Messy Postcolonialism in Joss Whedon's *Firefly-Serenity* 'Verse

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"So Here's Us, On the Raggedy Edge": An Introduction to Postcolonialism in the 'Verse

2020 marks the eighteenth year since the release of *Firefly* (2002-2003) and the fifteenth year since the release of its follow-up film, *Serenity* (2005). Yet, over a decade after the *Firefly* franchise lived and presumably died, countless fans continue to carry on the legacy of these works. Undoubtedly, people gravitate toward *Firefly* and *Serenity* because these works comprise an extraordinarily nuanced universe that explores psychology, class, religion, and gender, among other topics. However, many fans seem most fond of a specific area of Whedon's work: his critique of neocolonial economics. It is no accident that, out of all the names that *Firefly* and *Serenity* fans could have adopted, they call themselves Browncoats—a reference to the soldiers who fought against the government's interference in the 'Verse's local economies.

The apparent magnetism of Whedon's neocolonial

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message conjures up ideas related to the field of postcolonial studies—comprised of a group of theories that, according to Lois Tyson, "seeks to understand the operations[—]politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically[—]of colonialist and anticolonialist ideologies" (398). In essence, to examine anything using the framework of postcolonialism is to seek evidence of colonialism's impact on the subject of study and to assess what the subject argues about the nature of colonization. In a 'Verse made up of literal colonies, postcolonialism seems a natural lens through which to examine Whedon's work. However, Whedon scholarship has thus far only explored the edges of postcolonial theory in relation to the 'Verse. Many scholars have analyzed the problematic treatment of race and culture in the 'Verse (both crucial components of postcolonial analysis), but none have specifically mapped out how such issues problematize the postcolonial messages in *Firefly* and *Serenity* at length. This essay seeks to bring existing race and culture scholarship to bear in the context of postcolonial analysis of the 'Verse.

Notably, the impetus to fill a gap in Whedon studies is only one reason why a postcolonial analysis of the 'Verse is crucial. More importantly, there is perhaps no better time in U.S. history to examine the *Firefly-Serenity* 'Verse through this specific theoretical lens. Current events in the U.S.—from the Black Lives Matter movement to the Supreme Court's affirmation of Native American rights to almost half of Oklahoma—are bringing the importance of postcolonialism to the fore. While the U.S. publicly analyzes and reckons with its own colonialist oppression, it is high time for *Firefly* and *Serenity* to follow suit given its importance and longevity as a piece of U.S. popular culture.

All of this suggests the question: can *Firefly* and *Serenity* be considered anticolonial texts, or do they serve to reinforce colonialist narratives? This can only be answered by plunging into the messiness of the *Firefly-Serenity* 'Verse's postcolonialism.[1] This essay will examine Whedon's critique of neocolonial economics—the strongest indicator of anticolonialism in the 'Verse—alongside other underlying postcolonial elements in these texts—namely cultural and racial colonization. Answers to the aforementioned question will be explored by discussing the importance of political, postcolonial analysis in U.S. pop culture studies today.

"Couldn't Let Us Profit. Wouldn't Be Civilized": Neocolonial Economics in the 'Verse

In the highly politicized 'Verse of *Firefly* and *Serenity*, Whedon creates a complex universe that exhibits the power dynamics of economic exploitation. Exploring this type of exploitation is, by nature, a postcolonial act, so *Firefly* and *Serenity* are already taking a step in an anticolonial direction. A detailed view of how Whedon crafts the 'Verse's colonizing economy and his critique thereof is crucial for this analysis.

Notably, the physical and economic geographies of the 'Verse are practically singular. The money and power of the 'Verse are seated at the center of the star system, separated from Reaverspace by cozy layers of peripheral planets, suns, and moons. From that Core outward, the more financially disadvantaged a person is, the farther that person is pushed out into unsettled territory and pushed toward the unpredictable assaults of the Reavers. Even a cursory glance at

a basic map of the 'Verse (see figure 1) shows these class divisions:

