Investigating *Veronica Mars*

Essays on the Teen Detective Series

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Rethinking "The Getting Even Part"

Feminist Anger and Vigilante Justice in a Post-9/11 America

TAMY BURNETT AND MELISSA TOWNSEND

> There's the part of me that thinks Veronica should grow and evolve. She should get past her pettiness. She should learn how to forgive.... The other part of me wants to keep her complicated. Difficult. Testy. I don't want her to soften into angelic heroine who consistently does the "right thing." Like America, Veronica and I are at a crossroads.
> —Rob Thomas, creator of *Veronica Mars* (148)

When a classmate asks Veronica Mars how she deals with sustained exclusion and mistreatment by her peers, the teen responds, "Here's what you do. You get tough. You get even" ("Like a Virgin," 1.8). Indeed, throughout *Veronica Mars*' run, Veronica's raison d'être seems to continually shift back and forth between justice and vengeance. Even when searching for justice—for her murdered best friend, for her classmates who are victims of a bombed school bus, for young women raped on her college campus, or for her own sexual assault—Veronica is quick to formulate plans designed to extract petty vengeance from those who have wronged her. Later in the same episode, the classmate, Meg, suggests Veronica modify her response by saying, "Getting tough? Yeah, that was good advice. And I needed that. The getting even part? You might want to rethink that one." Meg's suggestion here represents an ongoing struggle for Veronica's character: where should she draw the line between justice and vengeance?

The series' pilot makes plain the wealth of injustices and harms Veronica

has already suffered before the series even begins: abandonment by her mother, murder of her best friend, loss of social status when her father is fired from his job as sheriff (and subsequent loss of socio-economic status), rejection in the form of an inexplicable and unexpected break-up with her boyfriend, rape after being drugged at a classmate's party, and humiliation when the new sheriff mocks her attempt to report the crime. These various factors — especially the rape, which serves as a tipping point — irrevocably alter Veronica's view of justice and her own safety in her world; because of this shift, *Veronica Mars* begins with its heroine a sarcastic, cynical young woman whose penchant for vengeance is easily understood. However, as the series progresses, Veronica remains hardened to a degree, unable to fully return to the carefree girl pictured in pre-series flashbacks. Indeed, repeatedly Veronica finds herself at a crossroads, having to choose between holding onto her anger, sense of violation, and loss of faith in the social systems that should have protected and advocated for her — in short, all the factors which contribute to her desire for vengeance — and letting go of her suspicions and fear, forgiving those who have harmed her, and trusting again in social systems and authorities for her safety and well being. Both because of the time frame in which the series originally aired (2004–2007) and because of this preoccupation with questions of justice versus vengeance, *Veronica Mars* offers insight into the American psyche at a time when the nation was still eager to define itself as "post–9/11." In addition to helping understand the U.S as a nation at war in response the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001,[1] the ongoing tension between justice and vengeance helps illuminate *Veronica Mars*' construction of a strong feminist protagonist.

While *Veronica Mars* provides useful commentary on American attitudes in reaction to 9/11, we cannot overlook historical precedent for the nation's response to conflict. In December 1941, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor led to such national change that America joined a world war from which it had previously worked hard to remain apart, a choice that served to reinvigorate a floundering national economy and resulted in the enactment of more social welfare policy than any other period in the nation's history. While these positive outcomes are among the first (American) history textbooks delineate, America's response to the attack on Pearl Harbor also resulted in numerous outcomes of a less positive nature. For example, a nation which defines itself through the rhetoric of freedom and opportunity for all nonetheless imprisoned Japanese Americans all along its west coast (the coast closest geographically to Japan and with the heaviest population of Asian immigrants) in internment camps for the duration of the war while simultaneously winning the race to create a weapon so powerful and destructive it ended the war and

created a sustained sense of hostility between east and west for decades to come. In addition, Americans in the post–World War II Cold War–era witnessed systemic persecution of political minorities and other social "deviants" like homosexuals,[2] as well as cultural reinforcement of rigid gender roles and ideals of family, all of which ultimately created a nation that lived and thrived on the politics of fear for much of the next thirty years.

