

*“Buffy the Lesbian Separatist”:  
Cinnamon, Sex, and Gender in Buffy the Vampire Slayer  
Season 8*

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Joss Whedon once said, “If I made ‘Buffy the Lesbian Separatist,’ a series of lectures on PBS on why there should be more feminism, no one would be coming to the party, and it would be boring. The idea of changing the culture is important to me, and it can only be done in a popular medium” (qtd. Jowett 21). Whedon’s judgment of PBS aside, *Buffy*’s shift from primetime network television to a still-popular but less mainstream medium—comic books—has brought Buffy closer to both lesbianism and separatism than ever before. With freedom from both television censors and episode budgets, Whedon and his fellow writers have presumably had free rein in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer Season Eight*. Examining the graphic collections from gendered, queer and feminist perspectives reveals that the series’ hybrid characters and same-sex romances have been preserved, although Buffy’s careful gender balance has become somewhat skewed and concepts of bisexuality remain subtextual at best. However, while *Buffy Season Eight* has taken its third-wave feminism several steps further in pitting the Slayers against the world, it is doubtful that Buffy the Lesbian Separatist truly represents Whedon’s end-game; the series explores the concept more overtly, but ultimately retreats from it.

My analysis covers the first three softcover collections, which encompass *Buffy Season Eight* #1-15. In this series<sup>1</sup>, Buffy and her friends have successfully activated the powers of would-be Slayers around the world. They have been recruiting these new Slayers into an army against evil, and have divided their forces into several international training camps. Buffy herself, along with Xander, Dawn, and sometimes Willow, is training a group in Scotland. This article focuses on the brief lesbian relationship that occurs between Buffy and another Slayer, Satsu. In issue #3, Buffy is stricken with a curse that can only be lifted by true love’s kiss; when she is healed, the unknown person who kisses her leaves the taste of cinnamon on her lips. In issue #4, Buffy borrows Satsu’s lip gloss and notes it is cinnamon-flavoured; in this fashion, she discovers that Satsu is in love with her. Their friendship eventually evolves into a sexual relationship, which soon ends (in issue #15) as Satsu realizes that she has no real future with Buffy. Despite the short-lived nature of the dalliance, this

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<sup>1</sup> The first three collected books were written by Whedon, Drew Goddard, and Brian K. Vaughan, and illustrated by Georges Jeanty (with collection covers by Jo Chen).

lesbian flirtation has taken Buffy—the character—far beyond any previously subtextual explorations, and overtly examined her sexuality within the context of the narrative.

*Buffy* the television series has always been notable for the gender hybridity of its characters, and much work has been done in this area, particularly Lorna Jowett's full-length book *Sex and the Slayer*. Jowett argues that ultimately, "the show does not offer successful alternative gender representations but does raise awareness of the problems inherent in attempting to re-vision gender" (197); I would certainly agree that *Buffy* is not free of problematic issues in its portrayals of women and men. However, its use of hybridity is clear when one examines its major characters: Willow, who combines soft ways and feminine dress with what is arguably the greatest level of power in the series;<sup>2</sup> Xander, who from the first few episodes of the series is configured as "less than a man" due to his sensitive nature – and who, as Jowett notes, serves as the "heart" of Buffy's gang; Giles, the "New Age" father figure whose supportive role as Watcher is also generally passive; Angel, whose tortured form serves as an eroticisation of heterosexual male vulnerability (McCracken 120); and Spike, whose self-described position as "love's bitch" gives his otherwise aggressive and violent character the fluidity necessary for survival in the series (Spicer ¶1). Arwen Spicer notes, "*Buffy* repeatedly depicts a hybridization of conventional gender roles within individual personalities in ways that evade categorization. The traditional tropes of gender persist, but they become so dissociated from their traditional correlations to physical sex that they often interrogate more than support the gender roles they typically define" (¶5). Characters can be both masculine *and* feminine; Willow, for example, can gain power both from her masculine mastery of logic and technology, and from her feminine, intuitive and "illogical" use of her innate witchcraft abilities (or as Buffy describes it in issue #7, "Laptop-geek Willow" versus "Broomstick Action Willow").

