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Frontier, Displacement, and Mobility

in Joss Whedon's *Firefly*

Emma Boone Nelson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Frontier, Displacement, and Mobility in Joss Whedon's *Firefly*

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*Firefly*, a television series created, written, and directed by Joss Whedon, premiered on the Fox network in 2002 and aired only eleven episodes before it was cancelled halfway through its first season. While it gained some on-air popularity, it was not until fans convinced Fox via online chatrooms to release the series on DVD that it gained posthumous acclaim. Whedon credits westerns as the inspiration for *Firefly* because frontier characters tend to be natural, flawed, complex human beings who question universal truths through widely recognized motifs of classic westerns.

In a February 17, 2011 *Entertainment Weekly* interview, *Firefly* actor Nathan Fillion stated that if he won the lottery, he would buy the rights to *Firefly*, inadvertently rallying fans to bring back the series that was cancelled almost a decade before, mirroring the cowboy culture that *Firefly* emulates of marginalized individuals fighting for a cause. Despite its science fiction and space motifs, *Firefly* is no different from classic westerns in blending legend and reality, reinforcing the mixture of myth and fact that constitutes frontier ideology. *Firefly*, like the cowboy culture it represents, has become a cultural icon, romanticized because of its brief and nostalgic nature.

This paper will look at the enduring appeal of *Firefly* through western motifs of frontier, displacement, and mobility, considering why westerns lend themselves to continued nostalgia and reinvention in contemporary popular culture.

Keywords: *Firefly*, Joss Whedon, *Stagecoach*, western film, popular culture

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### Frontier, Displacement, and Mobility in Joss Whedon's *Firefly*

In a February 17, 2011 *Entertainment Weekly* interview, actor Nathan Fillion stated, "If I got \$300 million from the California Lottery, the first thing I would do is buy the rights to *Firefly*, make it on my own, and distribute it on the Internet" (Hibberd). Immediately the website HelpNathanBuyFirefly.com was created, followed by sites like unstoppablesignals.com and Facebook pages such as "Browncoat Redemption," rallying fans to bring back the series *Firefly*—a television show that was cancelled almost a decade before, halfway through its first season. The Big Damn Plan, as supporters called it, quickly raised over \$1,000,000, most of which fans later donated to charity when the plan was disavowed by creators of the series. Rarely has there been such a loyal, long-lasting following for such a short-lived program. Fans who call themselves "Browncoats," referring to the series' duster-wearing Independents who challenged "the system," mirror the cowboy culture that *Firefly* emulates, creating a lasting frontier mythos based on a brief, romanticized moment in time.

This paper will look at the enduring appeal of *Firefly* through western motifs of frontier, displacement, and mobility. John Lenihan's *Showdown: Confronting Modern America in the Western Film* asserts that the western genre has a proven "capacity for redefining America's mythic heritage in contemporary terms" (176), making a western the perfect backdrop for *Firefly*'s exploration of frontier ideals that lend themselves to continued nostalgia and reinvention. *Firefly* focuses on frontier figures living in what Christina Rowley's "Firefly/Serenity: Gendered Space and Gendered Bodies" calls a "comprehensively developed imaginary universe and 'back-story' . . . [that is] a richer and more fruitful text with which to engage" (321), suggesting that *Firefly*'s lasting appeal lies both in recognizable patterns of western films and in rich, engaging characters. *Firefly* has become a cultural icon to

marginalized people who, like cowboys themselves, hear and answer the call of the frontier as they emulate *Firefly* characters in fighting for a cause.

### ***Firefly*, Westerns, and Science Fiction**

*Firefly* premiered on the Fox network in 2002, airing only eleven episodes before cancellation. While it gained some on-air popularity, it wasn't until fans convinced Fox via online chatrooms to release the series on DVD that it gained posthumous acclaim. The 2003 DVD release won *Firefly* several awards and enabled a 2005 motion picture sequel, *Serenity*, that spent two weeks in top ten charts and grossed \$39 million worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Joseph Hill (Joss) Whedon—creator, writer, and director of *Firefly*—is a self-proclaimed humanist, feminist, atheist, existentialist, and fan of westerns—and all of these interests are apparent in his series. David Lavery and Cynthia Burkhead's *Joss Whedon Conversations* cites an interview in which Whedon credits westerns, particularly *The Searchers* and *Stagecoach*, as inspirations for *Firefly* because the films are “uncompromising” (82), especially in the sense that both of Ford's Wayne figures and Whedon's Mal are allowed to run their natural course. Sometimes they are right. Sometimes they are wrong. But each of them is uncompromising in being a natural, flawed, complex human being. Whedon's talent, according to Fillion, is in his ability to “twist story conventions into reality” (Hibberd), or question universal truths through widely-recognized motifs. In addition to *Firefly*, Whedon has written and created numerous comic books, short films, and television series, including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, which have all contributed to his cult status (associated with a fan-base that demonstrates an emotional connection to a piece or creator) within popular culture.

*Firefly* incorporates social functions of both westerns and science fiction, reinterpreting traditional characterizations and motifs into an adaptation, or what Christa Albrecht-Crane and

Dennis Cutchins' *Adaptations Studies* call "free translations or reworkings of texts into 'new languages'" (20) that rely on traditional tales for contemporary discussions. A recent iteration of a western/science fiction mix, *Cowboys and Aliens*, opened nationwide in July 2011, continuing a genre of films like *Star Wars* and television series like *Star Trek* and *Battlestar Gallactica* that have similarly blended science fiction and western elements to contrast society's nostalgic past and uncertain future in which traditional characters in a futuristic world "offer us resources with which to critique our own" (Rowley 318).<sup>2</sup> Despite science fiction elements, however, *Cowboys and Aliens* adheres closely to generic western conventions, identified by Jane Tomkins' *West of Everything*, as "the gunfight, the fistfight, the chase on horseback, the figure of the mounted horseman outlined against the sky, the saloon girl, the lonely landscape" (6). *Cowboys and Aliens*, like many westerns, also explores morally ambiguous characters. In one poignant scene a dying preacher tells Daniel Craig's amnesiac cowboy figure, "I've seen good men do bad things, and bad men do good things," alluding to commonly conflicted frontier figures.

*Cowboys and Aliens* is worth mentioning not only because of its thematic similarities to *Firefly*, but also because its director, Jon Favreau, states that the role of westerns is "to lay out characters that have a long way to go, and through overcoming their own inner demons they can then fight off . . . external demons" ("Favreau"). Like Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) and Stone's *Men to Match My Mountains* (1987), westerns are iterations of hero archetypes<sup>3</sup> who take literal and symbolic frontier journeys where, according to Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the hero's "departure into the land of trials represented only the beginning of the long and perilous path of initiatory conquests and moments of illumination" (97). A perilous journey of illumination is the essence of *Firefly*, a western/science fiction blend of flawed frontier characters, each defined by their individual heroic journey.

