The Serenity Logo: Otherness and Inauthenticity

Eric Benson

Introduction

This paper explores and critiques the typographic and design decisions made in the creation of the logo and brand for the 2005 film *Serenity* by Joss Whedon and how the choice of the Papyrus-inspired typeface used in the logo perpetuates the potential for orientalist, racialized stereotypes, and material dishonesty previously seen in the film's casting, props, and story critiqued prior in *Serenity* scholarly literature. In addition, this paper explores how the choice of Papyrus leads to the conflation of Asian visual culture and stereotypes throughout the entire brand of *Firefly* and *Serenity*. Scholar Carrie Rose Evon best explains this false pluralism:

> [T]he 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 that a white American man thinks is Asian enough. (51)

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Brands are ubiquitous in our culture as we see them daily in stores, on our bodies, and in the media. A brand is defined by British advertiser David Ogilvy[1] as "the intangible sum of a product's attributes: its name, packaging, and price, its history, its reputation, and the way it's advertised" (qtd. in Rozdeba). A brand, therefore, is not just a logo but the amorphous everything that exists in the mind of the public. The Joss Whedon-created *Firefly* and *Serenity* brand is one that represents many things to its fans, from space western underdog to love, family, witty banter, thrilling heroics, and a friend that left us too soon.

The main logo for the film *Serenity* was designed by Geoffrey Mandel for Universal Pictures (IMDb, Geoffrey Mandel).[2] It is constructed of two concentric red and orange circles with the Mandarin word "Níngjìng" (serenity) set horizontally in calligraphy with the English word (in black uppercase letters) "Serenity" superimposed over the Mandarin script. "Serenity" is set in a typeface like the Chris Costello-designed Papyrus. However, it is not Papyrus. Instead, Mandel digitally edited the Papyrus typeface so it would be unique enough to become a wordmark (or a text-only logo). On the *Serenity* logo, the Mandarin and English type appear hand-painted, and their friendly curved yet irregular edges are designed to fit together as a whole aesthetically to visually represent Whedon's vision of the blending of the two cultural and economic superpowers (U.S. and China) in the year 2517.

Despite the designer's attempts to capture Whedon's fusion of two diverse cultures hundreds of years from the present day, Mandel's poor choice of a digitally manipulated Papyrus as a typeface is an example of both material dishonesty (like faux wood grain) and cultural generalization (inappropriate

adoption of customs or practices by someone from a different culture). The use of a Papyrus-inspired typeface for the wordmark is intended to be construed as exotic enough to a Westerner to represent an Other, but it is completely void of authentic cultural meaning. Papyrus (also used in the logo for the 2009 James Cameron film *Avatar*) was critiqued extensively by both the graphic design and cultural studies communities (as well as in NBC's S*aturday Night Live*) as a typeface that scholar bell hooks would describe as "eating the other" (21).

For this article, I am not discussing the *Firefly* (2002-2003) logo, but instead only the *Serenity* (2005) visual identity. The *Serenity* logo (or visual identity) first appears in the 'verse during the pilot episode ("Serenity" 1.1). It is shown briefly at twenty-two minutes into the episode. The *Serenity* logo is painted on the front half of Malcolm Reynolds' spaceship as it is parked at Eavesdown Docks on the planet Persephone. Kaylee Frye, the ship's engineer, waits below the logo swirling her signature red, yellow, green, and white paper parasol hoping to attract travelers to sail in her Firefly class ship. "Mine's the nicest," she smiles at Shepherd Book, engaging him in a conversation about Firefly class ships and his past, offering passage on "the smoothest ride from here to Boros, for anyone who can pay" ("Serenity" 1.1, 22:31). Shepherd Book accepts Kaylee's offer and becomes an integral yet mysterious member of the *Serenity* crew throughout the television series, the film, and beyond into the comics and novels.

The logo painted on *Serenity* that we see in the first episode is not the same logo we see later in the film, on movie posters, comics, and connected merchandise. There are multiple different logos for the ship created for the franchise. In fact, the *Serenity* logo takes on six different forms (Fig. 1):

1. Horizontal Mandarin calligraphy in a circle with the word "serenity" underneath in uppercase letters in a condensed sans-serif typeface ("Serenity")
2. Horizontal Mandarin (静 Níngjìng) in a circle (painted on the ship in the film *Serenity*) with the word Serenity on a layer above
3. Vertical Mandarin (静 Níngjìng) in a circle with Serenity on a layer above (used in merchandise and film trailer)
4. Vertical Mandarin calligraphy in a circle
5. English wordmark (all uppercase typeface like Papyrus used on movie posters/DVDs)
6. Wordmark likely set in Quadrat Serial Medium with alterations made to the E, R, and Y (used on some movie posters/Blu Ray discs)

However, before a more detailed exploration of the *Serenity* logo design, it is important to first discuss and define a logo and a brand.