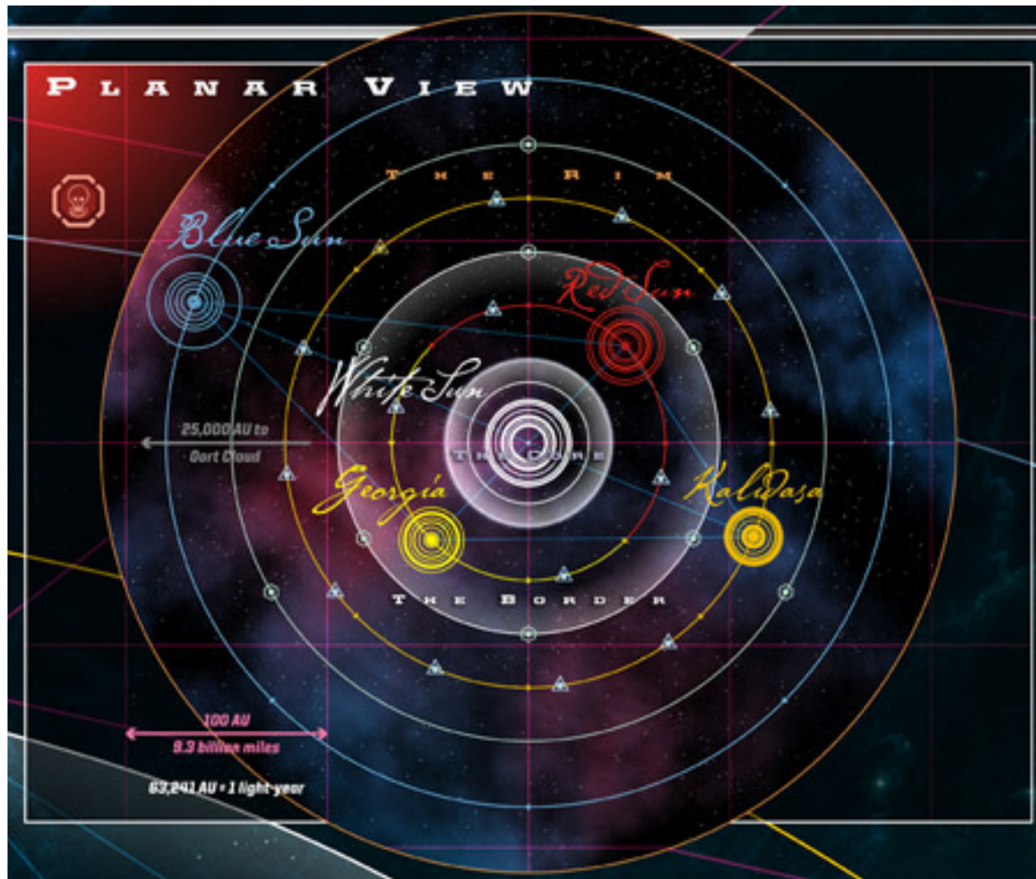

Figure 1. Planar View, from Complete and Official Map of the 'Verse, Quantum Mechanix and Universal Studios, https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/firefly/images/7/71/'Verse.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/1000?cb=20180719152308.

In this image, the thicker white halos at the center of the 'Verse represent the Core; everything between the last halo of the Core and the single, more faint halo farther out represents the Border; and everything beyond that represents the Rim. The ominous red symbol and glow in the upper left corner represents the hub of Reaver activity. This physical geography is a clear visual representation of the various class stratifications that Whedon introduces.

While this and other maps of the 'Verse seek to chart physical geography, they also illustrate several key economic factors that contribute to various forms of colonization. For instance, the tight formation of the Core means that its inhabitants have close access to a variety of resources such as medical care. Even though few scenes in the show and film actually depict life on the Core planets, glimpses of the Core reveal important details. One example includes Simon's education at one of the best medical schools on the Core planet Osiris ("Serenity" 1.1). Obviously, if the planet is capable of supporting several medical schools, Osiris has access to an abundance of medicine. This availability of medical care is also seen in the episode "Ariel" (1.9) when the *Serenity* crew robs an Alliance hospital on the titular Core planet. The hospital that they steal from overflows with doctors, nurses, advanced medical technology, and cabinets full of medication expensive enough to incentivize the *Serenity* crew to load up a body bag full of meds to sell off. There appear to be no expenses spared when it comes to the medical care of Core planet residents.

Conversely, in "The Train Job," residents of a small town called Paradiso on the Border planet Regina suffer from a treatable disease caused by the environmental imbalances of terraforming mixed with the underground air in the town's mines. With no other resources to offer the Alliance than ore, Paradiso's need to provide economically for the Alliance is literally killing its people. After crates of medicine needed to control the disease are stolen on the way to town, the Alliance does nothing to replace the meds ("The Train Job" 1.2). The Alliance's disregard of the theft shows that Border-planet people are only worth so much medicine and the money it costs. Whedon scholars like Jocelyn Sakal Froese and Laura

Buzzard, in their essay "'I Mean for Us to Live. The Alliance Won't Have That': New Frontierism and Biopower in *Firefly/Serenity*," have also commented on Paradiso's economic relationship with the Alliance: "[The] Alliance only values the population for the products they make, not as human life. The Alliance exercises biopower in accordance with the needs of the central planets and the ability of the Rim planets to produce goods, or to uphold the center." In other words, the Alliance holds power over Paradiso by both providing and selectively threatening provision of medical supplies in order to increase Paradiso's desperation for survival and, in turn, their productivity.

