

**“The Source of Our Power”: Female Heroes and Restorative
Collaboration in Contemporary Television**

by

Sarah Pepe

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Department of English

State University of New York

New Paltz, New York 12561

May 2017

“THE SOURCE OF OUR POWER”: FEMALE HEROES AND RESTORATIVE
COLLABORATION IN CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION

Sarah Pepe

State University of New York at New Paltz

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the
Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend
acceptance of this thesis.

Annie Swafford, Thesis Advisor
Department of English, SUNY New Paltz

Heather Hewett, Thesis Committee Member
Department of English, SUNY New Paltz

Approved on: _____

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts degree in English at the
State University of New York at New Paltz

Sarah Pepe

MA Thesis

19 May, 2017

“The Source of Our Power”: Female Heroes and Restorative Collaboration in Contemporary
Television

I. Introduction

In 1941, Wonder Woman debuted as the first ever female superhero with staying power.¹ When she did, her Amazonian presence and lasso of truth snared the hearts of comic-lovers around the nation--especially young girls and women, who had previously only had male heroes to look up to. Well-known feminist writer Gloria Steinem was a child when Wonder Woman appeared on the comics scene, and she recalls being “rescued” from the “plight” of all-male comics at the age of seven or eight (204). Even today, Steinem looks back on those initial comics and is “amazed by the strength of their feminist message” (204). Indeed, Wonder Woman’s creator William Marston is often quoted expressing some fairly feminist sentiments, certainly for his time:

Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power. Not wanting to be girls, they don’t want to be tender, submissive, peace-loving as good women are. Women’s strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman. (qtd. in Tate 118)

¹ The actual first woman superhero was The Woman in Red, but she was soon forgotten (Robbins 54).

Here, Marston seems to be tapping into something: he was ahead of his time in many ways, in that he understood the importance of diverse female representation. That is, he recognizes the importance of figures girls and women can look up to who embody strength and other atypically “feminine” traits.

As heartening as Marston’s message is, though, it still only works within the constraints of then-contemporary thought on gender. His understanding seems to overlook the fact that male domination constitutes the other side to women’s submissiveness, and he conflates a woman’s beauty with her goodness. Further, he is also known to have said that “women are superior to men because they have love as well as force” (qtd. in Steinem 206). Clearly, this is a limited way of understanding gender, and it perpetuates the idea that there must be a gender hierarchy; Jennifer Stuller articulately explains that Marston “advocated a reversal of the existing gender hierarchy rather than an egalitarian society” (233). She goes on to say, “his belief that there are essential sex characteristics is a controversial and unproductive dogma” (233). I would agree that these are obvious shortcomings of Wonder Woman’s legacy. Can’t men possess “love as well as force”?

In many ways, then, it’s fair to say that Wonder Woman represents dogmatic, hegemonic, and patriarchal ideals, simply shape-shifted into a feminine form. Another way this manifests is through her status as a “Lone Wolf,” a model which Stuller argues is “rooted in traditional uber-masculinity and isolationism” (216). Many of the plot lines in Wonder Woman comics involved her uplifting other women, and working with communities of women--which, admittedly, positions her as less of a “Lone Wolf” than someone like Batman--but these relationships are still rather hierarchical (Steinem 205). Wonder Woman occupies the position of

The Hero, and everyone else is secondary at best. The fact that she hails from the isolated Paradise Island underscores her Lone Wolf status: in America, she is an outsider.

While feminism undoubtedly needed Wonder Woman back in the 1940's, our new era calls for a new kind of female hero². More and more, scholars, thinkers, and lay people have been realizing--like William Marston did in the 1940's--that *representation matters*. The very existence of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media is a testament to this fact. The institute, whose tagline reads "If she can see it, she can be it," aims to "engage, educate, and influence content creators and audiences about the importance of eliminating unconditional bias, highlighting gender balance, challenging stereotypes, creating role models and scripting a wide variety of female characters in entertainment and media that targets and influences children ages 11 and under" ("About Us"). While surely this demographic is an important one, media influence does not end at age 11, and portrayals have the potential to influence women's self-esteem and self-concept into teenagehood and adulthood. The bottom line is this: art has political implications.

As the tagline of the Geena Davis Institute suggests, it's difficult for people to imagine themselves in certain roles if they have never seen *someone like them* in that role. Nicole Martins and Kristen Harrison, who performed a longitudinal study on the effects of exposure to gender and race representation on self-esteem, explain this effect in terms of cultivation theory, "which posits that people's view of social reality is modeled by the media" (341). In other words, if there is a lack of strong women in media representations, viewers may understand that this lack

² I use the term "female hero" in lieu of "heroine" because I am fundamentally opposed to gendered language; in the same way I would not call a server a "waitress" or a firefighter a "fireman," I would not call a hero who happens to be female a "heroine." Her gender does not alter or define her heroism.

reflects the social reality--which is, of course, not the case. This is why female heroes are important, and why they should reflect progressive cultural values.

More and more, visual media that feature female heroes has been expanding the cultural conception of heroism to include compassion, community, diversity, and egalitarianism between the genders. This project uses four American television series--*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Sense8* (2015-present), *Steven Universe* (2013-present), and *Jessica Jones* (2015)--as case studies to examine the ways in which queer love between women bolsters community-driven heroism and combats patriarchal toxic masculinity, which is, almost universally, the enemy. In each of these shows, the heroic characters move further away from the “Lone Wolf” model of heroism, toward something more inclusive and powerful. In all cases, it is the love and solidarity between women that dismantles patriarchal domination and models non-hierarchical compassion for heroic men--men who *do*, thanks in part to the women around them, possess “love as well as force.”

II. The Power of Woman-Led Teams: Queer Women, Toxic Masculinity, and Epistemic Negotiation

When it comes to my focus on queer women, this study finds its theoretical roots in radical lesbian-separatist feminism of the 1970's. Of this community of radicals, Lillian Faderman, author of *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, writes:

Since they were convinced through feminism that the root of [the social problems of the era] was male--caused by greed, egocentrism, and violence that came along with testosterone or male socialization--they believed that only a ‘woman’s

culture,' built on superior female values and women's love for each other, could rectify all that had gone wrong in male hands. [...] they wanted to create entirely new institutions and to shape a women's culture that would embody all the best values that were not male. It would be nonhierarchical, spiritual, and without the jealousy that comes of wanting to possess other human beings, as in monogamy and imperialism. (216)

Feminist discourse has moved past this categorical rejection of men and "male" values, but the attitudes that Faderman describes do still hold some--albeit selective--water: this community of women identified "greed, egocentrism, and violence" to be the root of many social ills, and I would argue that they were not wrong. Furthermore, their focus on creating a nonhierarchical community was, I feel, a step in the right direction, and incredibly salient in the context of this study.

To bring these powerful yet exclusionary ideas into the modern day, we might separate men as a whole from the problematic traits Faderman lists. The problem is not men in any essential, categorical sense; the problem, to put it broadly, is patriarchy and, more specifically, toxic masculinity. While there is no official, scholarly definition for toxic masculinity, I use it to describe the violent, oppressive, and dominant behavior that men exhibit as a result of having their emotional expression policed to the point where it is safer to repress anything more vulnerable than anger. Although he does not use the term "toxic masculinity," Michael Kaufman explains what I understand to be its systemic roots in his essay "The Construction of Masculinity and the Triad of Men's Violence." As the title suggests, Kaufman identifies a triad of violent behaviors that indoctrinated men exhibit: those against women, those against other men, and

those against themselves, which all serve to bolster their sense of masculinity--a fragile identity, as it is a relational quality that must be continuously proven. In the section of his essay in which he explains the role that the fragility of masculinity plays in the violence equation, Kaufman writes,

The tension between maleness and masculinity is intense because masculinity requires a suppression of a whole range of human needs, aims, feelings, and forms of expression. Masculinity is one-half of the narrow, surplus-repressive shape of the adult human psyche. Even when we are intellectually aware of the difference between biological maleness and masculinity, the masculine ideal is so embedded within ourselves that it is hard to untangle the person we might want to become (more “fully human,” less sexist, less surplus-repressed, and so on) from the person we actually are. (617)

The way men get this way, Kaufman argues, is through an understanding that masculinity is equated with power, and that power is only accessible through domination of others (617). It is this combination of a need for a sense of power, and the extreme emotional repression that results from the attempt to maintain that sense of power, which leads to toxically masculine behavior.

Queer love between women is often free of this destructive behavior, and therefore it cultivates strength and togetherness in the absence of the oppressive and hierarchical relationship dynamics that can potentially occur in heterosexual romance. Further, since I nor any of the shows in my study advocate for lesbian-separatism, and therefore this study is also concerned with men, the non-hierarchical strength and power produced by queer relationships between

women works to cultivate empathy and dispel toxicity in the men who spend time around the involved parties, as friends and team members. In this sense, the empowered women in these shows, along with their friends and lovers, reeducate the men they come into contact with through inclusion and by example. The result is, as Kaufman might put it, men who are more “fully human,” less sexist, and less emotionally repressed.