A logo is defined by *Oxford Dictionary* as "a printed design or symbol that a company or an organization uses as its special sign." It is an image, text, shape, or combination of the three organized together to tell a story of who that group is and what they do or stand for. Every decision down to a straight or curved corner, color, and choice of typeface helps weave together a unified narrative so anyone can understand and recognize a company or group. A successful visual identity separates an organization from others, is quickly and simply read, scalable in size, and is geared toward an intended audience. Logos are usually difficult to create as they must represent many characteristics distilled down into a simple holistic mark. It is also common for multiple viewers of a visual identity to have

different interpretations of the logo, despite the designer's diligent research, process, and decisions making success that much more difficult.

Logos work (or do not) based on a designer's understanding of semiotics. The study of signs is part of foundational art and design teaching dating back to the Bauhaus (1911 1933) in Germany during the early twentieth century. Artists and designers are taught to understand the difference between a sign and symbol and how color, composition, shapes, typography, rhythm, balance, and other concepts in art help create meaning together (Gestalt theory) or separately. A logo is therefore a symbol where audiences accept the design to mean certain themes and ideas about the story of a brand.

Visual identities are *not* a brand. However, they are an integral component of a brand. Brands are ubiquitous in our culture as we see them daily in stores, on our bodies, and in the media. The American Marketing Association describes a brand as a "name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition" (American Marketing Association). A brand, therefore, is not just a logo but the amorphous everything that exists in the mind of the public. As noted, the Joss Whedon-created *Firefly* and *Serenity* brand represents many things to fans: a loveable space western underdog, family, adventure, or a friend gone too soon. The feelings and traits of the *Firefly* brand can be seen throughout the television series, film, novels, comics, advertisements, and connected merchandise. Each of these pieces of media and ephemera, if created well, should exemplify the brand consistently.

Brands have a mission, essence, promise, personality, and values that create a compelling story that inspires trust, loyalty, and engagement with customers and fans. The *Serenity* logo has succeeded in creating strong brand equity as 20 years later many Browncoats still adore the TV show, film, comics, books, and merchandise as much as ever. Brand equity is the relationship and bond that customers (and fans) have with the brand that theoretically (if done well) should grow over time. "It is often so strong that it compensates for performance flaws, whether an out-of-stock situation, poor customer service, a product that falls apart, inconvenient store hours, or a higher-than-average-price," according to Brad VanAuken (4).

Designing a visual identity is an important step in creating the overall brand of a company, organization, or in this case a film. Visual identities typically come in seven different forms: abstract mark, mascot logo, combination mark, emblem logo, lettermark, pictorial mark, and wordmark. The most often seen logo for *Serenity* consists of the English and Mandarin words for "serenity" centered in two varied tints of orange concentric circles.[3] This is a combination mark, where there is a combination of both shape/image and typography. *Serenity* also exists as type-only, which is defined as a wordmark. Off the ship, the Fruity Oaty Bar logo, seen in a commercial during the film *Serenity* at the bar Maidenhead on the planet Beaumonde, is composed of text and three cartoon geishas (Fig. 4). This is an example of a mascot logo.

It is common for logos for one company or group to exist in multiple forms. A visual identity can have different logos which are essentially a variation on a theme with consistent colors, typography, and other formal relationships. A company could have a combination mark, abstract mark, and wordmark to suit certain media and circumstances, for example. The

fitness shoe and apparel company Nike is a good case study of this phenomenon, where the "swoosh" (abstract mark) can exist alone or with the name "Nike" together (combination mark), while "Nike" can also exist on its own as a wordmark. Each of the three are recognizable and represent the brand equally as well. The ability to have three strong variations of a logo that are quickly understood is called brand equity or "(a) set of assets or liabilities in the form of brand visibility, brand associations and customer loyalty that add or subtract from the value of a current or potential product or service driven by the brand," observes David Aaker (26 27). Nike is a well-known company which has grown its brand equity over the years. When the shoemaker first started in 1964, the value of its brand was small, so the ability to have each visual identity have equal weight was not as prolific as today. Like Nike, the *Serenity* logo exists in multiple formats, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

The *Serenity* Logo Design Dissected

The six *Serenity* marks, originally designed by Geoffrey Mandel (and art directed by Daniel T. Dorrance) for Universal Pictures, mix a script typeface (in English) with Mandarin calligraphy likely to symbolize the Sino-American Alliance (an authoritarian Chinese and American super-government) that Whedon and his writing team created as the antagonist in the franchise. In this Alliance, the English and Mandarin languages are commonly woven together in everyday conversation, and therefore unsurprisingly painted together as the logo for the Serenity spaceship. This mirrors the codeswitching that appears in the dialogue of the television series and film, where Mandarin and English are woven into various conversations among the crew. The writers' choices to codeswitch in the

scripts involves peppering in Chinese as slang or curse words but keeping English as the main language. That singular use of Chinese is a prime example of tokenism, says Susan Mandela, and moreover is "usefully discussed as appropriation and abrogation" (37). That trend of appropriation continues in the choice of typeface for the *Serenity* logo.

