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A New Frontier: Whedon Studies and *Firefly/Serenity*

[1] In 2006, *Slayage* coeditors David Lavery and Rhonda Wilcox quietly slipped a new phrase into the journal's submissions statement inviting essays on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*: the phrase was "and *Firefly/Serenity*." This special issue of *Slayage*, devoted to Joss Whedon's *Firefly* and *Serenity* (and edited by Rhonda Wilcox and Tanya Cochran), explores many aspects of the series and film, from the complications of aesthetics to the implications of sociology, from the meaning and social impact of the Reavers to Malcolm Reynolds as the archetypal Trickster-Shaman. We have assembled the issue both to highlight the growing scholarship on these particular Whedon texts and to preview similarly high caliber scholarship that will appear in the forthcoming (May 2008) edited collection *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier* (I.B. Tauris). Additionally, these essays contribute to the burgeoning field of television criticism, with special attention to Quality and Cult TV, and demonstrate how much cultural work these popular texts do, how much impact they have on audiences and, therefore, society. Though a short-lived series, one aired out of Whedon's intended order and limited to only fourteen episodes, *Firefly* is inspiring the kind of varied and rich scholarship associated with the study of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in *Buffy*'s first few seasons on air. We believe, as Michael Adams says of *Buffy* in his introduction to *Slayage* 5.4 (May 2006), that *Firefly* and its sequel film *Serenity*, "stand up to serious . . . inquiry of all kinds" (par. 1). This issue introduces some of the earliest academic work on these two visual texts; we expect there is much more to come.

[2] The story of this issue and *Investigating Firefly and Serenity* actually begins many years ago when Tanya first became interested in intersections between her graduate study of rhetoric and *The X-Files* (1993-2002); that is when she bought a copy of *Deny All Knowledge: Reading the X-Files* (Syracuse, 1996) and first came to read Rhonda's work (in a collection co-edited by David Lavery). Not too long after her purchase, Tanya attended her first professional conference, the annual meeting of the Popular Culture Association in the South. Rhonda was not only present at that meeting but was soon to be the association's president. After both Tanya and Rhonda were scheduled for the same panel at the National Popular Culture Association in 2000, the two formally met. It was the beginning of a hopefully long academic relationship and certainly a long friendship. So in April of 2006 at the national conference of the PCA, Tanya approached Rhonda with a proposal: "Wanna edit a collection on *Firefly* and *Serenity*? An academic collection isn't available, and if we don't do it, someone else will; it's just a matter of time." It was actually a crazy idea, since Rhonda was working on another collection and about to co-host the second *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverse (SC2) and Tanya had just started a full-time position as a first-year writing professor while still trying to write her dissertation. Rhonda tried to be wise; she gently said no to the proposal. But something happened between April and the few weeks leading up to SC2. Rhonda called and

took the plunge: “Let’s do it! Can we get a call for papers ready in ten days?” Since that time, we have been living and breathing *Firefly* and *Serenity*. Not a bad existence, but we are happy to be close to the end of the process. We began with over 150 proposals for the book, many more than we had expected. The elimination process was difficult and, in many cases, painful. As a result of our desire to both suggest what is coming in *Investigating Firefly and Serenity* and to share some of the best scholarly work on the series and film, we have assembled this issue. Some of the contributors contacted us because they had heard of our plans for the collection, and some we contacted separately; all of them are included because the word *contribution* is truly applicable to their work: they genuinely contribute to Whedon scholarship.

[3] Jes Battis’s “Captain Tightpants: *Firefly* and the Science Fiction Canon” attempts to place *Firefly* within the generic category of science fiction, while recognizing the variations on generic theme present in any Whedon text and recognizing that “the peculiar indefinability of SF as a genre is precisely what gives it such extraordinary qualities” (par. 1). He argues that “most SF programs . . . are already stuck in the Western genre—*Firefly* merely puts it out in the open” (par. 11). Nonetheless, he believes that *Firefly* derives from the more “fluid texts” of science fiction, particularly written texts. Using three episodes (“Serenity” 1001, “Out of Gas” 1008, and “Objects in Space,” 1014), Battis, the author of *Blood Relations: Chosen Families in Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel* (MacFarland, 2005), explores the idea that “*Firefly* is basically a story about finding home, which is also a ‘zone of possibility and impossibility’” (citing Landon Brooks on the fluidity of SF texts, par. 13). Those families are derived from the convincing humanity of their members: thus, *Firefly* is “really more a show about small moments than it is a show about train jobs and space ships” (par. 36).

[4] Rebecca Brown’s “Orientalism in *Firefly/Serenity*” argues that the series and movie can change how we think about “what it means to be colonial and imperial in a postcolonial, postimperial world” (par. 1). The article evaluates *Firefly/Serenity* in light of both science fiction’s attitude(s) towards, and the historical record(s) of, “civilizing missions” (par. 2). With careful, close analysis of the aesthetic elements of the text and, in particular, the character of Inara, she explores the complex subtleties of *Firefly/Serenity*. In moving from the civilizing missionaries of *Star Trek* to *Firefly/Serenity*, she believes, “We move from Said’s analysis of Europe’s complicity in the construction of the Orient to Chakrabarty’s call to shift the center from Europe to the margins” (par. 15). As always with Whedon, the meaning is more complex than it may at first seem. In the end, in *Firefly/Serenity*, “difference has not been ‘solved.’ Indeed it has been multiplied and made messy” (par. 25)—not a bad thing, in the eyes of many a *Firefly/Serenity* viewer.