In addition to the reeducation of individual men, dismantling hierarchy is crucial in the fight against patriarchy, which is why the lone wolf model of heroism espoused by Wonder Woman has no place in progressive gender politics. Contemporary female heroes who embody and encourage societal healing, and who set the best kinds of examples for their viewers, perform their heroics as part of a team and engage in a method of strategizing called “epistemic negotiation,” which necessarily dismantles hierarchy and, in the process, makes them stronger and more effective as heroes.

Sharon Ross, who writes on female friendship and heroism, defines epistemic negotiation as “a process of building knowledge in which individuals come together as a community to discuss what they each know and then debate how best to address the situation at hand” (232). Although Ross applies this method of knowledge-building to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* specifically, I would argue that we might understand all of the works I address in this paper, to different extents, through the lens of epistemic negotiation³. As a rule, the characters in all four of the shows in question are most effective when they act as part of a group, rather than as so-called “lone wolves.” Indeed, there are times in most of the shows when one hero will act alone without consulting his or her group, and such ventures usually end in

³ *Buffy*, with its scenes of the Scoobies conferencing over how to defeat the monster of the week in nearly every episode, provides the most consistent, classic examples.

disaster because the group was not consulted and no balance was brought to the hero's approach. Further, in all four shows, there are no "main" heroes and no sidekicks; there are only teams and groups of heroes, who work together non-hierarchically. Certain characters embrace more of a leadership role, but the teams always achieve their best results when their leaders take all perspectives into account.

What follows are a series of detailed discussions of the aforementioned four shows, and how they each enact the principles and values of the framework I have put forth. While none of them work in quite the same way, they each present a unique permutation of the above, illuminating different themes depending on the concerns of the show.

III. "We Are Forever"⁴: Friendship, Solidarity, and Queer Love vs. Toxic Masculinity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Buffy the Vampire Slayer, created by Joss Whedon, is by far the show in this study that has received most critical and academic attention. It centers around Buffy Summers, aged 15 when the show begins, whose destiny it is to be the one, chosen vampire slayer. Slayers are always female, and always find out about their calling around the time they hit puberty--a well-worn coming-of-age story device. Although slayers typically work alone, save for their watchers--an adult whose job it is to guide and train them--Buffy is determined to be a normal teenager in whatever ways she can, and hence involves her best friends, Willow and Xander, in her slaying escapades. The three of them, plus Giles, her watcher, constitute the core group of what they will eventually call the "Scooby Gang"⁵, or "Scoobies" for short; throughout the

⁴ Quote is from Season 4, Episode 21, "Primeval" (see conclusion).

⁵ This term obviously references *Scooby Doo*, the logic being that that show, also, revolves around a group of teenagers who solve mysteries and fight evil.

series, members come and go, as friendships and relationships begin and end. In this sense, the show is big on the idea of “chosen family,” which I will expand on later. Each of the seven seasons of *Buffy*’s run culminates in a fight with a “big bad,” whom each member of Buffy’s chosen family must lend their unique talents to defeat.

Much of the academic and popular fascination with *Buffy* is due to its status as a groundbreaking work of art: when the show aired, it had been the first show, along with *Xena: Warrior Princess*, to tell women’s stories in a way that does not revolve around men (Ross 234). Put simply, late-90’s viewers were excited to watch a powerful woman kick ass. However, the show’s resonances run deeper than pure entertainment value; many scholars have noted that the show, with its predominantly-male vampires forcibly preying on the bodies of others, has overtones of sexual violence. In her essay “Feminism and the Ethics of Violence: Why Buffy Kicks Ass,” Mimi Marinucci writes, “The feminist content of Buffy’s struggles runs much deeper than the mere fact that she happens to be a woman who totally, and literally, kicks ass. Given the sexualized nature of so much of the violence that she faces, her mission is symbolic of the fight against sexual violence, for example, rape” (68).

This parallel between vampires and rapists is one way in which Buffy fights patriarchy and toxic masculinity, but there are many others. For my purposes, I will be focusing on the Season 6 “big bad,” Warren Mears, who embodies toxic masculinity more perfectly than any other character in the show. At the end of the season, Warren kills a beloved female character: Tara, Willow’s romantic partner. Tara’s death causes Willow to go on a murderous rampage, which Xander is able to put a stop to with a demonstration of unconditional love⁶. This situation

⁶ Love which, by the way, is neither romantic nor sexual in nature.

presents the perfect microcosm to examine the gender dynamics in the show as they pertain to my paper: Xander's exposure to Willow's queer relationship (as well as his own friendships with other women), which is subsequently destroyed by Warren, an embodiment of toxic masculinity, allows him to embrace the "feminine" quality of love--and use it as the healing, life-giving gift it is.

Although my primary interest is in the queer⁷, romantic relationship between Willow and Tara, it is important to first acknowledge that the female collaboration and solidarity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* extends far beyond the romantic. Willow does not discover that she is queer until she and Tara meet and begin their relationship, which happens midway through season four, but the sense of strength between and among women is present from the very first episode. In fact, a large part of the show's appeal is in its portrayal of the loyal and unwavering friendship between Willow and Buffy. For my purposes, I am interested in the ways that their relationship is anti-hierarchical and divergent from the "Lone Wolf" model, and perhaps more importantly, the fact that Xander spends a lot of time with the two of them, and it is likely that it is his exposure to, and inclusion in, their friendship that allows him to serve as a model of non-toxic, "feminized" masculinity.

Sharon Ross, author of the essay "Tough Enough": Female Friendship and Heroism in *Xena and Buffy*" has a lot to say when it comes to the symbiotic and compassion-centered bond between Willow and Buffy--and Xander, by extension, although she does not explicitly include

⁷ I use this word as an all-encompassing blanket term to cover non-platonic same-sex relationships. I don't want to use the word "lesbian" or even "gay," because they are limiting; Willow seems to self-identify as gay after beginning her relationship with Tara, but she did have a long-term, loving relationship with Oz in previous seasons, who is definitely a man. While I respect this fictional character's self-declared identity, I'm also aware that biphobia and bi erasure is an ongoing issue in the media. Perhaps Willow is bi, but saying so would have been too controversial in the early aughts.

him in her argument. She asserts that, in both of the shows she writes about, “these women grow as heroes because of their female friends” and also that that they both “stress that a woman can be ‘tough enough’ to fight patriarchy when she learns to listen to other women’s perspectives on the world and when she values her emotional bonds with other females as a source of strength” (231). This is unquestionably true of Buffy and Willow; when they first meet, Buffy fits the archetype of the destined hero reluctant to rise to the demands of her calling, and Willow is a socially ostracized and disempowered nerd. Together, over the course of the show’s run, they are both able to reach their full potential.

Although Buffy’s friendship is hugely important to Willow’s personal development, nobody is more central to her embracing her power than Tara. Willow and Tara first meet in the season four episode “Hush,” at a wicca group, and the nature of their first one-on-one encounter demonstrates the parts of Willow’s character arc that Tara helps to advance. At this point in the series, Willow had been dabbling in spellwork for some time, but had not yet found her own way; without a teacher or anyone to guide her practice, her attempts were clumsy and often backfired. Further, it can be said that Buffy and Giles, who mostly focus on more “masculine” methods of combat like martial arts, devalue witchcraft as indirect, feminine, and dangerous. All of this changed when Willow met Tara, who ultimately helps her to embrace her own natural talent as a witch.

Willow went to the aforementioned wicca group hoping to find community, only to discover that most of the members were clueless; later in the episode, though, Willow and Tara literally run into each other while trying to escape “The Gentlemen,” the monster of the week, and discover each other’s abilities as witches. The Gentlemen cause everyone around them to

lose their voices, so the exchange that follows between Willow and Tara occurs in the absence of dialogue. The pair lock themselves in a room in their dorm building, but they hear the Gentlemen attempting to break down the door. They both notice a large vending machine that would be perfect for barricading the entrance, but it's too heavy for them to move through brute force (37:25). Willow, who has fallen to the floor due to an injured ankle, looks at it and attempts to move it with her magic, but it only wiggles (37:43). Following this, Tara wordlessly reaches out and laces her fingers with Willow's (37:55); their eyes meet, their fingers tighten, and in mutual understanding they simultaneously turn their heads and apply magical force to the vending machine (38:11); it swiftly and dexterously spins and backs itself against the door, as if weightless (38:15).

Just at face value, this scene demonstrates the incredible synergy between Willow and Tara, on a purely literal level: their spells, together, are greater than the sum of their parts, and they are utterly in sync. Diving a little deeper, the choice to use a vending machine as a barricade is interesting and textually rich: it contains food, which is life-giving in a very literal way. What essentially happens here is that Willow and Tara used their combined force to put a nurturing source of energy between themselves and certain death. Further, their held hands are telling: it is not simply through nonverbal communication that they are able to perform this feat, but it necessitates physical contact. This foreshadows their physical intimacy, which will come later, but it also makes the strength, power, and importance of their bond more obvious by rendering it visible. Ultimately, a reading of this scene reveals that the bond between Willow and Tara is a source of power, life force, and physical comfort.

As I have suggested, though, this exchange with the vending machine is also, and perhaps more obviously, representative of the growth that occurs between Willow and Tara as their relationship progresses. Later in the episode, when the characters have regained their voices, Whedon sets up that growth in a conversation between them:

WILLOW: How long have you been practicing?