The typeface used in the most common *Serenity* logo is based on the much maligned and overused typeface Papyrus. However, in Mandel's logo, he digitally squashed the word "Serenity" to lower the cap height (height of a capital letter) of the letterforms (Fig. 2), while keeping the painterly edges. Besides squashing the Papyrus typeface, Mandel kerned (or adjusted spacing between letters) connecting the "E" to the "N" and "T" to the "Y" in Serenity, disconnected the middle cross bar (or horizontal stroke) of both "E"s, and extended the bowl (or rounded top portion) of the letter "R" past its vertical stem.

The first, second, third, and fourth variations of the *Serenity* logos (from the list above) are in a scratched series of concentric circles (red and orange) that includes a script typeface that resembles the typeface Papyrus and Chinese calligraphy that both spell "Serenity" (*Níngjìng*) in English and Mandarin. However, the first logo listed prior (Fig. 1.1), although similar in the use of the warmly colored circles and Chinese calligraphy, uses an all-capital-letter condensed (tall and slender) sans-serif typeface (underneath the circles) different from the altered Papyrus in the second through fifth identities.

The third logo was used in the *Serenity* film trailers, while the second was painted on Malcolm Reynolds' ship. The all-English wordmark is used on some of the movie posters, DVDs, and the Dark Horse comic books of 2006 *Those Left Behind* (Whedon and Matthews), 2008 *Better Days* (Whedon and Matthews), 2010 *The Shepherd's Tale* (Whedon and Whedon),

and 2010 *Float Out* (Oswalt). However, on both the two-sided official movie poster for *Serenity* and the Blu-ray disc set, Universal Pictures used a different wordmark with sharp serifs and a sweeping swash of the letter Y and tail of R (likely the typeface Quadrat Serial Medium) to resemble the memorable sword and axe River uses to kill the Reavers at the end of the film, shown in her dynamic warrior pose on the poster (Fig. 3).

In addition, Dark Horse Comics decided to use yet a different typeface (in mixed case) made to look like scratched metal letterforms in 2014's *Leaves on the Wind* (Z. Whedon) and 2017's *No Power in the 'Verse* (Roberson). (The newer Boom Studios! comics do not incorporate the *Serenity* logo, but instead the *Firefly* logo from the television series.) The design decisions by Universal and Dark Horse to vary the typeface of the more common uppercase script wordmark are apparently never recommended by branding agencies to their clients as these variations create confusion and weaken the brand. However, despite this lack of overall brand consistency, the two different typefaces Universal and Dark Horse chose might be an improvement over the choice of the original one that resembled Papyrus, with its potential for invoking stereotypes.

Papyrus and Otherness

Papyrus was created by American designer Chris Costello in 1982 (Drumm). On the official website for the International Typeface Corporation (ITC) that distributes Papyrus, Costello describes that he created Papyrus by hand, sketching "the font on textured paper with a calligraphy pen over a six-month period; the lettering was drawn to emulate what the designer felt the English language would have looked like, had it been written on papyrus 2000 years ago" ("Papyrus® Font Family Typeface Story"). Costello later said in a 2016 interview with

Fast Company Magazine that he was questioning his faith during that period: "I was thinking a lot about the Middle East, then, and Biblical Times, so I was drawing a lot of ligatures and letters with hairline arrangements" (Brownlee).

Costello sold the typeface in 1984 to Letraset and then to ITC (International Typeface Corporation), who describes it on their ecommerce site as

> a roman calligraphic typeface with distinctive human touches like rough edges, irregular curves, and high horizontal strokes in the caps. It imparts a warm and friendly ambience to everything from restaurant menus to book covers ("Papyrus® Font Family Typeface Story").

Since its launch, Papyrus now comes pre-installed on both Apple and Windows machines ready for use by billions of users in one click. Besides being in the *Serenity* logo, Papyrus has been used countless times, as actor Ryan Gosling described in a 2017 *Saturday Night Live* sketch for "hookah bars, Shakira merch, and off brand teas" ("Papyrus," 58:00). Websites like (the now inactive) *Papyrus Watch* document instances where Papyrus is used in everyday life. In a three-week period from December 2011 to January 2012, the site creator found Papyrus used in branding for not only menus and book covers but (indeed) off brand teas, coffee shops, bars, pizza places, credit unions, and a Caribbean cultural festival ("Exposing the Overuse of the Papyrus Font"). Papyrus has been deemed the "other most hated font in the world" ("Papyrus: The Other Most Hated Font in the World") second only to Comic Sans. It is everywhere, othering many cultures as a single exotic generalization.[4]

In the 2017 *Saturday Night Live* sketch, Ryan Gosling is triggered by the use of Papyrus as the wordmark for the 2009 James Cameron film, *Avatar*. He describes the typeface choice as a random selection, "like a thoughtless child just wandering by a garden, yanking leaves along the way." "He just got away with it," Gosling continues. "This man, this… professional graphic designer. Is it laziness; was it cruelty?" ("Papyrus," 58:00). As Papyrus is pre-loaded on billions of operating systems, the sketch makes a humorous yet valid point by describing a designer choosing Papyrus as lazy.

