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A Sweet Vamp: Critiquing the Treatment of Race in *Buffy* and the American Musical Once More (with Feeling)

[1] With its non-descript high school, architecturally classic Main Street, and single Starbucks café, Sunnydale evokes contemporary suburban America. Despite the Scooby gang's having to fight off all sorts of demons, the characters are meant to be otherwise everyday people with everyday lives and everyday problems. In a sense, the outer appearance of Sunnydale is that of a utopian (if otherwise non-descript) suburbia: friendly, pretty and relatively peaceful, if only with an awfully high death rate. The town—along with its inhabitants, blissfully ignorant of its location over a Hellmouth—indeed helped establish the universality that brought the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* a large and committed audience.

[2] But Sunnydale itself cannot exactly be seen as "everyday America" with its characters representative of "typical American youth" if for no other reason than everyone seems too white, especially for Southern California where about half the population is not white.[1] This is not to say that the series has been ignorant or unresponsive to representations of the Other; indeed, one of the show's hallmarks confronts issues of the dangers of Othering through its treatment of demons. Specific key examples include the realization that Oz might be a good person despite his outward appearance and habits as a werewolf in "Phases" (2015) from Season 2, the Scooby Gang's acceptance of Tara as a witch in "Family" (5006) from Season 5 and the general acceptance of Anya as a flawed yet human character throughout the series once she ceases to be the demon Anyanka. Nonetheless, for the large majority of the first six seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, there is an absence of people of color in Sunnydale. Such an absence is only articulated once by evil sidekick Mr. Trick (played by K. Todd Freeman) upon his entrance to town during Season 3's "Faith, Hope and Trick" (3003) when he says, "admittedly, it's not a haven for the brothers. You know, strictly the Caucasian persuasion in the 'Dale. Trick's comment reflects not just the main cast (who are all at least coded as white[2]), but also among the cameo and extras casting.

[3] Several articles have already been written about the lack of racial integration in *Buffy*, particularly Kent Ono's hallmark piece, "To Be a Vampire on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: Race and ('Other') Socially Marginalizing Positions on Horror TV," Lynne Edwards' "Slaying in Black and White: Kendra as Tragic Mulatta in *Buffy*" and Mary Alice Money's "The Undemonization of Supporting Characters in *Buffy*." Indeed, this paper does not aim to add much new to the discussion of race within the first five seasons.[3] By showing how a similar trend occurs in racial critiques of Hollywood musicals of the 1930s, 40s and early 50s, however, I propose that director, creator and episode lead writer Joss Whedon comments on the racial inequities that can be leveled against both the musical genre and his own television series through a subtle critique that will continue through *Buffy*'s final season.

[4] The "success" of stand-alone musical episodes as an "event" seems to depend largely on how delicately it is treated with the trajectory of the series as a whole.[4] This process is distinct from and yet related to how audiences have accepted (or not) the cinematic musical. The significant audience skepticism with which some contemporary film musicals have been met may be due to unfamiliarity with the genre. As such, audiences must "buy into" the believability of a world of spontaneous singing and dancing, rather than accept it as a possible generic characteristic. The problem for contemporary audiences is that they must accept the fantastical tenets of this unfamiliar genre at the same time that they are being drawn into the narrative, which may be too much for audiences to embrace simultaneously.[5] Television series like *Buffy* and other

series that have recently employed the musical within single episodes (such as *The Drew Carey Show, Scrubs, Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Oz*) can do so only because the audience already is familiar with the characters and realities of the series as a whole. Indeed, the special nature of the musical episode depends on the audience's recognition that this is not the normal reality of the series. This necessary "audience participation" in quickly justifying the musical "reality" is acknowledged within this episode of *Buffy* in the penultimate number "Life's A Show" when Buffy turns to the camera and invites the audience to "sing along."

