

## **“A Very Specific Skill Set”: Joss Whedon’s Black Widow as Radical Icon of Third Wave Feminism**

Lewis Call

Joss Whedon’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is often read as an artifact of American feminism’s third wave (Karras 2002, Byers 2003, Pender 2004, Levine 2007). The strong, sexy, feminine Slayers embody third wave “Girlie” or “girl power” feminism. Yet Whedon’s *Avengers* seems anti-feminist. Critics accuse Whedon of tokenism (Scott 2012, Groen 2012), since the six-person Avengers team features just one woman: Natasha Romanov, the Black Widow.

But Black Widow is no token. She is an integral part of the Avengers, and a legitimate heir to *Buffy*’s third wave agenda. The Widow’s commitment to teamwork represents third wave forms of collective action which include both men and women (Karras 2002). In proper third wave fashion, the Widow advances her team’s agenda by making tactical use of her beauty, her sexuality and her apparent (but illusionary) feminine weakness.

Furthermore, Whedon’s Widow is a radical figure who goes beyond *Buffy*’s limited third wave perspective. Black Widow embodies the crucial third wave theory of intersectionality, which analyzes interlocking identities such as gender, ethnicity, and sexuality (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003). While *Buffy* lacked ethnic diversity (Byers 2003) until its final season (Pender 2004), Whedon’s Widow fulfills the third wave’s promise to promote multiethnic feminism. Scarlett Johansson, an actress of Belarusian Jewish descent, convincingly portrays the Russian Natasha Romanov. Romanov invokes her ethnicity by speaking Russian. She evokes alternative sexuality by switching effortlessly between dominance and submission (DS). She thus brings intersectional diversity to the Avengers.

While Whedon’s Slayers were self-aware “hot chicks with superpowers,” Whedon’s Widow is something more revolutionary: a strong, skillful, sexy woman *without* superpowers, who easily holds her own in a club of superpowered men. In a comic book culture which usually emphasizes the virtues of the superhuman, Whedon offers the radical notion that an ordinary woman can be a superhero.