More likely, however, both Mandel and the designer who created the *Avatar* wordmark, chose Papyrus not because it is easy to find, but because its "tribal but futuristic" ("Papyrus," 58:00) look appears as possibly Asian or at the least different or exotic enough for a white audience to accept that it could be Asian. Even though Costello created the typeface to mimic handwriting from Biblical times in the Middle East, both logo designers for the film selected it from the top dropdown menu looking for a typeface that was "other" than the typical Eurocentric machined serif or sans-serif option. Papyrus appears as if it could be Asian. It also presumably seemed as if it could be from a culture of indigenous blue aliens or a future where China and the U.S. fuse their cultures to lead a colonization of a new 'verse.

In a 2006 interview, the designer Geoffrey Mandel described his vision for the *Serenity* branding: "For the *Serenity* 'verse, I knew the look of the series (combining English with Chinese, high-tech with the Old West), and tried to take it one step further. The graphics on the series were fairly flat […] for instance, the original Alliance seal looks more like a manhole cover. I knew there was a potential for bold, Trek-style graphics, and did all I could do to work them into the movie" ("Serenity

Stuff"). It can be presumed from Mandel's description that he saw the combination mark using both English (set in Papyrus) and the Chinese script as pushing *Firefly* further into the future Western and Asian blended culture in the film.

The *Serenity* logo is not Asian, nor is it Asian and American fusion. It is a damaging example of cultural generalization. Cultural generalization is defined as "…a statement about a group of people" (Bennett 2016). This "statement" can lead to stereotyping and the racist myths that many times follow. Pop culture scholar Leigh Adams Wright describes cultural generalization as to "strip it of its original meaning until it's just an object ("it doesn't mean what you think"), which can be used to signify something else entirely" (Wright 31). Mandel, when designing the logo, seems to have attempted to generalize Asian cultures without indicating an understanding of the meaning of or the differences between the many Asian cultures.

It is important here to note that culture in its use above is plural. There is nothing about Papyrus that defines its look and feel as "Chinese." Instead, the rough "exotic" script appears "Asian" (many cultures) to white audiences. It is not until Mandel uses the combination of color and (in some of the logo variations) Mandarin calligraphy that the logo is more specifically associated with looking "Chinese." Mandel chooses red in the logo as it is a common color to represent China: red is not only the dominant color in the Chinese national flag, but also a traditional color representing joy and luck. Those connotations combine with Papyrus to communicate to a general white audience that the logo was from the Eastern world and in particular China. This is an example of what racialized design (design that perpetuates elements of racism) scholar Sue Hum calls the racialized gaze where

design predisposes designers to use certain image vocabulary, structures, and grammars for depicting race. Consequently, existing resources are narrowed to two mutually constitutive, interrelated dynamics: authenticity and universality. The dynamic of authenticity names a practice by which people of color are depicted through aesthetic and surface markers; those skin-deep differences are then augmented into significant social distinctions, ones that matter (double entendre intended). (195)

Papyrus in its use in the *Serenity* logo is akin to "the Chinaman" (an indiscriminate racist description of a person native to East Asia) where the typeface functions as exotic to the West and is reminiscent of handwritten type from somewhere in the East. This racialized design is "a pervasive Western tradition academic and artistic of prejudiced outsider-interpretations of the Eastern world, which was shaped by the cultural attitudes of European imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries" (Said 20 21). Unfortunately, not only does racialized design happen in the *Serenity* logo, but also within the entire *Firefly* franchise, as feminist scholar Dee Amy-Chinn notes:

[B]ased on Whedon's view that the last great superpowers on earth will be the USA and China, the show also invokes a US-Oriental hybrid culture. The Oriental influences in the world of *Firefly* are less of a melting pot and more the re-emergence of the fantasy of a generic Orient, echoing Theresa de Lauretis' reading of *M. Butterfly* as drawing on an "Orientalist pastiche" of Chinese/Japanese culture that perpetuates the conflation

of histories and cultures within the discourse of Orientalism. (Amy-Chinn 177)

Supporting Amy-Chinn's argument of generic Orient, Carrie Rose Evon notes that within the franchise the design team used Thai baht instead of the Chinese yuan to model the *Firefly* currency (50).