The contrast between the availability and expendability of medication on Osiris and Regina not only exemplifies the concept of medical colonialism, but also shows the vast economic difference between the Core and Border planets. In the 'Verse, life only matters at the seat of money and power, and labor dictates who lives and dies on the Border. Given that medical colonialism is inherently intertwined with money and its politics, Whedon demonstrates his willingness to dive into more complex elements of the 'Verse's neocolonial economics and its devastating effects on public health.

The evils of economic disparity are also seen in the difference between labor practices on Core planets and Border planets. The only Core planet laborers seen in the show and film are doctors, military officers (always depicted in clean uniforms with no signs of actual physical combat), teachers, politicians, and other workers in minimally physical careers.[2] However, labor practices are much harsher on the Border planets because, as in Paradiso, their only economic value is production of goods for the Alliance. Unlike the Core

planets, the Border planets are ridden with slavery and indentured servitude utilized for hard labor.

Perhaps the clearest example is in the "Jaynestown" episode when the *Serenity* crew travels to the town of Canton on Higgins' Moon near the Border. The foreman of the Canton Mudworks explains that the facility has "over two-thousand workers, mostly indentured, pay 'em next to nothin'" ("Jaynestown" 1.7, 00:04:41-46). Scholars have prodded at the potential reason for the Alliance's allowance of slavery on the Border and Rim planets. Howard Kahm's essay "'They Couldn't Let Us Profit—It Wouldn't Be Civilized': Economic Modalities and Core-Periphery Relations in the Political Economy of *Firefly-Serenity*" argues that the mudworks is just another example of an economy that circulates around a constantly critical shortage of resources to support an overabundant population: "The labor-intensive nature of the Mudders' work [....] [requires] little capital outlay on the part of the factory owners [...] [Labor] is plentiful and cheap, which is a [...] function of overpopulation" (161). Not only do Border planets have to find the cheapest way to provide for the Alliance, but they also recognize the economy of using human labor in a world with 49.95 billion people ("Complete and Official Map"). These factors often lead to unfair labor practices that the Alliance does not seem to mind.

Again, Whedon's message seems to be that neocolonial economies physically privilege the already privileged and oppress the already oppressed. The 'Verse's economically influenced distribution of medicine argues that the people in the Core are more valuable than those outside of it, but the argument does not stop there. Whedon's depiction of labor disparities in the 'Verse shows yet another mode by which

neocolonial economics harms the bodies of the disadvantaged through hard, uncompensated labor.

As if these medical and labor-based disparities were not compelling enough evidence that the 'Verse's economics are aggressively colonialist, Whedon heightens the potential for violence as one moves out from the Core. Conditions on some of the Rim planets stand in even starker contrast to the Core than the Border planets, and this is almost completely due to the Rim's proximity to Reaverspace. The wealthy residents of the Core are so padded from the threat of Reaver attack that many do not believe that Reavers are real.[3] On the other hand, close proximity to the Reavers leaves Rim planet residents both physically and economically vulnerable.

One example is the first glimpse of the Rim seen in the 'Verse: the moon Lilac in the Blue Sun system. Whedon's shooting script in *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* describes that the architecture of Lilac "embodies the lives of the folk out here: adobe and wood mix with metal and plastic—whatever's on hand to build with" (Whedon, "The Shooting Script" 61). This description shows that, as opposed to the Border planets that produce resources for the Alliance to accumulate wealth, the Rim planets have nothing to offer or survive on. The town on Lilac only profits from private security and law enforcement services (*Serenity*). The people of Lilac make money by enforcing law where the Alliance is too busy (or scared) to go. The use of bodies for law enforcement on the Rim, however, is also limited. The entire Blue Sun system only has a population of 18 million people, while the Core planets' White Sun system boasts 39.5 billion ("Complete and Official Map"). The disparity between these systems comes from fear of Reavers and fear of unsettled lands, but it also comes from the Reavers' homicides

diminishing local populations over time and certainly affecting their economies. Life on the Rim planets near Reaverspace are bound by their physical and economic geography—a sign that the colonizing mindset of the powers that be have doomed the economically disadvantaged to a life of monstrous violence.

One may argue that the other Rim sun system, Kalidasa, is not presented as an unsettled wilderness and faces minimal threat from Reavers since it rests at the other side of the 'Verse. However, even without Reavers, Kalidasa's distance from law enforcement makes the system its own type of economic wilderness in contrast with the Core planets. Almost every encounter the *Serenity* crew has with a Core planet involves some sort of police interference. Alliance officers are seen patrolling the Eavesdown Docks of Persephone ("Serenity" 1.1), police attempt to apprehend the crew at the hospital on Ariel ("Ariel" 1.9), and "feds" respond immediately to a burglary alarm on Bellerophon ("Trash" 1.11). Law enforcement lingers everywhere on the Core planets, presumably to protect Core citizens.