There is no doubt that America has been changed yet again since 9/11. The complexity of Americans' collective response to the attacks stems from the fact that there were, and still are, multiple reactions occurring simultaneously: grief over the loss of life; fear, resulting in a newly understood sense of vulnerability; anger channeled into the "War on Terror," which later included war in Iraq; patriotic pride and worry (simultaneous) in response to the passage of the Patriot Act, giving the government leave to impinge upon previously inviolable individual rights; and righteousness and horror (also simultaneous) in response to reports of torture of political detainees. However, the most notable change within the U.S. collective psyche in the direct aftermath of September 11 was an overwhelming sense of unity. As a part of this rise in national unity, Virginia A. Chanley argues that trust in the government by U.S. citizens nearly doubled in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, with a correlating decrease in cynicism regarding government/military action and spending.

That level of unity was unsustainable, however; as early as 2003, when the U.S. marched to war in Iraq, Dale Krane shows that not only were members of America's two major political parties, Republicans and Democrats, arguing and divided, but divisiveness was also growing between individual states and the federal government. Deborah J. Schildkraut found that although there was an increase in unity rhetoric by political elites, the masses were far from united, division occurring most often along lines of culture and race. For example, by 2004, hate-motivated violence toward Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians was on the rise and was understood by the American public as "a regrettable, but expected, response to the terrorist attacks" (Ahmad 1262). Parallel to American experience with World War II, the U.S. response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 manifested as a complex web of reactions, experiences, and motivations, as America struggled to balance its thirst for vengeance with a national identity that prides itself on justice. These two historical examples are significant for their impact on America's sense of self as well as for the pattern they represent: Americans' understandings of justice are impacted dramatically when citizens find themselves in the position of being vulnerable. The lesson here is clear: when Americans feel personally and individually victimized, the country feels equally empowered to take significant action, but

Americans are also subject to the whims of fear and anger. Veronica Mars, as a character, is no different.

Veronica's personal "9/11" is the rape she experiences. While other events leave her vulnerable, or shake her faith in social authority like the judicial system, her rape and the sheriff's crude, sneering response to her attempt to report the assault mark a critical moment of change in Veronica's psyche and approach to the world around her. While Veronica understands the rape as a culmination of her status as a social outcast (after all, she was drugged and raped at a party full of her peers and no one cared enough to step in and keep her safe), it is also the point at which she realizes that her world is filled with injustice and no one is going to advocate for her other than herself—a realization symbolized in the shift from long-haired pastel-colored clothes-wearing Veronica of pre-series flashback to the short haired young woman who routinely wears long sleeved shirts and layers in Southern California (her wardrobe change depicting a classic response to sexual assault wherein the victim takes to wearing more concealing clothing). Further, flashback Veronica is carefree and happy, whereas present Veronica is cynical and angry, quick to act vengeful and constantly working to ensure she is not again victimized by others or the social authority that should work to protect her.

In considering this parallel between *Veronica Mars* and America's post–9/11 cultural consciousness, we wish to particularly engage with Deanna Carlyle's essay "The United States of America: Teen Noir as America's New Zeitgeist." Carlyle writes that "9/11 was the defining event for America's current sense of violation" (152), arguing, as we do here, that Veronica's sense of victimization positions Veronica parallel to the American public. She expands her claim by pointing to the fact that "in season one, Veronica exacted revenge for offenses committed against her and those she loved, much in the way the U.S. bombed the Taliban out of power in Afghanistan after 9/11, hunting down and killing al-Qaeda members throughout the world" (153). However, Carlyle's analysis ultimately offers a blueprint for recovery from the state of violation and abandonment she identifies in *Veronica Mars*, suggesting that true power lies in responding to these violations through forgiveness, accepting one's own vulnerability and pain, and acting to protect innocence in one's self and others — rather than seeking revenge. This is the point at which we disagree with Carlyle's essay; while the path Carlyle posits is appealing for the resolution it offers and is, undoubtedly, the more emotionally healthy course of action, we are disturbed and troubled by what such a path would mean for Veronica, especially in terms of her construction as a feminist figure. Further, while the analogy of Veronica's experiences to 9/11 is valid, it can only extend so far. In examining the limits of the analogy, we offer new insight

into both America's response to 9/11 and Veronica's development as a strong female character.

