Jes Battis

"She's Not All Grown Yet": Willow As Hybrid / Hero in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

[1] Buffy, ultimately, is a program that teases, explores, and sometimes violates the liminal space between social ideals that are themselves themselves constructions. It needs to be addressed as a complex and ambiguous work of fiction that explores the decay of 'normal' as it intersects with the fantastic and the grotesque—specifically the Bakhtinian grotesque, representing a form "not separated from the rest of the world…[but rather] unfinished…transgressing its own limits" (Bakhtin 26). For monstrous bodies in Buffy are those which hold the most ambiguity, the most danger; and when the principle characters (some of whom are 'monsters') collide with this erratic and subversive positionality, the veracity of 'normal' becomes as untenable as that of 'monstrous.' I employ Bakhtin here not to align Buffy's characters with his much-remediated notion of the grotesque body—which can be read as anything from a performance meant to resignify cultural norms and release social tension, to a display of anarchic physicality that disrupts fields of safe, conventional viewing—but to reveal these characters' status as incomplete, becoming, and through their physical incommensurability, subjects capable of wild transgression.

[2] To interrogate the show's ambivalence, this article aims not at deconstructing Buffy herself—the archetypal figure who embodies every televisual feminine caricature from Bridget Jones (cinematic, admittedly) to Xena—but rather Willow, who has been overshadowed by Buffy, but who has also *shadowed* her, and at times, eclipsed her. Throughout the course of seven seasons, Willow has occupied many personas: shy academic; computer expert; budding witch ('budding' being a signifier commonly ascribed to Willow's magical studies, which holds all kinds of double-voiced meaning when connected to her name)[i][1]; ingénue; agent of the apocalypse; and, finally, a guilt-stricken 'reformed' addict, whose self-imposed embargo on magic is all that prevents her from reverting to primal destruction once again. Unlike Buffy, who is the satellite around which her surrogate family of 'Scoobies' revolve, Willow has lingered on the outer edges, and proven herself to be a chaotic force more powerful than the Slayer, the Watchers, or any other instrument of authority within the show's diegesis. The title of this article was taken from the episode *Restless*, wherein Willow describes the nameless kitten (referred to only as 'miss kitty,' or 'kitty fantastico') that she and Tara have adopted as being "not all grown yet" (*Buffy* 4022). Willow, like all of *Buffy's* characters, is still very much in a state of evolution. But her growing pains are of particular importance, for they identify her as a hybrid site upon which several of the show's most resounding ambivalences converge, overlap and shadow each other.

[3] Let us begin at the end: or rather, the end of season 6, as Willow is about to invoke apocalypse. "On the first day of kindergarten," Xander reminds her in *Grave*, the season finale, "you cried because you broke the yellow crayon, and you were too afraid to tell anyone" (*Buffy* 6022). This childhood Willow (further described by Xander, the ironic communicator, as "crayon-breaky Willow") bears little resemblance to the black-eyed figure of violent energy that he is addressing. Their confrontation ends not with an epic battle, but with a speech act—a declaration of love—that forces Willow to re-access her own humanity, and sees her crumpled against Xander's uncertain body, weeping, as her black hair reverts to its previous shade of orange. This is not, as it may seem, the safe containment of the Gothic, or the triumph of normativity over the abject 'other.' Willow must still learn how "not to be evil," as Anya calls it, and her insecurities, like those of Xander and *Buffy*, remain very much in the foreground of the show's narrative (*Buffy* 7003). Like Season 4, which ended with a dream rather than a battle (as well as a battle within a dream), and Season 5, wherein the defeat of Glory was overshadowed by Buffy's death, Season 6 ends with a question: who is Willow, and what shall become of her? How can she reconcile the oppositional binaries of her character, which Xander so aptly terms as "crayon-breaky Willow" and "scary-veiny Willow?" Is there any space left for her between these poles, and if so, is it a space that she wants to occupy?

[4] Willow's transition from the show's passive 'information system[ii][2],' to an instrument of chaos who seeks to vitiate the bonds that join her own family together, can be traced from the end of Season 2. In *Becoming Pt II*, the audience sees a weak, bedridden Willow suddenly snap into a trance, and begin chanting a powerful spell in ancient Romanian (*Buffy* 2022). Injured after an attack which was supposed to kill her, Willow instead experiences a moment of naked and frightening power, during which a voice—not her own, but one that the audience will come to know much better as the story progresses—intones Angel's curse with the ease and facility of an expert linguist. It is she who reunites Angel with his soul, thereby making Buffy's task of killing him all the more difficult, and shadowing her apparent victory—the world, after all is saved—with the clear expression of betrayal on Angel's face as he disappears into the void. The enormity of this destructive act is never fully articulated until an episode five seasons later, when Buffy is forced to remind Xander of the impossible choice that, more than anything, propelled her from childhood to adolescence (*Buffy* 7006).[iii][3]