The same observation holds true of Buffy, whose position as a "normal girl" is always in tension with her status as the chosen Slayer. Buffy frets about her hair, yet possesses superhuman strength. She moons over her boyfriends, but spends her evenings chasing down vampires and other monsters. She is a petite, attractive young blonde who nevertheless possesses the abilities of a powerful masculine warrior. Spicer observes, "In a social context of patriarchy, it can be argued that if Xander and Giles are men coded feminine, Buffy is a woman coded masculine. This observation is valid. At the same time, such codings have the potential to lead to the reification of masculine gender as synonymous with power, feminine gender with weakness, a move that undoes much of the transgressive work of placing a woman in an empowered and heroic position in the first place" (¶4). However, as Spicer has acknowledged, *Buffy* (both the series and the character) is not so easy to categorize; this

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<sup>2</sup> I have somewhat simplified Willow's character here; for more detailed discussion of the gender implications surrounding Willow/Dark Willow, see Lavigne, Carlen. "'Forces of the Universe': Intuition and the Lesbian Witch in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." *Technologies of Intuition*. Ed. Jennifer Fisher. Toronto: YYZ Books, 2006. 189-199. If (as this article is about to argue) season eight Buffy is "too male," season six Willow was "too female;" either way, the series seems to advocate balance.

ambiguity continues in season eight. In the comics, Xander wears cute ducky pyjamas (#2) and fawns over his “master” Dracula (#12; #13), but also commands Slayers (#1) and avenges the death of his would-be lover Renee (#15). Likewise, Giles remains primarily in a Watcher role as he works to guide the Slayer Faith—but a tattoo reminds us of his youthful rebellion (#6), and he also destroys an enemy warlock from the inside out (#9). Buffy displays much of the same gender balances; however, her relationship with Satsu seems to tip her gender coding ultimately toward the masculine.

Satsu is not the only factor in this shift. Sarah Buttsworth has noted that *Buffy* the television series most clearly demonstrated a feminine vs. masculine tension in season four, wherein Buffy squared off against the Initiative—a military organization ostensibly dedicated to controlling the same demons that Buffy herself fights. This narrative of “embattled masculinity” (Buttsworth 186) served to demonstrate how pure patriarchy supposedly could not hold when faced with Buffy’s empowerment; Buffy’s boyfriend at the time, Riley, was a member of the Initiative and ultimately left because he could not handle Buffy being more powerful than he. Season eight both reinscribes and reconfigures these tensions; the military is again the enemy, but in issue #1, Buffy and her Slayers have formed an “army” of their own that assimilates and reflects the soldier conditioning formerly ascribed only to men within the show. Addressed now as “ma’am,” Buffy is without question the general, and her teams are divided into “squads” that follow her orders. As season eight “opens,” Buffy and her squad descend from helicopter lines to mount an assault on a demon-infested church (Figure 1.1); they use high-tech equipment to keep in contact with their base, where Xander and another group of Slayers use computers for tactical monitoring. Buffy’s new role is far more masculinised than her previous position as *de facto* leader of a group of misfits – and, notably, she was not always the leader in the television series. As Jowett observes, “At various times different members of the Scooby gang lead . . . *Buffy* is not about solitary heroics but about a communal effort from a mixed-gender group” (26). This dynamic has partially, but clearly, changed. Buffy leads a paramilitary organization based on traditional patriarchal structures; the effort may be communal, but she is always the one in charge.

Buffy’s relationship with Satsu reinforces her masculinisation; much like her relationship with Spike in season six, hers is predominantly a “male” role—not necessarily in sexual aggression but rather in emotional detachment. She is the recipient of Satsu’s love, but does not return the affection; she enters the sexual relationship because she is lonely, and she is quite clear that she considers her lesbian interaction to be a one-night stand (although it becomes two nights before the relationship ends). Although Buffy apparently likes Satsu on a friendly basis, she is not emotionally engaged, and the first post-coital panel has Buffy in the masculine position (head higher on the pillow, Satsu curled to her chest; Satsu is holding Buffy but Buffy is not returning the embrace) (#12) (Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.1 -- Buffy leads her new soldiers in the opening panels of issue #1. (Satsu is far left.)



Figure 1.2 -- Buffy and Satsu after their first sexual encounter.