Campbell's simplified hero archetypes have been criticized by some scholars, most notably folklorist Alan Dundes whose "Folkloristics in the Twenty-First Century" (2004) calls Campbell an amateur, stating "I believe there is no single idea promulgated by amateurs that has done more harm to serious folklore study than the notion of archetype" (397). While Campbell's research and ideas are not without flaw, he makes an important argument that Homeric epics, literary quests, and legends all rely on a formula of "a hero [who] ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder . . . a decisive victory is won [and] the hero comes back from the mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (30). The familiarity of the cowboy epic to contemporary audiences suggests the timelessness of frontier characters overcoming internal and external obstacles in order to help humanity. *Firefly* relies on journey tropes common in westerns, but one of the ways that the series creates multi-dimensional characterizations is by having nine significant characters who all play the hero role in various ways and at various times throughout the series.

Complex character groups are a subgenre of the hero journey that are not new to *Firefly*. Group quests are replete in literature and film, allowing for a more in-depth look at humanity than is often revealed by an individual hero journey. In both Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939)—American examples of group character journeys—a mobile vessel acts as a microcosm of society when a group of dissimilar passengers find a human connection. Many critical readings of *Stagecoach* have established the roots of the film in Guy de Maupassant's short story, "Boule de Suif" (1880) which takes place during the Franco-Prussian War. Ten passengers attempt to flee a war torn city in a coach, learning to coexist despite their differences in lifestyle and beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Bret Harte's short story "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" (1869) forces a miscellaneous group of outcasts to band together for



survival in a snowed-in cabin where ultimately they become equal through death. *Firefly* likewise focuses on diverse characters who reflect larger social and human issues as they are confined to a mobile world, a spaceship, reminiscent of *Moby Dick*'s *Pequod* and *Stagecoach*'s horse-drawn coach.

*Firefly*'s mirroring of *Stagecoach* is perhaps its most obvious tie to classic westerns, especially as the series mimics Ford's diverse character group. *Firefly*'s protagonist, Captain Mal Reynolds, is the quintessential "cowboy," an honorable man in a dishonorable world; Zoe, his sidekick, is a loyal, intelligent warrior-woman; Inara as "companion" combines the stereotypes of the western prostitute and the educated gentlewoman; Kaylee is the western tradesman as *Serenity*'s mechanic; Wash provides comic relief and *Serenity*'s expert piloting; as the crew's gun hand, Jayne is the archetypal good guy/bad guy; River imitates the Indian captive of the old West, an innocent corrupted by the Alliance and forced to learn survival skills; as River's brother and the crew's doctor, Simon embodies the Easterner forced to move West; and Shepherd Book, the religious leader, provides context for moral and religious discussions with the crew. Each of the characters gives a nod to traditional frontier figures, but reinvents them in a futuristic context.

*Firefly*'s cosmic frontier replicates *Stagecoach*'s Old West, space acting as a macro-frontier of the open range, and each inhabited planet acting as a micro-frontier with traditional western motifs. The frontier becomes an essential backdrop for Whedon's characters because of its absence of societal constraints. In Whedon's frontier there is no law, allowing for fiercely independent characters; however, the lawlessness also means that there are no societal structures to rely on when things go horribly wrong—which they inevitably do in the Wild West. Additionally, Whedon's characters who fit traditional frontier profiles function as macro-representatives of western life, while *Firefly*'s format as a television series, allowing more

detailed back-stories of individual characters than can be obtained in standard-length westerns, acts as a microcosm, or deeper analysis of the individual. Fred Erisman's "*Stagecoach in Space*" suggests that in *Stagecoach* and *Firefly* "the journey undertaken by both sets of characters takes place within a distinctive context—a hostile environment offering little by way of support, and forcing them to turn inward for the resources they need to overcome its peril" (251). Figures central to frontier mythos—a doctor, a kind-hearted prostitute, a good-for-nothing gun-hand, and a morally ambiguous protagonist—distance themselves from traditional society to look for new opportunity in uncharted spaces. Mal is one example of a traditional archetype becoming contemporary as an evolved version of Owen Wister's cowboy figure from *The Virginian* (1902), often credited as the first western novel. Throughout the series, *Firefly*'s characters run from old ways of life toward new frontiers, mirroring Whedon as a director taking pieces of the traditional archetypes of western film toward new perspectives for contemporary television.

Additionally, frontier figures in *Firefly* question traditionally recognized portrayals of the Old West. For example, Owen Wister's *The Virginian* has been criticized for historical inaccuracies, yet many of the motifs he introduced have become integral to the genre, establishing, as David Dary's *Cowboy Culture* points out, "the gunfight between the hero and the villain as a western theme" (332) and "the stereotyped cowboy as young, handsome, courageous, soft-spoken, independent, and holding a high sense of honor" according to Lonny Taylor's *The American Cowboy* (71).<sup>5</sup> Theodore Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West* (1885-94) was similarly instrumental in perpetuating the image of the cowboy as Anglo-Saxon,<sup>6</sup> ignoring racial traditions of geographically diverse cowboys with jobs ranging from ranch hands, open rangers and trail herders.<sup>7</sup> White, well-mannered, and independent, cowboys have thus remained the archetypal western figure for novels and films. For example, Ford credits *The Virginian* as the inspiration

for the manners and morals of Ringo, John Wayne's *Stagecoach* character,<sup>8</sup> and Whedon cites Ringo as his inspiration for *Firefly*'s Malcolm Reynolds.<sup>9</sup> While these portrayals create problematic stereotypes that add to the blended history and myth of frontier legend, contemporary westerns like *Firefly* add racial and gendered diversification that helps to push beyond stereotypes and question traditional motifs of the Old West.

Other significant foundations for frontier heroes are implicit cowboy codes that dictate the moral compass of western figures, including those from *Firefly*. Phillip Snyder's "Cowboy Codes in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy" asserts that though frontier occupations have largely disappeared, "cowboy codes continue to assert their influence on contemporary American culture, literary and otherwise" (199). Codes have become a universal component of westerns, creating a sense of honor and accountability within the lawlessness of frontier lifestyle. For example, Michele Morris' *The Cowboy Life* establishes that a cowboy "keeps his word, never steals another man's wife, and never gives a horse too much work" (20) and Richard Slatta's *Cowboys of the Americas* states that "the average cowboy does not bother himself about religion" (227). Although westerns like Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and Leone's *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (1966) portray violent, self-serving gunfighters, classic westerns generally focus on cowboys who are, if not less violent, at least sympathetic with more inherent good than bad. Films like *Stagecoach*, *Hondo* (1953), and *The Searchers* launched John Wayne as the quintessential representation of cowboy codes. According to Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation*, audiences view Wayne "not as a player in cowboy pictures, but as an authentic representative of the Old West" (513). Cowboy codes reflect the ambiguity central to western figures who may not hesitate to shoot a man but would never consider "cussing another man's dog" (Morris 20), further blending myth-historic referents of frontier figures.

*Firefly*'s ideology pulls from cowboy figures like the Virginian and John Wayne who, according to Brian Ireland's "Errand into the Wilderness," "offer simple explanations to complex problems [and] deliver justice immediately" (505). Whedon's blend of western and science fiction motifs focus on futuristic problems solved through codes of the Old West, signifying the frontier as, what John White's *Westerns* calls, a "place within which we can imagine good triumphing, even if justice can be achieved only by a man taking the law into his own hands before fleeing [to] where it is still possible to live the 'American' Dream" (126). Whedon's futuristic frontier is bleak, but his characters find hope in the continued relevance of Old West ideals. Frontier, displacement, and mobility are central themes within *Firefly*, providing a better understanding of how the series has maintained a devoted fan-base for more than a decade, reminiscent of the short-lived and nostalgic culture of the western cowboy.