[5] It is valid to observe that a character's shift from good to evil (usually rounded out by a return to good) on the show is sometimes clearly marked. As Krzywinska notes, "'bad' Willow's black lipstick and leather, or Angel's smoking and cruel laughter, indicate their changed personas" (181). This of course refers to Willow's transformation in the episode *Dopplegangland*, when the 'good' Willow meets her other-dimensional shadow, an emboldened, violent and pan-sexual vampire (*Buffy* 3016). The 'bad' Willow, as Krzywinska suggests, is negatively coded by her sultry appearance. She is nothing like the impish Darla, whose vampirism is subverted by her blonde hair, wispy voice and hyper-feminine clothes (one outfit, that of a preparatory schoolgirl, being probably the most disturbing when aligned with Buffy's own age and status as a high-school student). When Willow is at the height of her destructive powers, she is similarly re-coded, given black hair, black eyes and a kind of dark power-suit that makes her appear strangely business-like.

[6] But the audience does not have to look too deeply in order to see the gaps in this binaristic transformation, for Willow's outer 'darkness,' like Angel's vampire-face, still contains remnants of the physical beauty that preceded it. Angel is still very much attractive as a vampire—not a loathsome creature like the Count Orlock of Murnau's film *Nosferatu*—and Willow is simply Willow with black hair and different clothes. Xander recognizes this easily, and thus addresses not the black-eyed Willow, but the old Willow whose face is still visible underneath. It must also be remembered that both of these characters perpetrated significant cruelties while still appearing very human. Angel's speech to Buffy after they have sex for the first time—a callous dismissal of her as a lover—is made more disturbing because he retains his human face, just as Willow's multiple betrayals and violations of her relationship with Tara happen long before her physical metamorphosis. The shift between good and evil is not so smooth, and for Willow, finding normalcy after her brush with apocalypse merely re-emphasizes the exile status that she has struggled with since the show's first episode.

[7] Like all serial shows, *Buffy* relies upon the concept of sameness. Unlike most serials, it constantly calls this sameness into question, challenging its own programmed structure as a media vehicle that must obey certain popular themes—it may obey them, but not transparently, and not without visual and narrative resistance. Umberto Eco's description of the serial as a constant narrative that gives the illusion of change, and within which "the secondary characters must give the impression that [their] new story is different from the preceding ones, while in fact the narrative scheme does not change" (Eco, *Limits* 86), is both applicable to and resisted by *Buffy*. Repetition gives a show emotional currency with its audience, for by rehashing the same scenarios, it "consoles us (the consumer), because it rewards our ability to foresee: we are happy because we discover our own ability to guess what will happen" (86). And in this sense *Buffy* conforms to Eco's model, for every season presents us with the same core group of characters (Buffy, Willow and Xander) who are visited by alternating supporters (Anya, Oz, Riley) detractors (Adam, Glory, and most recently the First Evil) and ambivalent characters like Spike, who straddle the line between protagonist/antagonist in ways that continually disrupt the audience's perceptions.

[8] Every season culminates in a new disaster, which is averted by some means, thereby saving the world (or the universe). The core group changes, both mentally and physically, but the characteristics that they first brought to the show—Willow's childlike and insecure grasp of the world, Buffy's protectiveness and defiance of authority, and Xander's wisecracking which masks his powerful sense of loyalty and optimism—all remain untouched. The audience loves these characters because they are the same, they are predictable, they are 'their' people. Like the safe spaces within *Buffy's* diagesis—the Bronze, the Magic Shop (before its destruction), and above all, Buffy's massive three-story house with its warm decor and bright, cheery kitchen—the characters themselves represent security to the audience. Their static lives seem superior to the reversals and exigencies of the 'real' world.

[9] However, *Buffy's* narrative also demonstrates marked changes that derail story arcs and surprise audiences—changes that are not overwhelmingly positive. When Angel talks about leaving Sunnydale (and thus, the show) he really does *leave*. The formative, heterosexual romance upon which the show was originally built is suddenly absent, and Angel's replacement—Riley—is coded as a failed love-choice almost from the beginning of his courtship with Buffy. Similarly, the death of Tara is cruel and permanent—Willow can never see her again, never contact her through some mystical proxy, and Amber Benson (the actor who plays Tara) will not make another appearance on the show. In lieu of these events, Eco's claim that all serials depend upon this principle of monotony, and that "the era of electronics . . . [has produced] a return to the continuum . . . the Regular" (Eco, *Apocalypse* 96), does not address *Buffy's* willingness to sever relationships, eliminate characters, and frustrate its viewing audience with new story arcs that they may not be so easy to digest.