TARA: Always. I mean, since I was little. My mom used to... she, um... She had a lot of power. Like you.

WILLOW: Oh, I'm not--I don't have much in the way of power. Really, I mean, most of my potions come out... soup. Besides, spells going awry, friends in danger... I'm definitely nothing special.

TARA: No, you are. (41:18 - 42:00)

The surface significance of this exchange is that Willow has never had her power acknowledged before; in this conversation, Tara recognizes Willow's raw potential, which is the encouragement she needs to take the next step toward self-actualization as an active member of the Scoobies, rather than someone who works behind the scenes. Further, the tension between Willow's timidity and Tara's certainty about her power is palpable in the way the exchange plays out. Here, Willow pauses and sputters in protest of the suggestion of her power in a way that reveals the depth of her self-doubt. In addition, it's clear from the moment that we meet Tara that she is a shy character; she stutters, her body language communicates social discomfort, and she is soft-spoken. The quiet certainty with which she speaks her "No, you are" contrasts with her baseline to such an extent that we, and Willow by extension, must take her seriously.

The season six episode in which Tara dies, “Seeing Red,” can provide us great insight into the gender dynamics of *Buffy*, so what follows will be a detailed exploration of those dynamics, and an effort to connect them to what I have already argued about the space love between and among women carves out for empowerment and restoration. In this episode, Warren’s toxicity crystallizes, in that we can glean an understanding of where his thirst for power comes from--which also constitutes a commentary on the perpetuation of toxic masculinity in general. Further, Xander, a man who does not, generally, succumb to toxicity, goes head-to-head with Warren. Next, a violent conflict between Buffy and Warren, in which Buffy symbolically castrates him, is juxtaposed with the resolution of a conflict between Buffy and Xander, in which Xander humbles himself before her and demonstrates his ability to speak the language of emotion. Lastly, their encounter is interrupted by a gun-carrying, revenge-seeking Warren, who lashes out in a state of wounded pride, shooting Buffy and killing Tara. To sum up, I argue that this episode--and the dramatic events that follow, as a direct result--demonstrates that toxicity and victimization begets the very same, and that the only way to interrupt that cycle is through unconditional love and compassion.

At this point in his scheme, Warren, leading The Trio⁸, is on a search for his balls. I say this jokingly, of course; he is actually searching for a pair of magical artifacts called the Orbs of Nezzla’Khan. However, the show draws clear parallels between these Orbs and virility--and, indeed, actual testicles. Examples of this proliferate, but to list a few: firstly, they are a literal pair of spheres which provide strength and invulnerability; Andrew mentions that he thought

⁸ This is the name that Warren’s band of villains goes by. “The Trio” consists of him, Warren Mears, plus Jonathan Levinson and Andrew Wells. They’re all stereotypical “nerds,” and use a combination of technology and magic to carry out their schemes to, vaguely “take over Sunnydale.” They figure out early on that in order to do this they must first neutralize Buffy.

“they were supposed to make [The Trio] all huge and veiny” (17:06); and Warren stores them in a pouch on his belt, fairly close to his crotch, meaning that when people make a grab for them (which they do!), it looks like they could be reaching for Warren’s actual testicles. The show, true to campy form, also takes the opportunity to make a fair few testicle jokes: Warren tells Jonathan and Andrew that they can have a turn “as soon as [he’s] done playing with them” (17:31), and later, Andrew, who is coded as queer and clearly has feelings for Warren, says “I can’t wait to get my hands on his orbs” (34:51). All jokes aside, it’s fair to say that we can view these artifacts as weaponized hypermasculinity.

Warren’s first act upon acquiring the Orbs is to visit a bar and chat up a woman while her boyfriend is in the bathroom. At first, this seems like par for the course for Warren and his sleazy antics, but when the other man comes back from the bathroom--the other man, who, by the way, likely receives every imaginable form of male privilege given that he is white, extremely tall, fit, and generically attractive--we find out that the two have a history. Manically, Warren reminds this man who he is:

WARREN: Frankie? Oh my god, is that you? How long has it been? It’s Warren. Remember, Warren, gym class, fifth period? You and your jock buddies used to give me such a hard time. That thing with the underwear. God, I thought I’d never stop *crying*!

FRANKIE: That was you?

WARREN: Yeah, that was me. But hey, no hard feelings. I mean, I know you were just foolin’ around, like I’m gonna be with your girl in about five minutes.

Predictably, Warren's words provoke Frankie, who lays hands on him but finds him immovable. He expresses surprise, and Warren says "This isn't high school" before decking him (27:24-28:11).

This exchange illuminates a lot about Warren's character. First, on a purely informational level, we now know that Warren was bullied and victimized as a teenager. Second, the manic, unhinged tone with which he delivers this little speech illuminates his mindset: we might extrapolate that Warren knew Frankie would be at this bar, which is why he made a beeline for it once he acquired superhuman strength: he wanted revenge on his high school tormentor. Lastly, his means of revenge--"threatening" to sexually engage with Frankie's girlfriend, with a complete disregard for her consent--underscores his misogyny, and unsurprisingly reveals that he aims to revenge his gender-based trauma by staying within prescribed gender frameworks: women are objects which serve as status symbols for men, as signs of their virility, so that is his means of attack. To get a little more theoretical about it, Frankie is at the absolute top of the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity. Warren, who could never wield the same social power or garner the same level of respect, with his comparatively less "manly" physique and nerdy proclivities, must seek out a pair of artificial "balls" to get on the same level, power-wise, and to have a means to exact revenge to counterbalance his overwhelming feelings of resentment.

The takeaway from this information is that toxic masculinity is a psychological cycle: a victim goes on to victimize another, who, in turn, becomes a victimizer himself⁹. We see this briefly with Xander a few moments later: he returns from the bar's bathroom to find Warren making some women uncomfortable, and tries to use his male privilege for a good cause: to

⁹ There is no room in the show for this level of nuance, but it's fair to say that Frankie likely had an older brother or father figure putting him down, and that's what turned him into such a bully.

defuse the situation. But when Warren makes a crack about Anya, Xander's ex-fiance, Xander is provoked and takes a swing. Because Warren is still in possession of the Orbs, Xander is no match for him, and winds up on the floor with a bloody nose. Of all the Scoobies, Xander is the typically the least likely to resort to physical force, and is not by any means a violent man, but Warren, with his pointed comment, momentarily draws him into the current of toxic masculinity.

Buffy's showdown with Warren is just a couple scenes later. The fight between them does more to emphasize Warren's misogyny, but viewers are rewarded for their patience with his reprehensible antics: he calls Buffy "Super Bitch," degrading her, and she aptly responds, "You've really got a problem with strong women, don't ya?" (35:08). The beat-down that ensues is viscerally satisfying; when Buffy kicks Warren's ass, she's symbolically kicking the ass of every misogynist who ever dared to underestimate the strength of a woman. Eventually, Warren finds himself buried under a pile of rubble, and Buffy thinks he is defeated, but he rises up and says, "What's the matter, baby? You never fight a real man before?" (35:55). Again, this heavily gendered, masculinely-charged language reinforces Warren's explicit connection to the concept of toxic masculinity.

The fight ends when Buffy crushes Warren's orbs (with her *bare hands*), literally robbing him of his superhuman strength, and metaphorically castrating him. After his defeat, Buffy says, "You're nothing but a sad little boy, Warren. But it's time you grow up and pay for what you've done" (37:23). Here, Buffy demonstrates her awareness of Warren's regressed psychological state: he is trapped at a level of immaturity because of the trauma he has endured. Instead of facing it and healing, he's chosen to remain trapped in the cycle of toxic masculinity, and lash out at others to build himself back up. Frustratingly, Warren abandons his friends and escapes

with a cartoonish jetpack before Buffy can hold him accountable by, presumably, handing him over to the police.

A couple scenes later, Xander, who has also recently been metaphorically castrated¹⁰, approaches Buffy in her garden. The two have been fighting, and he has come by to reconcile with her. Although his ego is bruised, Xander is big enough to extend the olive branch first: referring to Warren, but implying a sentimental double-meaning, he says, “You’ll find him. He won’t be much good without his friends” (40:15). Buffy agrees, and they sit down on a bench together to talk things out. Xander opens up about his feelings, admitting that what happened between the two of them hurt him. Buffy apologizes, and Xander even goes so far as to concede to the part he played in the unfavorable situation. At one point he tears up a bit and says, “I don’t know what I’d do without you and [Willow]” (41:30). When they’re done talking, they embrace, and Buffy tells Xander she loves him (41:44). This scene contrasts sharply with what came before: Xander, like Warren, has been hurt and had his ego bruised, but instead of lashing out, he has the courage to be vulnerable--a valuable emotional skill he learned from the women in his chosen family. Xander and Buffy’s reconciliation also demonstrates how love, compassion, and empathy can work to resolve conflict, in lieu of retraumatization and violence.