### **Frontier**

The cowboy era was a short-lived reality for North American cowboys who "thrived for only a couple of decades . . . [until] fencing, haying, windmills, motorized vehicles, the extension of railroads, the arrival of farmers and shepherds—all altered the face of the West" (Slatta 221). However, some of the strongest themes of American identity—from the masculine, freedom-loving cowboy to the rough, wide-open spaces of western landscapes, and to the "don't fence me in" mentality of exploration and discovery—surround frontier legends, ballads, artifacts, and folk heroes. Dary asserts that though "the golden age of the real cowboy in the American West was gone as the twentieth century dawned . . . a cowboy culture was glowing brightly in the minds of Americans . . . a blend of fact and imagination" (332), ensuring that though frontier culture was short-lived and romanticized, it has been one of the defining periods of American identity.

Politics are one indicator of pervasive cowboy mythos in American culture. Recent examples include 2008 presidential and vice presidential candidates John McCain and Sarah Palin who called themselves “mavericks” and “rogues,” alluding to cowboy nonconformists. 2012 presidential hopefuls Michele Bachman and Rick Perry similarly played on frontier ideals, Bachman stating that she “grew up with John Wayne’s America: proud to be an American, thrilled to be a patriot” (“Michele Bachman”), and Perry touting his work and family values while wearing a 10-gallon hat, chaps, and cowboy boots. In 2008 an Iranian parliamentary speaker accused Barack Obama of using rhetorical tools that “resemble those of old American cowboys” (“Iran Accuses”). John F. Kennedy Jr., Theodore Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, and others also focused on frontier ideals in politics, demonstrating that Americans tend to identify with themes of freedom, independence, and democracy found in westerns such as *Firefly*.

Set five-hundred years in the future, *Firefly* imagines a society that has depleted Earth’s resources and is attempting to transfer western ideals to the frontier of space. By using Old West motifs, Whedon effectively creates a sense of reality for viewers because, according to Bill Nichols’ *Ideology and the Image*, “perception depends on coding the world into iconic signs that can represent it within our mind” (11). As contemporary audiences relate to frontier themes inherent to their own politics and culture, *Firefly*’s frontier resonates with believability and belonging. Stuart Hall’s “Culture, the Media and the ‘Ideological Effect’” asserts that “there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code” (131), suggesting that society depends on signifiers, and when they are recognizable, viewers will find meaning. *Firefly* has successfully attracted a diverse audience by relying on westerns codes that are easily identified, but Whedon pushes the series a step further to create a shared understanding by giving traditional frontier motifs fresh perspectives for contemporary viewers.

Generic conventions as codes are essential to the recognition and perpetuation of motifs, but they also lead to one of the inherent problems of frontier culture: the difficulty in separating history and legend. Frederick Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893) and Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West* both argue that the Old West represents a set of frontier ideologies from which American character and values are derived.<sup>10</sup> Roosevelt, Turner, and others informed western literature and film by establishing the frontier as "a set of symbols that *constituted* an explanation of history. Its significance as a *mythic space* began to outweigh its importance as a real place" (Slotkin 61). Norman Foerster's *The Reinterpretation of American Literature* argues that four primary factors shaped the American identity—Puritan tradition, romanticism, realism, and the frontier spirit—all of which can be attributed to European influence, except for the frontier spirit which steadily grew as generations shifted increasingly westward, "sending back to the East currents of thought and feeling and power that in large measure determined the development of American democracy" (29). The stories and feelings surrounding the frontier ideal gradually replaced the reality of frontier lifestyle, creating the "ambiguous space between the myth and the reality" (Snyder 200), or mythic space, that has become prevalent in legends, literature, and films of the Old West.

Fiction has perpetuated blended myth and reality of frontier life since the 1800s. One example, William F. Cody (Buffalo Bill), became an icon of the frontier<sup>11</sup> in nineteenth-century dime store novels written by himself and ghostwriters Ned Buntline and Prentiss Ingraham. Bart McDowell's *The American Cowboy in Life and Legend* asserts that Cody was instrumental in establishing western motifs in fiction as his *Wild West Show* (1883-1913) toured America and Europe with "cowboys, Indians, horses, wagons, [and] guns" (197), glamorizing frontier life for audiences who had no concept of the real West. Similarly, Charles Portis' novel *True Grit* (1968)

and its later film adaptations (1969, 2010) blend legends of harsh frontier life—violent Indians, outlaw gangs, barroom fights—with tall tales and religion in the unlikely partnership between a one-eyed, trigger-happy drunkard and a pious, articulate, independent woman. Blended historic-myth referents in westerns also frame contemporary social issues: *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) questions sexual norms; television series *Walking Dead* (2010) implements cowboy codes in a post-apocalyptic, zombie-filled world; *Justified* (2010) explores Old West law enforcement tactics in the present-day South; and Cormack McCarthy novels like *Blood Meridian* (1985), the Border Trilogy (1992-98), and *No Country for Old Men* (2005) validate westerns as metaphors of humanity, war, and death in contemporary literature and film.

Western adaptations, including *Firefly*, tend to share “a hard-edged nostalgia for the cowboy past tinged with a persistent advocacy of cowboy virtues in the present” (Snyder 199), representing a longing for the Old West while contemplating contemporary meaning. Surfacing continually in literature and film, frontier ideologies of the New World (discovery of America), Westward Expansion (taming the hostile West), and the Final Frontier (expanding into space) attest to the lasting influence of frontier mythos. Ireland argues that the frontier “is a vast blank slate on which artists can paint their visions. Setting [*Firefly*] in a devastated landscape restores the danger that was once present” (504), the enormity and ruggedness adding to the blurred fact and fiction of westerns. A blending of reality and science fiction makes *Firefly* the ideal setting for questioning the mythic space of westerns through the lens of contemporary social concerns.

In addition to frontier as a setting, the landscape is essential to developing and revealing character. Turner argues that American identity is dependent on frontier idealism, stating:

to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics—that restless energy; dominant individualism, working for good and evil, and that

buoyancy and exuberance that comes from freedom—these are the traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (37)

Turner's claim that Americans are defined by frontier ideology speaks to the energetic, individualistic, freedom-loving figures portrayed in westerns. *Firefly* similarly creates strong characters whose "petty concerns are nothing compared to the majesty" of the frontier (Ireland 504), emphasizing the tension between civilization and the fringes of society. In Whedon's harsh frontier space, characters are either broken or defined.

One illustration of frontier identity in *Firefly* is the independent, "don't fence me in" mentality of the characters. In one instance, *Serenity*'s crew has transported a herd of cattle to an outlying planet where River talks soothingly to the cows, prompting the following conversation:

Jayne: Cattle on the ship three weeks, she don't go near 'em. Suddenly we're on Xinjiang and she got a drivin' need to commune with the beasts?

River: They weren't cows inside. Now they see sky they remember what they are.

