

Introduction to *Queering the Whedonverses*:
Interrogating Whedon from a Multiplicity of Queer
Perspectives

Lorna Jowett and H  l  ne Frohard-Dourlent

[1] Why queer? Why now?

[2] Over the last 15 years, *Slayage: The Journal of Whedon Studies* and other publications have featured a range of writing and scholarship about queer issues, identity, and representations related to the Whedonverses, but there has not yet been a publication dedicated solely to queer Whedon studies. This special issue, therefore, seemed timely, if not overdue.

[3] As this issue was in its final stages of preparation, *The Wrap* published an article written by Kai Cole, who was married to Joss Whedon for 16 years. Cole stated that Whedon had had a series of affairs with women he worked with from the point he was working on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and she accused him of being a hypocrite for calling himself a feminist. This seems to be the final nail in the coffin of Whedon's public veneration as a feminist man producing female-friendly media, a veneration that could likely have benefitted from some nuance throughout his career (and did, in some circles).

Lorna Jowett is Reader in Television Studies at the University of Northampton, UK where she teaches horror, science fiction, and television, sometimes all at once. She is author of *Dancing With the Doctor: Gender Dimensions in the Doctor Who Universe* and *Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan*, co-author with Stacey Abbott of *TV Horror: Investigating The Dark Side of the Small Screen*, as well as co-editor of the collection *Time on TV*. She has published widely on television, film and popular culture, with a particular focus on genre and representation. Lorna is the vice-president / president-elect of the Whedon Studies Association.

H  l  ne Frohard-Dourlent received their Ph.D. and M.A. in Sociology at the University of British Columbia. H  l  ne's work focuses on gender- and sexuality-based inequities in the fields of education and health, as well as critical analyses of popular culture. Their research has been published most recently in *Sex Education*, *Nursing Inquiry*, *Canadian Review of Sociology* and *Sexualities*. H  l  ne's article on readers' reactions to the Buffy/Satsu storyline in the Season 8 *Buffy* comic books won the Whedon Studies Association's Mr. Pointy Award for Best Essay in 2012.

The fallout from Cole's article is yet to be determined, though it is worth pointing out that infidelity does not prevent someone from producing feminist work. Human beings often embody contradictions. It is also worth pointing out that not everyone who calls themselves a feminist might be one in the eyes of others, partly because there is no monolithic definition of what feminism is. Whedon scholarship has long debated Whedon's relationship to feminisms, and scholars within queer studies have been some of the most critical of his supposedly egalitarian and inclusive representations. At a point, then, where Whedon's personal life and professional reputation seem to be imploding, it is instructive to interrogate Whedon productions from a range of queer perspectives and explore their complexities.

[4] Other contexts also serve to frame the articles collected in this special edition. One is the contemporary culture of online interaction and social media, where marginalized groups may find safer spaces—some of them connected to specific fandoms—for meeting like-minded people and discussing their interests. These online spaces are also spaces where, alongside what some have dubbed “fourth-wave feminism,” a culture of critical readings of popular culture has thrived. (Fourth-wave feminism is summarised by Kristen Sollee on media site *Bustle* in 2015 as queer, sex-positive, trans* inclusive, anti-misandrist, body-positive, and digitally-driven; for a more academic overview, see Munro). Through blogs, online magazines, and social media, anyone can now draw attention to problematic representations in popular media, and many people do. Queer perspectives, strengthened by intersectional approaches, the increased visibility of gender diversity and trans rights, and hashtag-style labels establishing themselves as tropes (“dead lesbian syndrome” aka “bury your gays”) have often played a central part in these critiques. Indeed, despite what seems to be increased acceptance and visibility of queer identities in popular culture, oppression of queer groups and individuals is ongoing, and studies consistently show that inequality and lack of diversity are still rife in the media industries.