A key component in understanding this negotiation lies in understanding the genre choices of *Veronica Mars* and how those choices frame ideas of justice and the individual. The series' engagement with and revision of the noir genre is at the heart of its negotiations of justice. Lani Diane Rich suggests that the noir element in *Veronica Mars*, which she defines as a way "to describe storytelling with a dark edge, expressed visually by shadowy lighting and the classic Venetian blind stripes on any wall that'll have 'em," (9–10) is successful due to its pairing with the use of camp, a style of "over-the-top storytelling with a hint of kitsch that's not even trying for reality" (10); because the two genres temper each other, the series offers a more engaging narrative that resists the danger of becoming too dark or too silly. Similarly, Chris McCubbin argues that *Veronica Mars*' connection to the noir genre is captivating because the series calls upon more that just that one genre: "*Veronica Mars* blends hard-boiled detective fiction and film noir, where everything is corrupt and fundamentally hopeless, with the family drama/coming-of-age story, which is wholesome and intrinsically hopeful" (140; see also Alaine Martaus on the combination of noir and coming-of-age). And, of course, we cannot ignore the obvious and much-cited comparison of *Veronica Mars* to the genre-exploding *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), most often in terms of the empowered female teenage hero genre. All of these comparisons exemplify the ways in which *Veronica Mars* conforms to, challenges, or rewrites genre rules, all of which affect the narrative in significant ways. However, the comparisons also inevitably come back to the base component of noir, reinforcing the importance of that genre's influence. Indeed, given how central questions of justice/corruption are to the noir genre and to *Veronica Mars*, an analysis of the series' construction of Veronica as agent of justice must engage with the rich history of this genre.

Veronica's acts in the name of justice position her as a vigilante, a role traditionally constructed as a (masculine) agent working outside the law, seeking justice when socially sanctioned institutions fail in their duty to provide justice. Alafair Burke's description of Veronica's hometown as "lawless" (116) posits that that the failure of these social institutions is exactly what gives Veronica authority to act. She writes, "In Neptune, the criminal justice system is consistently either indifferent or incapacitated" (116), ultimately suggesting that "the law, ... [in Neptune] is an impediment — not a vehicle — to justice" (123). Although legal and governmental authorities are presented as uniformly corrupt, Veronica's brand of justice in response to them is not uncomplicated or unproblematic. Veronica's commitment to seeking justice for justice's sake

is often undermined when she accepts (or demands) monetary compensation when helping someone with whom she has no personal relationship. Similarly, Veronica frequently skirts or outright breaks the law in her pursuit of justice, and she lies frequently when doing so advances her cause. Veronica seems to operate from the slippery moral slope of an "ends justify the means" perspective, but as John Ramon points out, viewers are willing to forgive Veronica these actions because her dishonesties occur within an already corrupt system, allowing for the moral rule that "lies told in pursuit of the truth are acceptable" (107). As Kristin Kidder remarks, what is most important in understanding Veronica's construction as a vigilante figure and the appeal of that construction is the truth that "as long as the vigilante's notions of justice remain in line with those of mainstream America, the term is not likely to be used as a pejorative" (127). During the show's original run of programming, one possible draw for some American viewers may have been that Veronica's vigilantism embodied a parallel cultural desire to take action in response to the feelings of helplessness and violation that impacted American cultural consciousness following 9/11.

The extent and severity of Veronica's vigilante action follows a trajectory wherein her confidence in her actions and their scope in a specific situation are inversely proportional to the size of the failure/transgression the social authority in question has committed against her. The scope of that past failure is always present in the backstory provided in the pilot episode, and viewers are continuously reminded of this through the repeated use of flashbacks during the first season. However, the ongoing extent of that failure is elaborated upon throughout all three seasons with repeated betrayal by various modes of social authority. Veronica's brand of justice is driven by her sense of entitlement to pursue her justice on her terms, entitlement she demands upon realizing that the institutions that should help her will not. Carlyle argues that, at some point, Veronica must get past the wrongs done to her in the setup of the series in order to find peace and move on as a person. Indeed, such a path may be the only course of action open to America as a sustainable, long-term means of dealing with the cultural and governmental response to 9/11. But where Veronica differs from the American people post–9/11, and from Carlyle's assessment, is in the continual nature of her victimization by figures of authority. Veronica's vigilantism and vengeance-tinged justice is not only legitimized in the pilot episode and first season as a response to the collective events that shape our first impressions of Veronica. Rather, this attitude is also legitimized on a weekly basis as Veronica is continually victimized in various ways.