Mal: Is it bad that what she said makes perfect sense to me? ("Safe")

Mal's empathy for cattle forgetting their identity in captivity relies on legends of cowboys at home in wide-open spaces of the frontier. Like pioneers of the Old West, Mal is drawn to what Jennifer McMahon's *The Philosophy of the Western* calls "the vague yet inexorable allure of a wild, untouched land, of terrain laden with golden opportunities" (1), relying on frontier characteristics of energy, independence, and self-discipline amidst the dangers of daily existence.

Whedon's characters personify frontier identity throughout the series; however, they also complicate frontier values by blurring the good versus evil paradigm of westerns. Mal, for example, is a cowboy figure but also a thief and an outcast, creating an ambiguous figure whose motives are at times unclear. His character is also defined by similarly ambiguous enemies who



illustrate, as Snyder suggests, that “the quality of the western self depends on the quality of the adversaries it successfully engages” (215). Like Mal, Jayne Cobb is a conflicted character who, as the archetypal reckless gun-hand, is compared to “a trained ape without the training” (“Jaynestown”). Alex Bledsoe’s “Mal Contents” suggests that “Jayne is Mal writ large and crude, with all his sociopath tendencies given free reign. Mal will kill strangers with no regrets; Jayne will kill anybody with no regrets” (100). However, several instances reveal Jayne’s softer side: in the episode “Serenity,” he huddles in a corner, afraid for injured Kaylee; he wears a sentimental hat knit by his mother; and in “War Stories” he says it is suicide to rescue Mal, but risks his life trying. Jayne’s feminized name, the antithesis of his masculinity, suggests more to the character than is initially apparent and illustrates the frontier character with a long way to go. Because characters like Mal and Jayne work outside absolutes, they accentuate complex human nature and suggest new ways to view the traditional cowboy “cult of toughness.”<sup>12</sup>

Frontier ideals are further contrasted by “the Alliance,” *Firefly*’s universal government that objectifies humans by promoting society over the individual and enforcing arbitrary laws on the frontier. The tension between society and frontier becomes complicated, however, because the Alliance also represents social and technological advancement. Mal sees the Alliance as a threat to his way of life, but according to Whedon, “sometimes he’s wrong—because sometimes the Alliance is America, this beautiful shining light of democracy” (Lavery 68). Mal sees only the negative aspects of society while characters like Inara and Shepherd are revered by society for their professions, and Simon would gladly return if given the chance. Some characters feel the pull toward progress while others feel threatened by society, creating a blurred line between the worth assigned to frontier and society.<sup>13</sup>

The evolution of frontier characters in literature and film and their continued role in society suggest possible reasons why Whedon chose to frame his characters as frontier rather than science fiction types. According to Rowley, *Firefly* contrasts similar western/science fiction blends like *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* because Whedon “wanted to tell the boring stories about Han Solo when he wasn’t involved with the Rebellion . . . mundane stories . . . in the spaces in between actions” (319). *Firefly*’s characters interact during jobs as well as at home on the ship, displaying human connection through action and inaction. Secondary figures central to westerns create similarly complex social interactions: Patience, the Belle Starr outlaw-type, repeatedly tries to cheat and kill Mal; Reavers, savages created by the Alliance, “rape [humans] to death, eat [their] flesh and sew [their] skins into clothing” (“Serenity”); Saffron seduces and cons the crew; and The Operative acts as Mal’s noble foe, an honorable man who, according to Jeffrey Bussolini’s “A Geopolitical Interpretation of Serenity,” “commits undemocratic acts in order to defend democracy” (150). Each frontier figure reveals human interactions and questions whether the end justifies any means. Whedon followed *Stagecoach* in creating a character-driven series focused on multi-dimensional western figures, but moved beyond Ford’s community to reach contemporary audiences outside of traditional western or science fiction viewers.

W. P. Webb’s *The Great Frontier* (1951) claims that “people are going to miss the frontier more than words can express. For four centuries they heard its call, listened to its promises, and bet their lives and fortunes on its outcome” (373). *Firefly* has found a way to recreate frontier nostalgia by exploring the space between reality and myth, suggesting that ambiguities of morality, gender, and power remain unanswered in both contemporary and futuristic societies. *Firefly*’s mythic space is similar to Buffalo Bill’s in that he was “aware that his representation of historical events was inaccurate, but he seems to have been sincere in his

belief that the Wild West offered something like a poetic truth in its representation of the frontier” (Slotkin 77). Frontier legends are ultimately about character development in American identity, and *Firefly*’s representation of poetic truths within a vast cosmic frontier is no different.

### **Displacement**

Many westerns portray the cowboy as a displaced figure who is at odds with organized society. Though social, political, economic, and religious displacement are romanticized through autonomous frontier figures who prefer solitude to civilization, contrasting “individualism with the collective blandness of the modern age that has made the cowboy obsolescent” (Lenihan 167), most characters are *forced* to disconnect from society. *Firefly*’s characters echo frontier figures living on the margins of society, but rather than romanticizing independence, Whedon complicates displacement in a vast frontier where not belonging is the rule rather than the exception, layering various western displacement motifs in a futuristic, dystopian world.

*Firefly*’s society, the Alliance, espouses ideals that contemporary viewers generally value such as cleanliness, order, non-violence, and progress, but the frontier communities suggest that understanding humanity lies outside of social relevance, political compliance, or economic security. Examples of *Firefly*’s displaced individuals include “Browncoat” insurgents ostracized after a war lost to the Alliance; impoverished miners, farmers, and other working-class citizens forced to eke out an existence from the harsh frontier; black market criminals who prey on other marginalized characters; the Reavers, epitomizing displacement, as failed Alliance experiments rejected from civilization as well as humanity; and The Operative, an Alliance worker who commits atrocities in hopes of a better world, who says to Mal, “there’s no place for me any more than there is for you” (*Serenity*). Displacement in *Firefly* mirrors Old West opportunity for

economic, social, and political new beginnings on the frontier, but also seems to suggest that there are more people displaced from society than there are that belong.

Social displacement is a common theme in westerns where characters, including *Firefly*'s Mal and *Stagecoach*'s Ringo, live on the fringes of a totalitarian system yet find human connection by adhering to their own codes of conduct. Both Mal and Ringo are lawless men who disdain society, but they are humanized to viewers through chivalry and self-awareness that is often higher than that of the socially accepted characters. One example of the outcast becoming the civilized occurs during a meal in *Stagecoach*. Ringo, an ex-con, pulls out a chair for Dallas, a prostitute, and sits beside her. Outraged that outcasts would sit beside their social superiors, Lucy and Hatfield move to the far end of the table. Ringo's reply, "I guess you can't break out of prison and into society in the same week" (*Stagecoach*), shows that he recognizes his estrangement from society. Although he adheres to social niceties like politeness to others and pulling chairs out for women, his past ensures that he cannot belong to that society.