Although Buffy does move down to face Satsu in the bed, suggesting the possibility of a more equal relationship, she keeps Satsu at a distance throughout their flirtation. This is a symptom of Buffy's growing alienation; in conversation with Xander, Buffy notes that she no longer shares the feminine sense of community and support felt by the other Slayers. "Connection," she muses. "Why can't I feel it?" (#11).

The Slayer army is not wholly masculine, nor is Buffy's new position; an anonymous reviewer of this article observed, "[T]he Slayer army also have a party where they play on Dawn as though she were a climbing frame (see Figure 1.5) and they talk about hairdos a lot – it seems to me the comic has a butch line they are very careful not to cross." This is a valid point – the Slayers remain hybrid, as this blending of gender tropes has always been a mark of *Buffy* protagonists. Buffy herself is also still coded as femme; my argument is not that Buffy becomes entirely masculine, but rather that Buffy is unbalanced when she becomes more masculine than feminine. Despite her continued fascination with hairstyles, her pink bedroom, and her stated need for lip gloss, as well as her "girl talk" with Willow, Buffy's femininity seems pushed aside in season eight by her need to command. She stands alone. Without a romantic relationship such as the ones she pursued with Angel and Riley—the relationships that, in the series, always emphasized Buffy's alternate position as a "normal girl" —her feminine qualities are further lessened, and her casual liaison with Satsu does nothing to re-balance Buffy's shifting hybridity. While this might not in itself be taken as negative, the fact that Buffy's masculinisation is linked to a lack of community connection is telling – when she loses her gender balance, she loses her ties to the support base that has kept her going throughout the series.

Of course, readings of gender are distinct from readings of sexuality, and Buffy's sapphic fling also invites the root question: is she a lesbian? I have been somewhat fast and loose in ascribing this term to Buffy, since—despite her experimentations with Satsu – the text is adamant in asserting Buffy's heterosexuality. In the season eight series, panels describe Buffy's sexual fantasies regarding Angel, Spike, Daniel Craig and Christian Bale (#3; #10) (Figure 1.3). Later, Willow speaks with Satsu about Buffy, a conversation wherein both women agree that Buffy is "not a dyke" and Satsu's relationship with her has no future (#13). But need Buffy be completely straight? Is her night with Satsu – which she clearly enjoys, and in fact repeats – simply a misbegotten experiment? Certainly, although this is her first overtly lesbian relationship, her interactions with both Willow and Faith in the television series were often coded as romantic; the wealth of slash fiction on the internet attests to this, particularly in light of Joss Whedon's well-known assertion that viewers should "bring [their] own subtext" (Kaveney 11). Indeed, in season eight, as Faith reflects on her broken relationship with Buffy, the meaning is left ambiguous: "Step one: you finally meet somebody you dig, somebody you can groove with, somebody who doesn't seem like all the other phony losers out there. Step two: they share a little of themselves with you, you share everything with them. Step three: it all goes to crap [...] and in the end, no matter how many wicked good times you had together, you woulda been better off flying solo all along"



(#7). Faith ruminates about Buffy the same way she might think about an ex. Separately, Willow's mild indignation that Buffy chose to "experiment" with another woman (#15) also reflects an attraction on the witch's part, and partially demonstrates the past ambiguity of her own relationship with the Slayer. This is not to bely or undermine the possibilities of close female friendship, or to confuse such friendship with lesbianism; it is only to assert that Buffy's female relationships have always contained the possibility of alternate readings, particularly considering Buffy's alternately masculine and feminine codings. Satsu is simply the first woman the reader (or the viewer) has actually seen Buffy in bed with.