The three tiers of social authority which operate in Veronica's life serve

to illustrate the relationship between her continual victimization and her continual pursuit of her own brand of justice. The first level is the conventional authority of law enforcement and the criminal justice system, which plays the largest role in establishing and demonstrating her vigilante justice. This entity is the most corrupt, with the most serious consequences for Veronica, and it is the one she cares the least about hurting in her pursuit of true justice. The second tier is the political/governmental authority in Neptune. This form of authority also exerts significant impact on justice in Neptune and for Veronica, and it is important because of Veronica's desire to believe in the system, even as she is repeatedly failed by it. The third tier is found in Veronica's primary social environment — school. This tier has two layers: the first is composed of school officials who shift between traditional authority figures who fail Veronica and individuals who turn to Veronica as a peer, requesting her assistance; and the second is made up by other students who are Veronica's peers and who also shift between making Veronica a victim and enlisting her aid when they are in turn victimized by an unfailingly unjust social structure.

The first tier of social authority is the one that has most obviously and egregiously failed Veronica: the law enforcement in Neptune, as embodied by Sheriff Lamb, the man who took Keith Mars' position as sheriff after Keith was recalled from office during the Lilly Kane murder investigation.[3] Although Lamb is obviously insecure in his position, belittling Keith and harassing Veronica when he can, his response to Veronica's report of her sexual assault — suggesting she was filing a false report while simultaneously insinuating that she should be stronger by suggesting she "go see the wizard [and] ask for a little backbone" (Pilot) — clearly shows viewers why Veronica's anger and perception of him as a corrupt, ineffectual authority figure (and by extension, the rest of the sheriff's office) is accurate and justified. While Veronica happily takes advantage of any opportunity to expose corruption and inefficacy in the sheriff's office, the depths of law enforcement's failure of her — and everyone else in Neptune — is displayed by her actions in "Donut Run" (2.11). Veronica crafts a plan to help her first love Duncan escape the country with his infant daughter, in order to prevent the child's abusive maternal grandparents from gaining custody, and the lynch-pin of her plan relies on Lamb's arrogance and propensity for grandstanding. Because of her absolute faith that Lamb will act in a manner designed to advance his career, even — especially — at the cost of true justice, Veronica manipulates him into unwittingly smuggling Duncan over the border into Mexico (Lamb does so not realizing Duncan has stowed away in the trunk of his patrol car). Not only does Veronica thumb her nose at Lamb and the law enforcement authority he represents through her actions

here, she also makes Lamb an accomplice in enacting the justice Neptune's corrupt system is incapable of providing.

The series makes clear, however, that it is not just law enforcement but also the legal judiciary system that fails Veronica. The most obvious example here is the acquittal of Aaron Echolls when charged with Lilly Kane's murder ("Happy Go Lucky," 2.21); although his celebrity and community status undoubtedly contribute to the verdict, the prosecution's case begins to deteriorate during Veronica's testimony when the defense lawyer forces her to admit to having been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease, attacking her credibility through the old, underhanded, gendered victim-blaming tactic so often employed by rapists, domestic abusers and, apparently, movie stars who lock young women in refrigerators and set them on fire (i.e., a sexually active, single woman's integrity cannot be trusted). The defense lawyer then uses suggestions of Veronica's "promiscuity" to provoke her father into displaying anger while on the stand, further damaging the prosecution's case. Although using victims' past sexual history to discredit them is a violation of the Model Rules of Professional Conduct of the American Bar Association and often disallowed by judges in reality (and the defense lawyer's obtainment of Veronica's medical records is a direct violation of HIPPA laws), the *Veronica Mars*' writing team's choice to use this tactic reinforces how corrupt the legal system in Neptune is; what is reprehensible and often inadmissible in the real-life U.S. judicial system secures a murderer's freedom in Neptune.

In contrast, "One Angry Veronica" (2.10) shows Veronica working the judicial system and succeeding in directing it towards justice. In the episode, Veronica is called for jury duty and her co-jurors appoint her the jury forewoman as a "chance for her to learn about civic responsibility in the justice system." The irony, of course, is that it is Veronica who delivers a lesson in civic responsibility and justice when she convinces the other jurors to look past their prejudices that favor the rich, white defendants over their poor, Latina victim, as well as to resist the desire to complete their service quickly and simply (and at the expense of true justice). Aaron Echolls' acquittal and Veronica's success as jury forewoman seem to present contradictory messages about Neptune's legal system; in fact, the underlying reality in Neptune is that while the system may still be viable — and Veronica never fully loses her faith in its potential — the men and women who run the system are the source of its pervasive corruption. And when those in charge fail Veronica, and they do so spectacularly time and again, she feels no compunction in subverting them in an equally spectacular manner.