[5] In terms of the academy, a similar picture is evident: while universities and academics increasingly invest in the language of diversity and inclusion, a disturbing lack of diversity remains among senior administration and academic staff, in stark contrast to the

student body. Universities still function (within certain national and cultural limitations) as spaces for experimentation, and often—particularly for undergraduate students—reinvention, though, as might be expected, an atmosphere of inclusivity at some levels may be counteracted by resistance to real change at others. While “queer” now refers to a range of identities and the multiplicity of queer and trans identities is signalled by the terms “LGBTQ+” and “trans*”, nonetheless heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions are still deeply embedded and perhaps inherent in some academic disciplines.

[6] Whedon Studies is undeniably part of the academy, though it has itself often been misunderstood as more fannish than scholarly. Particularly during 2017, following Cole’s blog, criticism or condemnation of Whedon’s “feminism,” politics, or ideology has increased, and those invested in academic study of Whedon’s work have found themselves defending what they do even more than usual. Whedon Studies, a blanket term adopted after some debate, is not intended to suggest study of Whedon the individual, but of work generated by him, or by his close associates in the creative industries (Editor’s note: See the *Slayage* Submission Guidelines). Many Whedon scholars may be fans of some Whedon products or creations, but promoting Whedon or his work is not what the field is about. As academic study necessitates, robust critique has always been part of Whedon studies, and publications, blogs, conference papers, or public talks by scholars from a range of disciplines have interrogated the complexities of productions from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to *Dollhouse*, the role of Black Widow in the *Avengers* movies, and the leaked *Wonder Woman* film “script” written by Whedon during the long history of its production.

[7] Given all of these factors and contexts, the time is right for a concentrated examination of the Whedonverses from the perspective of queer theory and queer identities as they overlap but also differ, in all their complexity as they exist within an intersectional world. The papers in this special issue range across formats, platforms, and media, covering TV, film, and comics, as might be expected of contemporary transmedia content; they address and examine tropes, stereotypes, and the same old stories about queer identities; they offer an explicit focus on queer sex and sexualities; in some cases they provide subject-specific or pedagogical approaches; and ultimately all see queering as a discourse or position of

subversion or “troubling” normativity. All the articles included provide implicit, if not explicit, examination of queer bodies; examine audiences, reception, and consumption; and adopt perspectives drawn from queer studies, the Whedonverses, and the academy.

[8] In the first contribution, “Undead objects of a ‘queer gaze’: A Visual Approach to *Buffy*’s Vampires Using Lacan’s Extended RSI Model,” Marcus Recht reminds readers that *Buffy* is an “aesthetic object” with structures particular to the visual as well as a narratively, thematically, and ideologically rich text. Combining concepts from psychoanalytic theory and queer studies, Recht’s analysis of the way vampire characters Angel and Spike are visually presented and the way the ‘gaze’ is itself represented within the series in several key scenes builds on and develops Whedon scholarship by emphasising the visual construction of *Buffy*’s much-debated negotiation of gender and sexuality.

[9] Following Recht’s visual analysis, Anthony Stepniak argues that a specific character, the vampire Drusilla in the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, offers a unique way of understanding how queerness operates in the Whedonverses. “Actualizing Abjection: Drusilla, the Whedonverses’ Queen of Queerness” starts from the notion of the vampire as transgressive and develops close readings of particular episodes and scenes featuring Drusilla. Applying and synthesising perspectives from psychoanalysis, feminist, and queer theory, Stepniak argues that Drusilla is an “abject subject” who continually resists binary models, queering categories with a combination of seemingly contradictory characteristics.

[10] Taking a less positive stance, Steven Greenwood in “‘Life Isn’t a Story’: Xander, Andrew, and Queer Disavowal in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*” examines how series regular Xander and recurring character Andrew demonstrate particular tendencies in representing homoeroticism and the tensions it creates for nominally heterosexual male characters—and potentially for heterosexual viewers. Acknowledging debates about queerbaiting and gaps in *Buffy* scholarship, Greenwood unpacks some of the complexities inherent in queering heteronormativity on a mainstream, commercial medium like US network television.