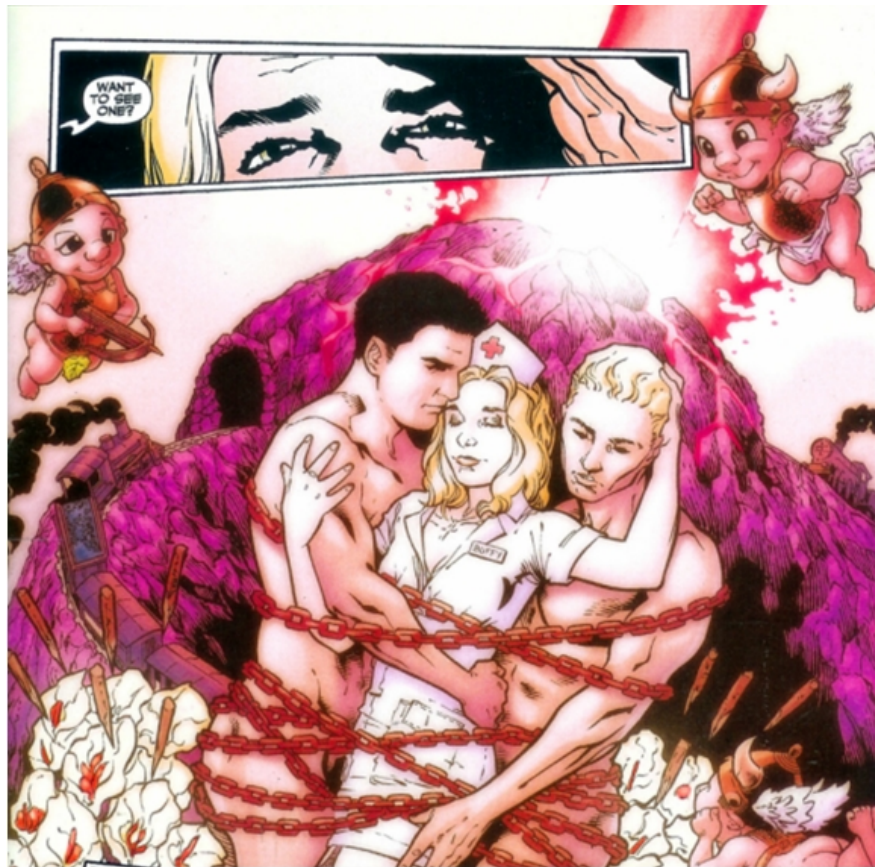


Figure 1.3 -- Buffy's heterosexuality is reinforced for the reader as her sexual fantasie are revealed.

Moreover, Buffy admits to herself (and us) that she finds it "sexy" when Satsu calls her ma'am (#14), and when Satsu asserts, "You're not gay," after her love for Buffy is discovered, Buffy ambiguously replies, "Not so you'd notice" (#11). The suggestion is that Buffy may be bisexual, but this goes unexamined—which fits with the series' overall failure to acknowledge bisexuality as a category. Examining Willow's character in the television

series, Em McAvan asserts that “bisexuality has rarely been explicitly coded *as* bisexuality” (§1) and that “though the series explicitly codes Willow’s sexuality in essentially binaristic terms, there are a number of instances in which she is coded as *implicitly* bisexual” (§5; see also McCracken 117). Willow begins the television series as straight but comes out as gay in season four, after which she is verbally defined as a lesbian; she cannot have it both ways. Buffy has always been canonically defined as heterosexual, but her reactions to Satsu suggest that queerness may be more than subtextual. However, like Willow, she must—at least verbally—choose a side; she continues to define herself as straight. *Buffy* the series was nominated for several GLAAD awards—and rightly so—for its onscreen depiction of Willow’s complex relationships with her girlfriends Tara and Kennedy; however, McAvan’s critique is also valid, in that there seems to be little open acknowledgement of sexual fluidity in the series. McAvan points out that Willow’s bisexual overtones are most prominent when Willow is evil (Vampire Willow, or Dark Willow); Buffy’s sexual experimentations at least avoid this trap, since her interaction with Satsu seems to be purely positive. The comic books continue the series’ trend of normalizing gay relationships; however, they seem to have the same difficulty in articulating sexuality in terms other than straight or gay.