The second tier of authority is political/governmental. In the larger context of the setup of the show, political authority is held by the voters of Neptune and Balboa County (in which the unincorporated Neptune exists). While early episodes do not feature politicians, viewers know from Veronica's backstory that it was the voters that removed Keith from office in a special recall election when they did not like the direction of his investigation into Lilly Kane's murder, a decision that irrevocably altered the lives of members of the Mars family. His lower income means the Mars family must sell their house; the added financial strain contributes significantly to the dissolution of Keith's marriage to Veronica's mother and results in Lianne Mars' abandonment of her husband and daughter; subsequently, Keith's absence from the sheriff's office compounds the issue of Veronica seeking legal justice for her rape. Had his constituents not voted Keith out of office, Veronica would have been able to continue living in her house, her nuclear family would have been more likely to stay together, and she would not have found herself in the position to be victimized either by her rapist[4] or by Sheriff Lamb while attempting to report her rape.

However, once specific political figures are introduced into the series, they offer Veronica no more access to justice than the voters did. For example, one major figure who embodies political authority in Veronica's world is the ironically-named Woody Goodman, the mayor of Neptune. Although he provides many reasons throughout the course of the second season of the show for the audience to dislike him, there is one instance in particular in which Goodman's abuses of his authority result in injustice that directly impacts Veronica. In order to save his own political skin in "Look Who's Stalking" (2.20), Goodman intentionally smears Keith's name to create a political scandal that will prevent a ballot measure Goodman initiated from passing — an action Goodman is blackmailed into undertaking to prevent exposure for past crimes. While Goodman's action in response to the assistance Keith provides is a personal betrayal, the twisted cause-and-effect chain of events that leads to his blackmail and subsequent manipulation of the public demonstrates how far-reaching the corruption of the political system is. From this moment on, hurting Woody Goodman is of no consequence to Veronica. If he gets caught in the crossfire of her pursuit of justice for herself or her paying clientele, viewers understand that he had it coming.

In addition to this direct impact on Veronica, the conclusion to the second season's mystery of the bombed school bus reveals a complex web of corruption and injustice that again connects Goodman to Veronica. The mystery of Veronica's rape takes several twists in the first two seasons. Veronica's initial categorization of the event as rape occurs because she wakes up in a torn dress, missing her underwear, feeling the physical aftermath of experiencing sexual intercourse for the first time, and with no memory of the night before (Pilot).

Subsequently she learns that she slept (voluntarily) with her ex-boyfriend Duncan (who did not know she was drugged), and she redefines this pivotal event as consensual sex even though she never regains memory of the night ("A Trip to the Dentist," 1.21). Finally, though, she learns, through the diagnosis of the sexually transmitted disease, that she was exposed sexually to someone other than Duncan, someone who did in fact rape her while she was unconscious. The twist, however, is that her rapists' actions were not the result of malicious targeting of her specifically, as she first believes. Instead, her rapist is Cassidy "Beaver" Casablancas, a young man whose actions are motivated by his desire to prove his masculinity in the face of two factors: his older brother's taunts and past sexual abuse by his little league coach — who is, of course, none other than Woody Goodman ("Not Pictured," 2.22). Goodman's sexual abuse of the prepubescent baseball players in his care instigated a cycle that led to an abused young man attempting to overcome his shame and psychological trauma through sexually assaulting someone else. That Goodman could get away with his actions for so many years is a gross miscarriage of justice; further, that he could go on to be a much-loved town leader reflects the inherent corruption of Neptune. In such an environment, where injustices are perpetuated and corruption is seemingly rewarded, Veronica's continued commitment to vigilante justice is justifiable and even desirable.

The third tier of authority that victimizes Veronica exists in her primary social world(s): her school settings. The traditional authority figures in her school life are Vice Principal Clemmons (high school) and Dean O'Dell (college). Both of these men initially react to Veronica in the same manner as other social authority figures; while they do not treat her with the same contempt as Sheriff Lamb or engage in as corrupt behaviors as Mayor Goodman, both Clemmons and O'Dell first experience adversarial relationships with Veronica. For example, the pilot episode shows then–Vice Principal Clemmons targeting Veronica's locker during a "random" locker search (it is made clear that this search is neither random nor infrequent), suggesting, at a minimum, that his opinion of Veronica has been colored by her family's very public fall from grace. Likewise, O'Dell's first meeting with Veronica follows this pattern when he threatens to expel Veronica unless she reveals a confidential source for a story she wrote for the college newspaper ("Wichita Linebacker," 3.03).