Mal shows similar social consciousness at a ball in the episode "Shindig" as he dances with Inara. When Inara's client for the evening cuts in, insisting that he has paid for Inara's company, Mal punches him and is challenged to a duel. As Mal prepares to fight, Inara chides him for his hypocrisy in hitting someone who implies she is property, when Mal openly calls her a whore. Mal responds, "This duel is as a result of the rules of your society, not mine. You think following the rules will buy you a nice life, even if the rules make you a slave" ("Shindig"). Mal adheres to social conventions in defending Inara's honor, but refuses to overtly acknowledge the value given her by a society that uses her. Ringo and Mal have no place in society, yet their codes of honor dictate a higher conduct than what they perceive exists in society. Westerns, according to Patrick McGee's *Rethinking the Western*, often privilege the "individual action over

society and social responsibility” (33), but characters like Mal and Ringo complicate traditional motifs by subscribing to both individuality and social responsibility on their own terms and within their personal codes of conduct.<sup>14</sup>

Mal’s displacement is also evident in his odd jobs, often as a thief and black market dealer, which work against society to provide for him and his crew. *Firefly*’s first aired episode establishes the moral ambiguity of the crew when Mal states, “Ladies and menfolk, we have ourselves a job. Got us some crime to be done” (“Train Job”). Whedon expertly blends westerns and science fiction as Jayne is lowered from a hovering spacecraft onto a moving train, pulling stolen goods into the sky. However, learning that the crates contain medication for impoverished mining families, Mal returns the supplies and the money he had received for the job. The sheriff, evoking frontier law as higher than legal justice, says “a man can get a job, he might not look too close at what that job is. But a man learns the details of a situation like ours, well, then he has a choice.” Mal responds simply, “I don’t believe he does” (“Train Job”). Mal’s lawlessness displaces him from society, but his cowboy codes forbid victimizing innocent people.

Former military men on the frontier, a common form of political displacement in westerns, are reflected in Mal’s background as a “Browncoat” rebel who fought against the Alliance in a civil war, hearkening to westerns such as Ford’s *Fort Apache* (1948) and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), Farrow’s *Hondo* (1953), and Lowry’s *Last Stand at Saber River* (1997). Similar to *The Searchers* in which Ethan Edwards returns to the frontier after fighting as a Confederate soldier, *Firefly* explores ex-cavalry men looking for social and economic opportunities on the fringes of the society that they fought against and lost. Reminiscent of western figures after America’s Civil War, Mal becomes an outlaw, changing his tactics but not eliminating his battle against oppression. Mal’s displacement is illustrated in his military history,

his choice of employment, and in his similarities to men like *The Operative*, suggesting that although he has the potential to find himself a secure place within society, Mal chooses his personal belief system over political belonging in the Alliance's Unification.

Displaced characters struggling to survive beyond reach of the Alliance populate the frontier, but two that paradoxically illustrate social, political, economic, and religious displacement most distinctly are Simon and River Tam, a well-educated, affluent sibling pair who belong neither in society nor on the frontier. Simon Tam mirrors *Stagecoach*'s Doc Boone who, Michael Cronin's *Translation Goes to the Movies* says, "finds himself in the space between the social classes" (37) as a highly respected doctor whose education, manners, and sense of propriety are out of place on the frontier even though his lifestyle has displaced him from society. As a fugitive who cannot re-enter civilization, Simon "painfully cling[s] to the conventional notions of gendered decorum and etiquette with which he has been raised . . . conventions considered snobbish and rude on the Outer Rim of space," (92) according to Susan Sutherland's "Dystopia in Joss Whedon's *Firefly/Serenity*." Simon does not belong on the frontier, but remains to ensure his sister's freedom from the Alliance. He adheres closely to the morals of society and ethics of his profession, but occasionally breaks the law when he believes it is for the greater good. Simon's moral ambiguity is always selflessly motivated, emphasizing the mythic space between good and evil on the frontier.

Simon's sister, River, emphasizes the dehumanizing effects of society and technology, reflecting western captivity narratives which describe, according to Barry Grant's *John Ford's Stagecoach*, the "capture, the cruel march into the wilderness, the brutalities suffered while living among the Indians, and the eventual escape" (116). River becomes displaced from society when the Alliance leaves her physically and psychologically damaged, her captivity narrative

chronicled in the series through her fragmented thoughts and Simon's memories. River finds freedom on the frontier, apart from the society that represents her traumatic capture, captivity, and escape, suggesting that though her presence continually disrupts those around her, the emptiness of the frontier restores sanity stolen by society. Simon's social, political, economic, and religious ideals are out of place on the frontier, but River finds peace in its simplicity, displacing them both from society, family, and even the frontier.

Religious displacement is prevalent in the frontier philosophy that, as Peter French's *Cowboy Metaphysics* states, the "Western is a world of work and death without God" (53). *Firefly*'s crew questions religion throughout, especially in the contrast between agnostic Mal and Shepherd Book, a preacher with a mysterious understanding of crime, sex, and humanity. By challenging western clichés that religious men are "enfeebled by the doctrines of feminized Christianity" (Tompkins 33) or "emasculated and left defenseless by the civilized Christian ideals they have been forced on them by women" (French 16), Shepherd acts as a catalyst for discussions of morality and religion, revealing and emphasizing the diversity of beliefs among the crew. A morally ambiguous character himself, Shepherd states at one point, "I've beaten a law man senseless, fallen in with criminals, watched the captain shoot the man I swore to protect. I'm not even sure if I think it was wrong" ("Serenity"). The spiritual conflicts mirror western characters displaced from organized religions, but *Firefly* also displaces the characters from the perceived Godlessness of frontier religion, suggesting a futuristic world in which religion and truth can be fluid for the individual as part of, or separate from, community.

Social, political, economic, and religious displacement in *Firefly* create a dismal picture of frontier, but Whedon successfully blends romanticized cowboy individualism with community to suggest the plausibility of maintaining autonomy *within* society. According to Lorna Jowett's

“Back to the Future,” the Alliance represents society’s “sterilization, alienation, and artificial control” and the frontier evokes “intimacy, authenticity and freedom” (102). Distance from the Alliance while living as a frontier community indicates that *Firefly*’s crew is able to avoid dehumanizing effects of society while still finding connections with humanity, mirroring group journeys like those in “Boule de Suif,” *Moby Dick*, and *Stagecoach* that similarly explore the balance between isolation and maintaining a sense of belonging.

Frontier groups that balance society and isolation—often referred to as “Fordian Communities” because of films like *Stagecoach* and *Fort Apache* that illustrate Ford’s focus on unified, emergent societies—explore individualism within a framework of community rather than rejecting society outright. McGee suggests that “transformation of social consciousness necessarily involves some turning inward and alienation from the socius as it currently exists” (33), an autonomy that is evident in many westerns. However Fordian communities, like the one in *Firefly*, explore the coexistence of society and individuality through characters like Inara and Shepherd who are valued as moral, social, and economic assets within society, but choose to remain with *Serenity* on the frontier. Others in the crew avoid society but find meaning within their group, suggesting the importance of balancing society and isolation.

Erisman suggests that while Ford may have created the Fordian Community, it is Whedon’s *Firefly* that perfects it: “within the isolated confines of the ship, the crew and the captain coalesce into a distinctive family group . . . that strengthens all its members in its functioning” (256). An example of their coalescence occurs when Mal rescues Simon and River from an angry mob despite previous quarrels over the trouble the sibling pair has caused the crew. Upon returning to the ship, the following conversation takes place:



Simon: Captain, why did you come back for us?