Of course, many analyses of *Buffy* ultimately come down to a different question: is it feminist? For whose pleasure does Buffy “experiment”? Jason Middleton has raised the spectre of the omnipresent male spectator, and his analysis of earlier *Buffy* comic books (not to be confused with the season eight series) suggests that “the eroticisation of the characters exists as a sort of undercurrent made available for the pleasure of male fans of cult heroines, while the book on the surface maintains the premise that Buffy is the ‘exception to the rule’” (154). He observes the tensions created when some fans attempt to group Buffy in with other sexualized cult heroines, and aptly concludes that the comics and the television series both leave room for such readings (through Buffy’s sexy body and clothing) while outwardly denying the possibility (165). Separately, McAvan raises the possibility of “making mileage out of a flirtation with (femme coded) lesbian sex, but rapidly retreating back into normative heterosexuality” (§20)—in other words, the equivalent of a lesbian kiss during sweeps week—but credits Whedon with avoiding this pitfall with Willow. One might argue that the series has fallen into exactly this trap with Buffy—playing the relationship purely for the voyeuristic possibilities—although a closer reading of the comics suggests that Buffy’s dalliance has not been played as clearly for male pleasure as it could have been. Out of the fifteen issues, only one panel displays Buffy and Satsu openly engaging in sex (#15) (Figure 1.4); on their first night together, we do not see the act itself, but only its aftermath. While the panels show the sheets outlining Buffy and Satsu’s forms beneath, the depiction is not graphic (Figure 1.2).







Figure 1.6 -- The Chen covers for issues #9 and #3 sexualize Faith and Willow, respectively.



Figure 1.7 -- Buffy is more overtly sexualized on the first cover, while the second has what was referred to in the presentation as "gratuitous nipple action." However, this is not entirely the norm; one might compare the image from Figure 1.3, wherein Buffy is fully clothed but Angel and Spike are nude.

Buffy is certainly shown as attractive, and there are a few covers where she seems clearly sexualized in order to sell more comics (Figure 1.7); additionally, Willow is shown within the text asking Satsu for details on “how it was” (#13), which presumably invites the reader to imagine as well. Notably, however, Satsu is not forthcoming with such details, and there are no issue covers featuring Buffy and Satsu in any sort of intimate embrace—which would have been an easy tactic to employ if the goal of the pairing was solely to increase circulation (Figure 1.8). While the sexualisation of female figures is an issue, overall Buffy’s sex scenes with Satsu acknowledge lesbian sexual desires without exploiting them.

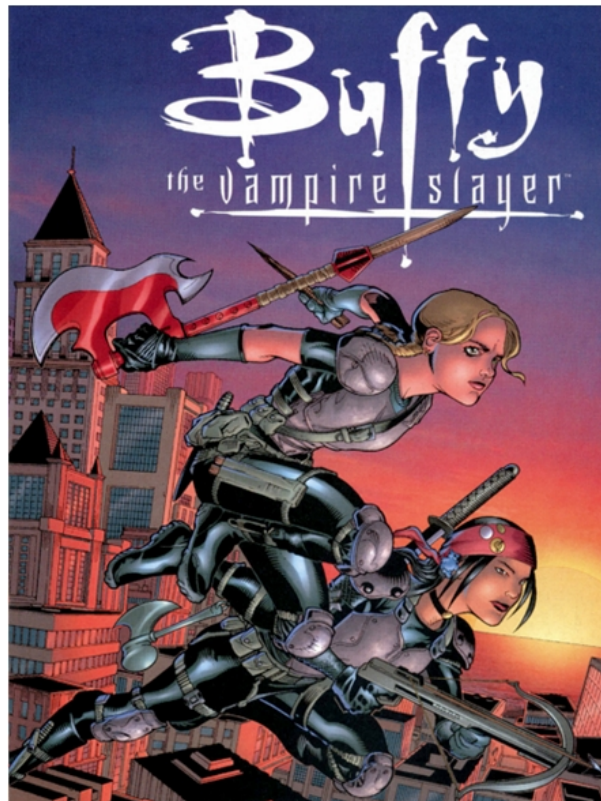


Figure 1.8 -- The only cover solely featuring Buffy and Satsu.

I have established, then, that Buffy’s flirtation with lesbianism enhances her masculine tendencies, highlights the series’ lack of tolerance for bisexual codings, and seems to occur mainly for purposes other than male titillation (not that a certain amount of voyeurism isn’t inevitable, and likely encouraged in a comics industry trying to market its product). My final area of exploration revolves around Buffy the lesbian *separatist*; I assert that her lesbian relationship is both a sign and symptom of her newly isolated Slayer community. With the exceptions of Giles, Xander and Andrew, Buffy’s forces consist entirely of young women. Giles and Andrew (both feminized in different ways) are at separate training sites; Buffy’s only male companion is Xander, and we learn in season eight that they have tried a sexual

relationship but she is physically too strong for him (enhancing, again, her masculinity and his femininity) (#2). Buffy ruminates to herself that she is lonely, and that she misses sex (#1); really, the only partner strong enough for her and available to her is another Slayer. Satsu is the only viable option, since despite defining herself as heterosexual and a “girl,” Buffy has placed herself in direct opposition to masculine forces. In season eight, the military comes after the Slayers in a repeat of season four’s oppositional binaries – Buffy even makes a comment about “the Initiative” when she finds herself in the military bunker of her new enemies (#4). The exchange she has with the military commander is telling:

