"I Mean for Us to Live. The Alliance Won't Have That": New Frontierism and Biopower in *Firefly/Serenity*

Jocelyn Sakal Froese and Laura Buzzard

[1] *Firefly* scholars agree that frontier mythology is central to both the landscapes and plots depicted throughout Joss Whedon and Tim Minear's *Firefly* series. While these scholars have clearly established some of the historical roots of *Firefly*'s frontier concept (e.g., Amy Sturgis) and have mapped some specific ways in which *Firefly* deviates from those historical roots (e.g., Richard Lively's reading of feminine characters; Hillary Jones's reading of the political dimensions of the frontier), there are fundamental innovations in *Firefly*'s use of the frontier that have been previously unexplored. This essay puts forth an argument that seeks to complicate previous readings of the frontier in *Firefly* and *Serenity*; we argue that the text's engagement with the frontier is slippery and at times unstable, and as such, cannot be fully tied to any single frontier theory. Rather, we trace the coexistence in the text of two incompatible visions: Turner's "frontier thesis" and the "progressive" concept of the frontier. For much of the series, Mal tries to occupy the position of frontier hero as conceived by Turner, but the frontier he tries to occupy differs in key ways from the frontier as Turner conceived it. Because the frontier in *Firefly/Serenity* is shaped by the Alliance's exercise of biopower, Mal finds that he in fact occupies a different role justified by the "progressive"

Jocelyn Sakal Froese is a Ph.D. candidate in literature and cultural studies at McMaster University. Her work is in queer and feminist theory, biopolitics, and coming of age graphic novels and visual narratives. She is an award winning teaching assistant, and runs "living theory," the McMaster humanities theory podcast, which you can find on iTunes.

Laura Buzzard lives and works in Hamilton, Ontario, and Nanaimo, BC. She holds an undergraduate degree in Liberal Studies and Women's Studies from Vancouver Island University and a Master's in English from McMaster University. She is currently a senior editor for the academic publisher Broadview Press. She is co-editor of *Science and Society: An Anthology for Readers and Writers* and *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, and a contributing editor for *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature*. Her academic interests include feminist and queer theory, science fiction, and utopia.

frontier narrative: the Alliance treats him as a savage and, as such, relegates him to the state of "bare life."

[2] *Firefly/Serenity* necessarily engages with the ideological heritage of the frontier because, through its engagement with western tropes, the Rim—the outer edge of the verse—is marked as a frontier space. *Firefly/Serenity*'s auditory, visual, and ideological borrowings from the western genre have been widely recognized by *Firefly/Serenity* scholars. The theme music, Christopher Neal (191-93) and S. Andrew Granade have pointed out, with its "decidedly country-western feel", immediately associates the show with the western tradition (Granade 626). Many of the landscapes we see in the 'verse are dirty and scrubby, with rolling hills—a terrain evocative of the western—and, importantly, we only see such landscapes on Rim planets, such as Whitefall, Haven, and Higgins' Moon, that share other qualities with the frontier of the western genre. Visual markers of the west that feature prominently on these planets include "dirt roads, nineteenth-century clothing" (Buckman 174), "horses, holsters, almost abandoned towns" (Granade 625), "roaming cattle herds, and rough-and-tumble saloons" (Hill 489). But the Rim planets are not just aesthetically similar to the frontier of the western genre; they also resemble, at least superficially, the political organization of the frontier town as it often appears in fictional westerns. They are without government protection, and so are plagued by "rampaging outlaws" (Hill 489) as well as the more mundane problems of resource shortage (Buckman 174). As events throughout the series suggest—from "Serenity" (1.1), in which the crew cannot make a sale without engaging in a gunfight, to "Heart of Gold" (1.13), in which a gunfight is necessary to protect the inhabitants of a brothel from a wealthy rancher—the Rim in *Firefly/Serenity* is a "Wild West where the law of the gun prevails" (Amy-Chinn 177).