In contrast, the crew's visit to Beaumonde—a Kalidasian planet—in the film shows a world filled with crime and desperation. One of the numerous examples is a man yelling at a woman passing by in the very first shots of Beaumonde. The English translation of his Chinese is "Pretty lady, hire me for the night and I'll open you like a flower." Moments later, another man tries to proposition a *Serenity* crewmember for sex (Whedon, "The Shooting Script" 83), showing that unregulated street prostitution and harassment is the norm on Beaumonde and that people are just as desperate to make a living on these planets as they are in the other Rim sun system. Also, the mandatory firearm lockers and the openness of shady business in the Maidenhead Bar, the main setting for

the Beaumonde scenes, indicate other forms of financial desperation and fear of violence. These little glimpses of Beaumonde and more show that the lack of Alliance presence on the Rim allows for increased crime. Notably, just as in the Blue Sun system, few want to live in the Kalidasa system either; it has the second lowest population in the 'Verse[4] ("Complete and Official Map"). Even without Reavers, Kalidasa is a land of danger, lawlessness, and desperation. These problems are yet another way that the 'Verse's economic system physically endangers the lives of the colonized and underprivileged.

The Alliance's distribution of wealth, resources, and population all form a powerful neocolonial force that drives countless disenfranchised people to dangerous and economically unstable worlds, but the question of intention becomes crucial to understanding Whedon's neocolonial argument. After all, if the Alliance's exploitative economics are modeled to save lives or help people, *Firefly* and *Serenity* become vastly different pictures of postcolonialism. Several theories exist for why the 'Verse's economy operates the way it does. Froese and Buzzard argue that the Alliance's emphasis on biopower leads them to exploit the physical bodies of the people it governs. They write, "[The] Rim planets embody a marginalized space created by the Alliance in all senses [...] [The] Alliance relies heavily on those margins to maintain itself" (Froese and Buzzard, para. 13). The Alliance's exploitation of an economically stratified geography allows the Alliance to exercise power over people to strengthen itself. Economics are just another cog in the machine of biopower that the Alliance manipulates. On the other hand, Kahm argues that the 'Verse operates out of economic desperation for resources in light of overpopulation (155). To Kahm, the

only reason the Alliance manipulates the economically disenfranchised is that it recognizes the terrifying threat of scarcity that looms over the entire 'Verse. Froese and Buzzard's theory posits that the Alliance is a crafty and evil government set on no-holds-barred exploitation, but Kahm paints a picture of a frightened regime—one that fears for the future of the entire 'Verse, not just the wealthy and powerful.

Perhaps the most accurate assessment of the Alliance's neocolonialist economic model rests somewhere in between these two extremes. Whedon himself undermines Froese and Buzzard's argument when he says in an interview that the Alliance is "not really an evil empire [...] [The] government is basically benign" (Whedon, "CulturePulp Q&A" 108). No, the Alliance did not intentionally create a stratified economy just to be evil, but it is equally reductive to claim, as Kahm does, that the Alliance is simply scared. Even though economic clues indicate that the Alliance does need resources, stockpiling for the future health and wealth of the 'Verse is not their primary concern. If it were, then the Core would be encouraged to conserve and pull its own weight in the 'Verse too. There is no evidence that the Core has any concerns about resource management or overpopulation. Also, if the Alliance cared only about preservation of resources, why would they expend research, development, equipment, and drugs merely to "calm the population" of Miranda? In light of all of these points, the Alliance seems primarily motivated by maintenance of its own power and, sometimes, a desire to make the 'Verse a better place.

This might sound like an excuse for neocolonialism, but the Miranda incident is the perfect example of why neocolonial methods outweigh good intentions and leave no room for condoning the Alliance. In fact, colonialism in the

past and in today's world is always flavored with a dash of compassion and a desire to help people, yet the effects that colonialism has on colonized bodies always proves devastating. This is also the case with the Miranda incident and the Reavers' creation due to what Jeffrey Bussolini, in his essay "A Geopolitical Interpretation of *Serenity*," calls blowback. Bussolini writes that the term "blowback" was coined by the CIA to define "the unintended consequences of intelligence, military, and diplomatic operations" (147). He continues to explain how the Miranda incident reflects the United States' weaponization of Iraq to protect itself (and the U.S.) from Iranian threats. This weaponization led indirectly to the formation of Al Qaeda, which later posed a threat to both the United States and Iraq (148). In many ways, blowback from U.S. foreign policy may have caused 9/11—an event that presumably influenced Whedon's creation of *Firefly* (one year after 9/11) and *Serenity* (four years after 9/11). Bussolini goes so far as to say that the entire 'Verse is one giant critique of the unintended colonialist failures of the U.S. government in the Middle East (140). If the Alliance is a reflection of U.S. government, then the Alliance is neither an innocent nor a fully guilty power in the 'Verse. Instead, the Alliance is a commentary on how the colonialist mindset—in any and all forms—creates dangerous interference that inevitably ends in negative results.