[5] The step from the world of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—and, indeed, from horror, superhero and/or fantasy genres in general—to the film musical is actually a very small one when thinking syntactically. [6] In his seminal article on the musical "The American Film Musical as Dual-Focus Narrative," Rick Altman maintains that the main character-driven (often romantic) storyline in the musical is interrupted periodically for song-and-dance numbers which, more than just adding slight momentum to the overall plot, practically halt it for the sake of the *spectacle* of a musical number. The same can be said of *Buffy*, for which an episode cannot go by without the titular heroine kicking someone's butt. Both dancing and butt-kicking are physically strenuous exercises and, as Altman maintains in his larger book-length work on the musical, often indicate sexual tension, if not outright substituting for sex. [7]

[6] Also like *Buffy*, however, the musical is a film genre marked by racial segregation. The classic period of musical production featured very few characters of color, particularly the MGM musicals (such as Stanley Donen's *Singin' in the Rain* [8] [1952] and Vincente Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis* [1944]) now seen as defining "integrated" examples of the genre. [9] Prominent writers on musical—Rick Altman, Richard Dyer and Jane Feuer, among others—have noted these films function within an idealized, fantasy world where problematic social issues did not interfere nor overpower the main romantic story between the male and female leads. The genre seems to demand this to maintain its characteristic happy, light tone. In defining a significant portion of musicals, Rick Altman notes, "The fairy tale world must be a utopia, but in order for that utopia to have substance it must be a limited realm, one seemingly cut off from the outer, evil world, accessible only through the magical action of song, love and belief" (158). Social issues such as acknowledging the problematic constructions of racial interactions would necessarily be part of the "outer, evil world" that would interfere with the entertainment involved in singing and dancing. [10]

[7] As such, most musicals of the 30s, 40s and early 50s avoided the question of race entirely by simply not showing races mixing, if interacting at all. If a studio musical featured black actors, it was often because the entire cast was black: for example, the enormous cast of Otto Preminger's *Carmen Jones* (1954). If black performers appeared in otherwise all-white musicals, they often simply did that: *perform*, not act. In many cases, such as *Down Argentine Way* (1940) and other 20th Century Fox non-integrated musicals, these performances were featured in breakout sequences unrelated to the plot. [11] In his book-length work *Disintegrating the Music: Black Performance and American Musicals*, Arthur Knight summarizes how Hollywood studios regarded the question of race:

> From an African American perspective, the so-called integrated musical [in terms of integrating song and dance within the plot]– whatever its powers and pleasures—was manifestly *not* integrated [racially]. In fact, as the originating texts of *Oklahoma!* and *Carmen Jones* along with *Show Boat*, [12] *Hallelujah!*, and *Porgy and Bess* suggest, the creation of the ultimate utopian feeling in the integrated musical relied on an explicit social-racial segregation, and no quantity of formal intervention could hide that. In a perverse way, though it specifically circumscribed "utopian" aspirations, the "integrated" musical clarified in nation, song, and dance an important

and for African Americans painful American circumstance of long standing. (16)

[8] Knight's articulations coincide with *Buffy* scholars' concerns with the series' treatment of race. While Mary Alice Money notes convincingly that the series' fleshing out of supporting characters, both human and demon, "stand[s] in for race in American society" (98), this does not excuse the conspicuous fact that the Sunnydale population shown to audiences has been white, which is patently unrealistic for a show set in Southern California. By not giving "face-time," much less the opportunity to voice an opinion, racial others can actually be viewed as even more marginal than the vampires and demons which Money would argue stand in for them as American Others. Kent Ono argues that, among the minorities that *do* appear, "*Buffy* relies on what have now come to be conventional depictions of racial (and other) marginalized characters, depictions that may appear to be harmless, if one simply blocks out the similar way marginalized characters appear in everyday news discourse" (178). Ono's discussion does not emphasize the fact that the two subjects he examines—Jamaican Slayer Kendra and Incan Mummy Girl Ampata (both from Season 2, played respectively by Bianca Lawson and Ara Celi)—are not just two of the only people of color, but they also happen to be coded as foreign, *non-American* minorities. This trend continues beyond the scope of Ono's article into further seasons with Giles' love interest Olivia (Phine Oruche) and First Slayer Sineya (Sharon Ferguson), both in Season 4, as well as the Chinese Slayer (Ming Liu) in Season 5's "Fool for Love" (5007). The only *American* characters of color within the first six seasons are almost all African-American: in addition to Mr. Trick, cameo speaking appearances are made by obtuse Initiative member Forrest Gates (Leonard Roberts) in Season 4, Dawn's best friend Lisa (Rae'Ven Larrymore Kelly) and the ambulance driver that informs Buffy that her mother is dead (Kevin Kristaldi) in "The Body" (5016) and Nikki Wood (originally played by April Weeden-Washington), the New York slayer in "Fool for Love." [13] These characters are in addition to a number of otherwise "faceless" vampires and demons of color as articulated in Ono's article. Interestingly, there are no Asian-American nor Latino-American characters in Sunnydale, reflecting a mistaken idea that race is "simply black-and-white" without the myriad complexities. [14]