[3] Arguably, *Firefly/Serenity* draws from the western genre in another important respect: its incorporation of a frontier hero as a central character.[1] As Richard Slotkin observes, "[w]hen history is translated into myth, the complexities of social and historical experiences are simplified and compressed into the action of representative individuals or 'heroes'" (Slotkin 13). At first glance, Mal appears to be one such hero for the mythology of the frontier in *Firefly/Serenity*—

though, as we will see later, this surface similarity conceals a more complex structure. Sturgis has pointed out that his origin is similar to the southern American origin of many cowboys of both the real and mythological west: as a soldier for the Independents, a thinly veiled parallel for the Confederates, he has headed for the frontier after fighting on the losing side of a civil war (28; see also Erisman). He is even, in the tradition of western stories, concerned about the eventual loss of frontier space through the encroachment of civilization: "Every year since the war," he laments, "the Alliance pushes just a little further out towards the Rim" (*Serenity*).

[4] Concern regarding the contrast between the frontier and civilization is central both to frontier mythology and to the driving conflicts of *Firefly/Serenity*. Slotkin describes the successful frontier hero as "one who had defeated and freed himself from both the 'savage' of the western wilderness and the metropolitan regime of authoritarian politics and class privilege" (11). It is—or seems to be—clear who occupies these roles in *Firefly/Serenity*: the central government of the Alliance, whose power radiates outward from sophisticated urban planets, is the "metropolitan regime"; the Reavers, who conduct raiding parties and engage in rape, cannibalism, and other wanton violence on the frontier, embody the worst of "savage" stereotypes; and Mal, as the typical frontier hero, attempts to survive without running afoul of either extreme. In "Serenity," Zoe observes that, like the Alliance, the Reavers are also "pushing out further every year." Mal responds, "it's gettin' awful crowded in my sky," evoking the image of the ship perpetually trying to find a free space between the two as the Alliance pushes outward from the centre and the Reavers push inward from the edge. This is a common reading of the text. Hillary Jones, for example, describes Mal's position as a "reject[ion of] both the savage and the civilized" (239), while Matthew Hill conceives of it as "between two diametrically opposed and insurmountable forces in the 'verse: the Alliance, representing totalitarian social control, and the Reavers, figures of the violent rejection of all social norms" (492).

[5] Though frontier life is fraught with difficulty and danger—in Mal's case, posed by the Alliance and the Reavers—it holds an allure of freedom for the frontier hero. The nature of this allure is clearly

articulated in Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis." Advanced in 1893, three years after the American government declared the frontier officially closed, Turner's "Frontier Thesis" fostered in the American popular imaginary an enduring fascination with frontier ideals, frontier heroes, and the frontier as both a real and imagined landscape representing the edge of civilization, just beyond the reach of governments deemed to be a hindrance to personal liberties (Sturgis 26-28). The frontier was defined, physically, as an expanse of land free for the taking, and in the imaginary as the continual westward movement of American settlement that "explain[s] American development" (Sturgis 26). In Turner's conception, the wild nature of the frontier fostered individualism and "a kind of primitive organization based on the family" characterized by "antipathy to control" (30), but as settlements gradually took on "the complexity of city life" (2), they developed into fully fledged democratic political communities: "frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy" (30). As wilderness developing into civilization, the frontier was a "place where American ideals of democracy, egalitarianism, and self-reliance not only could, but also had to be put into practice" (Stevens cited in Lively, 183).

[6] Amy Sturgis argues that the frontier ideology encapsulated by Turner is strongly paralleled in Mal's attitudes. For him, the frontier represents a space "beyond the long arm of the Alliance" that "obstructs the workings of their daily life and their exercise of individual liberty" (Sturgis 31, 25). As Mal phrases it, "we'll never be under the heel of nobody ever again. No matter how long the arm of the Alliance might get . . . we'll just get us a little further" ("Out of Gas," 1.8). Though, unlike the farmers Turner "assigned the leading role" in frontier mythology (Slotkin 33), Mal leads a nomadic, unsettled existence, he does see Rim space as free for the taking in the sense that his right to occupy it is inalienable: "you can't take the sky from me," the *Firefly* theme song proclaims. The social structure Mal fosters on board *Serenity* is certainly a "primitive organization based on the family," and Mal explicitly expresses his "antipathy to control" in the first episode: "That's what governments are for. Get in a man's way" ("Serenity" cited in Sturgis, 25).