This moment of mature and loving forgiveness is then interrupted by Warren, who has come to seek revenge on Buffy for his symbolic castration. He stumbles into Buffy’s backyard appearing, if it’s possible, even more unhinged than he had been in previous scenes. He rants, “You think you could just do that to me? You think I’d let you get away with that? [He laughs.]

¹⁰ His former fiance recently slept with a vampire named Spike, who, he soon found out, Buffy had also been sleeping with. He felt betrayed by all, especially because Buffy didn’t let him in on what was going on with her. You know: your typical friend-circle problems, but with the undead.

Think again” (42:01). Warren fires five shots: the first three at Buffy and Xander, one of which hits her in the chest, and the last two into the air as he flees the scene. It is the last careless shot, discharged senselessly in a state of spite and mania, which breaks the window of the upstairs bedroom and strikes Tara in the heart from behind, spraying Willow with her blood. The last moments of the episode show Xander and Willow, tending, respectively, to Buffy and Tara, as they bleed on the ground: Xander tries desperately to staunch the flow of blood to save Buffy, but it’s clear to Willow, as she cries out in despair, that Tara is already dead. The final shot shows Willow lifting her head, her eyes clouding over with rage and what we understand to be dark magic (42:30).

Warren’s act of spiteful, thoughtless revenge, driven by his damaged masculine ego, leads to the destruction of one woman’s body and damage to another’s, and further, it temporarily breaks up Buffy’s chosen family. Although Buffy survives her gunshot wound, everyone falls to pieces over Tara’s death, most notably Willow: she turns evil and goes on a magical power trip, fueled by, as one character remarks, “pure fury” (“Villains” 13:58). Observing Willow while she is on her rampage, it is clear that she has emotionally shut down; she is only in touch with her anger, because to acknowledge any of the other feelings she has would be too painful. The depth of Willow’s rage is in itself a testament to her love for Tara, and to the destructiveness of Warren’s toxic masculinity. Her first act is to kill Warren, but when that’s not enough, she goes after his accomplices, and then decides that the only way to end her pain, and indeed all the pain in the world, is to destroy it. Many of her friends try and fail to stop her, most notably Buffy, who does so with violence; during this ensuing battle, Willow, echoing

Warren, calls Buffy “Super Bitch,” which is further evidence that his toxicity proved to be catching (“Two To Go” 39:16).

For characters and viewers alike, the series of episodes between “Seeing Red” and the end of the season are emotionally painful; while Buffy has certainly faced the possibility of apocalypse before, that potential apocalypse has never been at the hands of one of the Scoobies. The fracturing of the love bond between the members of the group is grim for all involved, but ultimately it is only faith in that same love that is able to repair it, and it is Xander, whose emotional intelligence has been incubated by his female friends throughout the series, who, in this season, saves the world.

In “Grave,” Willow makes her final magical effort to end all of human suffering through destruction, and Xander steps in the way. True to form, he attempts to break the ice with his sarcastic humor, but before long he turns serious and authentic--something he doesn’t do often, but he has demonstrated he is capable of. He says, “I know you’re in pain. I can’t imagine the pain you’re in. And I know you’re about to do something apocalyptically evil, and stupid, and hey, I still wanna hang. You’re Willow” (34:06-34:20). Here, Xander starts his speech with a demonstration of his empathy; he shows Willow that, even though she has hurt him and his friends, he can still understand how she feels. Then, he begins to demonstrate his unconditional love for her, which comes through even more strongly as his speech continues:

XANDER: The first day of kindergarten, you cried because you broke the yellow crayon, and you were too afraid to tell anyone. You’ve come pretty far--ending the world, not a terrific notion--but the thing is, yeah, I love you. I love

crayon-breaky Willow, and I love scary, veiny Willow. So if I'm going out, it's here. If you want to kill the world, well then start with me. I've earned that.

WILLOW: You think I won't?

XANDER: It doesn't matter. I'll still love you.

Willow strikes Xander repeatedly in response to his benevolence, first with magic, and then with her fists. After every blow, he tells her he loves her. They proceed in this manner until she collapses and dissolves into tears in his arms, her hair returning to its natural color, signifying the return of her humanity (34:21-36:27).

Here, Xander demonstrates his unconditional love¹¹ for Willow, even in the face of the threat of his death, and his is only effort that succeeds in disarming her. Xander's empathy, compassion, and love seeps through the toxicity she has walled herself off with, and it melts her resolve not to feel. Faced with Xander's acceptance, even in the face of what she became in the wake of Tara's death, she is able to welcome back her humanity and her right mind; what follows, she knows, will be overwhelmingly painful for her, but as long as she knows she is loved--not just by Xander, but by her whole chosen family--she can bear it.

In its totality, *Buffy* presents a feminist vision of empowered women working together, alongside men who escape the trap of toxicity in their inclusion. *Buffy*'s women teach the men around them that power need not be synonymous with domination, and that strength can coexist with emotional vulnerability--and that sometimes, strength *is* emotional vulnerability. Where *Buffy* falls short is in its racial politics; people of color are few and far between, and are only

¹¹ It's not Xander's love, as a man, that saves Willow, but his love as her oldest and best friend; Xander is the "heart" of the Scoobies, and it's understood that, while his own emotional aptitude is admirable, he is speaking for the entire team in this scene.

fleetingly included in the Scoobies' antics, often problematically. Happily, the more recent shows in this study expand their definition of community to include people of many races and nationalities.

IV. "We Are More Human"¹²: Literalized Empathy and the Fight for Bodily Autonomy in *Sense8*

Sense8, created by the Wachowskis, is a Netflix original series which follows eight superhuman "sensates" who share sensory information with one another; that is, they can communicate telepathically, astrally "visit" one another, and occasionally possess one another's bodies in order to lend their own unique skills to any dire situation. While they are not heroes in the same sense that the characters from the other shows in this study are--that is, their aim is not to save the world, or indeed, anyone outside their own cluster¹³--I think of them as such because they possess superhuman powers and regularly perform acts of courage to preserve their own and each other's lives and freedom. Essentially, the show contains "larger than life" elements characteristic of heroic narratives. Further, *Sense8* keeps with the themes of family, community, and empowered women but builds on and expands them: while Buffy's community was always very insular, the community of *Sense8* spans multiple continents and includes people of many races¹⁴. The show also expands our definition of "woman": one of the main characters, Nomi, is a trans woman.

¹² Quote is from Season 1, Episode 10, "What Is Human?"

¹³ "Yet," I should add; The show is presently only 13 episodes long (as of the beginning of this project), and there is more to come. As the plot develops, the sensates' feats could become global in scale.

¹⁴ I say this not to preclude any suggestion that *Sense8* contains problematic elements. While it does include characters of many races, some of the discourse around the show has suggested these portrayals are stereotypical. Also, there are a disproportionate amount of white, western characters. *Sense8* is imperfect, but it's a step in the right direction.

Additionally, *Sense8* expands our understanding of the adversarial presence of toxic masculinity. While in *Buffy*, the resonances of patriarchy are found most often in individual characters, *Sense8* represents this force at the institutional level. I will explain the way this manifests in more detail shortly, but for now, suffice to say that this institutional embodiment of patriarchy is a more accurate approximation of the way it manifests in the real world. Our society contains plenty of toxically masculine individuals, but each of those individuals is a product of a greater system which pervades all. Further, the influence of a patriarchal individual can only reach so far, but once an institution is working to limit women's freedom, it is much harder to neutralize or escape. Hence, *Sense8*'s representation of patriarchy more closely approximates what it feels like to be a woman in Western society; in a sense, there is no escape from the oppression.

In *Sense8*, the toxic patriarchy works through the institution BPO (Biologic Preservation Organization); BPO is connected to at least two national governments¹⁵ and is able to exploit governmental power through the legal and medical institutions in order to achieve its ends. The organization feels threatened by the sensates, whose powers are centered in connection and empathy, due to their potential to participate in the war on terror, as either allies or adversaries. BPO poses its own threat to the sensates, mostly through a disregard for bodily autonomy, which we may broadly describe as a women's issue. My argument focuses on Nomi, who is a trans woman, and therefore the intersection of her different vectors of oppression further threatens her bodily autonomy; it's appropriate that she is the first of our main characters who faces the possibility of a lobotomy, which is BPO's weapon of choice to neutralize the sensates. Her

¹⁵ American and British, as of Season 2.

empathetic connection with her fellow sensates, and her unwavering bond with her girlfriend Amanita, allow her to escape the clutches of this evil, patriarchal organization. Further, in the show, masculinity is redeemed by the male sensates: they come through for their cluster-sisters and lend their own unique strengths to help preserve their freedom.

The Biologic Preservation Organization, or BPO for short, is a largely faceless institution, but in Season 1 we meet a member who the sensates call “Whispers.” Whispers, who is also a sensate, views their powers as a potential threat to national security, and with the institutional power of BPO, and the help of a surgeon named Dr. Metzger, who he enlists to perform lobotomies, seeks to track down the sensates and destroy them. This diabolical mission might be broadly compared to eugenics or genocide; it is an institutionally-backed endeavor to selectively destroy individuals who, through no fault of their own, possess biological qualities which larger society considers to be dangerous or “undesirable.”