[9] "Once More with Feeling" (6007) begins its racial critique by addressing Ono's notion of the "faceless" black vampires. The only two vampires that the audience sees dusted during the show happen to be African-American—and in this episode, their dusting is conspicuous since both occur at poignant moments lyrically in the opening number "Going Through the Motions": the first dies during the pause in "Nothing seems to penetrate my—heart," while the second explodes in a swirling, mass of dust to reveal Sarah Michelle Geller in a close-up singing the last word of the song, "—alive." That both vampires are black may be coincidence, but their dusting at the opening of the episode serves to remind us of the series' usual treatment of "faceless black demons" in order to upend that notion by the end of Act 1 with the episode's central demon, referred to in the published script as "Sweet." [15]

[10] The episode consistently references either standards intrinsic to the (white-centered) film musical tradition or specific films that follow them: the opening orchestral overture within the credits sequence, the overture, the long camera takes ensuring maximum coverage of the performers' routines, the chimney sweeps in the background straight out of *Mary Poppins*, the complete Technicolor palette displayed through costuming in "Where Do We Go From Here?" similar to "You and I" from *Meet Me in St. Louis*, the disparate voiced rendition of "Walk Through the Fire" reminiscent of the quintet version of "Tonight" in *West Side Story*, even the *Oklahoma!*-inspired ballet in the middle of the episode. Most explicitly, Xander and Anya's duet, "I'll Never Tell" clearly hearkens back to the 40s-style sexual-battle-through-song-and-dance numbers associated with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers and even finishes with a fall onto a sofa that references the closing of "Good Mornin'" from *Singin' in the Rain*. [16] This even

causes Anya to despair as she recognizes the "outdated" nature of the tune: "Clearly our number is a retro pastiche that's never going to be a breakaway pop hit." Even when the episode strays from the cinematic nostalgia represented, the musical styles performed by the main cast characters are also fairly "white-centric": the guitar-driven rock behind Anya's "Bunnies" and Spike's "Rest in Peace," the folk-inspired performances by Tara in "Under Your Spell" and Giles in "Standing" and (to use Anya's words) the "breakaway pop" of both of Buffy's major solo numbers, "Going Through the Motions" and "Something to Sing About."

[11] The episode takes a decided turn with the full introduction of Sweet in the jazz-inspired song "What You Feel." By itself, perhaps neither the character nor the performance would be coded as particularly "black" since, although the actor actually *is* African-American, he is completely covered in red makeup and wears ice-blue contact lenses. Within the context of the episode as a whole, however, the differences stand in relief. The song stands apart from the remainder of the soundtrack in two significant ways. First, in referencing jazz, the syncopated rhythms of "What You Feel" call attention to a musical tradition generally overlooked within the film musical, primarily its association with African-American origins. [17] This is also a musical first for the series, which does not generally feature music typically associated with non-white American ethnicities, even those which have nonetheless crossed over into mainstream music, such as hip-hop, reggae, or *corrido*. [18] Sweet also wears an brightly colorful outfit that is something akin to a zoot suit, which was emblematic of an ethnic identity—largely, but not exclusively, Chicano—during World War II. More notable, however, is the quality of actor Hinton Battle's performance. While part of the fascination with the episode is that each of the regular actors actually sings his/her own part (and thereby provides verisimilitude for the concept that a demon is making everyone in Sunnydale sing, whether they can or not), Hinton Battle's vocal quality and performance single him out as the sole professional performer among the cast, displaying why he is a three-time Tony-Award winner singer and dancer. [19]