[7] In a way that appears to contradict Turner's frontier narrative, Mal is decidedly not invested in the development of democracy—as he says, "we do not vote on my ship because my ship is not the gorram town hall" ("Serenity"). However, even his disdain for the final stages of frontier development is a key characteristic of the traditional frontier hero, the "function" of whom "is to make the wilderness safe for civilization in which he is unsuited (and disinclined) to participate" (Slotkin 34). Mal displays these tendencies perhaps most strongly in the episode "Heart of Gold," in which he and his crew defend brothel workers against an attack by a misogynist whose wealth has enabled him to tyrannize the impoverished frontier planet. In this regard, Mal occupies a role that is, according to Slotkin, often assigned to frontier heroes: that of "men (or women) who know Indians—characters whose experience, sympathies, and even allegiances fall on both sides of the frontier" (14). This knowledge enables them to act as mediators or, more often, as fighting allies, in conflicts between the civilized and the savage (16). Mal acts as a typical "man who knows Indians" in the episode "Bushwhacked" (1.3), in which he helps an inexperienced Alliance official deal with the aftermath of a Reaver attack. Throughout *Firefly* (the film *Serenity*, as we will discuss later, proves to be an exception), Mal's attitudes and actions tend to strongly parallel those of a traditional frontier hero.

[8] This does not, however, mean that the Rim really constitutes a frontier in the tradition of Turner—or even that Mal always fully occupies the frontier hero role. In fact, as Michael Marek observes, "[m]ost of the *Serenity* crew seek a positive, utopian, future," but this often places them in conflict with "the reality of existence in the dystopian environment of the outer planets" (112). Many scholars (e.g., Rowley 234, Sturgis 33) have described the Rim planets as an anarchic, kill-or-be-killed, "Hobbesian" political environment—a far cry from the democracy and egalitarianism envisioned by Turner. Colonists are either dying from lack of resources or living under the thumb of anyone who is able to amass sufficient guns or resources. The crew of *Serenity* encounter evidence of both frequently, from the superstitious small town desperate for a doctor in "Safe" (1.5) and the miners suffering from a preventable disease in "The Train Job" (1.2) to the oppressed Mudders in

"Jaynestown" (1.7) and the prostitutes forced to defend themselves in a gun battle in "Heart of Gold."

[9] This sort of suffering could easily be part of a traditional western—battles for survival against the wilderness and against outlaws are, indeed, frequently the focus of western stories. However, there is an ideological chasm between the source of these troubles in the mythology of the west and in *Firefly/Serenity*: the political climate of the traditional frontier was a product of "*separation* and *regression*" from civilization (Slotkin 11, emphasis original). The Rim planets certainly have inferior technology and lack civilized legal structures—the main ingredients of "regression"—but they are not really "separate" from the Alliance in the way that is demanded by the mythology of the frontier. In her article "Serenity and Bobby McGee: Freedom and the Illusion of Freedom in Joss Whedon's *Firefly*," Mercedes Lackey makes the argument that conditions of life are always, in life and in fiction, produced by what or whoever wields the force of power, and *Firefly/Serenity*'s Alliance is no exception (64). To be sure, the Alliance does not visibly interfere in the everyday lives of Rim inhabitants, but the Central planets are no less responsible for the overall shape of lives on the Rim: we are told that the planets have been "terraformed to support human life" (*Serenity*).[2] This means that conditions on the Rim have been, quite literally, *produced by state power*. The frontier of the 'verse is thus neither a space beyond civilization nor its expanding edge, but is instead a marginal space within the state.

[10] The class and power structure that results from Alliance rule operates under the logics of neoliberalism, which are characterized loosely by the investment in "the right of individual and ruling groups to accrue wealth removed from matters of ethics and social cost," which leads to a new metric for valuing human life in which bodies are valued only as sources of profit—and bodies that are not sources of profit are not valued (Giroux "On the Rise of"). When Linda Jencson notes that the Rim planets are occupied predominantly by "exploited workers, forgotten colonists, trafficked slaves, and endangered prostitutes [whose] enemies are the idle and indifferent rich, and an inept state—the Alliance" (Jencson par. 4), she observes the impacts of neoliberalism. In fact, though Jencson does not use the same politically charged language

that we invoke by citing Henry Giroux, she draws the same parallel between the excluded, dying, barely surviving, and displaced bodies that occupy *Firefly/Serenity*'s Rim planets with the real-world bodies of those abandoned to die in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (par. 7).