[10] *Buffy's* characters do change, evolve, and most often, flow between varying identities. The audience sees, for example, Xander's retreat into the useful, effective 'handyman' persona after leaving Anya; they see Willow's struggle to negotiate a life without reckless magic, and without Tara; they *see* these transformations, like wrinkled skin, waning beauty, and are sometimes horrified, sometimes pleased, by the mutability of their beloved characters. And this suggests that there is no clear distinction between Eco's "critical spectator," his *experienced* reader, and his naieve or semantic reader (93-94). An academic, despite her ability to locate and articulate this phenomenon, is no better equipped to subvert or avoid it than the casual viewer. Every audience member, regardless of their critical interest in a given program, desires the unchangeable, and is simultaneously repulsed by it. That is the paradox of the viewer. They cannot be happy unless a program is both static and dynamic.

[11] And if *Buffy's* characters are looking back, returning the gaze of the audience with a frustrating gaze of their own, then it is Willow's black eyes that disarm onlookers the most. For, as Giles admonishes her after she capriciously describes Buffy's resurrection, "of everyone here . . . you were the one I trusted most to respect the forces of nature" (*Buffy* 6004). Shy Willow, outsider Willow—even sexualized Willow—is the character that the audience finds most easily recognizable, for she is the character most clearly 'named' and positioned by her friends and family. Unlike Buffy's tryst with Spike, which is but one more perverse development in her ongoing flirtation with the dark powers that she allegedly subverts, Willow's abuse of magic challenges the audience to renegotiate their perceptions of "Willow…she of the level head," as Buffy calls her (*Buffy* 6009). Her awkwardness, paired with her great erudition and technological efficiency, makes her a delightfully stable character whose subsuquent slide into deviancy (that is, a deviation from viewing expectations) thus becomes all the more pronounced.

[12] Because she serves as both an information system, and as a repository of mystical power, her transition from ally to adversary is all the more threatening. It is Willow's magic that enables Buffy to fight cybernetic Adam via the enjoining spell; and the result of this spell, most fittingly, is a hybrid—Buffy united with the spirit of every Slayer,

as well as the spirit of her family—whose power comes from a "source" that Adam "cannot grasp" because he is a cybernetic (metal/flesh) rather than a *psychic* (body/mind) hybrid.[iv][4] That same magic is the only weapon capable of weakening Glory, and the only power against which Buffy's own strength cannot contend. Willow has proven herself to be Buffy's surrogate sister, the twin to Xander's "big brother" identity that Buffy herself hints at in *Restless* (*Buffy* 4022). Yet she is also the sole force capable of defeating the Slayer—capable, as well, of annihilating her family, and with them the world.

[13] To find the 'real' Willow, which may or may not be "like a tragedy," as Anya suggests, is to collide with a hybrid identity that deforms the text of *Buffy* itself. For Willow is still growing, and waiting for her redemptive moment. Buffy has her dive; Xander can say proudly that "I saved the world with my mouth" (*Buffy* 7003); even Spike chose to be ensouled, although recent episodes have deconstructed this act as one of profound ambiguity and negative consequences. But Willow has yet to make a sacrifice. She has lost a great deal, but not yet *given* anything away—save for choosing to stay in Sunnydale for 'Buffy's sake' rather than attending a major university, although this may very well be to fulfill her need for definition through the Slayer. Willow, unlike Buffy and Xander—who, despite their occasionally rash choices, still remain legible as 'the Slayer' and 'the Loyal' to the audience—is involved in a more complex negotiation of identity. She is the middle-child of the Scoobies, vacillating between Xander's immaturity and Buffy's hyper-responsibility.

[14] Her vast power allows her to act out the Slayer's darkest fantasies of violence and immolation—rather than saving the world, she can literally destroy it—and her childlike petulance allows her to become totally infatuated with a love object (Tara), while at the same time manipulating and controlling her in order to sustain the most pleasurable and anxiety-free scenario. She can, in effect, do what Xander and Buffy long to do, knowing that their affection for her will remain unchanged. Even when she is poised to extinguish all life on earth, Xander simply tells her that "I know you're about to do something apocalyptically evil and stupid, and hey—I still want to hang. You're Willow" (*Buffy* 6022).

[15] She is 'Willow' not because she, or the audience, knows precisely who Willow *is*, but because Xander and Buffy have *told* her who she is. They have constructed a 'Willow' who is always available, always ready with an innovative solution: the same Willow that Xander addresses, in *Becoming Pt I,* when he asks "how am I gonna pass trig, you know? And who am I gonna call every night . . . and talk about everything we did all day? You're my best friend" (*Buffy* 2021). She is Xander's best friend, and Buffy's best friend, and "she of the level head." But beneath that amicable façade lies an ambivalent, dangerous character, given form and em(bodied) purely by the perceptions of others, whose pain, confusion and psychic turmoil allow her to access what Giles calls "a place of rage and power" (*Buffy* 6022).