BPO and Whispheres embody the patriarchy and toxic masculinity in many ways: in that BPO is threatened by the empathic connection between sensates, and Whispers weaponizes it invasively and abusively; through their connection to powerful institutions which make up the infrastructure of our society; and, notably, through their repeated violations of bodily autonomy. It is this last point that I will focus on most closely, as it is most salient to Nomi’s ordeal. Although Whispers, Metzger, and BPO have institutional, patriarchal power behind them, Nomi is able to escape their threats to her bodily autonomy due to the love, trust, and solidarity between she and her girlfriend, Amanita, as well as with the help of Will, a cis-male member of her cluster.

As I've already pointed out, Nomi is a trans woman, which enriches the gender politics of the narrative, and deepens its commentary on bodily autonomy. Contemporary discourse around trans rights reveals that not only do trans people have to reckon with people challenging the validity of their gender identities--which, according to society at large, often hinge on their physical embodiment and surgical status--but also with the medical institution deciding whether or not they can do what they wish with their own bodies. Most surgeons require extensive psychological evaluation and referral from a mental health professional before they will perform gender confirmation surgery on a self-identified trans person. To get a little less literal and a little more broad, large societal institutions dictate what trans people do and do not have access to (legal gender on official documents, bathroom access, sex-segregated institutions such as homeless shelters and prisons, etc.). This is, to a different degree, also true for women, who, over four decades after *Roe v. Wade*, are still fighting patriarchal institutions for our sexual and reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. Nomi's struggle against BPO represent all these threats to individual freedom.

Without exception, it is her bond with Amanita which allows Nomi to escape the clutches of BPO. The first episode of the show, "Limbic Resonance," quickly establishes the supportive dynamic between the two, which is essential for what follows when the plot thickens. Although the bond between them is personal, there's also a political element to it: Amanita, a cis woman, is wholly supportive and accepting of Nomi's trans identity. When the scene in question begins, the couple are sitting at a picnic table during the San Francisco Pride festival, eating lunch and reminiscing about their first Pride as a couple. While their initial flashback centers around the pot brownies they had eaten together, Nomi proceeds to ask Amanita, "But do you know what I

remember best about that day?” (31:56). Another flashback begins: Nomi and Amanita walk across a lawn crowded with people, and run into some feminist friends of Amanita’s. Amanita introduces Nomi, and one of her friends says, “Wait, I know you. You’re the tranny that blogs about politics” (32:11). She proceeds to criticize one of Nomi’s articles, and further disrespects her identity as a trans woman by calling her, “Just another colonizing male trying to take up any space left to women” (32:26). Amanita immediately stands up for Nomi: “Sam, say one more thing about my girlfriend and I will colonize your face with my fist” (32:26). Nomi leaves, and Amanita follows her, noticing that she’s crying. The following exchange occurs:

AMANITA: Honey, what is it? You never cry at stuff like that.

NOMI: I’m not crying because of her.

AMANITA: Then what?

NOMI: I’m crying because no one’s ever defended me before. (32:54)

The two kiss and embrace, and the flashback ends; we return to the present day, and Nomi says, “That’s the day I knew I would always love you” (32:58).

In this scene, we see Nomi encounter a group of women who consider themselves feminists--a political position that supposedly announces solidarity with other women. However, it’s clear that Amanita’s friend does not respect Nomi’s identity as a woman, and therefore, she is part of the problem. Amanita’s defense, and Nomi’s emotional response to it, further underscores the importance of women supporting other women. Once we’ve seen Amanita stand up to a friend on Nomi’s behalf, we have a sense of the degree of solidarity between them, which plays a huge role in what follows.

Later at Pride, Nomi passes out and wakes up in a hospital with her unsupportive mother at her side, still insisting on calling her “Michael.” We soon learn that Metzger, her doctor, has used the rules of the medical institution to entrap her and, essentially, coerce her to consent to brain surgery. Whispers and Metzger are aware of the fact that newly “born” sensates necessarily experience strange, nonlinear visions of other people in their cluster, and that they will likely be confused by these visions, so they create the convenient lie that there is something wrong with Nomi’s brain. In the hospital, Dr. Metzger tells Nomi that she has “Undifferentiated Frontal Lobe Syndrome,” which causes hallucinations and will result in her death if untreated. The only solution, he says, is to operate (“I Am Also A We”). This exploitative twisting of the truth, of course, is a form of gaslighting, which is an abusive tactic used to make people--often women--question their own sanity and perceptions. Nomi already seems to intuitively know that something is wrong with the situation, but when Jonas, another sensate, visits her to tell her that Metzger is planning to lobotomize her, she knows she has to escape. She is only able to do so with Amanita’s help.

If not for the unwavering faith and trust that Amanita has in Nomi, she may not have believed the gravity of her situation. The lie that Metzger and Whispers have concocted is designed to inspire doubt in the sensate as well as, presumably, any loved ones who may be able to help them. In fact, Nomi herself doubts her own sanity when she begins to experience more sensory input from other members of her cluster bleeding into her own consciousness. Despite this uncertainty on Nomi’s part, Amanita is steadfast; she tells Nomi over the phone in the hospital, “I will burn this building down before I let anyone touch that beautiful brain” (44:25). Nomi protests that Metzger could be right, and explains that she has seen Jonas multiple times

since the “dream” she had when she witnessed Angelica’s death. Instead of buying into the very plausible idea that Nomi was hallucinating, Amanita looks for evidence; she goes through Nomi’s phone and locates Jonas in one of the pictures she took at pride, proving that Nomi is quite sane.

It is Amanita’s continuing leaps of faith, such as this one, that allow the two to join forces to be such powerful resisters in the face of evil and to preserve Nomi’s bodily autonomy. The focus on Nomi’s “beautiful brain” is especially telling: the culture at large touts a narrative that there is something “wrong” with trans people’s brains; indeed, Gender Identity Disorder was classified in DSM as a mental illness until the release of DSM-5 in May 2013 (Busfield 241). Amanita’s explicit defense of Nomi’s brain validates her identity and her perceptions, and also makes clear that she intends to continue to advocate for Nomi’s bodily autonomy. She does so again in the next episode, when she literally prevents Nomi from being physically violated: orderlies in the hospital strap Nomi down and force her to take pills, leaving her drugged and afraid. Soon after, the fire alarm goes off, and she knows Amanita is behind it (“Smart Money Is on the Skinny Bitch”).

The positive, restorative message of *Sense8* is complete once a man becomes involved in Nomi’s rescue. Will, another member of her cluster, meets Jonas and receives information from him while Nomi is going through her own ordeal. In the process, he learns that he is inextricably connected to, and a part of, seven other people--the members of his cluster, of whom Nomi is one. Jonas tells him that she needs his help (“What’s Going On?”). Later that same episode, he hears Nomi’s cries for help and subsequently witnesses her on her gurney, and still later, he awakes in her body to help her escape. Presumably, since she is drugged and he is not, he is able

to remove her IV and use his skills as a police officer to pick the lock on her handcuffs. As a result of Will's help, Nomi is able to meet up with Amanita and escape the hospital.

These events are significant because Will, a man--and a member of a governmental institution--embraces a woman's problems as his own, and steps in to advocate for her bodily autonomy¹⁶. The logistics of the show, with the very concept of a cluster that, in a sense, shares an identity, contains a beautiful message about the power of empathy when oppressed people are up against institutional forces that are racist, patriarchal, homophobic, and cissexist. Ultimately, nobody in the cluster can escape the clutches of BPO without collaboration from its other members.

V. "We Made Something Entirely New"¹⁷: Queer Female Love as a Form of Resistance in *Steven Universe*

Steven Universe, although it also concerns heroes with supernatural powers, differs from the other shows in this study in that it is marketed as a children's cartoon; however, it addresses issues and themes that can and do appeal to adult audiences. The show follows a group of extraterrestrials who call themselves the Crystal Gems, and who live on Earth as a chosen family in order to defend the planet against threat from "Homeworld," the planet they originate from. The Crystal Gems are essentially a group of heroic rebels who have severed ties with their government in order to defend the human race.

Although gems, as a race, exclusively identify and present as female, their culture is what we might describe as patriarchal; this detail separates gender essentialism from the concept of

¹⁶ This is not the first time Will puts his own neck on the line to advocate for a helpless stranger. In the first episode, he rescues a youth who has been shot during a gang fight, even though his partner is against it. Although Will is a police officer--a typically masculine and stoic profession--he is portrayed as a sensitive soul.

¹⁷ Quote is from Season 2, Episode 22, "The Answer."

domination. The show demonstrates that, although we earthlings live in a patriarchy, in which men have the power, there is nothing natural or essential about this arrangement, and therefore it critiques absolute power in general. Hence, even women who have too much power and control can dominate and oppress. Homeworld is totalitarian and oligarchical, and abides by a strict caste system, in which individual gems are ranked by their relative “value”—that is, there is an order to the hierarchy, in which diamonds inhabit the highest echelon, and pearls, for example, are more of a servant class (“Gem Homeworld”). The only male gem in existence is Steven, the show’s protagonist, who is 13 when the show begins; he is half-gem and half-human. His mother, Rose Quartz, who was quite powerful and founded the Crystal Gems, gave up her physical form to give birth to him. So, in a sense, Steven *is* Rose Quartz¹⁸.