However, both men come to realize that Veronica's unorthodox methods get results; this realization causes them to call upon Veronica for assistance. While each man's interactions with Veronica might suggest they are creating an alliance with Veronica and therefore representing a social authority interested in true justice, the truth is that neither man fully escapes the corruption

that permeates the larger social authorities of Neptune. Clemmons, especially, continually manipulates Veronica to help him, with a clear understanding on the part of all involved that, should their cover be blown, neither would admit to having been working with the other. Clemmons sometimes engages Veronica's investigative services by appealing to her better nature, but he also threatens her at times, with punishments ranging from suspension to the loss of her college scholarship. Typically, she gains nothing from these interactions, not even the monetary benefit her classmates are willing to give her. Dean O'Dell seems to be on a more promising trajectory than Clemmons, and his interactions with Veronica — after she makes clear what she has to offer by helping him — more closely approach the level of mutually beneficial allies. However, O'Dell's murder in "Spit and Eggs" (3.09) removes him from Veronica's world before he has the chance to fully reject the model of corrupt social authority in which he exists, perhaps suggesting that Neptune has no place for authority figures who may evolve out of corruption.

Outside of the traditional authority figures of Clemmons and O'Dell exists another layer of social authority in Veronica's school environments. Rather than specific individuals, this social authority is comprised of the peers and peer groups that represent authority in Veronica's world. In the world of Neptune High School, Veronica was once a part of the "09er" social group (comprised of students who reside in the wealthy zip code 90909), best friend to Lilly Kane and girlfriend to Duncan Kane — children of one of the wealthiest and most revered families in town. Lilly and Duncan's approval helped ease Veronica's entry into this social circle, despite her family's working-class status. Veronica is expelled from that heightened social status when Duncan dumps her shortly before his sister's death. The examples of how her social peers wrong Veronica after the pilot episode are systemic and numerous and are such a staple of the show that, in many cases, the individuals responsible aren't specifically named, although viewers understand that the actions are perpetrated by some portion of the 09er group. For instance, in "Like a Virgin" (1.8), 09er girls stuff Veronica's clothing into the toilet while she is showering after gym class, leaving the naked Veronica with no choice but to borrow Meg's cheerleading uniform. While the image of Veronica as a cheerleader is comical to viewers because it contradicts what we have come to expect of the character so far, as exemplified by her non-designer, non-conforming (seemingly non-expensive) preferences in clothing,[5] the girls' actions constitute a serious assault on Veronica's physical person and on her refusal to engage with their vision of "school spirit." Another example is found in the episode "Clash of the Tritons" (1.12), where two 09er boys who get in trouble for underage drinking blame Veronica for the fake IDs they made themselves; they are banking on

Veronica's lack of social standing and continual position as a victim to make her an easy target in the larger corrupt levels of social authority in Neptune.

Although the third season educational setting of Hearst College does not yield social ostracization for Veronica in the same manner of (petty) personal attacks, her forceful personality and commitment to seeking justice alternatively endear her to various social groups and make her suspect in her peers' eyes, ranging from the college equivalent of the 09er clique, the Greek system, to individuals. One of the most overt attacks by an individual peer is found in "Hi, Infidelity" (3.06), when the student teaching assistant for her introductory criminology course accuses her of plagiarism and falsifies the "proof" backing up his accusation. The other student, Timothy, is motivated by jealousy over Veronica's status as favored student by the course professor (a position Timothy previously had held), and his jealousy manifests in the childish personal attack reminiscent of Veronica's high school experiences with her peers. Given the continual assaults on Veronica's scholastic and social standing in both high school and college, the groups of students and her school administrators consistently position Veronica in the role of the victim. Because of this corruption and sustained victimization of Veronica, she maintains her commitment to justice and her acts of vengeance throughout the series.