[16] Her body—metamorphosing from healthy, to addicted, to destructive, and then back again—becomes a living signifier for the anguish that she feels. She is the archive of *Buffy*'s doubt, of Xander's foolishness, and she can hold all of this because she lacks corporeality. Or rather, she is inscribed with it to the point of excess—given a sexy doppelganger who actually licks her (thus, Willow licks 'herself')—but fails to maintain her own body without making the radical foreclosures needed to satisfy her friends' expectations. Nearly every significant event in the show involving Willow suggests this, making her body less and less clear, until all that's left is the "costume" that Buffy summarily rips away.[v][vi]5] And, as this paper is bent upon the interrogation of Willow as an incomplete—and, therefore, potentially transgressive—subject, I will now address more specific scenes which illustrate Willow's lack of em(bodiment). I will further discuss her positioning (or de/positioning) as an exile, and her ability to destabilize not just the familial unit of the Scoobies, but the discursive fabric of the program itself.

[17] Let us return, for a moment, to Eco, who suggests that "there are serial works that establish an explicit agreement with the critical reader and thus . . . challenge him to acknowledge the innovative aspects of the text" (Eco, *Apocalypse* 92). In accordance with this theory, *Buffy* 'double-codes' many of its scenes, using a combination of foreshadowing and subtextual references that the more discerning reader can access. Such is the case with Willow, whose conflicts are explored as early as Season 3, when she comes face to face with her doppelganger. Upon meeting this simulation of herself, Willow is horrified to observe that "I'm so evil and . . . skanky! And I think I'm kinda gay" (*Buffy* 3016). When Buffy assures her that one's 'vampire self' has nothing to do with one's 'real' identity, Angel interrupts her containment of this evil with a highly ambiguous: "Well, actually . . ." It is thus made clear that 'bad' Willow is shaped and informed by 'good' Willow, and vice versa. Fittingly, then, Willow is not a static body, but rather a system of good and evil, capable of being dominated by either force. Like the double-voiced "death is your gift," which the first Slayer pronounces to Buffy, Willow's engagement with her dark self is neither helpful nor oppositional, but needs to be decoded.

[18] This decoding occurs most prominently in dreams, which are powerful and didactic within *Buffy*. The two Slayers who exist in a kind of intimate opposition with each other—Buffy and Faith—can communicate peacefully, and meaningfully, only through dreams. *Buffy*'s dreams are often prophetic, and in the episode *Restless*, any demarcation that may have previously existed between the 'real' world and the dream world is smudged away. If, as McLuhan says, "the movie camera is a means of rolling up the daylight world on a spool . . . [and] the movie projector unrolls the spool and recreates the daylight world as a dark dream world" (290), then dreaming in *Buffy's* televisual universe is a deepening of shadow, a more subterranean layer beneath the already simulated "real." The dream is the equivalent of the dark cinema for these characters, where their fears move and whisper just outside the light, and all that they considered stable suddenly takes on a new reflection.

[19] *Restless* begins with Willow's dream, and the audience is at first not sure why. But it soon becomes clear that the disorienting imagery, tinged with violence, in Willow's dream world will influence and inform the content that follows. Unlike Xander, Buffy and Giles' dreams, which begin weirdly or comically, Willow's dream begins with a scene of physical intimacy—Willow is painting Greek characters on Tara's naked back, as she lies with her head down, looking pensive. The Greek is an invocation to Aphrodite, translated in part as "I beg you, don't overcome my spirit with pain and care, mistress" (Bowman 2; Lattimore, trans. 515). This is an oracular statement, since Willow's love for Tara, juxtaposed against her love for magic, will drive the conflict that precipitates her addiction and subsequent flight from reality. Tara expresses worry over not having found "her name," and Willow's interruption—"miss kitty?"—provides only one possible subject. It is still unclear just whose "name" Tara is talking about, but as the episode progresses, it becomes more evident that the character who fears being seen— being *named*—the most is Willow herself.

[20] And Willow's answer to Tara's fear, "she's not all grown yet," only further emphasizes her lack of positioning. Willow, unlike Tara, is not all grown yet. Her corporeality is as fluid as her dream world, and thus, the only talismanic character traits that she brings to her own dream—asking questions, doing homework, and transmitting information (via the Greek characters)—are the ones with which she has been most keenly inscribed by her friends. Buffy, Xander and Giles each have moments, however slight, during which they recognize that they are in a dream, but Willow tries to enforce order upon each scene—"this drama class is just . . . I think they're really not doing things in the proper way, and now I'm in a play and my whole family's out there" (*Buffy* 4022)—even after Tara observes that "you don't understand yet, do you?"

[21] What Willow does not understand is that she is not simply hiding from the first Slayer, but from the fear that her constructed identity may have no substance beneath it. With the kind of disorienting meta-criticism that *Buffy* is famous for, Willow, a character in a TV show, fears that she may be nothing more than a character in a play, and that her costume will not protect her from the scrying gaze of her friends. And, although she tries to contain this fear, pressing on with a sense of normalcy by delivering a book report on that staple of high-school curricula—*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*—the phantasmal figure of the first Slayer still attacks her.