Steven Universe contains many features and themes which overlap with *Buffy* and *Sense8*. Firstly, like *Sense8*, it includes a diverse cast of characters. While gems are not human, and therefore do not technically belong to any racial group, two of the gems, Amethyst and Garnet, are coded as women of color. Further, the population of Beach City, where Steven lives, is rather diverse, and Steven’s human best friend Connie is also of color. Also like *Sense8*, empathy is a prominent concern in the show; Steven’s powers are explicitly connected to his emotions, and he experiences, as his Wikia page terms it, “empathetic telepathy”—that is, Steven is occasionally able to share a mental connection with another being, which allows him to feel what they feel and to see through their eyes (“Steven Universe (Character)”). Further, like *Buffy*, the main character’s empathy extends to other characters who were originally cast in the role of

¹⁸ Rose says the following, in a video message addressed to Steven: “Steven, we can’t both exist. I’m going to become half of you. And I need you to know that every moment you love being yourself, that’s me, loving you, and loving being you, because you’re going to be something extraordinary. You’re going to be a human being” (“Lion 3: Straight to Video” 10:07-10:28).

villains: that is, there is no clear division between good and evil in *Steven Universe*, and an individual's worthiness always depends on their choices rather than where they come from or what they've done. One character in particular, Peridot, was originally introduced as an adversary, but winds up joining the Crystal Gems and becomes one of Steven's best friends.

This is all to say that *Steven Universe* brings together, and builds upon, many of the salient qualities of the previously discussed shows in this study. Also, *Steven Universe* contains perhaps the most explicit example of queer love between women dismantling a patriarchal institution. Although gems are asexual, they possess the ability to "fuse" with one another--an ability that the show implicitly equates with sex. Essentially, when two gems fuse, they become one new one, and their fused form possesses the combined magical qualities and personalities of the two individual gems. Garnet, the most powerful of the Crystal Gems, is in fact herself a permanent fusion. Her taboo choice to become who she is, and stay that way, is a subversive and rebellious act which allows her to fight more effectively against the likes of patriarchal Homeworld. Furthermore, *Steven Universe*, in the character of Steven himself, presents the most heartening and complete example of redemptive, non-toxic masculinity in this whole study, due in part to the fact that this character was and continues to be raised by and around strong, empowered women.

Due to their society's rigid social structures, it's no wonder that gem culture considers it taboo for two gems of different types--that is, belonging to different castes--to fuse; such a fusion poses an ideological threat to the entire infrastructure of gem society. Indeed, when Ruby and Sapphire, who are of two very different castes¹⁹, fuse to become Garnet for the first time, the

¹⁹ While Ruby is a common foot soldier valued for her muscle, Sapphire is a member of the nobility with powerful future vision.

gems around them are outraged: they call their fusion “unbelievable” and “disgusting,” and Blue Diamond, who was present for the incident, threatens to shatter Ruby for fusing with a member of her court. Clearly, their fusion is interpreted as an act of insubordination (“The Answer” 4:58-5:22).

Beyond the ideological threat, though, Garnet’s existence also poses a literal, physical threat to the powers that be. The episode “The Answer” nicely clarifies the difference between fusion between similar and dissimilar gems, which elucidates said threat. After Ruby and Sapphire fuse for the first time, they haltingly discuss the revelatory nature of the experience, and Ruby says, “Whenever I fuse it’s always just been me, but bigger. I’ve never had a third eye before” (7:44). We can deduce from this that, while the power of a fusion between similar gems is additive, the power of fusion between dissimilar ones is exponential; they strengthen due to the combination of their disparate powers and strengths.

However, beyond that, even, is the fact that Garnet is greater than the sum of her parts, due to the alchemy of love between Ruby and Sapphire. As I have suggested, fusion carries romantic and sexual overtones; the show makes this quite explicit in Ruby and Sapphire’s case. In the episode “Jail Break,” in which we first find out that Garnet is a fusion, Ruby and Sapphire are forcibly separated, and upon their reunion and re-fusing, the romantic nature of their bond is clear. What follows is a fight between Garnet and Jasper, a brute who works for Yellow Diamond and is aligned with Homeworld’s nefarious purposes. During this fight, Garnet sings a song about herself and her strength and power as a fusion. One of the verses goes as follows:

But I am even more than the two of them;

Everything they care about is what I am:

I am their fury,

I am their patience,

I am a conversation.

I am made of love,

And it's stronger than you. (5:41 - 7:58)

Here, Garnet not only explicitly states that, as I have said, she is greater than the sum of her parts and is quite literally “made of love,” but emphasizes the role that emotion and passion plays in her power. In particular, her assertion that she “[is] a conversation” is notable: it emphasizes the collaborative nature of Garnet’s being, and the way in which that collaboration contributes to her strength. Indeed, this word choice brings to mind the strategy of epistemic negotiation, which, as I have said, all the shows in this study engage with to a degree..

So, Garnet’s power is twofold: physical, in that she is literally stronger than non-fused gems, and metaphysical/ideological, in that her existence represents the dismantling and rejection of hierarchy--a concept which the patriarchal infrastructure of Homeworld depends upon. The message to take away from all this is, of course, that love will always win over power and domination.

To accompany and enrich *Steven Universe*’s empowering portrayals of strong women is Steven, a model of healthy, non-toxic masculinity. Indeed, Steven is atypically masculine in almost every imaginable way: he is upbeat, openly emotional, unafraid to cry, and the least likely of the main ensemble of heroes to use physical force in situations of conflict. Steven’s powers, which he inherited from Rose Quartz, mostly serve defensive purposes: his flashiest powers allow him to conjure shields and bubbles to protect himself and his friends. Further, as I

suggested earlier, control of his powers correlates directly with his emotional state, which forces him to be in touch with, and in control of, his emotions. He was raised by the Crystal Gems²⁰, and hence, the show demonstrates that when boys are raised by and around strong, empowered women, toxic masculinity is not a concern nor a possibility.

An example of how the gems help Steven to cultivate his empathy and emotional control occurs as a result of the events of the episodes “Back to the Moon” and “Bubbled.” In the former episode, Steven abruptly finds out from an adversary that Rose Quartz had shattered²¹ Pink Diamond, one of the rulers of Homeworld, and he reacts with denial, tears, and anger (9:04-9:15). Events later in the episode separate Steven from the gems for a while, but upon their reunion, they have a conversation with him about Rose’s actions which helps him come to terms with them. The conversation goes as follows:

STEVEN: But did mom really do it? Did she really... shatter her?

GARNET: She had to. The Earth belonged to Pink Diamond. Destroying her was the only way to save the planet, for Amethyst to be herself, for Pearl to be free, for me to be together, for you to exist.

STEVEN: But I thought... at least she’d never...

GARNET: She didn’t always do what was best for her. But she always did what was best for Earth.

STEVEN: Even if it meant shattering someone?

²⁰ Steven lived with his father, Greg, when he was younger, and they still spend time together when the show takes place.

²¹ Shattering is the gem equivalent of murder; gems are nigh-immortal unless damage is done to their stones, which are a part of their bodies, and which project their physical forms. As Steven views his mother as a beacon of morality, the information that she committed murder--even against an adversary--is hard for him to swallow.

GARNET: Yes.

Steven sighs in response, but it's clear that his sigh is one of acceptance: he doesn't like what he's heard, but he's processing it, and he has taken Garnet's perspective into account. Here, we see that Steven's upbringing has cultivated a willingness to listen in him, and to open himself to new perspectives despite strong gut reactions. This is a sign of emotional intelligence; men who are unable to process emotions tend to remain firmly in a state of anger when in disagreement with someone. Steven's emotional maturity exceeds that of some men who exceed his age by decades.

On the whole, *Steven Universe* furthers my point about the role love between heroic women plays in dismantling patriarchy and creating emotionally healthy men, but out of all the examples I present, it is the most straightforward: Garnet is literally made out of love between women, and she poses the clearest threat to patriarchal Homeworld.

VI. "I Learned It From You"²²: Female Solidarity in the Face of Trauma and Sexual Violence in *Jessica Jones*

Jessica Jones is, in many ways, a departure from the other series I have covered thus far: its outlook is, on the surface level, much more grim, and its cast of characters is very pared down. The result is that there is much less of a sense of community--the protagonist is, with a couple exceptions, more or less isolated, and the tone of the show is much more gritty and evocative of film noir. However, the show deals directly with themes of trauma and sexual violence, so in that sense the dark tone is rather appropriate.

²² Quote is from Season 1, Episode 11, "AKA I've Got the Blues." Spoken by Trish in response to Jessica saying, "Just had to be a hero, didn't you?"

The series takes place in the Marvel universe, in which individuals can and do have all sorts of extraordinary powers. Jessica, the titular character, is working as a private investigator when the show opens, barely utilizing her powers of super strength and endurance. We soon find out that she is dealing with extremely severe PTSD as a result of the months she had been held captive by a villain who goes by the name Kilgrave, who possesses insidious mind-control powers. During her months as a mental prisoner, Kilgrave forced Jessica to spend time with him, do his bidding, and have sex with him. Over the course of the first season, Jessica works with her best friend Trish to form an unlikely plan to defeat Kilgrave, avenging her own trauma and protecting other women who might fall into his clutches.