Mal: You're on my crew.

Simon: Yeah, but you don't even like me. Why'd you come back?

Mal: You're on my crew. Why are we still talking about this? (“Safe”)

Mal, a fiercely independent, cynical frontier figure who is derisive of society, nevertheless has created a familial bond with the crew of *Serenity*. Throughout the series a pervasive image of a lone spaceship drifting through never-ending blackness is superimposed with scenes of warmth and interaction inside *Serenity*, providing a sense of community that separates the crew from the Reavers and other dark figures who roam alone in the dark wilderness of space.

Displacement makes for a compelling context for Whedon fans as a marginalized group displaced from mainstream society because they are viewed, by themselves and others, as eccentric and nonconformist. Distrust of society is part of western mythos that romanticizes independence by focusing on “the risk of life and limb [as] a high but necessary price to pay for refusing to submit to the stale confines of modern society” (Lenihan 168). Historically, however, displacement never existed as literature and film suggest. For example, 1960s westerns were notoriously “critical in their vision of society, pessimistic about reform, and accepting of personal violence as an alternative” (White 161), but in a romanticized context of the cowboy era that had not existed for decades, if ever. *Firefly* is innovative in its attempt to incorporate westerns’ wary pessimism of society while implementing alternative communities in which individuals rely on each other for survival, suggesting that although organized society might not be the answer, neither is absolute isolation. Displacement is central to western films that often “end on an isolationist note” (Slotkin 292), portraying solitude as an inexorable piece of frontier identity when in reality, as Snyder argues, on the frontier “individual survival, instead of being

opposed to hospitality, becomes dependent on it” (221). Thus, *Firefly* shows that maintaining community is essential to strengthening the individual because without it, even in contemporary culture, displacement becomes exile. Similarly, without movement, both literally and figuratively within the frontier, displacement becomes death.

### **Mobility**

Because displacement is central to frontier identity and present-day American society, it must follow that displaced individuals rely on mobility to find connection and subsistence. The very nature of the “American Dream” of individual prosperity relies on fluidity of culture especially as it pertains to society, economics, identity, and gender. As America moves further away from its former dependence on small towns, extended families, personal exchanges, and farming communities and increasingly toward a cowboy-type lifestyle of transience and autonomy, many living independent of family, society, religion, and face-to-face commerce, it makes sense that the nostalgia of western films would make a resurgence in contemporary culture. Nostalgia for community on the frontier also suggests one reason why *Firefly*, a series cancelled in 2002, is still relevant to twenty-first century viewers who are often displaced in some form and identify with the series’ lone individuals who find belonging through mobility.

Because displaced characters in westerns are often separated from society and progress, mobility becomes an essential motif of frontier independence in its physical forms, but in the case of *Firefly*, in social, economic, and gendered mobility as well. Throughout western film and culture are variations of a “don’t fence me in” theme, perpetuating myths of a semi-nomadic cowboy, maverick, and gunfighter. Hedges’ *Last Buckaroo* (1995) and versions of Shaefer’s *Monte Walsh* (1963, 2004), for example, portray cowboys who move unfettered literally across the frontier and figuratively within society. For Mal and his crew, freedom and survival are

dependent upon their transportation: a “Firefly” vessel named *Serenity*, an old, rusty spacecraft resembling the shape and lighted abdomen of a firefly insect, starkly contrasting the shiny, streamlined ships of the Alliance. Unlike other displaced individuals in the series, *Serenity* enables the crew freedom to pursue economic autonomy and distance from society’s oppression. Akin to horses that “express a need for connection to nature, to the wild” (Tompkins 93), *Serenity* mimics the bond between cowboy and horse in establishing “a working partnership that makes possible the safe and successful execution of the fatiguing and sometimes dangerous vocational pursuits” (Snyder 211). Whedon personifies *Serenity* as a “she” and calls her the tenth character in the series, recreating the cowboy/horse dynamic that provides Mal independence, Inara self-employment, and River and Simon escape.

*Serenity*, named for the Independents’ final battle against the Alliance at Serenity Valley, represents the value Mal places on mobility. When he shows Zoe the outdated spaceship in need of extensive repairs, she derisively calls it a death-trap, and the following conversation ensues:

Mal: Don’t think about what she is; think about what she could be.

Zoe: What’s that sir?

Mal: Freedom. (“Out of Gas”)

As a character, *Serenity* is also marginalized, referred to derogatively throughout the series and called a vessel for “low life vultures” by the Alliance (“Serenity”), but to Mal she represents the promise of freedom, the battles he has fought, and the security of home. Nancy Warfield’s *The Structure of John Ford’s Stagecoach* says of *Stagecoach* that “the coach is the star of the film—it is set apart, it moves, the camera is focused upon it through most of the movie” (3). *Serenity* is likewise a star with a distinctive personality and purpose in the series,<sup>15</sup> enabling autonomous movement of the crew through their literal and symbolic frontier journey.

In addition to transportation, *Serenity* also provides a home for the crew. Individuals personalize each bunk room, the crew bonds over shared meals in the ship's kitchen, and in the cargo-hold they make group decisions or play impromptu games. Contrasting the sterility of the Alliance ships, *Serenity*'s familial dynamic illustrates the disparity between the harsh atmosphere outside and the energy within. *Serenity* becomes a microcosm of the frontier ideal in which outlying communities are the place "where real human development takes place because there people are forced to engage with physicality" (Jowett 106). Because *Serenity* mobilizes the crew, the economic and social needs of the individual and group are met as the harsh environment creates and reveals each character at home in their transitional space.

Whedon's reinvention of frontier class and gender roles is also central to mobility, questioning westerns in which "the class system correlates with gender hierarchy; the feminine is identified with lack of power and physical force, and those elements at the bottom or on the margins of society are either feminine or subject to feminization" (McGee 42). By feminizing *Serenity*, the source of movement and progress, and inverting gendered conventions to create female characters with male roles and feminized male characters, Whedon creates what David Magill's "I Aim to Misbehave" calls a "progressive, justice-based vision of masculinity for men and women" (86). *Firefly* subverts traditional western patriarchy and static gender roles by creating fluidity for characters that have historically been portrayed through unattainable masculinity or femininity only as wife and mother or prostitute.<sup>16</sup> For example, the women of the crew include the greatest fighter, the best mechanic, a respected ambassador, and an intuitive intellect. The men include a rogue with the feminized name "Jayne," a pilot unashamedly loyal and subservient to his wife, and a doctor in the traditionally female role as healer. *Firefly* disregards social expectations and resonates with contemporary audiences by offering, what

Lenihan calls, “hope for the preservation of traditional frontier values in spite of the certain, undesirable accompaniments to civilization” (173) like destructive gender labels. Whedon empowers *Firefly*’s characters by questioning flawed gender perspectives that persist into futuristic societies.