[22] Willow's death at the hands of the First Slayer is far more visually exotic, and symbolically charged, than the other Scoobies. Xander's heart is ripped out, and Giles is scalped—both grisly demises—but the attack itself is a clear act of violence and organic invasion, since both characters have body parts forcibly removed. Willow, as she is mauled by the Slayer, actually transforms. Her skin becomes yellowish, almost reptilian, and her eyes change. She becomes not herself, and not the first Slayer, but a strange hybrid of the two—a demonic entity whose birth leaves the 'real' Willow gasping on the couch, as if being strangled. Buffy—now a character in Xander's dream—upon seeing this, calls her a "big faker" (*Buffy* 4022), but it's unclear exactly what she's faking, or rather, which 'Willow' is the fake.

[23] What the audience expects from Willow is the slightly awkward, hyper-intelligent and intrinsically loyal friend that they have come to know. But her choices—and they *are* distinct choices, not the maneuverings of fate—within the last three seasons of the show have seriously displaced and disrupted these expectations. Her relationship with Tara, and consequent abandonment of Oz as a romantic interest, is probably the most dramatic character shift experienced by any of the Scoobies. Surprisingly, this relationship has received a great deal of popular discussion and criticism among fansites and magazines, but little academic attention. The most prevalent critical reading of the Willow/Tara relationship is one wherein magic and lesbian sexuality are conflated. 'Lesbian' may just as easily stand in for 'witch,' since both are socially othered identities, and Willow's sexual experiences are closely linked, and at times synonymous, with her magical ones (Winslade).

[24] But, despite the fact that magic is coded as feminine within the show, Willow is not intentionally accessing a grand, feminine *spiritus mundi*. On the contrary, her scathing description of UC Sunnydale's Wiccan Group—"Blah blah Gaia. Blah blah moon…menstrual life force power thingy" (*Buffy* 4010)—leads the audience to believe that she has no particular desire for feminine empowerment through Wicca. Unlike Tara, who holds intricate and reverent knowledge of the variegated mythologies which underpin the show's pseudo-Gardnerian type of magic, Willow's relationship with her power is visceral and emotional. Magic brings her closer to Tara, and closer to what she believes is an authentic identity. It becomes for her not, as Krzywinska suggests, a "witchcraft [that] is practical and not linked to any environmental issues or spiritual matters" (Krzywinska 188), but rather a unity of sexual and elemental power that is every bit as primal as the Slayer's strength. And just as Buffy uses this preternatural strength to engage in a mutually masochistic relationship with Spike, so does Willow use magic to experience heightened forms of physical intimacy with Tara. Magic is not merely conflated with sexuality in the show, but contiguous with it, emerging from the same organic drives.

[25] Willow's relationship with Tara, like her relationship with Oz, only further demonstrates her dis(embodiment) as a subject whose mentality and materiality is fragmented. She begins by desiring Xander, whose physical and emotional proximity to her—as a primary member of her support system—combined with his romantic disinterest for her, makes him an object charged with true *eros*, or lack. In calling *eros* a "verb," Anne Carson states that "the symbol of eros . . . [is] in the space across which desire reaches"—that space being what necessarily separates lovers (Carson 25). Absence itself, then, is what creates specifically *erotic* love in the classical sense—and, given the Greek characters being gently inscribed upon Tara's back in *Restless*, it is clear that certain classical conceptions of love and sexuality are important to this story arc.

[26] As with Buffy's later intense attachment to Riley, which Xander describes as being "right in front of my Xander face," Willow's desirability swoops beneath his cognitive radar, never made apparent until the possibility of reciprocating it becomes hopelessly complex (*Buffy* 5010). After their brief physical liaison, Willow forcefully tells

Xander that she must choose Oz over him—just as, in the future, she will have to choose Tara over Oz. In her words: "If I want to make things right with Oz, my hands, my—all my stuff—has to be for him only" (*Buffy* 3009).

[27] Love is verbalized and actualized by these characters in unique, specific ways. Spike name's himself "love's bitch"; Anya's love makes Xander "feel like a man"; and for Buffy, love and pain are perversely conflated, twined and warped together in a symbiotic embrace from which neither can be separated. But Willow is the only character who describes love as deficit, as lack. It is disembodying for her—she must become not abject, like Spike, but *object*. She must belong to Tara, to Oz, to Xander, in order to be inscribed by meaning, by the validity that others place in her. But what, then, to make of Tara's enigmatic comment? "I am, you know—yours" (*Buffy* 4019). Mendlesohn describes Willow's role in the relationship as a dominant one, stating that "Willow takes [her] gained confidence and employs it in the attraction of the painfully shy Tara, in which she repeats, in reverse, the primary dynamic of her relationship with Buffy" (Mendlesohn 59)—that is, the dynamic of submission/control that several critics have identified between Buffy and Willow, leading to a queer reading of their relationship. That aside, in regards to Tara's sentiment, it does seem as if Willow is doing most of the taking, not Tara. It is she who *already* belongs, and Tara who is looking for belonging.