[11] While Jencson draws a parallel between the Rim planets and Hurricane Katrina, Giroux also identifies Katrina as a key moment in American politics. For him, the general abandonment of large sectors of New Orleans' most vulnerable population in the aftermath of Katrina is not a springboard for neoliberalism, but an event of a magnitude that was impossible for the media, and the nation, to ignore, and thus rendered said abandonment—the conditions of which were well underway prior to the storm—*visible.*[3] Giroux names that which was made visible in that moment as a "biopolitics of disposability" (*Stormy Weather, passim*), a particular application of biopower that, operating under the logics of neoliberalism, categorizes some human life as "waste," and therefore expendable (*Stormy Weather, passim*). The manifestation of this movement of power made visible, in the aftermath of Katrina, bodies deemed less valuable to the neoliberal project, and especially bodies costing the state money, which were classified as "human waste" and relegated to social and physical positions that cemented and increased their vulnerability to such an event.

[12] The particular application of biopower employed in the biopolitics of disposability is twofold. First, mechanisms of discipline ranging from "surveillance and population control to genetic manipulation" are applied to individuals, concomitant with strategies for encouraging individuals to self-discipline, all of which occurs so that bodies can be ordered or ranked in terms of usefulness to the neoliberal project (read: the project of accruing and centralizing power and wealth) (Giroux, *Stormy Weather* 16). Second is the production of "a cleansed visual landscape in which the poor, the elderly, the infirm, and criminalized populations share a common fate of disappearing from public view" (Giroux, *Stormy Weather* 23). This same set of mechanisms is at play in the *Firefly/Serenity* 'verse, as the Alliance enacts the same forms of biopower on subjects under its control. All are subject to technologies of surveillance; as Zoe phrases it, "where there ain't sensors, there's Feds" ("Ariel," 1.9, cited in Sturgis 28). Those that opt to self-discipline,

however, are awarded greater freedoms. Consider that Inara, who subjects herself to invasive disciplinary tactics, such as yearly medical appointments ("Ariel"), moves through the 'verse relatively unhindered, while Mal and his crew become dependent on her access to mobility ("Ariel"). As Mal tells Shepherd Book in the pilot episode, "there are plenty of planets won't let you dock without a decent companion aboard" ("Serenity"). More pressingly, subjects classified as "human waste" are shunted out of view in accordance with the "cleaned visual landscapes" that are symptomatic of biopower for Giroux. In *Firefly/Serenity*, the Alliance have literally built a new margin—a set of Rim planets, far enough from Core planets as to be kept under surveillance but otherwise out of view from non-marginalized subjects.

[13] Rim planets are primarily populated with the working classes, who endure the hardships of bodily labor, poverty, and the further consequences of each. The miners that labor on Regina provide a key example of the kind of exclusion that occurs when a population is labelled as "waste." In "The Train Job," the sheriff informs Mal and Zoe about the particular negative effects of terraforming on Regina, and the resulting illness that the bodies of the planet's residents are made to bear: Bowden's malady—"an affliction of the bone and muscle. Degenerative." This dialogue is preceded by footage of miners wrapped up, huddled together, and coughing—a portrait of poverty and illness that aligns the population of Paradiso, and presumably the rest of Regina, with the type of population removed from view for the benefit of the wealthy and powerful in Giroux's formulation. According to the sheriff, the disease is so commonplace that it has become a condition of life for residents: "Everybody gets it. Miners, dumpers. Hell, I got it, I ain't never set foot in a mine" ("The Train Job"). Those afflicted with Bowden's malady require regular access to medication to maintain any quality of life, though the images of coughing, clearly suffering residents suggests that even with access to medication, the quality of life for residents of Regina is poor. Notable here is the cost/benefit analysis evident in this episode: the Alliance prefers to regularly ship medications to a Rim planet rather than to either fix the terraforming error that is causing the problem, aid the population in settling elsewhere, or shut down the mines, which appear to be the catalyst for the disease. As the

