacket/stina\\_Faq.html](http://home.earthlink.net/~leathrjacket/stina_Faq.html)

**d. Spoiler Alert Samples**

<http://home.earthlink.net/~leathrjacket/spoilalert.html>

39. Little Willow's Slayground

[http://members.tripod.com/Little\\_\\_Willow/](http://members.tripod.com/Little__Willow/)

40. Mary's Photo Album

<http://www.maryloye.com/>

41. Maverick's Home Page

16 sections

<http://geocities.com/SoHo/Atrium/8917/>

42. Merely Amazing: A Fan Club for Meredyth Smith

<http://www.iamaspy.com/mere/>

43. Nic Behrens

<http://www.nicbehrens.de/>

44. Nite Vizhun's Lair ~ Buffy & Angel Linkage

8 sections

<http://robfamerts5.tripod.com/nitevizhun/index.html>

45. ::Nodignity.com - We don't get any, so neither should anyone else::

<http://www.nodignity.com/>

46. orlon\_window - Community Info

[http://community.livejournal.com/orlon\\_window/profile](http://community.livejournal.com/orlon_window/profile)

**47. PB Lingo**

<http://www.geocities.com/tanabtvs/pbinfo/pblingo.html>

**48. PB Lingo Episode Abbreviations**

<http://www.geocities.com/tanabtvs/pbinfo/pblingoepabr.html>

**49. PBers Locations List**

<http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Studio/1299/pbers.html>

50. PBP

4 sections

<http://www.pbparty.com/>

**51. PHBA Home Page**

<http://www.angelfire.com/mo/LisaPage/phbapage.html>

**52. P.M. Carlson Web Productions**

<http://www.pmcarlson.com/>

**53. Polgara.net: The Official Website**

<http://www.polgara.net/>

**54. Popgurls.com: When Good Gurls Go Fan**

<http://www.popgurls.com/>

**55. Save Angel - A Fandom Campaign to Save Angel: The Series**

<http://www.savingangel.org/>

**56. Society for Dingo Advancement**

11 sections

<http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Lair/3789/index.html>

**57. Studies in LJ**

<http://studiesinlj.blogspot.com/>

**58. SweePer's Homepage**

<http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Studio/1299/>

**59. Tales from the Trenches**

<http://lawgeekgurl.blogspot.com/>

**60. Tiny Dingoes**

7 sections

<http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Studio/1299/tinydingoes.html>

61. Things of Bronze, Bronze Things

3 sections

<http://www.geocities.com/bronzethings/>

62. Totally Bronze Quiz

<http://totallybronzequiz.homestead.com/index.html>

63. tvjames x blog

<http://tvjames.blogspot.com/>

64. VoyForums: The Move to UPN Forum

<http://www.voy.com/28392/>

**65. What's What of the Bronze**

<http://members.tripod.com/~BronzeWho/whatindex.htm>

**66. Who's Who of the Bronze**

27 sections

<http://members.tripod.com/~BronzeWho/whoindex.htm>

67. Willow's Promise by CaughtNTheQuiet

<http://www.themasque.net/efiction/viewstory.php?sid=928>

68. Xander Dance Club

<http://slayground.net/xdc/>

## Appendix B: Bronzer's Archived Websites

All website URLs begin with: <http://web.archive.org/web/>. This was omitted from the URLs below for legibility. Sites are listed in alphabetical order by name. The Websites of the official WB Bronze at Buffy.com are listed separately in the first section. Websites of the official UltimateTV Bronze at BuffySlayer.com—this is the official Bronze that preceded the WB Bronze—are listed separately in the second section. The URL given is for the main page only. If a subsection was of particular relevance to The Bronze, it is specifically listed by name. Sites that contain the “official” rules of The Bronze—inasmuch as any such rules are official—are in **boldface**.

### Archives of the Official WB Bronze

1. Apollo Interactive, Inc.  
20000620023142/www.apollointeractive.com/
2. Buffy the Vampire Slayer - Bronze  
19990504144205/www.buffy.com/slow/index\_bronze.html
3. Buffy The Vampire Slayer - Bronze Community Page  
20010302102808/board.buffy.com/bronze/bronzecommm.html
4. Buffy the Vampire Slayer - Game  
20001018102541/www.buffy.com/slow/index\_game.html
5. Buffy the Vampire Slayer - Mortuary  
20010208115248/www.buffy.com/slow/index\_mortuary.html