Buffy: Are you talking about the girls who are protecting the world from—

General: Evil? Demons? Where do you think your power comes from? Oh, wait: *you already know*. You’ve upset the balance, girl. Do you really think we were going to sit by and let you create a master race?

Buffy: This isn’t about demons at all, is it? It’s about women. It’s about power and it’s about women and you just hate those two words in the same sentence, don’t you?

General: You think it’s only *men* who want to bring you down? You’re not human. (#4, original emphasis)

According to the general, the Slayers are no longer even the same species as he is; their gender hybridized, role-appropriating army is demonic, and they must be stopped because they cannot be trusted. “It’s about women,” says Buffy, and the subtext becomes text; her army of Slayers is at war with patriarchy.

Elena Levine has described *Buffy* the television series as negotiating tensions between post-feminism and third-wave feminism, ultimately choosing the latter. She offers the following definitions: “While the post-feminist mindset sees the feminism of the 1970s as no longer necessary and the patriarchy against which feminism has fought as no longer a threat, third-wave feminism remains invested in collective feminist activism and in the fight against a still powerful patriarchy” (170); post-feminism supports individual action, while third-wave feminism requires group unity. Levine states, “by turning *her* power into *our* power [by activating the other Slayers], Buffy ends the series as a truly New Woman, one who redefines television’s version of feminism and rejects a post-feminist perspective that sees the need for collective action as a thing of the past” (185). Season eight continues this trend, with frequent references to sisterhood and connection, as well as the literal separation of the Slayers from the world’s social systems. Buffy explores a relationship with Satsu because, in the society she has helped to create, it is the only option—apart from abstinence—that is left to her.



Notably, *Buffy* is not advocating separatism; it is merely exploring the possibility. Buffy the Lesbian Separatist ultimately proves untenable; the Slayer outposts are not utopias. Over the course of the first fifteen issues, we learn that Buffy and her squad have been robbing banks in order to support their activities; the morality of their actions has become clouded, particularly when they begin fighting human enemies along with the vampires and demons more usually arrayed against them. In season three of the television series, Faith accidentally kills a human bystander, and the backlash destroys her relationship with Buffy; in season eight, Buffy calmly contemplates the possibility of having to kill human soldiers (#4). Additionally, a group of Slayers steals a weapons cache and apparently intends to fight with guns (#11) (Figure 1.9) —something that Buffy had in the past vehemently eschewed (or as Andrew puts it in issue #2, “No Slayer carries a gun, ever, end of talk, good talk”).



Figure 1.9 -- Rogue Slayers demonstrate that Buffy's new community is not a utopia.

Jowett notes that female heroes may “consciously reject guns in an assertion of ‘feminine’ resistance to technological (masculine) weapons” (25-26); in the absence of “manly” men, the rogue Slayers adopt masculine weapons the same way that Buffy’s Slayers adopt the trappings of a masculine military.<sup>3 4</sup> This is problematic for the characters within the

<sup>3</sup> It was suggested during the conference that guns may be interpreted as feminine weapons because they are used at a distance rather than hand-to-hand. While I tend to lean more toward Jowett’s interpretation, associating guns with hyper-masculine soldier or cowboy figures (i.e. *The Punisher*), I do acknowledge other readings; the most important point here is that Buffy and her rogue Slayers are part of a supposedly unified new feminist society wherein women quite literally cannot agree on what weapons to use against the outside patriarchy. I also notice that in issue #1, Buffy and her Slayer squad seem to be equipped with some sort of