In addition to the currency, sets and props are mixed to also imply generic Orient: "The various scenes of [Inara's] shuttle's interior reveal a compilation of Asian elements chosen to evoke the luxurious boudoir of a madam, the Orientalist vision of the Middle Eastern harem, and a variety of courtesan images from Southeast Asia, China, and Japan" (Brown ¶ 19). The portrayal of the character Inara is critiqued with a similar cynicism by scholar Christina Rowley: "She is interpellated as Oriental/Geisha, in her clothing, through the quantity of Chinese that she speaks in comparison with other characters, the tea rituals she performs and the decor of her shuttle" (323). And the geisha imagery does not end with Inara; cartoon illustrations of geisha appear in the Fruity Oaty Bar logo (Fig 4), also designed by Geoffrey Mandel, furthering the Orientalism in the franchise in its visual design.

Scholar Rebecca M. Brown critiqued the entire *Firefly* franchise's blatant Orientalism by stating:

> *F/S* actively participates in the continuation and reinforcement of these Orientalizing images, relying on their exotic/erotic/ahistorical resonance to construct a picture of the future amalgamated universe. *Firefly/Serenity*, despite the reclamation of the powerful position of historical Asian courtesanship, and despite its attempts to incorporate and normalize Asian elements

within its fabric, remains largely within the bounds of Orientalizing imagery. (¶ 23)

The same exoticism occurs in the design of the *Serenity* logo. By choosing Papyrus, Mandel further normalizes a generic Orient present in current American culture. The cultural generalizations seen in Papyrus are ignored and instead recognized as acceptable and "Asian." The same can be said about the Chinese calligraphy in the logo.

A typical Western audience understands the calligraphy as originating from an Asian country, but not necessarily which one. With similar logic this same audience hears an Asian language woven into the English dialogue from the cast supporting the use of the calligraphy and other Asian props and clothing even without Asian characters. Asian multimedia artist Astria Suparak agrees in a 2022 interview on the *Imaginary Worlds* podcast:[5] "You know, we're told the cultures combined, we hear muddled Mandarin, we see Chinese newspapers and we see Buddha sculptures and chopsticks and other east and Southeast Asian cultures like strewn about in every scene. But where are the Asian people?" (Molinsky). Her comments can help clarify further my concerns with the *Serenity* logo. Using her description of *Firefly* and *Serenity*, the calligraphy in the logo is akin to the Buddha sculpture or a Japanese katana displayed in a Western home amongst lay-z-boy recliners, IKEA tables, and photos of their Caucasian family. The calligraphy like the sculpture or katana serves as exotic decoration. Suparak attempts to rationalize this exoticism in her interview: "I think it's a colonialist urge to collect exotic items specifically from other cultures or to loot them" (Molinsky). The red circle of the *Serenity* logo acts then as a container to collect Mandel's ideas of Asian-ness.

Design scholar Peter Fine critiques American designers as creators of visual culture who, since the vast majority are white (like Mandel), perpetuate whiteness: "In this space of largely anonymous cultural production, graphic designers have played with images and texts, often in combination. It is the very play with these forms that has helped to maintain racist and racialized images […]" (4). As mentioned earlier, designers are still taught today in the Modernist method theorized in the Bauhaus from the early twentieth century. Mandel, despite a film degree, likely learned design (on his own and on the job) and the art of typography through the lens of the Swiss Modernists like Jan Tschichold, Max Miedinger, and Josef Müeller Brockmann. All three put an emphasis on the universality of simplicity, legibility, objectivity, and standardization. But whose standard? The white European male designers'. In the Modernist pedagogical method, there is rarely room for a cultural canon, as the standard of Eurocentric machine aesthetics is sacrosanct. The design work one sees daily in media and commerce is based largely on the Swiss Modernist/Bauhaus theories on design and typography which perpetuates whiteness and racialized design throughout our visual culture still today. I argued in an earlier paper on racialized design that there is a pressing need for the "development of new systems of university-level, communication design curricula that allow for input from diverse social and cultural influences and that more readily afford access to students who hail from a broader array of America's socio-economic classes" to combat pervasive issues of whiteness and racialized design in the profession (Benson et al. 132). The poor choice of Papyrus comes from consistent racialized design (unknowingly for many) taught through the lens of Modernism in higher education.

Ironically, from a Swiss Modernist perspective the choice of Papyrus would be condemned. Tschichold's view on ornament in type, as seen in the rough non-geometric edges of Papyrus, "comes from an attitude of childhood naiveté. It shows the reluctance to use 'pure design,' a giving-in to a primitive instinct to decorate […]" (125). Tschichold's language here is littered with problems with regards to othering and demonstrates again the unfortunate historical connections between design history, practice, and whiteness.