6. Buffy The Vampire Slayer - Posting Board - PLEASE READ BEFORE ENTERING

[20010331053128/www.buffy.com/wwwboard/index.html](http://20010331053128/www.buffy.com/wwwboard/index.html)

7. Buffy the Vampire Slayer - Splash

[20000619030121/www.buffy.com/](http://20000619030121/www.buffy.com/)

8. Buffy The Vampire Slayer - The Stage

[20000607214513/www.buffy.com/bronze/stage-main.html](http://20000607214513/www.buffy.com/bronze/stage-main.html)

#### Archives of the Official UltimateTV Bronze

1. Buffy / Posting Board | Past Boards: Week 1

[19980202155559/www.buffyslayer.com/bronze/pbweek1.html](http://19980202155559/www.buffyslayer.com/bronze/pbweek1.html)

2. Buffy / Posting Board Sunnydale's Starbucks

[19980202155725/www.buffyslayer.com/bronze/starbucks.html](http://19980202155725/www.buffyslayer.com/bronze/starbucks.html)

3. Buffy the Vampire Slayer/The Bronze

[19980202153901/www.buffyslayer.com/bronze/](http://19980202153901/www.buffyslayer.com/bronze/)

4. Buffy the Vampire Slayer/ The Bronze Frequently Asked Questions

[19980202154254/www.buffyslayer.com/bronze/faq.html](http://19980202154254/www.buffyslayer.com/bronze/faq.html)

5. Buffy the Vampire Slayer / Episode Guide

[19980202153922/www.buffyslayer.com/show/guides/](http://19980202153922/www.buffyslayer.com/show/guides/)

6. Buffy the Vampire Slayer / Posting Board Tricks, Tips, Guidelines

[19980202154239/www.buffyslayer.com/bronze/postingboard.html](http://19980202154239/www.buffyslayer.com/bronze/postingboard.html)

7. Buffy the Vampire Slayer\_Photo and Media Gallery

[19980202153944/www.buffyslayer.com/gallery/](http://19980202153944/www.buffyslayer.com/gallery/)



8. Buffy the Vampire Slayer / Send Your Friends a Postcard  
19980202153908/www.buffyslayer.com/postcards/
9. Buffy the Vampire Slayer / Star Bios  
19980202153915/www.buffyslayer.com/show/bios/
10. Buffy the Vampire Slayer / Star Chat Alyson  
19980202155811/www.buffyslayer.com/show/starchat/alyson.html
11. Buffy the Vampire Slayer / Star Chat Charisma  
19980202155802/www.buffyslayer.com/show/starchat/charisma.html
12. Buffy the Vampire Slayer / Star Chat Joss  
19980202155822/www.buffyslayer.com/show/starchat/joss.html
13. Buffy the Vampire Slayer / Star Chat Nicholas  
19980202155751/www.buffyslayer.com/show/starchat/nicholas.html
14. Home | Buffy the Vampire Slayer  
19980202153530/www.buffyslayer.com/main.html
15. Nicholas Brendon  
19990117034809/www.ultimatetv.com/news/w/a/97/04/15brendon.html
16. Ultimate Television News -- Buffy: Throwing Down the Pom Poms, Kicking  
Vampire Butt  
19990116231031/www.ultimatetv.com/news/f/a/97/01/23buffy.html
17. UltimateTV News -- Alyson Hannigan's 'Willow -- Wallflower By Day, Assistant  
Slayer by Night  
19990117015437/www.ultimatetv.com/news/f/a/97/04/08hannigan.html

18. UltimateTV News -- He Just Slays 'Em: UltimateTV Visits With The Creator of  
WB's Latest Hit, "Buffy the Vampire Slayer"