Thus, the ultimate crime of the Alliance is not intentional creation of economic imbalance in the 'Verse, but their idealism about humanity that results in colonizing action. Oddly, the all-powerful Alliance itself falls victim to the blowback of their actions. Perhaps Gerry Canavan put it best in "Zombies, Reavers, Butchers, and Actuals in Joss Whedon's Work": "Like colonial powers and imperial

militaries right here on the Earth-That-Was, the Alliance outlives its usefulness to become itself the greatest impediment to its self-proclaimed mission of civilizing the Outer Planets and bringing light to darkness" (291). The Alliance is guilty of great evils solely because of its colonialist actions—its efforts to help in an uninvited and intrusive manner.

Ironically, the Alliance takes on economic damage as a result of their interference as well; due to their experiment, Rim planets become largely inaccessible, the civilized utopia of Miranda is wasted, and the Alliance is burdened with maintaining the universal smokescreen that covers up the true story of Miranda. All of these burdens act as punishment for their crime of interfering with people—their colonization of Miranda and the endless complications it causes. After all, at the beginning of *Serenity*, young River's main accusation against the Alliance is that they are "meddlesome" (*Serenity*, 00:02:02-03), a word that sounds like a comment on the dangers of colonialism.

Considering both the heartbreaking portrayals of economic stratification and exploitation of geography in the 'Verse, and considering the strong connection between the 'Verse's neocolonialism and U.S. foreign policy and economics in the early 2000s, Whedon's critique of neocolonial economics as portrayed in *Firefly* and *Serenity* certainly seems to codify these texts as anticolonial literature. Neither the show nor the film indicate sympathy for governments that exercise colonial powers to the detriment of people. Instead, they paint a nuanced and fiercely unforgiving picture of the complex evils of colonialism in their fictional worlds and in the realities of the United States.

"Aiya! Huaile": Cultural Colonialism in The 'Verse

Whedon's critique of neocolonial economics stands solid and rests at the forefront of the entire 'Verse's construction. Even though this hints at an easy categorization of *Firefly* and *Serenity* as anticolonial texts, other areas of Whedon's argument must be checked for major pitfalls that undermine his argument. Unfortunately, the 'Verse's neocolonial critique is, in part, thwarted by a lack of cultural considerations in keeping with postcolonial studies. Although Whedon attempts to construct a culturally dualistic, seamlessly hybridized culture as the backdrop of the 'Verse, he fails to do so with respect to Asian culture in the real world. This failure signals a crack in the 'Verse's anticolonial nature—one that allows room for cultural imperialism to sneak in to Whedon's 'Verse.

On the surface, the 'Verse's hybridized culture seems compatible with anticolonialism. The backstory behind why Chinese and U.S. cultures have intertwined in the 'Verse seems to tie neatly into Whedon's neocolonial economic critique. Whedon himself describes the origins of the 'Verse's East-meets-West culture thus: "On Earth-That-Was, the two ruling powers were once known as America and China. Though their empires remained separate, the two powers worked together throughout the colonization process, their cultures—as so many had—melding at many levels" (Whedon, "A Brief History" 13). This story shows how the economically privileged countries of the United States and China blended to create an inclusive hybridized culture in a mutually beneficial relationship. Notably, both of these countries are specifically entrusted with the future of human existence, and

the main qualification they share for such a task is their economic power. This focus on money highlights how much the 'Verse's colonialist corruption reflects our real-life past and present on Earth-That-Was—all in keeping with Whedon's anticolonial messages thus far.

Also in keeping with anticolonialism, the depth of the 'Verse's attempts at envisioning a hybridized culture is admirable in many ways (see Mandala). The level of detail in the use of Chinese language creates a seemingly accurate blend of East and West. Everyone from anywhere with any level of education in the 'Verse speaks both Mandarin Chinese and English. Much of the text seen in the show and film is written in Chinese characters with or without an accompanying English translation. The show and film also do not translate spoken Mandarin into English with subtitles. Yet careful nonverbal cues and the occasional hints from English responses to Mandarin sentences make these gaps in translation for Whedon's primarily American audience fairly unobtrusive. Also, Eastern clothing, architecture, interior design, martial arts, religion, food, and other cultural elements are seen throughout the 'Verse (see Granade). Surely, Whedon did not shy away from portraying an idealistic, hybridized future that encourages inclusivity and a breakdown of age-old cultural clashes.

All of this bodes well for the argument that *Firefly* and *Serenity* are anticolonial texts. The concept of integrating Chinese languages and culture in the 'Verse derives from a bold attempt at decolonizing and recentering Asian culture in defiance of Orientalism. Asian cultures have been especially prone to exotification and the culturally appropriative, pick-and-choose approach of Western colonizers. Edward Said's seminal text *Orientalism* argues that such collaging of Asia

stems from deeply rooted condescension regarding the continent's people. Said elaborates that, to the Orientalist mind, Asia has "a kind of extrareal, phenomenologically reduced status that puts them out of reach of everyone except the Western expert" (283). In other words, the East has always been the colonized subject of impositional Western definition and opinion. Whedon seems to be theoretically and cinematically defying that objectification, an act of anticolonialism.