Mandel's type choice is indeed exoticism. Jes Battis, in their assessment of the lack of Asian characters in the *Firefly* cast, explains why: "[W]e have Asian culture with no Asians. In this sense, Asian culture becomes a sort of white assemblage of different cultures, treading dangerously close to complete exoticization" (¶ 24). Mandel's logo design decisions, according to Leigh Adams Wright, were to choose the

> mysterious, the unknown, the exotic […] to add "spice" to every life. The goal is not a true understanding or appreciation of the Other, but an enhancement of one's situation, and experiential vacation yielding the conceptual equivalent of a piece of mass-produced Indian pottery and slideshow to impress the neighbors. It's bits of authentic culture recontextualized for a boring white mainstream's use. (31)

Seeing Papyrus used on various cultural ephemera from a Caribbean festival poster, a Mexican pop star t-shirt, a film about indigenous blue aliens, to a ship logo intended to be Asian, demonstrates a whiteness in design as a consistent racialized gaze employing visual generalizations about a culture. In the case of Papyrus, Mandel lumps many Asian cultures into

one (Chinese) despite the typeface designer's intentions for Papyrus to replicate Middle Eastern calligraphy styles, not Asian, Caribbean, Mexican, or Indigenous/First Nations. This mushing of cultures is classic Colonialism. Scholar Carrie Rose Evon agrees, arguing that 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 into Whedon's 'Verse" (Evon 47).

Papyrus and Material Dishonesty

Further compounding issues of the cultural generation of Papyrus is the additional presence of material dishonesty in the *Serenity* logo (including Papyrus). The concept of material dishonesty originated in the architecture discipline; material honesty is defined as selecting materials based on their properties to influence the form it is used for (Kaufmann 97) or "that a material used to build something should be what it looks like it is" (Kadavy). In more basic terms, if you install a wood floor in your spaceship, it should be a wood floor, not a plastic one with wood grain texture applied on top.

"Papyrus isn't hand-calligraphed on paper. It's merely the suggestion of letters hand-calligraphed on paper. Papyrus is the fake-destroyed-column of fonts," according to David Kadavy. Just as Papyrus is the suggestion of Asian culture, it is also the suggestion of carefully hand painted typography on papyrus paper. It is neither. It is dishonest in its purported authenticity. That presents a problem as a brand. In the contemporary business world, transparency and authenticity are paramount for the success of a brand. Once the public learns that a brand's claim that they are "environmentally friendly," for example, is

not entirely truthful, the trust a consumer has for that company plummets. (In the world of branding, what a company or film is trusted to deliver is called a brand promise.)

The same can hold true here for the *Serenity* logo. Through a cursory look at the Papyrus script and roughened circles, a general viewer could conceive that it relates to Asia and seems painted by hand. Once it is known that neither is true, combined with the lack of Asian cast members in a film whose backdrop is that of a Chinese American hybrid, questions arise about the genius of Whedon's creative direction and decisions on casting. Material dishonesty is not as much of an issue as the *Serenity* logo (one can assume my view based on the lengths dedicated to each section in this paper), but it is a problem that contributes to a false representation of culture in our media and our daily lives. As Kadavy explains:

> This is why material dishonesty matters, and this is Why You Hate Papyrus. In the movie *Avatar*, the Na'vi are fooled by the false representations of themselves, and it leads to tragedy. You don't only see material dishonesty in your furniture, and your bathroom tile. Material dishonesty seeps into every nook and cranny of civilization. One moment we accept walls that look like brick, but aren't, and the following moment we accept something that looks like food but isn't nourishing. We accept someone who looks and acts like a doctor but doesn't improve people's health. If we'll accept these things, we'll accept politicians who have one superficial characteristic that fits what we imagine a politician to be   and everything else be damned.

Material dishonesty and cultural generalization lead to the contemporary issues our society faces today where racial stereotypes become accepted truths, plastic is wood, and news is fake. For the *Serenity* logo, we see Inara paint its letters and warm circles on the Firefly class ship at the end of the film. In that scene, the logo is paint on metal. When we see the same visual identity on movie posters or t-shirts, we imagine that the logo is lifted right from that nearly final moment in the film to the ephemera we see on the wall or clothing rack. The letters are brush strokes from Inara's hand on the ship we all love. But they are not. They are instead Chris Costello's hand-painted letterforms that attempted to replicate Middle Eastern calligraphy styles on old textured papyrus manuscripts. The letters are obviously not painted by actor Morena Baccarin (Inara); they are instead digitized generalizations of materials and a culture.

How could Geoffrey Mandel or any designer avoid these pitfalls in the construction of the *Serenity* logo or any visual identity? A methodology called participatory design, I argue, could be the answer. Deborah Szebeko maintains that

> participatory design, or co-design, emerged from ideas that originated in Scandinavia in the 1970s. The idea that participants could cooperate with designers, researchers, and developers during the evolution of inventive and innovative processes was eventually adapted into healthcare, information technology, human + computer interaction design, architecture, and urban design as the 1970s gave way to the 1980s and 1990s. (581)

In other words, participatory design is designing "with, not for." When creating something about or for a culture or community,

it is best to not just talk with that culture or community about what is needed, but instead bring them into the process to co-create together.