[28] Yet, it is Tara who confronts Willow about her addiction to magic, and Tara who effectively ends their relationship.[6] Long after Tara has readjusted herself to life without Willow—helping Buffy research the particulars of her resurrection, and offering her emotional support—Willow herself continues to fall deeper into a state of emotional wreckage and sensory oblivion (*Buffy* 6009). Magic becomes not merely a form of sublimation for Willow, but a radical embodiment, as demonstrated when she mystically imbues one of Tara's old dresses with corporeality (6009). The dress physically embraces her, a shadow figure—born of cloth, air and intent—and for the first time Willow is 'real,' while Tara is just a magical construct; a memory.

[29] Magic is not a power that Willow manipulates here in order to invoke Tara, like a flicked switch or a pushed button. The power itself is what makes her real. By allowing it to embody her, she positions herself within a core of physical and social interstices—erotic desire, comfort, authority, selfhood—and is thus part of a Foucauldian system of interplay and difference where "power is immanent…to [all] other types of relationships" (Foucault 94). And, as further episodes illustrate, she cannot separate herself from the simultaneity of magic/body. Willow herself observes that "I *am* the magic"—a statement then reaffirmed by the image of a hundred magical books pouring their printed knowledge into her body, bringing her role as 'information system' to a new level by making her the living intersection of flesh and text (*Buffy* 6022). Willow's body, and Willow's magic, intersect upon a field of power that makes both subjects radically interchangeable. They are caught up in a power that, as defined by Judith Butler (who revises and recasts Foucauldian conceptions of power dispersal), "forms, maintains, sustains, and regulates bodies at once, so that, strictly speaking, power is not a subject who acts on bodies as its distinct objects" (Butler 34). Willow is thus no longer "distinct" from her power, her magic, because she has allowed it to embody her.

[30] It is Tara's subsequent death, abrupt and shocking, that pushes this Willow/magic relationship into crisis. Hit by a stray bullet meant for Buffy, Tara has time merely to look at Willow in confusion, and ask "your shirt?"—it is covered in a fine spray of her own blood—before collapsing (*Buffy* 6019). This radical and almost perfunctory silencing of Tara, who is denied a glorious swan-dive like Buffy, or a long, protracted moment of pain like Angel, has been the source of much audience outcry and criticism. Tara's death is further complicated by the fact the she and Willow begin the episode in bed together, after a night during which "there was plenty of magic," as Tara herself states wryly (6019). This violent juxtaposition—from sex to death in one episode—has invited criticism that "whether viewers are aware of [it] or not, murdering a lesbian just minutes after she has sex suggests a causality between lesbian sex and death" (Mangels 1).

[31] In all fairness, it does not happen *minutes* after the two have sex. But the observation is still valid, and it cannot simply be sidestepped that, by removing the Tara/Willow relationship, Joss Whedon has removed one of the few positive and 'graphic' (perhaps a better term is 'visualized') lesbian relationships on a television. And, although this 'gap' has allegedly been filled by the arrival of Kennedy—Willow's new love interest, who attempts to inject a bit of ease and frivolity into her sex life—the shadow of Tara remains. When Willow temporarily 'becomes' Warren—a spell of atonement engineered by Amy to punish Willow for her efficacy, her specialness—she blames the transformation on Kennedy's kiss. For, in that brief moment of physical satisfaction, Willow admits that "I killer her. I let her be dead," speaking of Tara (7013). This moment of loss, of foreclosure, results in Willow pointing a gun at Kennedy's head: case in point that Tara's death still haunts her, and will continue to delimit what she allows herself to feel, and who she lets into her life. Also, of course, her death precipitates what at first seems to be a clichéd narrative convention (scorned lover becomes grief-fueled killing machine) which repositions the Tara/Willow relationship (formerly unique and layered) within a realm of televisual kitsch. Perhaps.

[32] But it must also be remembered that the happiness and well-being of these characters is constantly being frustrated by powers seemingly beyond their control. Angel and Buffy are held in romantic abeyance due to a magical curse; Xander cannot marry Anya for fear of repeating the scenario of mindless conflict that his parents have presented him with; Giles finds romantic satisfaction with Jenny Calender, only to learn that she has been killed (in an equally swift and appalling manner) by 'evil' Angel (*Buffy* 2018; 2022; 6017). These characters gain verisimilitude—and thus audience appeal—through their suffering, reversals, mistakes, and attempts to negotiate a thoroughly obscured ideal of humanity. Willow and Tara are no different, and thus should not be treated differently by the show's narrative.