[5] Agnes B. Curry’s “’We Don’t Say Indian’: On the Paradoxical Construction of the Reavers,” tackles the vexed subject of the Reavers as a representation of Native Americans. It is, in effect, a conversation with the essay by J. Douglas Rabb and J. Michael Richardson in *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*. With consideration for identitarian analysis, Curry reviews Whedon’s earlier presentations of Native Americans as well as the Reavers in both *Firefly* and *Serenity*. While acknowledging the evidence that demonstrates Whedon’s intentions are progressive, she nevertheless

argues that the effect of these presentations is problematic, constructing an image of Native Americans that is a "social unreality" (par. 5). Analyzing visual imagery and auditory cues, she bases her case in part on the cognitive psychology concept of mental schema which (citing Steve Thoma) "often operates automatically and without the subject's explicit awareness" (par. 11). She further argues that the visual "has enormous epistemological privilege" (par. 19) in its impact on the viewer, even in the writing-centered world of Whedon. As for the explanation in *Serenity* that "we," the civilized, created the Reavers (i.e., the idea of Native Americans as savages), Curry argues that the film presents this implication: "the peaceful ones laid down and died while the remainder are fit only for slaughter" (par. 39). She closes with a recognition of the power of genre: "In working with the Western genre [Whedon] was playing with fire of a peculiar sort" (par. 42).

[6] Mark Gelineau considers Native American elements of *Firefly/Serenity* in a very different fashion in "Coyote in the Black: The Evolution of Malcolm Reynolds the Trickster-Shaman." His essay illuminates the mythic nature of Serenity's captain, harking back to a "Cree Indian mythological figure," the Trickster character—an archetype used in other mythologies as well, but "widely applicable in Native American mythology" (par. 5). Captain Mal Reynolds fits the pattern of "mischievous pranks . . . protean nature . . . breaking of social rules and laws, and . . . marginalized status" (par. 5). Gelineau argues that Captain Mal gradually graduates from Trickster to Shaman, healer, through his actions in *Serenity*. And he reminds us that "for [Joseph] Campbell, the Shaman can heal because he has been wounded himself"; so, too, Mal (par. 6). He helps start the healing for not only River but also the larger society. When Mal, in *Serenity*, "aim[s] to misbehave," it is "the final, great trick of the Trickster-Shaman" (par. 36).

[7] Linda Jean Jencson"s "'Aiming to Misbehave': Role Modeling Political-Economic Conditions and Political Action in the Serenityverse" takes an anthropological perspective on what she calls Whedon's "*uber*theme" of "the right and wrong uses of power" (par. 1). It considers, as well, the real-world impact of Whedon's texts on women's human rights (especially via the organization Equality Now). Furthermore, it focuses on the fact that, unlike *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Firefly* shows a keen consciousness of "class (and colonialism)" in power relationships of political economy (par. 4). She parallels the Katrina experience with elements of *Firefly* and explains the application to Whedon's story of standard anthropological concepts such as the distribution of goods and negative reciprocity "in the brutal competition for scarce resources in *Firefly*" (par. 11). Or to put it another way: "Conquered people are hungry people," and we see this in both *Firefly* and our own world (par. 23). She contrasts this competition with the moral economy of the *Firefly* crew: "Even Jayne sends money home to his mother!" (par. 15). Jencson further explains the way *Firefly* demonstrates the anthropological concept of what is, in effect, the power of narrative to maintain the status quo: "pretty stories that convince the oppressed that the situation is natural, inevitable, ordained by God, or even good for them"—the stories of hegemony (par. 17). In *Firefly*, as in our world, those in the Core consume, while those on the periphery are poor: "the Core uses the global economy to extract cheap labor and valuable resources from the periphery" (par. 28). The Mudders show us the third world. But fans can

and do use “weapons of the weak” (citing James Scott, par. 38) for “small, everyday forms of resistance” (par. 39). And the revelation of information in *Serenity*—like the uses of information in our own lives—is even more important. Whether it should be termed “resistance or revolt,” Jencson argues that “the Whedon-Browncoat-Equality Now relationship takes science fiction to a whole new level: it makes sci-fi/fantasy a small, yet measurable locus of social action and social change with the potential for a whole lot more” (par. 53).

[8] We hope that this introduction provides both some background understanding and an indication of the depth and quality of the contributions in this special *Slayage* issue. We also hope this issue will encourage other scholars to focus (or continue to focus) on the works of Joss Whedon. There is still much to be considered; for example, there is little to no published work on Whedon’s graphic novels *Fray* and *Astonishing X-Men*, and we expect there will be much more to write about with the appearance of the major motion picture *Goners* and Whedon’s upcoming return to television with *Dollhouse*. To close, we thank the many, many writers who submitted to the original call for papers for our edited collection, the ones who will appear in the forthcoming book, and especially the authors who share their work here in this special issue. We take Hoban “Wash” Washburne a bit out of context (we think he would approve) to say that this particular field of Whedon studies promises scholarly abundance: “Yes. Yes, this a fertile land, and we will thrive” (“Serenity,” 1.1).