19990117005036/www.ultimatetv.com/tvbiz/p/a/97/04/10whedon.html

19. The UltimateTV Show List

19980125223839/www.ultimatetv.com/UTVL/utl.html?card+2661

#### Archives of Other Sites

20. 'stina's theories

20000608212901/home.earthlink.net/~stinas/index.html

21. A delicate test, by clarrie

20010417155849/www.geocities.com/bakesale\_bitca/deltest.html

22. A Little Taste of the Hellmouth

20011116223802/www.geocities.com/buffy\_cook/main.html

23. A Slayer's world>>>>>>>>> Welcome back!

20021013200023/www.squashed-bananas.com/buffy/

24. ALASHA THE VAMPIRE SLAYER

20021016043746/www.angelfire.com/ca2/MountainSlayer/index.html

25. All for Anya

20020724004843/anyanka.tripod.com/

26. Alyson Hannigan || Welcome to WPWP

20001002114204/members.tripod.com/~Little\_\_Willow/whatiswpwp.html

27. All Things Philosophical on BtVS and AtS

20020926174843/www.atpobtv.com/

28. And You Thought YOU Were Obsessed With BtVS  
[20021015020540/lavender.fortunecity.com/rampling/271/index.html](http://20021015020540/lavender.fortunecity.com/rampling/271/index.html)
29. Angel  
[20010508184631/www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Palace/5895/cordy.htm](http://20010508184631/www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Palace/5895/cordy.htm)
30. The Angel Annex/ Presented by The Sunnydale Slayers  
[20010224010425/rhiannon.dreamhost.com/angel/](http://20010224010425/rhiannon.dreamhost.com/angel/)
31. Angel Love's Buffy  
[Site20021207043513/www.geocities.com/Area51/Portal/3520/](http://Site20021207043513/www.geocities.com/Area51/Portal/3520/)
32. Angel Music Pages  
[20010405202905/www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Lot/8864/angel/angel-ws2.htm](http://20010405202905/www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Lot/8864/angel/angel-ws2.htm)
33. Angelica's World  
[20030202020555/www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Set/6061/index.html](http://20030202020555/www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Set/6061/index.html)
34. Angel's Secrets  
[20001009102845/www.geocities.com/~angelsecrets/index2.html](http://20001009102845/www.geocities.com/~angelsecrets/index2.html)
35. AngelSeries.com, we knew he'd be here!  
[20001019092338/www.angelseries.com/main.html](http://20001019092338/www.angelseries.com/main.html)
36. angel fan fiction  
[20021012164544/ljconstantine.com/angel/](http://20021012164544/ljconstantine.com/angel/)
37. Angle Man's Infamous VIP Bios  
[20000610022649/www.angelfire.com/mo/LisaPage/vipbios.html](http://20000610022649/www.angelfire.com/mo/LisaPage/vipbios.html)
38. Atlanta pictures  
[20001016141643/members.aol.com/kameleon29/atlanta.htm](http://20001016141643/members.aol.com/kameleon29/atlanta.htm)

39. Atlanta PBfP and GLR party

20010420001846/totallybronzequiz.homestead.com/AtlantapbfpOct21.html

40. Becker's Fanfic and More

20031009153015/members.aol.com/akabecker/fic.html

41. Becker's Game of Death

20000505162607/members.aol.com/akabecker/BeckersGameOfDeath.html

42. The Best Buffy Page

19991008235908/www.angelfire.com/ca2/BuffyLover/index.html

43. Blood Type by Little Willow

20001011172143/www.mustreadtv.com/blood.html

44. The Blu Saga

20021201045434/theblusaga.envy.nu/

45. The Boarding House - Red Thunder's site

20000609220747/www.geocities.com/TimesSquare/Arena/1419/btvs.html

**46. Bookmarks of the Bronze**

20000609202833/www.angelfire.com/mo/LisaPage/phbalinks.html

47. BRBW Greeting and Intro page

20010803104800/www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Set/9193/intro.html