Although the core cast of *Jessica Jones* is small, and therefore may not address community in the same way the other shows in this study do, Jessica overcomes her paralyzing trauma and embarks on her heroic quest due to her sense of duty toward other women. Ultimately, it is the queer-coded love between Trish and Jessica which, in the most literal sense possible, allows them to dispatch Kilgrave. I would assert that the show's value lies not only in this display of solidarity, but in its unflinching look at the evil of rapists and their psychological impact on their victims, and its portrayal of survivors of sexual violence as resilient, empowered, and capable of healing and moving forward--with the help of other women, of course.

As Garnet of *Steven Universe* presents the most clear-cut instance of the power of love between women, Kilgrave is the most obvious example of toxic masculinity this study could hope for. Kilgrave is emotionally immature, permanently power-tripping, and above all, entitled. This is due, in part, to the fact that he acquired his powers during his adolescence; in a sense, ever since he gained the power to control others, his own emotional growth stopped because he

literally had everything handed to him. The show does not paint Kilgrave with too broad of a brush--it acknowledges his own childhood trauma and the fact that his unmet needs are what led to his abuse of power--but it also does not by any means suggest that we should excuse his behavior. To draw a parallel to larger society, one could compare the show's attitude toward Kilgrave to the attitude feminists might have toward male rapists: we must acknowledge the extent to which they are products of our imperfect society, but also demand that they take personal responsibility for their actions. As reviewer Laura Durkay puts it, "while the show allows us to understand how [Kilgrave] got to be the way he is, it never tries to excuse his behavior."

Psychologically, Kilgrave is a fascinating character, and part of that fascination relates to the ways in which he perfectly exemplifies how toxic masculinity operates. Durkay puts it quite succinctly: "Kilgrave's power is the literal embodiment of extreme male entitlement--being able to bend the entire world to his will while still feeling sorry for himself." Like an exaggerated version of any straight, white male who has failed to take stock of his privilege, Kilgrave walks into all situations expecting to have his every whim catered to with no concern for the feelings or needs of others. While in the real world, the power which allows men to unquestionably have their needs met is implicit, in *Jessica Jones* it is explicit: when Kilgrave commands someone to do something, they have no choice but to do it.

While Kilgrave is fine with blatantly dominating and commanding random people so he can get what he wants, the situation changes when he interacts with one of his female captives: not only does he command them, but his ego and enjoyment demand that he believes they are acting on their own free will. While, for example, it's all the same to Kilgrave if someone hands

over a stack of money willingly or not, when he enslaves Jessica, he must delude himself into believing that she loves him in order for him to get full enjoyment from her company. Even after she escapes his clutches, he insists several times that she does, or that she will come to.

Appropriately enough, Kilgrave's trademark command when it comes to Jessica, and indeed all the women he controls, is "smile." It's the first command he tries on her, and it is how he convinces himself that she is happy when she isn't ("AKA the Sandwich Saved Me"). This is appropriate, given the show's commentary on contemporary gender politics: countless women are told by men who are perfect strangers to them to smile while at work, on public transportation, and walking down the street. The implicit motivation behind such behavior is men's desire to operate under the impression that women don't have their own problems to deal with, and therefore exist to cater to and please men²³. Kilgrave is happy as long as Jessica remains uncomplicated, available, and obedient.

After Jessica breaks free from Kilgrave, initially believing he is dead, she isolates herself and drinks heavily to numb the pain of her trauma. She only returns to her heroic calling once she figures out that another young woman, Hope Shlottman, is in his clutches. However, she does not exactly jump at the opportunity to confront her abuser; it takes some convincing from her best friend, Trish. Indeed, the relationship between Jessica and Trish is the most significant

²³ In her essay "Why Women Smile," Amy Cunningham sheds some light on the cultural pressure women feel to smile. She writes, "Evidently, a woman's happy, willing deference is something the world wants visibly demonstrated. Woe to the waitress, the personal assistant or receptionist, the flight attendant, or any other woman in the line of public service whose smile is not offered up to the boss or client as proof that there are no storm clouds--no kids to support, no sleep that's been missed--rolling into the sunny workplace landscape. Women are expected to smile no matter where they line up on the social, cultural, or economic ladder [...]. It's little wonder that men on the street still call out, 'Hey, baby, smile! Life's not *that* bad, is it?' to women passing by, lost in thought" ().

one in the entire series, and Trish is the only reason Jessica is able to defeat Kilgrave--specifically, Jessica's love for and loyalty to Trish gives her the strength to fight back.

Jessica and Trish do not have an overtly romantic relationship, which sets them apart from the other pairs in this study, but I would argue that there are significant queer undertones between them throughout the series. Jessica and Trish are best friends, but they're also more than that: Jessica is Trish's adoptive sister. Although their history as quasi-family members could potentially invalidate a queer reading of their relationship, I would point out that since Jessica's adoption took place well into her adolescence, they wouldn't necessarily "feel" like sisters. The interactions between them do not feel as casually intimate as those between two close sisters, nor as caring-yet-disentangled as those between "gal pals." There is an intensity and a fierceness to the love between Jessica and Trish that goes beyond the familial and the strictly platonic.

A close look at some key moments from the series demonstrate that Jessica and Trish care for and trust each other more than anyone else. Over the first couple episodes of the series, the weight of the emotional history between them becomes clear: they both feel intensely protective over one another, and we find out that Jessica has estranged herself from Trish in order to keep her safe. When Trish tries to convince Jessica to move back in with her to keep her safe from Kilgrave, Jessica reminds her that, with a mind-controlling maniac on the loose who is after her specifically, Jessica could become a dangerous weapon. She tells Trish, "I can't risk you" ("AKA Crush Syndrome" 14:34). Consistently, each character chooses the other's welfare over her own. Furthermore, while both women carry out sexual relationships with men over the course of the season, neither of these relationships is as stable or trusting as the one between them: Trish is betrayed by her partner, and Jessica keeps secrets from hers. Throughout it all,

despite Jessica's trauma history which, understandably, makes her reluctant to trust people, Trish is the only person she fully puts her trust in.

The significance of Trish's encouragement is that, in a very real way, she pushes Jessica to own and embrace her agency as a powerful woman capable of creating change in her environment. Over the course of the first season of the show, Jessica moves from a position of passive, disempowered victim to active, empowered survivor. Although the show makes the issue larger than life with its inclusion of supernatural powers, it is very much about the devastation of rape: the toxically masculine, selfish, patriarchal mindset of its perpetrators, and the emotional desolation of its victims. In a broader sense, then, the show advocates for the importance of female solidarity in dismantling rape culture. The climactic scene of the show, in which Jessica defeats Kilgrave, positions the love between her and Trish as absolutely essential to the victory.

As they prepare for battle in the final episode, "AKA Smile," Jessica reminds Trish that she "won't know if [Jessica is] a minion of evil" (24:10)--that is, Trish won't know if Jessica is being mind controlled, and therefore if she herself is being tricked--so they establish a "signal" that is "something [Jessica] would never say" (24:17). Jessica decides that the signal should be "I love you." The joke is, of course, that Jessica is normally far too stoic and detached to say such a thing. However, there's another layer to this choice: Jessica is, true to self-deprecating form, acknowledging that she *should* be saying it. Later in the episode, Trish receives a text with instructions which ends with the phrase "I love you" (27:50). We see that Jessica's decision to make this the signal gives her opportunities to say something she feels she should have been saying all along.

Later than that episode, after a chaotic fight scene, Jessica and Kilgrave have the final confrontation she and Trish had been preparing for. For her plan to work, Jessica must pretend to be under Kilgrave's control; of course, upon first watching, we are not sure whether or not she really is. At a tense moment in the scene, Kilgrave takes Trish as a hostage; because he understands the depth of the love that Jessica has for Trish, he knows that threatening to take her as his next captive would be the perfect litmus test to find out if she is truly under his control once more. Jessica continues to stand still, trusting that if she fails to react and Kilgrave believes her, he will come back for her. Her gamble pays off: Kilgrave approaches her again, giddy with the belief that he has her under his control, and asks her to smile for the last time. When he asks her to tell him she loves him, she gazes over his shoulder at Trish and says "I love you." Then, she grabs him by the throat, tells *him* to smile, and breaks his neck, killing him instantly (41:31-42:24).

This important scene is satisfying for the audience, in that we finally get to see Kilgrave powerless and getting his comeuppance, but it is also thematically poignant. Jessica's "I love you," directed at Trish, tips both her *and* the audience off that Jessica is in fact acting of her own volition. The moment is thrilling, because it tells us that Jessica is in control. But it's also appropriate that this understanding comes from an utterance of "I love you"; it's a signal, sure, but it's also an expression of affection and solidarity between the two women, and it's an affirmation of their bond at the moment of a dramatic victory. In saying "I love you," Jessica involves Trish in Kilgrave's defeat, and acknowledges the role Trish played in their success.