[12] Battle's singular performance comes dangerously close to what critic Donald Bogle calls "the Negro Entertainment Syndrome," typical of 1940s Hollywood films and particularly evident in musicals, where black characters would be featured performers instead of integral to the narrative: "Rather than include him in the regular plot of the movie and have to stop in the middle of the serving scene while a Negro sang his song, producers introduced specific musical interludes in which the entertainer could perform unhampered by a story line" (119). Hence black characters made quick entrances and exits, but otherwise were featured only as entertainers, not characters. Among other reasons, this made it very simple for theaters who refused to show pictures with black characters, particularly in the South, to cut out the performance sequence without detracting from the overall plot. The Nicholas Brothers' performance in the Fox non-integrated musical *Down Argentine Way* (1940) serves as a good example of this: far more showstopping than any of the performances by lead actors Betty Grable or Don Ameche, the Nicholas Brothers steal the movie with a superior tap number. Sean Griffin points out that this performance, while not integral to the plot, was nonetheless so important to the success of the film that it was advertised in newspapers giving the time the number would appear. Other black actors of the period, including Lena Horne, Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, also appeared in other musicals of the period in "safe" entertainer roles, with superior performances that rose above but were otherwise isolated from the white-centered plot.

[13] Hinton Battle's performance differs—within both the Buffyverse and the discourse of black entertainers in white musicals—in that Sweet is not just an entertainer but indeed the most powerful character in the episode. Summoned unwittingly by Xander, Sweet uses his powers to affect all characters, human and demon, within Sunnydale; the evil nature of this power is that all the secrets which could not be said are instead sung aloud. Unlike the African-American vampires dusted at the beginning of the episode, Sweet is powerful enough to not let a single act of violence come to him.

Even Buffy must *sing* "Life's a Show" rather than simply fight once she encounters Sweet. More to the point, although he is thwarted in his attempt to drag Dawn off as his new bride, *Sweet does not lose*. Although he says "Big smiles everyone, you beat the bad guy," this is stated ironically, punctuated by Sweet's final vamp, the reprise of "What You Feel" which gives the episode its title: "And there's not a one/Who can say this ended well./All those secrets you've been concealing,/Say you're happy now—once more, with feeling." As such, unlike the previous characters of color on the show that are either staked (Mr. Trick and countless "faceless" vampires), dispensed with (Kendra, Ampada, Forrest, Nikki Wood) or simply ambiguously left to fade away (Olivia), Sweet leaves of his own volition. Sweet's presence lingers, however, as evidenced through the cast's needing to sing "Where Do We Go from Here?" even after his departure.

[14] The main characters are left unsteady and shaken up because they must now confront the future with the knowledge obtained from these previously concealed secrets; I would argue that one of these secrets involves the show's previous refusal to address race in the otherwise "blissfully ignorant" previous five seasons. As stated earlier, up until Season 6, characters of color are few and far between; in the final season, however, many more characters of color start to appear in extended, higher profile roles. If the musical episode is a subtle commentary on race, however, this same subtlety is admirably maintained throughout the final season: *Buffy* deals with the race issue by not making it an issue at all by slowly adding significant characters of color to the cast without explicit fanfare. The introduction of Robin Wood, son of former Slayer Nikki, provides a love interest first for Buffy, then for Faith and becomes a major player in the ultimate demise of the First. As noted above, Nikki Wood only finally gains an actual voice when played by K.D. Aubert in Season 7 when she speaks to her son as the First in "First Date" (7014). The same episode also features singer-actress Ashanti playing Lissa, a young woman whom Xander becomes interested in and tries to date before discovering she is a demon. Most notably, the Potentials (those next-to-be-called) that are summoned to battle in Sunnydale feature not only Slayers of different nationalities (the British Molly and the Chinese Chao-Ahn, played respectively by Clara Bryant and Kristy Wu) but also a number of American races: clearly both Chloe and Rona (played respectively by Lalaine and Indigo) are characters of color (both Latina and black) that play major and complicated supporting roles in the final showdown. [20] It seems as if the show finally commits to addressing the complicated issue of race by simply and subtly developing these new characters that are complex, vulnerable and indeed developed as *characters* rather than as anonymous fodder.