48. BrethrenBoreanaz

19991007102332/www.angelfire.com/al/BrethrenBoreanaz/

49. The Bronze Action Theater

20000621034237/www.angelfire.com/az/mechkitty/index.html

50. The Bronze AIM/ICQ List

20000615181555/www.geocities.com/Athens/Parthenon/5664/icqaimintro.html

51. The Bronze Bezoar Big Game Hunting Lodge

20011018102947/www.geocities.com/~x-lander/BBBGH.html

52. Bronze Gatherings

20010424084455/www.geocities.com/SouthBeach/Pier/2040/2041.html

53. Bronze Master Email List A-J

20010110091000/www.ticon.net/~emerald/emailaddies.html

54. Bronze Rerun Activities Committee

20021022061957/www.geocities.com/SouthBeach/Coast/1047/brac.html

**55. Bronze Safety 'Net Page**

20010330190556/www.geocities.com/tanabtv/safety.html

**56. The bronze rules and information page.**

20011217074304/www.thebronzealternative.com/therules/

**57. Bronze Welcome Wagon**

20001012071229/www.angelfire.com/in/btv/sjade/newbie.html

58. Bronzed

20010424163251/www.modernmuse.com/bronzecd/

59. The Bronzer Bash Poll

20010615015458/www.geocities.com/redrosefloweronline/buffy/noframes/  
poll.html

60. Bronzer History

20050317152548/splender.beautiful-oblivion.net/Archives.html

## **61. Bronzers' Links**

20010817083428/www.geocities.com/bronzelinks/

## **62. The BronzeShelter**

20020327111641/www.bronzeshelter.com

## **63. The BronzeShelter - A FLAME FREE ZONE**

20010423013348/pub26.ezboard.com/bbronzeshelter

## **64. Browse The Library**

20000615182704/www.risingstorm.com/library.asp

## **65. Bruce Cambell is Uncle Rory**

20010923070907/unclerory.homestead.com/uncleroryfp.html

## **66. BtVS/ Toronto Posting Board**

20000903011127/buffy.acmecity.com/attack/313/

## **67. The Buffer**

20001003063501/members.aol.com/LadyRHood/buffer.html

## **68. Buffy**

20011117062055/www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Palace/5895/BUFFY.HTML

## **69. Buffy\_Angel\_spoilers**

20010416023403/groups.yahoo.com/group/buffy\_angel\_spoilers

## **70. Buffy Addicts Hospital Roster**

20010424092441/www.risingstorm.com/BAH/

## **71. Buffy and Angel's Home at RJ's Place**

20031012103216/www.angelfire.com/il/RJsFunPage/index.html

72. Buffy/ Bronze VIP Posting Board Archive  
20010617020843/www.cise.ufl.edu/~hsiao/media/tv/buffy/bronze/
73. Buffy Cast in San Diego  
20001001031533/www.anotheruniverse.com/tv/features/buffysandiego.html
74. The Buffy Cross & Stake  
20000817173007/slayer.simplenet.com/tbcs/main.html
75. Buffy, Eh? Homepage  
20040709202110/members.tripod.com/~buffyeh/main.html
76. buffy index  
20010408063126/arielcarmona.tripod.com/buffyindex.html
77. Buffy Music Pages  
20010310065540/www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Lot/8864/music.htm
78. The Buffy Network  
19991008054649/www.shawnsworld.com/buffy/
79. Buffy the Patriarchy Slayer  
20010603115813/daringivens.home.mindspring.com/btps.html
80. Buffy The Vampire Slayer  
20021015043540/www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Hills/8290/buffymain.html
81. Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel/ Reviews Archive  
20001002074234/www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Theater/4507/index.html
82. Buffy The Vampire Slayer/ Fellow Tweakos United  
20001009052043/buffy.nut1.com/

**83. Buffy the Vampire Slayer Posting Board - Frequently asked questions**

20001025071654/home.earthlink.net/~leathrjacket/stina\_Faq.html

**84. Buffy the Vampire Slayer - Frequently Asked Questions**

20010321002443/home.earthlink.net/~leathrjacket/faqsys/newfaq.html

**85. Buffy the Vampire Slayer - Scooby Gang**

20010417004707/www.btvsg.com/

**86. Buffy the Vampire Slayer - TV Tome**

20010413105655/www.tvtome.com/servlets/ShowMainServlet/showid-10/

**87. Buffy Timeline**

20010609053143/members.aol.com/biglerdar/

buffyangel.html?mtbrand=AOL\_US

**88. Buffy, the Vampire Slayer**

20030404094948/www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Stage/3170/buffy.html

**89. Buffy UK Situation**

19991002203635/www.angelfire.com/mo/LisaPage/uksitch.html

**90. BuffyGuide.com**

20020926210630/www.buffyguide.com/

**91. Buffyholism/ Your BtVS & Angel Appearance News & Info. Site**

20030925095415/buffyholism.tripod.com/

**92. Buffy's Passion**

20010801145635/www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Stage/6190/buffyindex.html

**93. Buffy's Place**

20020926210401/www.buffysplace.org/



94. BuffyTheory 101  
20021211182702/www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Station/1668/index.html
95. Buffy: the Vampire Slayer  
20011221021958/www.geocities.com/TimesSquare/Dungeon/9205/buffy.html
96. ~Buffy World2~  
20021112170623/www.msnusers.com/BuffyWorld2
97. Canada Loves Buffy..Has Moved  
20040123090531/members.tripod.com/canada\_loves\_buffy/
98. Candy Kane's Oz Fetish Entrance  
20021006085337/www.angelfire.com/tn/ozcandy/index.html
99. chance  
20010303090823/zengurrljen.tripod.com/chancemovie/chance.html
100. The Chosen Ones - Buffy the Vampire Slayer Fanfiction  
20001204192500/www.griffworld.com/buffy/buffy\_fanfic.htm
101. Christopher Golden || Official Website  
20010302044817/www.christophergolden.com/
102. chicago bronzers  
20010524104313/ljconstantine.com/bronzers/
103. City of Angel  
http://www.cityofangel.com/main/index.html
104. Cordelia Chase Crew  
20040608195545/members.tripod.com/mesuvius/