Such a bold approach to postcolonial representation needs exactly the kind of painstaking attention that Whedon lends to his economic criticism; however, in the case of *Firefly* and *Serenity*, major gaps, errors, and misrepresentations of Chinese culture spell disaster for Whedon's anticolonial vision. For one, Whedon's execution of universal bilingualism falls horribly short. One of the most shocking problems with the use of Mandarin in the 'Verse is that Whedon did not use a native speaker as a translator. The show and film's main translator, Jenny Lynn, admits in an interview, "I'm far from being an expert in Chinese" (Lynn 136). While Lynn is formally educated in Chinese languages, she confesses to a degree of ineptitude when it comes to translation as a non-native speaker. To make matters more difficult, Lynn was left unable to educate the cast about pronunciation (138), and thus, the use of Mandarin in the 'Verse becomes more afterthought than accurate. The implication of these mistakes is that, as long as it 'sounded Chinese,' it was good enough for Whedon—a dangerous position for a white American creator to take when trying to avoid colonialist, Orientalist misrepresentations. Considering how important the use of language is in constructing the hybridized culture of the 'Verse, the lack of consideration paid to translation and

pronunciation of Mandarin Chinese signals the colonialist Orientalism in *Firefly* and *Serenity*.

This messiness carries into visual representations of 'Chinese' culture in the 'Verse as well. One brief example of the confused Asian culture that Whedon presents visually is the 'Verse's currency. In *Firefly: A Celebration*, several images of the paper money and coinage of the 'Verse are shown in detail. Randy Eriksen, the prop master of Firefly, comments on the graphic design of some of the 'Verse's paper money: "I think I got a bunch of different *foreign* currency, including some *Thai* money, and [...] manipulated the colors and stuff and printed it" (Eriksen 85, emphasis added). Eriksen seems completely unaware of the fact that China is the main Asian country that the 'Verse adopts from; rather, he seems to be viewing Asia as an amalgamous blob of interesting characters meant for neat graphic design. This imagery was apparently 'Asian enough' for the 'Verse, but the acceptance of such patchwork Asian representation embodies the definition of Orientalism and, in turn, colonialism.

Countless other layers of linguistic, visual, and aural slippage and carelessness abound, and many scholars have already explored these problems at length. Kevin M. Sullivan's essay "Chinese Words in the 'Verse" describes several language problems evidenced in *Firefly*, including uncorrected use of other Chinese languages in both spoken and written contexts (Sullivan 200-204). Eric Hung's essay "The Meaning of 'World Music' in *Firefly*" notes that Asian music in *Firefly* is only used as a backdrop for villains, sex workers, and exotic settings (196), and this qualifies *Firefly*'s music as mere "Orientalist sounds" (203). Of course, the most specifically indicting essay comes from Rebecca M. Brown in "Orientalism in Firefly and Serenity." She deeply analyzes the visual

presentation of Asian culture in these works and concludes that "despite [the franchise's] attempts to incorporate and normalize Asian elements within its fabric, [it] remains largely within the bounds of Orientalizing imagery" (Brown para. 23). In essence, all of these scholars show that the representation of 'Chinese' culture in *Firefly* and *Serenity* is actually a representation of a blend of Asian cultures that do not reflect a focus on China by Whedon. The culture of China becomes the culture of Asia becomes the culture of Asia that a white American man thinks is Asian enough. This is cultural colonialism at its shiniest, and these scholars have not shied away from granting it the blowback it deserves.

Strangely, though, with the exception of Brown, most of the critics of Asian cultural misrepresentation in the 'Verse do not use terms associated with postcolonial theory. However, such concepts are at the heart of these scholars' analyses. It is crucial to move beyond the mask of *how* Whedon's 'Verse skews Asian culture to see the face of age-old colonialist thinking on the other side. No matter his intention or the constraints surrounding his creative process, Whedon's failure to properly represent a truly respectful, balanced, accurate, hybridized Chinese-American culture deeply undermines the codification of *Firefly* and *Serenity* as anticolonial texts.

"   ": Racial Colonialism in The 'Verse[5]

If the cultural colonization of Asia undermines the anticolonial potential of *Firefly* and *Serenity*, the problematic treatment of race in the 'Verse exacerbates and complicates the postcolonial ideas in these texts even more. Indeed, the people of the 'Verse—the physical bodies that operate inside

the 'Verse's geography and economy—should define a franchise generally lauded for its intimate, character-based drama. So the fact that the 'Verse ignores or at least misconstrues the voices of so many people of color (POC) makes no sense in light of Whedon's seemingly grand postcolonial vision. Whedon's exclusion of Asian bodies from the 'Verse and the equally unjustifiable inclusions of problematic Black and Native American stereotypes undermines his postcolonial arguments about economics in a variety of ways; the problematic racial dynamics in the 'Verse act as a form of colonization in and of themselves.