[33] Extra-textual ramifications aside, it is Tara's death that fragments Willow's already-compromised identity beyond repair, causing her to become wholly subsumed and embodied by magic. At first her goal is simple—kill Warren, who is directly responsible for the shooting, and also his friends Jonathan and Andrew, who are guilty by association. But after her first kill—a gruesome act of *dis*embodiment, in which Warren is actually flayed—Willow's plans grow more abstract. While supposedly pursuing Andrew and Jonathan, she spends most of her time challenging and subverting her surrogate family—the Scoobies—by excavating their fears and undermining their accomplishments. (6019; 21; 22). Willow does not need magic to do this. Magic gives her the voice, the confidence, but it is through ordinary speech acts that she violates and tears down her friends. This psychic battle culminates in a physical one with Giles—whom she accuses of being "under the delusion that you [are] still relevant here"—wherein she brings him close to death, and extracts the magical power that he has 'borrowed' from a Coven; the power allegedly meant to contain her (*Buffy* 6022). This confrontation will ironically be recast as a teacher/student relationship in *Lessons* (7001), as Giles attempts to teach Willow focus and control over her power. The rhetoric that he employs, however, is merely a positive, slightly Gaian spin on what Willow has already enunciated: "I am the magic." Giles can never truly teach her what this ambivalent relationship means, how it must be maintained, or how it will transform her.

[34] Still—returning to *Grave*—it is the Coven's stolen power that taps into Willow's "spark of humanity," allowing Xander's own speech act to penetrate her. What might seem terribly hackneyed (good triumphs over the corrupted soul) is made interesting by the profound ambivalence of the situation. For Willow attempts to destroy the world not out of villainous, moustache-twisting ire—or because she feels betrayed by a world that falsely imagines her and renders her an outcast—but because she wants to annihilate human suffering. Her connection to the source of all magic allows her to experience a terrifying collectivity of earthly pain, anger and despair, the depth of which she cannot withstand. And she could not experience this without Giles's 'gift' of the Coven's power. Thus, the emotional event that drives her to extinguish all human life is the same event that allows Xander to reach her, and foster her dying "spark" of individuality. And that notion of the "spark" is made entirely more ambiguous by Spike's later speech to Buffy ("they put the spark back in me, and now all it does is burn" [7002]), leading the audience to question just how this soul-concept truly influences *Buffy's* characters (7002).

[35] This syncretism of interdependent forces—not the binary life/death, but rather life *in* death, monstrosity *in* humanity, informed and embodied by each other—creates a wildly subversive and critically fascinating vision of the 'real' social architecture that exists outside of the show, not just that which drives conflict *within* the show. If, as Baudrillard suggests, "it is the TV that renders true," then the exigencies of these characters are shared and simulated by their audience (Baudrillard 29). The fact that the world must be brought to the brink of apocalypse in order to save one human life—Willow's—is not lost upon the consciousness of the viewer. What is being said here may not be a master-narrative that guides *Buffy's* moral universe, but it *is* still a suggestion that these characters are not separate from the monsters that they fight—just as the prototypical construction of 'evil' within the show lingers on the borders of good, and is given form within that liminal space. Willow *is* the magic, and as Xander observes, there is no real demarcation between "crayon-breaky Willow" and "scary-veiny Willow," because both are reflections of a continually evolving source.

[36] This investigation, then, must begin and end with the same question: who is Willow? And, perhaps more accurately, why does she matter? As has been discussed, it is Willow's ambiguity that makes her interesting as a character—her lack of positioning that makes her the object of theoretical debate. She is Buffy's twilight sister and confidante, yet has the mystical power to destroy the Slayer. She is dismissive of Xander's friendship and foibles, yet all of her rage, grief and desire for vengeance cannot withstand his brilliant, calm declaration of unconditional love. She is the academic equal—and mystical superior—to Giles, yet it is Giles who 'teaches' her to reaccess her lost humanity by reminding her that she is part of a vast, organic system. In short, Willow resents her surrogate family, yet is informed by them, and desperately needs to anchor her free-floating subject to what she assumes are their 'solid' identities.

[37] Willow reflects all that her friends imagine her to be. She is Xander's kindergarten playmate, and the awkward, foolishly dressed 'nerd' who gives a boring report on C. S. Lewis in the episode *Restless*. She is the "rank, arrogant amateur" that Giles supposes her to be when she naively brings Buffy back from the dead, and also the computer-whiz who can effortlessly control what he terms "that infernal machine." She is Buffy's font of relationship advice, and also the black-eyed witch whose magically-induced strength allows her to match the Slayer blow-for blow, and summarily defeat her.