sheriff explains, "turns out the . . . air down underground, mixed up with the ore processors, is a recipe for Bowden's" ("The Train Job"). That the Alliance opts to provide medicines that keep the population of Regina well enough to work suggests that the Alliance values that population for the products they make. That the Alliance opts not to send their officers to recover the medication when it is stolen—even though the officers are already present at the scene—suggests that they are not invested in maintaining the population's quality of life; at least, we presume, not until the fact of the illness begins to interrupt the flow of goods. In other words, 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. We wish to emphasize that the Rim planets embody a marginalized space created by the Alliance in all senses—physically, but also through the relegation of certain bodies already deemed "waste" populations to those spaces—and also that the Alliance relies heavily on those margins to maintain itself. The margin and center, thus, are co-constitutive, a point that is key to our larger argument.

[14] It is the combination of the relegation of certain bodies to the Rim planets, and the nature and treatment of Bowden's malady, that leads us to read the type of biopower applied to the bodies of certain subjects by the Alliance in the *Firefly/Serenity* 'verse as tending towards the extremes of biopower as theorized by Giorgio Agamben. Modern biopower, for Agamben, is always tending towards the horrors of mass extermination, the key example of which is the Nazi concentration camp. Biopower in this formulation "include[s] exclusion and states of exception"—which we read as theoretical parallels to the designation of humans as waste—"and can motivate and justify violence that would otherwise fall outside its jurisdiction" (Canavan 173). Gerry Canavan places "unjust practices of labour exploitation," such as those borne out by the bodies of the miners located on Regina, firmly outside of the "terrible exterminative *potential* of biopolitical logic," and thus of Agamben's "camp" (Canavan 175, emphasis original). We argue, however, that Rim planet subjects provide an excellent example of "bare life," subjects marked by exclusion from the political life of citizens,

which reduces them to mere biological existence and makes them vulnerable to the kinds of biopolitical violence from which Canavan interprets them as being separate. This is not to say that life on Regina is equivalent to life in a concentration camp, but that power functions in both in a parallel way. In both cases, political life and bare life (*bios* and *zoe*, for Agamben) are distinguished according to those lives "deemed 'worth living,' and those deemed expendable" (Vint 163).

[15] In "The Train Job," Mal and Zoe learn a set of key facts about the conditions of life for the miners: most of them are "born into it," and all of them suffer from Bowden's malady, and only "live like a person [if] they get it [the medication that has been stolen] regular." Additionally, the sheriff remarks that, should the thief be caught, his preferred punishment, rather than jail time, would be to "toss 'em in a mine, [and] let 'em breathe deep for the rest of their lives." The conditions of life for those with untreated Bowden's are likened to a form of punishment or torture. The Alliance's part in the creation and maintenance of the margin, manifest in the Rim planets and the subjects that occupy them, is that it creates dependences like these: the miners are stripped of their political selves in that they are impoverished enough to be restricted in their movements and are wholly dependent on the Alliance for the maintenance of quality of life. They are, however, expendable to the Alliance, who refuse to send Alliance officers after the stolen medication on the grounds that "they have better things to do," or that their time is more valuable than the lives of the miners.

[16] Wholly overshadowed as it is by the power of the Alliance, the Rim is not really like the frontier as conceived in traditional westerns—and this reality, as we have seen, contradicts Mal's concept of the Rim as a place where freedom can be found. However, Alliance beliefs are equally out of touch with the real nature of its own power. Its ideology regarding the Rim also closely parallels frontier mythology—not the mythology as put forward by Turner, but another variant of frontier mythology that developed in the decades preceding Turner's frontier thesis. Slotkin argues that, while Turner may have received more scholarly attention, the American popular imagination has been more drawn to another style of frontier mythology, which he calls "progressive" (22-26). This vision "uses the Frontier Myth in ways that