Fortunately, many Whedon scholars have discussed *Firefly* and *Serenity*'s exclusions and misrepresentations of several different races. Leigh Adams Wright's "Asian Objects in Space" as well as Daoine S. Bachran's "Mexicans in Space? Joss Whedon's *Firefly*, Reavers, and the Man They Call Jayne" call out the conspicuous lack of Asian and Chicanx characters in the 'Verse respectively, highlighting how the 'Verse's Chinese-American and Western-movie-style construction necessitated the presence of these POC. Conversely, Neil Lerner's "Music, Race, and Paradoxes of Representation: Jubal Early's Musical Motif of Barbarism in 'Objects in Space'" and Candra K. Gill's "On Soldiers and Sages: Problematizing the Roles of Black Men in the Whedonverses" criticize that, although Black men are included in the main cast, they are often written to reflect the racist stereotype of the 'dangerous Black man.' Agnes B. Curry's oft-cited "'We Don't Say "Indian"': On the Paradoxical Construction of the Reavers" and her follow-up essay "'The Indians ride over the hill': Revisiting 'On the Paradoxical Construction of the Reavers'" argue that the Reavers are thinly veiled racist representations of Native American and Afro-Caribbean

people. Clearly, the world of Whedon studies is waking up to the modes of racial colonization that Whedon employs in his seemingly anticolonial texts.

While these racial misdealings can stem from a variety of sources (the colonial mindset readily finds excuses for racism), the main culprit in *Firefly* and *Serenity* is colorblindness. Brent M. Smith-Casanueva's "Race, Space, and the (De)Construction of Neocolonial Difference in *Firefly/Serenity*" claims that "*Firefly*, unlike other contemporary science fiction series that employ race as a signifier of difference, rejects the racialization of neocolonial discourse." He argues that this minimization of racial difference in the 'Verse is actually an anticolonial act since it decolonizes traditionally racialized bodies (Smith-Casanueva). While he rightfully acknowledges the ways in which Whedon handles race differently than other science fiction creators, Smith-Casanueva also—seemingly inadvertently—supports the oddity of racial homogeneity in a 'Verse that is supposed to be predominantly Chinese and American. In trying to define and at least partially defend Whedon's choices surrounding race, Smith-Casanueva draws attention to the colonial colorblindness inherent in such choices.

This colorblindness is further complicated by Whedon's claims to have "de-racialized" Reavers (qtd. in Curry "'We Don't Say'"), to which Curry responds, "What, precisely, does it even mean to have removed the racial aspect of a racial stereotype? […] Rather than deconstruct anything, Whedon merely exchanges an explicitly savage stereotype for a seemingly sweeter one" (Curry para. 3). In other words, Whedon's attempt to "de-racialize" eliminates his only defense against claims of racism. Calling the sanctuary of colorblindness and then participating in targeted efforts at

racial deconstruction exemplifies Whedon's lack of racial understanding. Unfortunately, actual Native American bodies are diminished by Whedon's creative power play.

Between the minimal existence of Asian and Chicanx people in the 'Verse and the problematic existence of racist stereotypes of Black and Native American people, *Firefly* and *Serenity* fail to uphold the vision of postcolonialism—a viewpoint that is supposed to cast a scathing glare on the oppressor, not the oppressed. Whether Whedon speaks or does not speak about race in the 'Verse, he cannot seem to remove the Western colonizing lenses through which he views the real world. This disregard or misuse of racial representation brings the potential anticolonialism of the *Firefly* 'Verse to a screeching halt.

"A World Without Sin": The Postcolonial Verdict and Its Implications for Pop Culture

In light of the 'Verse's brilliant critique of neocolonial economics and its not so shiny participation in cultural and racial colonization, the main question this analysis seeks to answer must be re-posed: can *Firefly* and *Serenity* be considered anticolonial texts, or do they serve to reinforce colonialist narratives? If one is willing to allow a stunningly well-crafted neocolonial economic critique to outweigh the egregious colonization of Asian cultures and the violence of colorblindness, then yes. But since culture and race are paramount to the study of postcolonial literature, the answer is no. *Firefly* and *Serenity* fail to uphold two essential pillars of postcolonialism, and no matter how well Whedon's economic analysis holds up under the weight of criticism, it cannot keep

his texts from crumbling under the weight of colonialist blowback.

