

Position Paper For
"Teens, Tweens, and In-Betweens: The Legacy of the WB"
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Glen Oak, Sunnydale, Capeside, and Stars Hollow are a selection of fictional towns from The WB's most popular television shows. Programs such as *7th Heaven*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dawson's Creek* and *Gilmore Girls* relied heavily on the construction of a well-defined community. These towns were similar in that they were typically represented as safe and friendly small towns. Presented as fictional towns, they borrow from the American imaginary and often recall an imagined former era of relative tranquility. They are towns that exist alongside real locations and implicitly provide an alternative. Their artificiality is essential for the type of community they construct--a simulacrum of small town America, even as this notion is at times undermined as it is in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Most notable in this cycle of the WB dramas that emphasized setting was *Gilmore Girls*. The town of Stars Hollow was filmed on the WB's back-lot and this location choice enabled its hermetic world to develop fully. Not only does *Gilmore Girls* set its main characters against the backdrop of a very lively community, this community is made up of both secondary and tertiary characters. Stars Hollow itself is often a central concern for one of the program's subplots and this narrative is often driven by these peripheral characters. It is this feature, which *Gilmore Girls* finessed, that set the WB's programming apart from other dramas during this time.

With the end of the WB and its transformation into the CW, community-driven dramas became a rare occurrence. Instead, focus is now frequently placed upon characters' dramatic entanglements, including an emphasis on what is portrayed to be the real issues of adolescence. Even very location-specific programs such as Fox's *The O.C.* were not driven by quotidian details of Orange County in the way Stars Hollow became not only a site for character exchange, but also, because of its idiosyncrasies, became itself a character, at times actively driving the plot. The relationship that characters had with Stars Hollow helped define them. And while during much of the series, Rory (Alexis Bledel)--one of its protagonists--lived elsewhere, Stars Hollow served as a locus for this character but also as a point associated with familiar, idyllic, and simple living, a sort of refuge for her.

The principle interaction was often between character and town, which contrasts with the character and character model that persisted before and after the WB. Somewhat surprising is the recent, though still rare, reintroduction of adolescent dramas that highlight their small-town setting. Two programs that continue this lineage the most explicitly are ABC Family's *Bunheads* and The CW's *The Hart of Dixie*. Each program features a fictional town and in the case of *The Hart of Dixie*, The CW has gone to great lengths in order to construct this town in the public's imagination and now operates a website posing as the Bluebell Alabama's city webpage. *Bunheads*, created by Amy Sherman-Palladino, the creator of *Gilmore Girls*, is set in the fictional coastal town of Paradise, California. Paradise, thus far in this nascent series, functions in a similar way that Stars Hollow did. In the pilot episode the series' protagonist leaves her job in Las Vegas to live in Paradise with her new husband. In doing so she must adjust to a different atmosphere and pace of living. Much like *Gilmore Girls*, where real towns such as Hartford or New Haven are contrasted with the slower paced fictional town of Stars Hollow, Paradise is also seen as a reprieve from a certain geographic reality. Of course these fictional towns are not without their troubles, but they do embody a certain American ideal of what small town living should be.

In another mode, other programs such as ABC Family's *Pretty Little Liars* follow *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in the way these narratives tell of an augmented small town, one that has been disrupted in one way or another. In either case the role of this active community as expressed through their small towns underscores the importance of community and the characters' habitat upon the dramatic interaction of its primary characters.

It is my contention that within the adolescent drama genre, the role of communal drama deemphasizes and recontextualizes the personal drama that is rampant in the adolescent dramas outside the WB cycle and its reincarnates today. A wider perspective upon characters and their issues are afforded and in turn a realism is developed despite the idyllic nature of towns that exist within these shows. Secondly, character actions also bear a strong causal relationship to this world. It is often this relationship that forms much of the drama within these programs rather than just the personal interactions of primary

characters. Such a shift demonstrates that the legacy of the WB is slowly starting to reappear in today's adolescent dramas produced by a variety of studios.