[15] Given Willow's empowerment of *all* potential Slayers in Season 7 and the overall message that Buffy is not as much a superhero as much as channeling a power that all women have inside, Whedon wisely chose to subtly re-address the conspicuous absence of multiple ethnicities on the series through use of the musical genre. While we as audience members "can sing along" with the musical "Kum Ba Ya-Yas" of "Once More, with Feeling," we can also swallow the racial implications that Sweet's outstanding vamp reveals: that characters of color on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are not all "faceless" vampires, "tragic mulattas" or foreign imports, but may also have some memorable power themselves.

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Notes

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[1] According to the 2000 census, 48.3% of California's population is white, 31.5% is Hispanic, 12.5% is Asian/Pacific Islander, 6.7% is black and 1.0% is "other" (State of California, 1).

[2] Although there has been some debate as to whether Charisma Carpenter is Latina, for the purposes of this article, I am labeling her as "white" since the character Cordelia is not coded ethnically.

[3] This article is also not concerned with the addressing of racial problematics with the spin-off show *Angel*, which features the introduction in Season 2 of black character Charles Gunn, played by Panamanian-American actor J. August Richards.

[4] An excellent article, "It May Look Like a Living Room…: The Musical Number and the Sitcom" by Robynn J. Stilwell, traces the history of the musical number within television comedies; however, she dismisses the episode in *Buffy* as being "about magic and fantasy to begin with" without examining the nature of such episodes within television audience reception.

[5] This would also explain the failure of the musical-centered series *Cop Rock* (1990).

[6] In discussing syntax, I am referencing Rick Altman's seminal work on film genre, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre": "The distinction between the semantic and the syntactic, in the way that I have defined it here, thus corresponds to a distinction between the primary, linguistic elements of which all texts are made and the secondary, textual meanings that are sometimes constructed by virtue of the syntactic bonds established between primary elements" (689).

[7] Likewise, the connection between sex and slaying in *Buffy* is made explicit during Faith's interaction with Xander during "The Zeppo" (3013).

[8] Although Rita Moreno gets a title credit for her co-starring role in *Singin'*, the character Zelda Zanders is not coded as Latina at all; it will not be until her role in 1958's *West Side Story* where she will be identified as a singing, dancing Puerto Rican actor.

[9] Here, "integrated" refers to the type of musical, one where the film's musical numbers are "integrated" into the plot itself.

[10] Some exceptions to this viewpoint of race can be found in Fox's non-integrated musicals (as noted by Sean Griffin in "The Gang's All Here: Generic Vs. Racial Integration in the 1940s Musical"), Paul Robeson's performance in 1936's *Show Boat* and Bill Robinson as Mr. Bojangles in the Shirley Temple vehicles.

[11] The fascinating approach to race used in the spectacles of Fox musicals in thoroughly detailed in Sean Griffin's "The Gang's All Here: Generic Vs. Racial Integration in the 1940s Musical"

[12] Knight later explains *Show Boat*'s otherwise incongruous inclusion in this list: "[*Show Boat*] uses an interracial cast, the members of which interact with one another; it makes several opportunities to comment directly on racist inequities, particularly of opportunity and labor, and it uses the malevolent social construction of racialized and miscegenated identity to drive its secondary plot. At the same time, several aspects of *Show Boat's* structure undermines its progressive features. Most obviously, the black characters disappear as the main plot proceeds. We follow the romantic lead couple of

Magnolia and Gaylord Ravenol, and in the face of this need for their story to resolve satisfactorily, the black characters become problems. Julie, the mulatto who sacrifices her own singing career so Magnolia can have an opportunity, is an explicit social, as well as a plot problem; Queenie and Joe ("Old Man River"), who have supported Magnolia and provided her with distinctive musical materials, are excess plot, but also perhaps social baggage. All three are absent at the end…" (22).