buttress the ideological assumptions and political aims of a corporate economy and managerial politics," such that economic and nationalistic concerns are bound together (as they would be, a century later, in neoliberal ideology) (Slotkin 22). Where Turner saw the politics of the frontier as individualism developing into egalitarian democracy, progressives saw the frontier as a platform for "the steady transformation of small individual concerns into large economic and political institutions" (Slotkin 22). A parallel philosophy is clearly reflected in the Alliance's 'verse-wide war to "unite all the planets under one rule" ("The Train Job"). In the progressive vision, "classes of heroes emerg[e] from the strife of races to earn a neo-aristocratic right to rule" (Slotkin 35). These, too, populate the Rim, from Patience, who Mal observes "owns half [the] damn moon" of Whitefall ("Serenity"), to Magistrate Higgins, who brutally exploits the indentured "Mudders" on his moon ("Jaynestown"). In each of these cases, the Rim-dwellers in question demonstrate their "right" to rule by mimicking, with varying degrees of success, the structures of power used by the Alliance: Rance Burgess classifies Petaline (one of the whores in "Heart of Gold") as "human waste" when he threatens to "cut [her baby] out of" her, should it prove to be his. Similarly, Patience of Whitefall attributes her ownership of most of that planet to the rule "I never let go of money I don't have to"—a rule that, coupled with the ease with which she resorts to violence (i.e., shooting Mal) in order to accrue wealth, aligns her with the logics of neoliberalism ("Serenity"). The power structures of individual Rim planets thus present, to varying degrees, a microcosm of the relationship between Rim and Core.

[17] As these examples imply, the progressive vision of the frontier is one predominantly characterized by violence—a "Social Darwinian" arena in which the best (that is, most civilized) societies and individuals fight to subordinate or eliminate the inferior (that is, savage) societies and individuals (Slotkin 55). In this narrative, the savage is conceived as an absolute threat to civilization with which civilization cannot coexist: "[m]ilitary folklore [of the west] held that in battle against a savage enemy you always saved the last bullet for yourself; for in savage war one side or the other must perish, whether by limitless murder or by the degrading experience of subjugation and torture"

(Slotkin 12). We suggest that the "savage" categorization shares significant parallels with Giroux's classification of "human waste" and acts as a justification for the relegation to bare life as conceived by Agamben.

[18] In *Firefly*, this conception of the savage is most obviously expressed through the Reavers, whose ultimate savagery is made clear by Zoe in *Firefly*'s first episode: "If they take the ship, they'll rape us to death, eat our flesh and sew our skins into their clothing, and if we're very, very lucky, they'll do it in that order" ("Serenity"). As this statement suggests, Reavers share many attributes with American Indians as depicted in typical westerns: they are cannibals (Rabb and Richardson 128, Curry par. 27); their skinning of victims echoes the practice of scalping (Curry par. 28); and they are coded as American Indians both visually through the "war paint" (Rabb and Richardson 127) on their spaceships and musically through the drumming that accompanies their appearance in the narrative (Curry par. 25). In addition to these genre cues, the Reavers are explicitly framed as being so savage that, in war with them, "one side or the other must perish." Shooting a person who has been captured by Reavers is seen universally as "a piece of mercy" (as Zoe says in the film *Serenity*), and even Jayne extracts a promise from Mal to "shoot [him] if they take [him]" (*Serenity*). Inara—despite having much less experience with frontier violence than characters such as Zoe, Jayne, and Mal—also subscribes to the philosophy of "saving the last bullet for yourself"; in the pilot "Serenity," when a Reaver attack seems imminent, she is shown preparing to inject herself with what viewers can only assume is a euthanasia drug.

[19] While the portrayal of Reavers undeniably evokes American Indians as they appear in westerns, there is one essential difference: Reavers are not presented as a distinct racial group. They appear in all skin colors, and, as we learn in "Bushwhacked," anyone who witnesses their violence up close can transform into one. Mary Alice Money and Reid Locklin have even suggested that Reavers are an apt metaphor for *white* settlers going mad in the frontier wilderness (cited in Curry n.p.). *Firefly* presents Reavers with the absurdly violent trappings of western-genre Indians, but without the justification of a distinct racial category—and, in fact, places emphasis on the ease with which anyone can

potentially become one. This destabilizes the idea of the "savage" as a racial category, and that destabilization is rendered complete in *Serenity* when we learn that the Reavers—like the habitable Rim planets themselves—are a product of Core planet technology. Rabb and Richardson interpret the creation of Reavers—a side effect of Pax, an Alliance-produced drug meant to subdue the population—as a metaphor for colonial oppression via racial stereotypes: the Reavers "were quite literally turned into savages by the Alliance" (137).