Perhaps the more important question is this: if the Orientalism and racism present in *Firefly* and *Serenity* are so glaringly obvious and so frequently discussed in academia, then why would anyone even try to argue that these texts could be labeled anticolonial literature? Why has this not already been explored in a way that shows the colonial roots of Whedon's story? These questions are complicated, but the answer is simple: people still love *Firefly*, and in the world of popular culture and fandom, people do not want to see the sins of their favorite works. Perhaps Mary Ellen Iatropoulos and Lowery A. Woodall III elaborate on this issue best in their introduction to the book *Joss Whedon and Race*: "Through the Whedonverses, we inhabit the contradiction of attempting to subvert evil institutions while still working from within them, while in some ways perpetuating them even as we fight against them" (Iatropoulos and Woodall). In other words, viewers cannot resolve the uncomfortable tension between loving a TV show or film or franchise and understanding its complex shortcomings in terms of racism, sexism, and other social issues. Through sharing, fans perpetuate the messages of their favorite media, so when presented with the idea that a 'fave' is actually a 'problematic fave,' fans may feel guilty for having spread those messages and try to ignore or justify them accordingly.

One often-used but insufficient way to quell this discomfort is to claim that a pop culture favorite is 'just entertainment.' However, pop culture shapes cultural norms and perceptions of the world that can and often do influence people's belief systems and, in turn, their social functions. The essay "Playing at Politics? Popular Culture as Political

Engagement" by John Street, Sanna Inthorn, and Martin Scott argues that popular culture holds immense power over our political minds:

> There remains good reason to believe that popular culture matters politically, and that as we confront the problems of political participation [...] we need to look as carefully at entertainment as we do at news and current affairs, and to listen hard to the conversations that music, video games and entertainment television provoke. (339, 355)

Through various political uprisings in the past decade of U.S. history, pop culture's influence on politics has become more urgently analyzed and corrected, especially when it comes to harmful racial depictions in comedy. However, more needs to be done. Academics—not just media producers—need to continue critiquing and teaching others to critique the failures of pop culture artifacts. This focus can only improve the critical thinking necessary to rip out the roots of colonialism that remain intact throughout the world.

This necessary work also applies to creators, not just their creations. The hero complex that society imposes on successful creators often blinds people to the creators' fallibility and its potential reflections on art. In Whedon's case, the sheer mass of books and articles published about him and the fact that a Whedon Studies Association even exists illustrate the importance of this auteur's work in the realm of pop culture. All the same, Whedon clearly embedded colonialist notions of culture and race into the 'Verse in completely avoidable ways. Whedon—as a white, American man—should not have attempted the creation of a hybridized

culture (at least not without more help from actual Asian voices). He also should have been more mindful in his treatment of race in the 'Verse. This seems obvious given this analysis, yet here we stand. Whedon still has a successful career, untainted by his colonizing creative choices, and Browncoats often seem none the wiser. We can and should do better, and it is time for fans and scholars alike to continue finding ways to look past the flashing lights of pop culture heroism and read the fine print underneath works like *Firefly* and *Serenity*—written with the same colonizer's pen that has ruled over literature for so long.

Because of pop culture's particular vulnerability to blinded discourse, postcolonial studies can be a specifically useful approach to today's popular texts. Postcolonialism reimagines power dynamics and forces minds to view both sides of the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy as thoroughly as possible. The more we reevaluate the power structures seen in popular media, like *Firefly* and *Serenity*, the more we can benefit from the complications they pose to our political and cultural consciousness.

Notes

[1] While other media—including multiple comic book series and online video shorts—are popularly considered canon in the 'Verse, this essay will only analyze *Firefly* and *Serenity* in this analysis, and "the 'Verse" will be used as a grouping term for only those two canonized literatures. The only exception is my use of "Complete and Official Map of the 'Verse;" this map is canonized and approved by Universal Studies, and it features demographic and geographical features that prove useful analyzing the economic stratification in the 'Verse.

[2] One exception is the Eavesdown Docks on Persephone, but considering that the Docks are a port for people who do not live on or have only recently migrated to the Core planets, the laborers here do not strictly count as Core planet workers.

[3] For references, see Simon calling Reavers "campfire stories" in "Serenity" (1.1) and Alliance Commander Harken scoffing at Mal's belief in Reavers in "Bushwhacked" (1.3).

[4] Kalidasa's population is 932 million. The next lowest population in the 'Verse belongs to the Red Sun system on the Border; this system houses 3.5 billion people ("Complete and Official"). That means the difference between Blue Sun's population and Kalidasa's population is a mere 914 million, but the difference between Kalidasa's population and Red Sun's population is 2.586 billion people. The population disparity between the least populated Border planet and the most populated Rim planet is a startling testament to the dangers of Rim life.

[5] I have tried to entitle the sections of this paper with *Firefly* and *Serenity* quotations that reflect the material of that section. There are no quotations about race in the 'Verse, so I have left the quotation marks blank empty, which might be the most pertinent comment possible in this case.

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