[13] Interestingly, little has been written about the Season 4 Thanksgiving episode "Pangs" (4008) which explicitly addresses tensions between Native Americans and the founders of Sunnydale. This episode is referenced by Anya in "One More, with Feeling" when she sings of Xander in "I'll Never Tell": "His penis got diseases from a Chumash tribe." Likewise, no one has addressed the complicated racial dynamics surrounding the Romani character Jenny Calendar (Robia La Morte). Certainly both issues deserve address in future *Buffy* studies concerning race.

[14] Tellingly, the only Asian-American I could find quickly looking through the series is the unnamed girl, played by Korean-American Nicole Bilderback, whose body is quickly drained of blood using the Master's machine in "The Wish" (3009) . . . which is, of course, in a parallel universe.

[15] It is unclear how much the name "Sweet" is meant to be significant. The demon is not named within the episode; when Buffy asks for a name, he replies, "I have a hundred." The online Buffy Trivia Guide indicates an apocryphal origin for the name: "as the credits say 'Sweet [slang for "cool, awesome"] Make-Up By…' everyone assumed the character was named Sweet." However, the published shooting script for the episode indicates the following description for the first entrance of the character at the end of Act 1: "…a man nattily dressed in a retro kind of suit, almost a zoot suit. … No one knows his name, but we will call him SWEET" (16). The name's presence in the script may intentionally reference Melvin Van Peebles' seminal 1970 blaxploitation film *Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song*, where a black hustler witnesses the beating of an innocent black man by white cops, goes on the run from the police force that is after him and survives the film to become a legend. Though there are few similarities between the film and "Once More, with Feeling" beyond the color of the actors' skin, the episode may be playing on the *Sweet Sweetback*'s revolutionary depiction of a strong black man who does not submit to a white-dominated narrative viewpoint. Van Peebles has said consistently that he made the film to "get the Man's foot out of my ass" and that "To get the Man's foot out of my ass means to me logically to get the Man's foot out of all of our black asses" (12). The film's militantly prophetic final title cards declaring "WATCH OUT – A BAAD ASSSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES!" was a lightning rod for black-produced pictures, ushering in the era of the "blaxpolitation" film but, more importantly, also Hollywood's recognition of a black audience. The name might also refer to the voodoo-knowledgeable jazz musician Toots Sweet from Alan Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987).

[16] The episode's use of explicit sexual double entendres within the song lyrics, necessary for broadcast television, also relates to Hollywood maneuvering around Hays's Code censors during the 40s and 50s. This is most clearly seen during "I'll Never Tell" (the "tight embrace") and "Under Your Spell" (particularly the syllabic breaking of the last word in Tara's line "surging like the sea/spread beneath my [W]illow tree/You make me complete").

[17] Although several traditional musicals reference jazz – most notably Vincente Minnelli's *An American in Paris* with its George Gershwin song catalog – they are racially "whitewashed," with virtually no black characters performing on screen.

[18] One exception to the use of “non-white” music occurs in “Listening to Fear,” when Buffy turns on the radio while washing dishes and listens to salsa. This uncharacteristic music, however, functions as counterpoint: we as viewers are struck by the anomaly that the radio is tuned to such music in the first place (since no one has given any prior indication of affection for Latin music) before we find the happy, peppy beat only heightens the sobbing that Buffy experiences thinking about her mother’s illness.

[19] *Sophisticated Ladies*, 1981; *The Tap Dance Kid*, 1984; *Miss Saigon*, 1991. No disrespect is meant to the remainder of the cast with this comment; fans were particularly fascinated by the wonderful vocal talents of Amber Benson, Emma Caulfield and James Marsters – although no one was surprised that Anthony Stewart Head was an excellent singer…and that Sarah Michelle Gellar is, at least musically, not quite the superpower that she is in the show.

[20] This analysis does not include the Potential, and Willow's new love interest, Kennedy who, while not explicitly coded with a particular race in the series, is played by Chicana actress Iyari Limón.