To be clear, Jessica could not have defeated Kilgrave without Trish, and it's because Trish trusted her. A huge part of the discourse around the issues that rape survivors face refers to

the constant doubt and questioning from others that they must confront; because rape is, more often than not, a crime without witnesses, the survivor's word is the only evidence. Some survivors find that even those closest to them refuse to believe what happened to them. Not only does Trish believe Jessica, but she aligns with her in unquestioning support; she even trusts her enough to risk her life for Jessica's scheme--a risk that ultimately pays off.

Unlike the other shows, *Jessica Jones* does not contain any one, shining example of redeemed masculinity. Luke Cage, Jessica's love interest, is a good and sensitive man, but he does not participate in Kilgrave's defeat, nor is he fully aware of the horror Jessica has been through. Granted, the show is only one season long thus far; I will be interested to see if and how Luke contributes to the show's feminist themes going forward.

VII. Conclusion: We Are One

Back in the 1940's Wonder Woman stood alone as a symbol of female strength, but now, in the 21st century, our female heroes reflect the reality that women need each other's love and support--as well as that of men--in order to fight back against the forces which seek to oppress us.

Strikingly, three out of four of the shows in this study contain at least one instance in which heroes share space *in the same literal body* in order to perform feats of strength and courage: Garnet is two souls occupying a single body; all the sensates have the ability to share thoughts silently and pilot one another's bodies; and in season 4 of *Buffy*, the Scoobies perform a spell which imbues Buffy herself with the strengths of all of her friends so they might collectively defeat Adam, that season's "big bad." Notably, *Jessica Jones* lacks this kind of

example, but its themes of abuse and bodily and mental invasion preclude the possibility of this type of intimate space-sharing feeling safe.

When Buffy is first imbued with the essence of all her friends, Adam taunts her: “You can’t last much longer.” In her own voice, layered with the voice of her friends, she responds, “We can. We are forever.” He shoots a missile at her; she raises a hand lightly, and the projectile transforms into doves. Adam sputters, unable to comprehend her upper hand. In her many voices, she tells him, “You can never hope to grasp the source of our power” (“Primeval” 37:36-39:25). That source, of course, is love, and by definition, that which is evil and oppressive will always wither in the face of it.

Sense8 also contains a moment of particularly unified heroics during a season finale; the episode “I Can’t Leave Her” finds Riley, another member of Nomi’s cluster, trapped in hospital about to receive a forced lobotomy. Will brings his physical body to Iceland, and the other cluster members work through him to free her: Nomi uses her hacking skills to get into the hospital; Lito, his acting to charm a doctor into revealing Riley’s location; Sun, her martial arts prowess to dispatch a group of security guards; Kala, her pharmaceutical knowledge to revive Riley from her comatose state; Capheus, his ability to hotwire cars to arrange a getaway car; and Wolfgang, his daredevilish disposition to pull a necessary driving stunt as they flee the hospital.

These scenes make literal that which is otherwise implicit: heroes must collaborate in order to be most effective. In particular--and especially in our time of division and fear of the other--it is important to collaborate with those different from ourselves in order to create positive, restorative change. The beautiful diversity of human beings on this Earth enriches our planet with different strengths, insights, and ways of viewing the world; because there is no

objective truth, and no one “right” way to do things, collaboration in the spirit of love and empathy is a must. Heroes like Buffy, Nomi and her cluster, Garnet, and Jessica show us what empowered women are capable of, but not a single one of them could be half as effective without their teams.

When Buffy is in “God mode,” she is utterly composed because she is not alone. Garnet is stoic and decisive because she is never alone. If we, as activists and thinkers, can build our teams with the same trust and empathy, we will have nothing to fear: love is the strongest force on Earth, and as long as it persists, so will those who wield it.

Works Cited

“About Us.” *Seejane.org*. <https://seejane.org/about-us/>

“AKA Crush Syndrome.” *Jessica Jones*, season 1, episode 2, Netflix, 20 November 2015.

Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80002313?trackId=200257859>

“AKA Smile.” *Jessica Jones*, season 1, episode 13, Netflix, 20 November 2015.

Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80002324?trackId=200257859>

“AKA the Sandwich Saved Me.” *Jessica Jones*, season 1, episode 5, Netflix, 20 November 2015.

Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80002316?trackId=14170068>

“Back to the Moon.” *Steven Universe*, season 3, episode 24, Cartoon Network, 9 August 2016.

Hulu, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/1021944>

“Biologic Preservation Organization.” *sense8.wikia.com*. http://sense8.wikia.com/wiki/Biologic_Preservation_Organization

Preservation_Organization

“Bubbled.” *Steven Universe*, season 3, episode 25, Cartoon Network, 10 August 2016.

Hulu, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/1021945>

Busfield, Joan. “DSM-5.” *Cultural Sociology of Mental Illness: An A-to-Z Guide*. Ed. Andrew

Scull, vol. 1, 2014, pp. 241-243. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*, SAGE Reference.

Accessed 16 May 2017.

Cunningham, Amy. “Why Women Smile.” *The Writer’s Presence: A Pool of Readings*, 8th ed.

Donald McQuade and Robert Atwan, eds. Bedford St. Martin’s, 2015. Pp 369-375.

Durkay, Laura. “Jessica Jones’ Superpower is Surviving.” *Green Left Weekly*, no. 1083,

February

2016. Accessed 31 January, 2017.

Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*. Penguin, 1992.

“Gem Homeworld.” *steven-universe.wikia.com*. http://steven-universe.wikia.com/wiki/Gem_Homeworld

“Grave.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, season 6, episode 22, The WB, 21 May 2002. *Hulu*, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/158820#i0,p20,s6,d0>

“Hush.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, season 4, episode 10, The WB, 14 December 1999. *Hulu*, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/158788>.

“I Am Also A We.” *Sense8*, season 1, episode 2, Netflix, 5 June 2015. *Netflix*, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025746?trackId=200257858>

“I Can’t Leave Her.” *Sense8*, season 1, episode 12, Netflix, 5 June 2015. *Netflix*, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025756?trackId=14170289>

“Jail Break.” *Steven Universe*, season 1, episode 52, Cartoon Network, 12 March 2015. *Hulu*, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/842588>

Kaufman, Michael “The Construction of Masculinity and the Triad of Men’s Violence.” *The Social Construction of Difference and Inequality: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*, 5th

Ed. Tracy E. Ore, Ed. McGraw Hill, 2011. Pp. 614-630.

“Limbic Resonance.” *Sense8*, season 1, episode 1, Netflix, 5 June 2015. *Netflix*, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025745?trackId=200257859>

“Lion 3: Straight to Video.” *Steven Universe*, season 1, episode 35, Cartoon Network, 4 December 2014. *Hulu*, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/752825>

- Marinucci, Mimi. "Feminism and the Ethics of Violence: Why Buffy Kicks Ass." James B. South, Ed. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*. Open Court: 2003.
- Martins, Nicole and Kristen Harrison. "Racial and Gender Differences in the Relationship Between Children's Television Use and Self Esteem: A Longitudinal Panel Study." *Communication Research*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2012. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0093650211401376>. *Sage Journals*. Pp. 338-357. Accessed 16 May, 2017.
- "Primeval." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, season 4, episode 21, The WB, 16 May 2000. *Hulu*, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/158777>
- Robbins, Trina. "The Great Women Superheroes." *The Superhero Reader*. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester, eds. Mississippi UP, 2013. pp. 53-60.
- Ross, Sharon. "'Tough Enough': Female Friendship and Heroism in *Xena* and *Buffy*." *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*. Sherrie A. Inness, ed. Palgrave Macmillan: 2004. 231-255.
- "Seeing Red." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, season 6, episode 19, The WB, 7 May 2002. *Hulu*, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/158788>.
- "Smart Money Is on the Skinny Bitch." *Sense8*, season 1, episode 3, Netflix, 5 June 2015. *Netflix*, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025747?trackId=200257859>
- Steinem, Gloria. "Wonder Woman." *The Superhero Reader*. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester, eds. Mississippi UP, 2013. pp. 203-210.

“Steven Universe (Character).” *steven-universe.wikia.com*. [http://steven-universe.wikia.com/wiki/Steven_Universe_\(character\)](http://steven-universe.wikia.com/wiki/Steven_Universe_(character))

Stuller, Jennifer. “Love Will Bring You Your Gift.” *The Superhero Reader*. Charles Hatfield, Jeet

Heer, and Kent Worcester, eds. Mississippi UP, 2013. pp. 216-236.

Tate, Chuck. “The Stereotypical (Wonder) Woman.” *The Psychology of Superheroes: An Unauthorized Exploration*. Robin Rosenberg and Jennifer Canzoneri, eds. Benbella, 2008. Pp. 118-129.

“The Answer.” *Steven Universe*, season 2, episode 22, Cartoon Network, 4 January 2016. *Hulu*, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/962290>

“Two to Go.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, season 6, episode 21, The WB, 21 May 2002. *Hulu*, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/158821>

“Villains.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, season 6, episode 20, The WB, 14 May 2002. *Hulu*, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/158822>

“What’s Going On?” *Sense8*, season 1, episode 4, Netflix, 5 June 2015. *Netflix*, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025748?trackId=15036065>