Some notable scholars in this field include Elizabeth Sanders, Pieter Stappers, Emily Pilloton, Pamela Napier, and Terry Wada. Early work of Pilloton involved designing *with* rural American and African communities to create needed products and architecture determined by the people living in the area (TED). Napier and Wada utilize "*participatory action research,* which is grounded in accounting for the experiences, reflections, and inclusive collaborations with others throughout the research and design process" (161). In the case of Mandel, he described his design process as one with little interaction. In a 2006 interview he discussed how he was allowed to explore the design on his own without much art direction from management: "Except for saying 'hi' in passing, I didn't really have much interaction with Joss, but I thought I knew what he was looking for, based on what I knew about him and from watching *Firefly*" ("Serenity Stuff").

Using a "design with, not for" methodology, Mandel would have consulted with Chinese creatives to conceive of a visual identity together. Evon in her critique of Whedon's lack of Asian actors echoes a similar suggestion: "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)" (57). Astria Suparak agrees: "They should hire Asians behind the camera, like Asians in decision-making positions and multiple agents, not just one consultant or one person" (qtd. in Molinksy). More Asian (and Chinese in this case) cast members and collaborators would have mitigated issues of racialized design and material dishonesty in the branding. It would have also prevented translation issues

within the Mandarin dialogue. "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," laments Evon (49).

Conclusions

I do not believe either Mandel or Whedon purposefully wanted to promote racism through the logo design or lack of Asian cast members, as scholar Agnes B. Curry agrees: "I'm certainly not arguing that it is Whedon's intent to promote racism or a colonialist mentality" (11). However, the issues with otherness and inauthenticity in the *Serenity* logo exist and only exacerbate existing concerns around the lack of Asian characters[6] and overall generalization of Asian cultures in other aspects (set, props, costumes, and dialogue) of the film and television series critiqued in existing *Firefly* literature. The deficiencies in the creative process leading to the choice of Papyrus in the *Serenity* logo further stress problems in American design education. To remedy future racialized design concerns, design in higher education must not only use co-design strategies, but also include more educators of color and discussions about and strategies to minimize racialized design to reduce the propagation of cultural generalizations in our visual culture. I argued in a previous article that:

> University-level, American communication design educators must also ask themselves and the ever-diversifying array of contemporary design practitioners, "Who does the profession serve?" So much of the contemporary classroom dialogue in our discipline across the country is currently focused on locating and sustaining careers that serve a limited group of corporate

oligarchs while avoiding discussions of how to effectively broaden the social, technological, economic, and political horizons of the discipline. Are jobs for communication designers in social entrepreneurial sectors possible, and, if so, what might these (should these) look like? How can the communication design discipline achieve an effective transition from the broad perception by those outside it of us operating as mere service providers to us being proactive strategists capable of advancing, or collaborating to advance, particular social and cultural agendas? (Benson et al. 149).

Philosopher Tony Fry believes that "design is one of the main operative agents of the social, cultural, and economic functioning and dysfunctioning of humanity's made world" (25), echoing Peter Fine's commentary that designers' work largely perpetuates whiteness and racist imagery. The work to turn design into a tool for the common good should cultivate in the classroom. Discussions between educators and students into society and race are necessary beyond simply making work that looks "good." The good news is that these conversations are happening. Design scholars Lisa Mercer (University of Illinois) and Terresa Moses (University of Minnesota, Twin Cities) developed "Racism Untaught," a toolkit "to facilitate people in identifying, analyzing, and re-imagining forms of Racialized Design design that perpetuates elements of racism" (Mercer and Moses). Their workshops for design educators (and companies) dissect cultural generalization in current branding, personal experiences with "otherness," and systems of oppression in the design profession. Additionally, in a 2022 publication of the Chilean journal *Diseña,* editors Frederick M. C. van Amstel, Lesley-Ann Noel, and Rodrigo Freese Gonzatto

(1) collected design scholars' research documenting their own case studies in the classroom tackling otherness and racialized design issues. This growing body of research and teaching includes many more design academics and could be the catalyst to minimize cultural generalization and inauthenticity in the design discipline, helping to keep Papyrus a relic, and no longer seen in logos, interfaces, and advertisements in this 'verse.

Notes

[1] David Ogilvy is the founder of famed advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather and has been called the "Father of Advertising."