[38] Willow inhabits all of these subjectivities, and none of them make her as legible as the other characters in the show, because she can move so quickly and seamlessly between them. Willow—alone among the Scoobies—has the power to choose between redemptive and destructive behavior. She is not bound by prophecy (like Buffy), or mediocrity (like Xander) or logic and propriety (like Giles). She is free, and thus, completely dislocated, bewildered and confused. For no identity satisfies her, no power can ever truly embody her, and after losing herself in 'dark' magic, no amount of atonement can erase the memory of what she inflicted on others through word and deed. Her hybridity, her ability to choose, comes with the loss of any meaningful sense of belonging, intimacy or certainty. Like Buffy, she is faced with the knowledge that she doesn't know "how to live in this world if these are the choices. If everything just gets stripped away. I just don't see the point" (*Buffy* 5022). But, also like Buffy, she knows that the illusion of safety, of a morally-governed universe, of a destiny not eclipsed by suffering and most likely death, is her only comfort. And it is, after all, the maintenance and defense of any human certainty, however small, that drives these characters to avert apocalypse season after season: not the assumption that there is any one suitable 'way' to live in the world, but rather the continual realization that the world itself is worth saving, that causes them to fight, even against themselves.

[39] Willow's role within the program is as ambiguous as the program itself. She is not a model heroine, nor is Buffy, since neither can ever fully juxtapose themselves against negative powers—whose meaning is forever deterred by signifiers like "darkness," "the First," or Spike's "big bad"—without violating the gossamer-thin line that separates them from those powers. Willow, more than anyone, knows how easily these lines can be transgressed. Again, like the program itself—which the viewer expects to be what Jacques Derrida might call a text with an "edge," but is instead an open-ended system—Willow's negotiation with the monstrous is a journey through dark, open terrain rather than a carefully defined block of cells (Derrida 256). She is engaged in a process of becoming, and is, in her own words, "not all grown yet."

[40] As the program nears its conclusion (there are, as I write this, only six much-hyped episodes left), it becomes increasingly clear that Willow's power and influence will be one of the strongest determinants of the final narrative. But she has driven that narrative from the beginning, and it is the rich history of her character—all of the awkward moments, turned phrases, and bursts of emotional intensity—which in itself composes the material of that narrative. The genealogy of these characters is the genealogy of the narrative itself, for *Buffy* is read by the audience not as a plot-driven system—an endless recession of soporific story-echoes, returns and repetitions), but as an evolving dialogue between its characters. Willow does not, then, have to arrive at a final transformation or defining moment, because—like the other Scoobies—she *is* the story. And she will continue to tell, (un)tell, and retell herself, pushing against the very limits of what can be said, of what might be embodied, in her search for existence without foreclosure. She must be crayon-breaky Willow/scary-veiny Willow at the same time, and find both loveable, both inhabitable—because it is not, as Buffy suggests, being "finished" (6003) that is most important, but rather the dark and seductive expanse of the story itself, with its critical gaps, eager to be reimagined.

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[1] Names and naming are significant within the serie. "*Buffy*" with its immature and "Californian" associations; "Xander" as a diminutive of the more appropriate "Alexander," further shortened to "Xan"; and of course "Willow," with its ties to the natural world.The materiality of Willow's name is interesting:Willows are supple, bending but seldom breaking.

[2] She is the only character capable of using a computer, which, in Sunnydale, can effortlessly decrypt all manner of civic and governmental databases.

[3] "I *killed* Angel," she tells Xander."Do you even remember that?"And, indeed, this reality is rarely touched upon after the third season.

[4] It is also worth noting that *Buffy*'s transformation into the hybrid-Slayer is similarly coded to (but visually the opposite of) Willow's transformation into dark or "Uber-Willow."*Buffy*'s eyes become golden and radiant, whereas Willow's become black and devouring.*Buffy* transforms bullets into doves, whereas Willow freezes them—both actions most keenly representing the containment and displacement of technology by mystical power.

[5] The notion of the "costume" is further explored in the The Body (5016), when Willow interrogates her own dependence on childish dress:"Why can't I just dress like a grown-up?Can't I *be* a grownup?"At this point her language dissolves, and she must turn to Tara, whose kiss—both comforting and traced with erotic power—serves here as a silencing technique (Willow stops talking) and as a force of embodiment (she is then strengthened, and supported, by Tara's presence).Interestingly enough, this entire scene is touched off by Willow's search for "the blue," a sweater that Joyce (who is now herself "the body") always liked.Willow's vacillations regarding what to wear to the hospital (an uncertainty usually reserved for social events) underscores her slippage between identities:purple is too "royal," yellow too "happy, lala, look at me," and every article of clothing thus becomes unsatisfactory.

[6] Willow's attempt to magically alter Tara's memory—the "tabula rasa" spell—is the ultimate repositioning of identity.In order to maintain her lover's (and her family's) expectations, Willow feels that she must eradicate any hint of transgression and start anew.As illustrated in the episode itself (6008), this "new" position is entirely illegible.

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