- 105. The Crawford Street Mansion  
20010701002738/www.geocities.com/Area51/Aurora/9738/tcsm.html
- 106. CRGtBtVS - Episode List  
20010414072439/www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Academy/7734/  
crgtoc.html
- 107. THE DARLING VIOLETTA HOME OFFICE  
20010209091324/www.darlingvioletta.com/darling.htm
- 108. David's Angels  
20010401234047/www.davidsangels.com/
- 109. The Dawn FAQ  
20010419132758/www.daydreamsltd.com/dawn.html
- 110. D E N C I T Y  
20021021152515/www.dencity.com/
- 111. Do you post like a spaz?  
20030831204455/www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Bistro/1070/door.html
- 112. Domain of the Slain  
19991004205509/www2.uic.edu/~ahufan1/btvs/
- 113. Doyle - Glenn Quinn  
20010206211215/ljc.simplenet.com/doyle/  
20010224004904/ljconstantine.com/doyle/
- 114. d u s k t i l d a w n ~ a buffy the vampire slayer and angel devoted site  
20020327045710/www.angel-btvs.co.uk/

115. The Dust Deadboy Brigade  
20021001144606/members.tripod.com/robyntsh/da.html
116. The Essence of Amber  
20020604150759/www.efanguide.com/~amber/
117. Free The Bronze  
20010505052615/www.geocities.com/freethebronze/mission.html
118. FREE TOM WARNER!  
20011023082751/wiliqueen.dreamhost.com/freetomwarner/
119. Garden of delight Splash page  
19991002122143/members.tripod.com/~drusilla\_15/  
GardenofDelight.html
120. Graveyards and Crosses  
20000309163125/www.geocities.com/FashionAvenue/6273/gandc2.html
121. Glenn-Quinn.com  
20031023130216/glenn-quinn.com/
122. Hannigan.MAIN | THE ORDER OF HANNIGAN  
20001017210945/www.hannigan.com/main.htm
123. The Haven  
20030407212618/www.selenayhaven.com/
124. HellmouthMain  
20010725041625/www.angelfire.com/tv/HellmouthMain/
125. In the Midnite Hour  
20040511063425/members.tripod.com/NiteRise/

126. Isms in the Buffyverse  
20010617185231/home.4w.com/pages/btvs/philos.html
127. JEFF PRUITT  
20000615173505/www.geocities.com/Hollywood/9324/jpstnt.htm
128. Jeff Pruitt Homepage  
20000506140817/www.mcs.net/~jcomroe/HTG.htm
129. J F B B  
20030920142406/www.buffydex.connectfree.co.uk/jfbb/  
jokebook.html
130. J F B B  
20010417144200/www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Studio/1788/jokebo  
ok.html
131. Joss is a Hottie  
20010515193302/64.87.45.250/
132. Kimberly's Buffy Fan Fiction  
20021019024338/www.angelfire.com/ky2/kendrafanfiction/
133. Las Vegas PBFP 98 Pictures!  
19990528125732/members.tripod.com/~mcastr/lvpbp98/
134. Las Vegas PBP '98  
19990429154927/members.tripod.com/~aliasj/nancye.html
135. Las Vegas PBP '98 - aethelaf  
19991011192757/members.tripod.com/~aliasj/aethelaf.html

136. The Library  
20021022073449/www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Set/6061/fanfic/  
fanfic.html
137. Little Willow's Slayground  
20000816070757/members.tripod.com/~Little\_\_Willow/index.html
138. Little Willow's Slayground / WPWP Posting Board  
20000522085729/www.insidetheweb.com/messageboard/mbs.cgi/  
mb80580
139. Lisa\_H's Direct Online Chronicles  
20010515215944/www.lisahdirectonlinechronicles.com/
- 140. The List - posts to avoid if you're a newbie**  
19990422104917/www.themessageinmybottle.com/offline/offline.htm
- 141. LJ's Helpful Hints for New Posters**  
20010321002802/home.earthlink.net/~leathrjacket/new\_posters.html
142. LJC's (Chicago bronzer) pages  
20020601163236/ljconstantine.com/sundown/sundown.html
143. Mary's Photo Album  
20020909231123/www.angelfire.com/celeb2/maryloye/
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