[11] Sharon Sutherland and Rowan Meredith offer a multi-generational critical perspective on bisexuality in the Whedonverses and move into new territory with a reading of Leopold Fitz in

“Dream Queer: Does Fitz Offer Positive Bisexual Representation on *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*?” Drawing on audience responses as well as notions of “queerbaiting,” they analyse Fitz’s representation primarily via the dream sequence from season 2. Taking account of the limitations that still pressure network television in the twenty-first century, they place the scene and the character within the history of bisexual TV representation as well as within the Whedonverses more broadly, and argue that “dream queer” has become a trope in contemporary television, albeit one used less in drama than in other TV formats.

[12] In the second article to directly address bisexuality as a queer identity, Alex Liddell’s “Problematic Tropes of Bi Women in the Whedonverses” examines female sexuality, bi-coding, and sexual fluidity in a range of characters from the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series and comics, as well as analysing Inara Serra from TV’s *Firefly*. While Sutherland and Meredith argue that there are elements of positive representation in coding Fitz as bisexual, Liddell frames representations of female characters in the context of bi-phobia and bi-coding, unpacking the nuances and connotations of identifying or coding characters as bisexual and demonstrating how, consciously or otherwise, Whedonverse characters tend to maintain rather than subvert standard stereotypes.

[13] Building on previously published work on the *Buffy* comics, Lewis Call’s “‘Find What Warmth You Can’: Queer Sexualities in *Buffy* Season Eight through Ten Comic Books,” explores how the comics format can push boundaries in terms of representing multiple and varied sexualities in ways not possible on television. Arguing that the *Buffy* comics present an “erotic pluralism” that offers an alternative to heteronormativity and its privileges, Call is nevertheless mindful of their limitations as he examines the relationship between Willow and Aluywn, the gay identities of Billy and Andrew, the submissive role of Xander and the dominance of Buffy, and Giles’ age-defying sexuality.

[14] Media representations have a cultural impact that can be harnessed within the classroom. In “Queer Composition, Fantasizing Phlebotinum, and Worldmaking with the Whedonverse: A Course in Religious Studies Using Critical, Genre-based, and Technology-supplemented Pedagogical Methods,” Nathan Fredrickson provides an outline syllabus suited to liberal arts education in the U.S., but

adaptable to other systems. Emphasizing the powerful potential of using Whedonverse texts in religious studies, Fredrickson's exploration of Whedon and pedagogy situates critical reflection as a common element linking religious studies, queer approaches, and the Whedonverse representations while allowing students to discuss potentially personal issues as represented in entertaining formats at a critical distance. Thus, it makes a fascinating finale to this special issue, in that it seeks to encourage self-reflection as part of critical thinking, something many Whedonverse fans might be struggling with themselves.

[15] Of course, there is much that is not covered in this issue, especially when it comes to the more recent productions attributed to Whedon's vision. There is more work to be done on intersectional queer identities; subject specific approaches; industry and production angles (Whedonverse queer creators, for example); acting and performance; fandoms and audience, especially "poaching" or appropriation and social media use (such as via Tumblr); aesthetics; genre and genre-queering (comedy, musical, melodrama, horror, Gothic, action, science fiction, superheroes). We see this issue as continuing conversations about queerness in the Whedonverses and about queer perspectives on them, at a time when queer identities seem to be gaining ground and visibility in society and in the academy. Our hope is that this issue will inspire further debate and feed into an increasingly coherent and dynamic strand of queer perspectives on Whedon's work.¹

Works Cited

- Munro, Ealasaid. "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?" *PSA*. Web. N.d.
<<https://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/feminism-fourth-wave>>. Accessed July 2017.
- Sollee, Kristen. "6 Things to Know About 4th Wave Feminism."
Bustle, 30 October
2015.<<https://www.bustle.com/articles/119524-6-things-to-know-about-4th-wave-feminism>> . Web. Accessed July 2017.

Notes

¹ We would like to thank the peer reviewers who gave their valuable time generously to enhance this special edition, as well as our contributors for the range and depth of their articles.