Veronica's continual victimization at the hands of various tiers of social authority — the law, government/political institutions, school authority figures, and peer groups — means that she is continually in the position of victim. Her actions make small gains towards justice, but the system remains corrupt and injustices flourish. This is the significant point of divergence in the *Veronica Mars*/post–9/11 analogy. The attack that so altered American cultural consciousness was a singular event with multiple, complex actions taken in response. For Veronica, her rape is only a tipping point, an event significant enough to alter her understanding of the world and her role in an unjust society. In 2006, between *Veronica Mars*' second and third seasons and as support for the war and the then-current administration began to drop off, series' creator Rob Thomas wrote, "Like America, Veronica and I are at a crossroads" (148). What the third season clearly demonstrates is that Thomas recognized the necessity of Veronica maintaining her quest for justice, even — perhaps especially — when that quest is characterized by Veronica's desire to "get even." While Veronica's approach to life is far from uncomplicated and does come with significant cost at times (especially to her personal life, as witnessed by the implosion of her relationship with Logan in the third season, fueled in large part by her sustained cynicism and suspicion), we contend that *Veronica Mars* would have failed its feminist roots had Veronica's character developed in any other way. To give up on her anger, to cease to fight back or exercise

every talent available to her in order to protect herself and others from injustice, would perhaps make Veronica "nicer" as a softer, more traditionally feminine woman. But doing so would also undermine the strength of Veronica Mars, both the character and the series.

This is a message only reinforced in the episode that turned out to be the series' finale. The concluding episode, "The Bitch Is Back" (3.20), makes clear that Veronica's battle is far from over. Keith is once again running for the position of County Sheriff, but his name has been once more damaged by corrupt social power, appropriately and ironically in the person of Jake Kane, as Keith's investigation into Jake Kane specifically following Lilly's murder led to his recall from office. The series' final images show Veronica exiting a polling station on Election Day; Veronica's voting is one last attempt to normalize her world, to have her faith in the system restored. However, the closing shot is an image of disillusionment and disappointment reinforced by the title line of the song "It Never Rains in Southern California" playing as viewers see Veronica walking away into a gray, rainy day. The dismal image, in contrast with the lyrics proclaiming that what viewers see is something that "never" happens, makes clear Keith will not win the election. While Veronica can get tough and attempt to get even, the sad truth is that her ongoing victimization means she can never truly become "even"; the system and her society are too corrupt.

In the context, then, of Meg's suggestion that Veronica "rethink" her "get even" attitude and Carlyle's argument that *Veronica Mars* offers a model for healing by releasing one's anger, we suggest that the series makes clear that not only does Veronica maintain her defining characteristic but also that her character can develop in no other way. A Veronica who gives up her anger and thirst for justice, regardless of how tinged with vengeance that justice may be, is one who would be nothing more than an agency-less victim because she lives in a world wherein she is continually victimized. And Veronica Mars is anything but a passive victim. The choice of noir as the base genre for the series demands social corruption to some degree, and Veronica presents an attractive option for responding to such corruption. Like many of her small screen teen heroine peers, Veronica is witty and regularly overcomes much more powerful opponents, but she is also angry and vengeful — characteristics that are not traditionally feminine. In embracing and sustaining them, *Veronica Mars* offers a needed alternative model of feminist agency. Indeed, "the bitch is back" in the series finale because the system is still corrupt, and only by remaining vigilant in her efforts on behalf of justice will Veronica remain true to herself.

Notes

1. It is perhaps too simplistic to suggest that the events of September 11 are the sole cause of the United States' military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan following 2001; however, we contend that one of the direct results of 9/11 is a cultural desire for retributive action, and, without that desire, Americans as a whole would not have been as willing to pursue sustained foreign military action, especially in Iraq. Thus, for the purposes of this essay, we posit a causative link between 9/11 and subsequent military action as a means of attempting to "get even."

2. For more on the persecution of homosexuals during the McCarthy era, see David K. Johnson's *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).

3. In *Neptune Noir*, Rob Thomas suggests that more than simply coveting the sheriff's office prior to his appointment, Lamb actively helped exacerbate the high tensions in Neptune in an effort to discredit Keith and accelerate his own career advancement: "I've always believed that Lamb actually leaked information to the press during the original Lilly Kane investigation. The one thing Lamb has ever done successfully he did as deputy, and that was stab Keith in the back" (114).

4. This is the initial implication of the backstory and Veronica's understanding of it; viewers familiar with the true sequence of events the night of Veronica's rape later know the situation's complexities ultimately preclude this simple reading (the sequence of plot twists is detailed later in this essay). What is important for understanding her characterization when the series begins, however, is her understanding of the rape at that point; as Martaus argues, "It is from her [Veronica's] belief in the rape that her anger and cynicism emerge" (76).

5. Jennifer Gillan points out that certain viewers realize that some of Veronica's wardrobe is more expensive than it might seem.

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