narrative: Buffy cannot keep the gun-stealing Slayers in check, and her moral certainty is threatened when Twilight, the season's major villain, asks her, "Have you made a difference? Have your Slayers helped change anything in the world?" (#11). (Notably, he also says, "One Slayer was all right, but all these girls ... the world can't contain them, and they will suffer for that." Like the military general, he feels a group of strong, united women is too much of a threat to the social order.) Although the Slayers are a powerful, connected sisterhood, they have yet to successfully negotiate a place within a larger world. In this sense, Buffy's relationship with Satsu could never have been successful; if it had, then the Slayers could presumably form their own self-sufficient community complete with satisfying sexual partnerships. Buffy and her forces would not have any need to emerge from their isolation—they would not have any need for men. The ultimate failure of Buffy's relationship with Satsu prevents the Slayers' version of feminism from being taken to extremes; despite the general's accusation, Buffy is not trying to create a "master race" or a truly separate society. Although the army of Slayers displays masculine structure and tendencies, this hybridity does not suggest a tenable single-sex community; Buffy's over-masculinisation, in particular, cannot be sustained, as her strength lies in her embodiment of both masculine and feminine qualities. The link between the Slayer sisters is described within the text as a "chain," with all the simultaneous durability and painful bondage that image suggests (#5). Despite this chain—its pleasures and its responsibilities—Buffy still has a desire for men in her life.

Within season eight, then, Buffy is neither a lesbian nor a separatist—but her flirtation with both positions provides a rich opportunity for gender-based readings of the text. Jowett has argued that *Buffy*'s true "edge" is that "the many contradictory positions about its 'value' indicate its success in exposing the difficulties of challenging conventional representations in a popular medium" (197); *Buffy* now encompasses at least three media, and academic arguments surrounding its importance or success continue apace. Comics seem to have given *Buffy*'s writers and artists more freedom in which to explore the concept of Buffy the Lesbian Separatist—while Whedon may have asserted that culture can only be changed through popular media, one might conclude that the most daring storylines are best explored in media that are not *too* popular. Nevertheless, although the possibility of lesbian separatism is raised within the series through Buffy's relationship with Satsu and through Buffy's leadership of a new, isolated Slayer community, the comics ultimately retreat from this position. This is not necessarily a negative outcome, and it would be presumptuous to interpret one interview line as indicative of Whedon's intent for the entire series; the larger context of *Buffy*'s multi-season narrative suggests the need for the multifaceted checks and

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pseudo-guns themselves (harpoons? stake-shooters?) although these are not visibly used in combat; the line of acceptability is clearly muddled.

<sup>4</sup> As depicted in Figure 1.9, the rogue Slayers might also be interpreted as "butch"—another sign that, even moreso than Buffy, they have become too masculine. This supports my point regarding the need for balanced hybridity in successful *Buffy* protagonists, but also raises questions regarding the series' use of stereotypes associated with butch women.

balances of the “Scooby Gang.” Particularly in season eight, the series walks a fine line; women (represented particularly by Buffy and by the rogue Slayers) can only become *so* masculine before they become too isolated or aggressive. This is problematic with regard to notions of acceptable female behaviour (as my reviewer said, the series has a “butch line” it does not cross), but also avoids a simplistic role reversal that would ultimately equate power and success only with masculine performance. Buffy the Lesbian Separatist is not a productive image, as it would undermine the cooperation between the sexes that the series has always highlighted. The series’ strengths lie in the hybridized genders, broken stereotypes, and varied backgrounds of its protagonists—a pattern which the comics have continued and expanded upon. *Buffy* could certainly be taken further in terms of its depictions of queer characters—its consistent failure to acknowledge the possibility of bisexual identities remains a concern. Moreover, *Buffy* is in danger of portraying lesbian relationships as unproductive—although Buffy and Satsu are balanced by Willow and Kennedy’s more stable union, Willow’s previous lesbian relationship led to Dark Willow and Buffy’s is paired with alienation and community instability. More positively, however, *Buffy*’s core group of heroes represent multiple genders, sexualities, and (particularly in the comics) races. Politically speaking, in order to “change the culture,” Buffy needs to engage with the world, not detach herself from it. In terms of season eight narratives, the lesbian separatist is stagnant; the Slayers cannot be permitted to remain isolated in their Scottish castle. As to whether or not they are able to reach peace with or victory over the patriarchal enemy, that remains to be seen—as of this writing, the series is not finished. Certainly, if Buffy is to move feminism—and the plot—forward, she must try.

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