[20] Reavers are an effective exploration of racial stereotyping, but they also show the ease with which the symbolism of the "savage" can be extended to non-racial groups. This trend has a long history in frontier mythology that reaches at least as far back as the late 1870s, when, Slotkin argues, the "race-war symbolism" of progressive frontier mythology was imposed upon conflicts between laborers and managers (Slotkin 19). Just as American Indians were cast as enemies to civilization, so were the members of the working classes—a logical step given that, according to the progressive vision, the civilization of the frontier was measured in the development of large-scale economic interests helmed by a deserving neo-aristocracy (Slotkin 21). Working-class people, dismissed as "savages," were given the same unlivable choice western mythology offered to Indians: subjugation or death, both of which were forms of destruction similar to those endured in the twenty-first century by "human waste." The administration of the Pax to the population of the planet Miranda can be read as an extreme metaphor mirroring the choice offered any population labeled as savage according to this ideology. Those who "stopped fighting" (*Serenity*) died when the drug rendered them completely inactive—i.e., they were destroyed through subjugation. Reavers were the subjects who refused subjugation; their constant aggression, which can be read as resistance against the domination of the Alliance, renders them such incontrovertible enemies of civilization that, in any encounters with civilized beings, they must kill or be killed by them.

[21] Yet the events on Miranda are only an extreme instance of the choice offered to all working-class people living on the Rim, all of whom are branded with the "savage" label. As Jencson has recognized, the "human colonists take [the] place" of "space aliens—[the]

indigenous peoples of distant planets" as "uncivilized Other" ("'Aiming'" par. 21). This label is applied explicitly: in the opening minutes of *Serenity*, a core-planet teacher recounting recent history describes the Alliance as a "beacon of civilization" in contrast with "the *savage* outer planets [that] refused Alliance control" (emphasis added). The children in the classroom even display some confusion about the difference between Reavers and ordinary Rim-dwellers—one student corrects another's claim that Rim colonists are cannibals—showing the degree of slippage in the popular imaginary of Core-dwellers between one group and the other. This labeling, by painting Rim-dwellers with the same brush as the Reavers, provides ideological justification for their subjugation and relegation to bare life.

[22] This slippage between settler and savage in *Firefly*/*Serenity*'s frontier narrative reaches even to Mal and, by extension, most of the rest of his crew. Mal may have much in common with the frontier hero—and he may reject the savage extreme along with the civilized—but the way the Alliance sees him is another matter: he is to them another savage, along with his crew. This fact is made clear in *Serenity* by the actions of the Operative, who attempts to kill them to suppress River Tam's scandalous knowledge about the origin of Reavers—or, in other words, the threat to civilization that the crew of *Serenity* poses. As such, it is the Operative, not Mal, who plays the role of the "man who knows Indians" in their interaction; Slotkin describes the role as functioning outside "the constraints of moral or civic order which the social collective must observe . . . . to make the wilderness safe for a civilization in which he is unsuited . . . to participate" (34). The Operative certainly works beyond both moral and civic order, as in his quest to drive the *Serenity* crew out of hiding he murders many, likely hundreds of people who are guilty of no moral or legal crime. And he acknowledges his own unsuitability as an occupant of the civilization for which he labors: "I believe in something greater than myself. A better world. A world without sin . . . . I'm not going to live there; there's no place for me there, any more than there is for you. Malcolm, I'm a monster. What I do is evil . . . but it must be done" (*Serenity*). Mal and his crew must be eliminated at all costs because they stand in the way of

the "better world"—that is, the civilized world—as savages refusing subjugation.