*Firefly* significantly contrasts *Stagecoach* and other westerns that embody static gender roles. Howard Movshovitz’s “The Still Point” claims that women within *Stagecoach* “constitute the powerful force of stillness . . . of civilization amidst wilderness” (71), representing women in westerns who expect cowboy figures to settle down and renounce the movement they usually represent. According to Movshovitz, the clichéd motif of the cowboy “riding off into the sunset” takes place *after* the action as the end of the film, preserving the image of cowboy mobility in contrast to women whose limited movement necessitates that to “retain their status as ‘good women,’ [they] must soon sit down again” (71). Thus, westerns often restrict female movement and its implied immobilization of the cowboy figure. In Whedon’s western, however, *Serenity* mobilizes women and men equally, undermining *Stagecoach* and other westerns that glamorize movement for men and stillness for women. One example is Zoe, Mal’s loyal sidekick, who is a strong, intelligent warrior who is treated as the captain’s equal. Her masculine-coded abilities complicate westerns where “women are typically mistreated . . . and regarded as interlopers who threaten male bonding” (Ireland 510). Always an active agent, Zoe refers to herself and Mal as “big damn heroes” (“Safe”), placing them on equal ground as archetypal cowboy figures.

Additionally, Zoe’s reserved nature contrasts women in westerns whose “solutions to their problems are to be had by talking things out” (French 32), establishing her character as the quintessential quiet brooder, a woman of action rather than words. In the episode, “Our Mrs. Reynolds,” Zoe plays the cowboy when the crew awaits an ambush. Jayne drives the wagon and

Mal sits beside him in a dress while Zoe hides with a sniper rifle. Afterwards Inara says, “explain to me again why Zoe wasn't in the dress?” Mal responds, “Tactics, woman. Needed her in the back.” Because Zoe fills the role of warrior, Mal assumes the needed female role. Zoe’s active role as protector and provider throughout the series undermines the exclusivity of warrior and cowboy labels that often present positive traits as masculine and negative qualities as feminine.

Rather than relying on simple role reversals, Zoe further complicates gender by adding femininity to the masculine landscape of frontier as, what Slotkin calls, a “powerful emotional and ideological counterweight to patriarchal authority” (338). For example, in “Shindig” the crew passes a shop where Kaylee becomes enamored with a ruffled pink dress, initiating the following conversation:

Zoe: If I'm going to wear a dress, I'd want something with some slink.

Wash: You want a slinky dress? I can buy you a slinky dress.

Jayne: I'll chip in.

Zoe: [*to Jayne*] I can hurt you.

Zoe’s femininity and sexuality seamlessly blend with her masculine abilities, creating wholeness in a fluidly gendered character. She allows her husband, as her equal and only life and sexual partner, to join the fantasy but forbids other males from objectifying her. Although Zoe is a cowboy-type, she equally values her female traits, suggesting that she is “neither defined solely by her fighting skills, nor by a ‘hyper-feminine’ spectacle of sexuality that must ‘compensate’ for her warrior characteristics” (Rowley 320). Zoe’s blended male and female roles, along with her literal action throughout, undermine westerns that force women to remain still.

Other female examples of gendered mobility include Inara, the gentlewoman and saloon girl blended into a “companion” who is refined, cultured, and educated, and Kaylee, *Firefly’s*

“heart of gold” mechanic. Whedon says that Inara represents the “Alliance and everything that’s good about it—enlightenment, education, self-possession, feminism’ (Rowley 321), and as a well-respected member of society she acts as the crew’s ambassador, questioning westerns that often displace prostitutes from society. Reminiscent of *Gunsmoke*’s Kitty, *Stagecoach*’s Dallas, or *Lonesome Dove*’s Lorena, Inara illustrates the prostitute’s value as a person, rather than glamorizing a profession in which, according to Jan MacKell’s *Brothels, Bordellos, and Bad Girls*, women “sold their own bodies and risked their lives simply in order to survive” (xiii). Though Rowley claims that Inara undermines feminism in a career “that places high value on artifice” (323), she is not a sexual slave. Inara is independent and pragmatic as she chooses her own clients, emphasizing her sexuality not only as a right but a respected profession in which she is the “only person on board *Serenity* who is able to make an honest (legal) living” (Rowley 322). Like Inara, Kaylee is sexually confident and feminine; however, where Inara is assertive and eloquent, Kaylee’s assertiveness, says Laura Beadling’s “Threat of the ‘Good Wife,’” “to defend those in her family, does not extend to her own needs” (61). Kaylee’s submissiveness, optimism, and pacifism are seen as female traits, complicating her masculine role as mechanic and creating a “complexly gendered character who cannot be adequately described via essentialist notions of masculine or feminine” (Beadling 61). Kaylee’s mechanical abilities ensure the crew’s physical mobility and her nurturing relationships provide emotional belonging, both essential to survival in a frontier environment. Zoe, Inara, and Kaylee illustrate fluid gender roles that emphasize female empowerment as it could exist within a patriarchal society.

Central to the physical mobility of *Serenity* is the pilot “Wash” who, like *Stagecoach*’s driver Buck, transports the group through dangerous situations. Both characters are working men

who have little interest in social hierarchies; and both act as comic relief from dark themes inherent to frontier lifestyle. Susan Swan's "Common Frontier Folk" asserts that Buck offers:

a picture of normal frontier folk, giving an underlying stability to a storyline dominated by the more flamboyant prostitutes, drunks, thieves, and gamblers.

[He] provides a dimension of reality . . . a point of identification for common folk.

Similarly, Wash offers little social commentary other than his loyalty to his wife and crew.

Though he has moments of bravado flying *Serenity* in dangerous situations and occasionally wielding a gun to defend the crew, ultimately he acts as a contrast to *Firefly*'s highly charged characters as "the funny one" ("Heart of Gold") and a contrast to cowboy mobility as he remains stationary in the cockpit while his wife and others fight the physical battles. By providing mobility without social commentary or overt masculinity, Wash's character suggests the diversity of displaced characters on the frontier and welcomes all who seek refuge from society.

Mobility is significant to *Firefly* characters as the frontier becomes a "space in which protagonists are tested and emerge as transformed," showing that "passage through the wilderness can either ennoble the travellers or reduce them to insignificance" (Ireland 520). Mal, "a man of honor in a den of thieves" (Magill 79), personifies frontier mythos of man pitted against nature as he and the crew maintain individual codes of honor, contrasting Reavers and other bandits who have lost all sense of humanity in the black abyss. Mobility through the frontier continually reveals the multi-dimensional characters of *Firefly* as they encounter obstacles that strengthen their sense of community and self, empowered rather than weakened by nature. Through physical, economic, and gendered mobility, Whedon's world uses western motifs to question contemporary social issues, ensuring continued relevance to fans of the series.



### **Life after *Firefly***

*Firefly* embodies frontier, displacement, and mobility through western motifs that seem as relevant and widely recognizable to contemporary audiences as they were to audiences in the 1950s. The series is not unique in its blending of science fiction and westerns, yet the attention to humor, character development, and cultural detail make it a television show that created enough mass appeal to generate a scenario in which *Firefly* fans fighting to save the series mirrors the actual content of marginalized characters fighting, what Stacey Abbot's "Can't Stop the Signal" calls, a "seemingly unwinnable war" (238). Though the open range lifestyle of the cowboy lasted only twenty years, from approximately 1866 to 1886, and the difficult life of the cowboy was largely idealized, decades later they remain icons of independence, manhood, and adventure. Westerns remain relevant to contemporary audiences because of the continued hope that "there has to be some better way for people to live" (Tompkins 233). While *Firefly* lacked the budget and mass audience of films like *Stagecoach* and *Cowboys and Aliens*, its cult status seems to suggest that "one of the attractions of watching [characters like] John Wayne in action is that we can momentarily see ourselves and gain some comforting imagined sense of being 'complete'" (White 98). Through *Firefly*'s characters audiences recognize themselves as imperfect, multi-dimensional characters with a long way to go.