[2] One can view a portfolio of Mandel's design work on his portfolio website www.geoffreymandel.com. There one can see his *Serenity* branding alongside a glimpse into his long history of design work in the entertainment industry creating for television shows like *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-2020), *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), *Star Trek Voyager* (1995-2001 [Mandel 2000-2001]), *Mad Men* (2007-2015), *The Muppet Show* (1976-1981), and more. Mandel also designed the Fruity Oaty Bar logo.

[3] Editors' note: It is also worth considering how the color combinations of Jayne's hat ("The Message" 1.12) and of the logo play off each other. Browncoats at fan cons wear the hats in the red, yellow, and predominately orange colors as quick markers of their identity as fans of *Firefly* and their association with its themes of "devoted family ties" (Rambo 191). Numerous vendors at these events sell merchandise that fall into this color pattern, item such as shirts and dresses, hand- and tote bags, and jewelry, to name a few. Fans can also purchase fabric in the *Firefly/Serenity* colors to create their own items for personal use or for sale, such as facemasks.

[4] Graphic designers (and comedians) use both Comic Sans and Papyrus as topics for jokes and mockery of bad design. One can now purchase their combined offspring Comic Parchment at Creative Market (https://creativemarket.com/benharman/229510-Comic-Parchment-Font-CENSORED), which is described as "mankind's first genetically-engineered superfont, boasting typographic DNA from the two most revered fonts in existence: Comic Sans and [CENSORED]."

[5] Suparak's "Asian Futures Without Asians" (Molinsky) discusses the lack of Asian characters in science fiction films and television (including *Firefly* and *Serenity*).

[6] Both the Dark Horse and Boom! Studios comics add more Asian characters, likely in part to address this critique, but debate on whether those characters are part of the *Firefly* canon is a subject for a different paper.

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Appendix

Fig. 1 - Six variations of the *Serenity* logo

Fig. 2 - *Serenity* set in Papyrus (top). *Serenity* squashed and edited by Mandel for the wordmark logo.
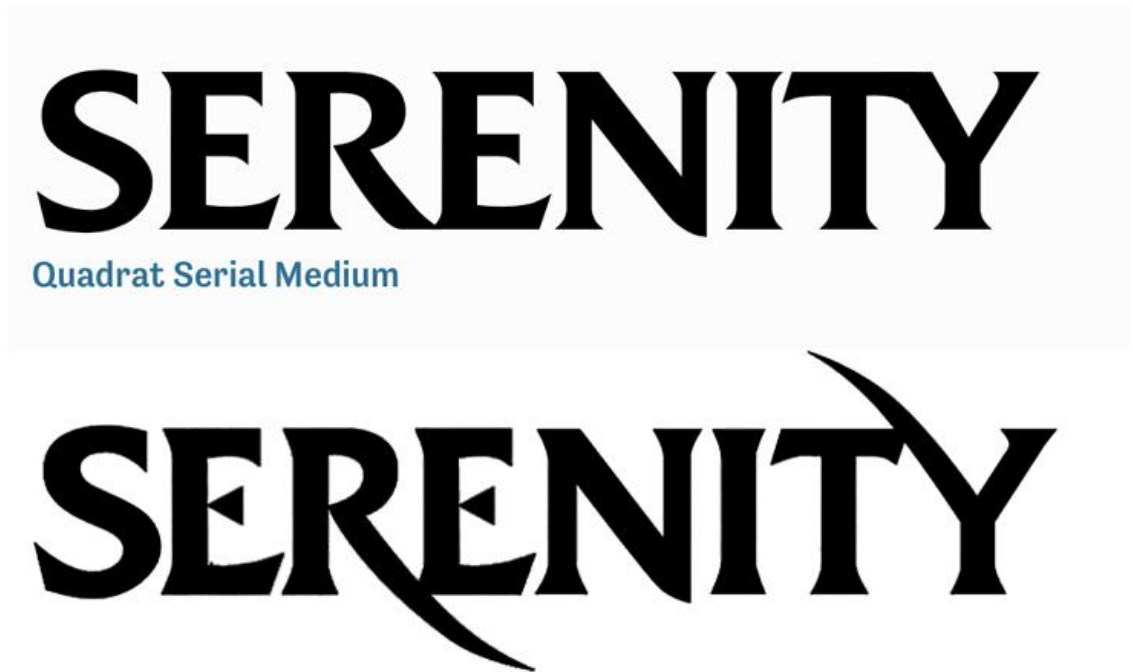
SERENITY

Quadrat Serial Medium

SERENITY

Fig. 3 - *Serenity* logo used on two-sided movie posters and Blu-ray discs. Likely typeset in Quadrat Serial Medium (or similar) but with extended tail of the R, swash of the Y, and triangles replacing the cross bars of the Es

Fig. 4   The Fruity Oaty Bar! logo used in the film *Serenity* designed by Geoffrey Mandel. This logo was shown on a monitor in the Maidenhead bar on the Beaumonde (the fifteenth planet of the Kalidasa System).