Albrecht-Crane and Cutchins note that, "adaptations, rather than being handicapped by their movements away from the earlier text, are often enabled by those differences" (16), emphasizing that adaptations are not meant to duplicate an earlier work, but to act as an independent creation with new levels of meaning.<sup>17</sup> The value of reinventing classic westerns like *Firefly* is in giving close attention to generic conventions and frontier legends through a contemporary lens. For Whedon, that meant a traditional cattle drive becomes a herd of livestock

in a spaceship's hold; the clichéd train robbery is a high-tech heist; and tomahawk wielding "savages" are replaced by humans turned rabid, flesh eating beasts in a science experiment gone wrong. Ford, by contrast, has been looked at by critics such as Warfield as a "typical Hollywood product . . . [with a] formidable talent for assimilation" (iii). Ford was known for Realism<sup>18</sup> while Whedon specializes in cult classics about spaceships, vampires, and other fantastical elements, creating fan fiction that captures "slavish devotion."<sup>19</sup> However, both Ford and Whedon have a solid place in contemporary audiences as their films play on conventions that, like the Old West itself, have taken on a life of their own. To fans of *Firefly*, the rumor that the series will be resurrected is just as important as the reality that Fox has no interest in selling the rights and Whedon has no stated interest in taking the series further.

Adam Vary's "Joss Whedon: Master of Cult TV" suggests that though he "has never been at the helm of a bone-fide mainstream hit, Whedon has become a master of cult TV, fostering a small(ish) but rabidly loyal fan base" (2). Despite his history of attracting marginalized characters, one indicator of Whedon's appeal in popular culture is his ten year presence at Comic Con, the international convention that serves as an "index to the Next Big Thing in popular culture" (Reid 4), suggesting that he appeals to a variety of viewers by rewriting cultural artifacts to coalesce with popular culture.<sup>20</sup> Abbot argues that fans identify with *Firefly* characters "as culturally marginalized outsiders, a characteristic that often attracts cult audiences" (237), functioning as a series that, similar to *Cowboys and Aliens* and *Stagecoach*, focuses on diverse frontier archetypes. Rowley states that "the characters, stories and spaces of *Firefly* are 'low' politics, focusing on the daily lives of, and portrayed from the point of view of, a small group of people" (319). *Firefly*'s dynamic personalities, like those of

classic westerns, have a long way to go both physically and symbolically, reasserting the relevance of frontier archetypes to a new type of offbeat crowd.

Although *Firefly* has been cancelled for nearly a decade, it still maintains a large following of devoted fans by breathing new life into the aggressive, intellectual, and disciplined characteristics that thrive on the frontier.<sup>21</sup> Robert Zubrin's "The Significance of the Martian Frontier" argues that "without a frontier from which to breathe life, the spirit that gave rise to the progressive humanistic culture that America has offered to the world for the past several centuries is fading" (2), suggesting that a space frontier should be more than fodder for science fiction because, as Turner and Roosevelt suggest, frontier ideals are essential to American identity. Despite space motifs, *Firefly* is no different from classic westerns in blending legend and reality, reinforcing that "the myth of the American West quickly took on a life of its own. And while the historical reality to which it refers is all but lost or perhaps never existed, the myth of the American West is alive and well, and continues to command an abiding interest in the western" (McMahon 2). *Firefly*, like the cowboy culture it represents, has become a cultural icon, romanticized because of its brief and nostalgic nature.

## Notes

1. Numbers taken from boxofficemojo.com where they are broken down into international and domestic revenue per week. (“Serenity Movie”).
2. Christina Rowley discusses how science fiction illustrates that societies are historically constructed rather than natural or inevitable. For an in-depth discussion of how westerns and science fiction coalesce, see Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation*, especially pages 634-36.
3. Ties to western motifs are implied rather than explicitly stated in Campbell’s text.  
Interestingly, George Lucas has acknowledged a debt to Campbell in creating the *Star Wars* films.
4. The title, “Boule de Suif,” translates to “ball of fat,” the nickname of the prostitute character.  
For a plot summary and ties to *Stagecoach* see Grant’s *John Ford’s Stagecoach*.
5. According to Taylor, the 1902 publication of *The Virginian* marked the final stage in the evolution of the cowboy from western hero to national icon and entertainer.
6. For an extensive discussion of Roosevelt and race on the frontier, see Slotkin 42-51.
7. Dary’s *Cowboy Culture* looks historically at different races and occupations of cowboys.
8. Taylor’s *American Cowboy* provides an extensive look at Johnny Ringo. Warfield’s *Structure of Stagecoach* (app. 19) discusses Ringo as the inspiration for *Stagecoach*’s Ringo Kid.
9. When Whedon cast Fillion, he encouraged him to watch John Wayne films to study the mannerisms and conduct of Ringo Kid. (Lavery 68)
10. While Turner felt that the geographic frontier was coming to an end, Roosevelt felt that Americans needed to keep expanding old boundaries into new opportunities. For a comprehensive discussion on Roosevelt and Turner see Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation*.
11. See Bart MacDowell’s text for an extensive look at William F. Cody as a legendary figure.

12. See Slotkin's discussion of John Wayne and the cowboy "Cult of Toughness."
13. Lavery's discussion with Joss Whedon looks at how America is represented in many forms throughout the series.
14. *Firefly* combines Old West and Chinese cultures, creating a dominant society with the strengths of both American individualism and Asian awareness of society. Western films work well in blending Japanese Samurai and Chinese Kung Fu philosophies with similar cowboy codes. Examples include Hill's *Last Man Standing* (1996), a remake of Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961), and Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954), a Japanese film popular in America, that was remade into Sturges' *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). Kurosawa credits Ford with many of his motifs, indicating universality in western codes.
15. Screen-writer Dudley Nichols attributes *Stagecoach* to Ernest Haycox's "Stage to Lordsburg," a short story published in Collier's Magazine in 1937. Ford and Nichols focused on developing characters because "the characters in the story weren't well drawn, they were just outlines" (Warfield app. 16) representing themes like love, death, and class, reductions common to western storytelling.
16. *Adaptation Studies* is not specific to westerns, but draws interesting conclusions about adaptations in general that work well for the discussion of *Firefly* as a western.
17. Erickson's *The Modern Cowboy* suggests that women were scarce in the cowboy lifestyle because a single man was always more desirable as an employee (24).
18. Ford won best director for *The Informer* which was a breakthrough film in realism/liberalism.
19. Whedon on the devotion of his fan base as "flattering and embarrassing" (Lavery 16, 37).
20. "Every society rewrites its history through its cultural artifacts" (White 172).
21. See Ireland's "Errand into the Wilderness," pg. 508, for distinct frontier characteristics.

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