[23] As a result of the Operative's actions, Mal comes to recognize the role in which the Alliance casts him and to act accordingly. Mal experiences an epiphany during a conversation with the Operative as the Operative says "If [you believed in nothing,] you'd be nothing more than a Reaver. But then, maybe you're not that far from—" (*Serenity*). Mal turns off the screen before the Operative completes the sentence; he does not need to hear the Operative say "a Reaver" because the Operative's murders have already made it clear that Mal and his crew—and everyone like them—are, to the Alliance, savage threats deserving only of bare life. As Mal phrases it moments later, "I mean for us to live. The Alliance won't have that." This is the moment at which Mal reveals the first phase of his plan to disguise *Serenity* as a Reaver ship so as to travel to Miranda and discover the Alliance's secret. The crew reacts with outrage: Simon, for example, protests "What's the point of living if you sink to the level of a savage?" Their response suggests the ideological import of this plan; where the crew's ideology has been, up to this point, the "rejection of the savage and the civilized" (as Jones phrases it), they now "recognize themselves as already dead," (Canavan 189), and thus overtly align themselves with the savage.

[24] This positioning becomes more apparent after the crew learns the secret of Miranda and discovers that the Reavers are, like them, victims of attempted Alliance subjugation. Their mission to broadcast the truth about Miranda at the climax of the film is, in a sense, a mission to save the Reavers—not the current Reavers, who cannot be saved, but the potential Reavers of the future, who Mal foresees will be made when "They [the Alliance] will try again," motivated by "the belief that they can make people . . . better" (*Serenity*). And in this battle, the crew essentially enlists the Reavers as allies. They are dangerous allies, to be sure, but they make possible the success of the mission, and the visual we see is of one apparent Reaver ship—the *Serenity*—leading an army of them into battle. Mal has always known that he was not living the freedom of the ideal frontier hero—the lengths he goes to in *Firefly* to avoid the Alliance are proof that he is not "a man who believes himself at complete liberty" (Sturgis 30)—but it is only in *Serenity* that he stops

trying to create a space for himself between civilization and savagery and instead chooses a side, coming to the defense of the savage.

[25] Mal and crew's discovery of Miranda and Alliance's experimentation on their own citizens, coupled with the final thrust of the plot of *Serenity* drive home the manner in which the changing concept of the frontier—for Mal, but also for viewers—is inextricably bound up with the newly visible workings of biopower. What is made visible is the precarious nature of existence that impacts all subjects under the Alliance—though the level of precariousness at which subjects are positioned is extremely varied. A close examination of several scenes reveals that Reavers, despite the extreme nature of their behaviors and the fear they incite, were the product of biopolitical manipulations aimed at a population much closer in cultural values and practices, but also in terms of wealth and economics, to Core planet populations than the rest of those on the Rim. Because of the degree to which the Alliance has erased existing knowledge of Miranda, we cannot know its exact function in the 'verse, or the exact nature of its relationship to the Rim/Core economic system. However, we can note that Miranda appears, at least at surface level, to be dissimilar to other Rim planets. Glimpses of Miranda reveal paved streets instead of dry dirt and scrub; buildings made of similar materials to those seen on Core planets instead of rough, wood structures; and corpses dressed in professional attire, rather than the casual and/or leather hewn apparel donned by most Rim dwellers. Despite these very clear differences, it was Miranda rather than one of the more apparently vulnerable Rim planets that was the site of this dramatically oppressive application of biopower. The possibility of increasing production—a task made simpler by Miranda's adoption of technologies associated with the "civilized," such as air ventilation systems and increased access to video communication systems, and a project foundational to the neoliberal project of accruing more and more wealth—put at risk even those that have ostensibly bought into the civilizing mission. If the freedom of the frontier is fundamentally compromised by the workings of biopower, then so is the freedom of the center.

[26] Richard Slotkin comments on the inevitable evolution of cultural mythologies:

> Myths are formulated as ways of explaining problems that arise in the course of historical experience . . . . Sooner or later the bad harvest, the plague, defeat in war, . . . internal imbalance in the distribution of wealth and power produce a crisis that cannot be fully explained . . . by invoking the received wisdom embodied in myth . . . . In the end . . . the revised ideology [that emerges] acquires its own mythology, typically blending old formulas with new ideas or concerns. (6)

[27] This is precisely what is accomplished regarding the myth of the frontier in *Firefly/Serenity*. The logics of neoliberalism—illustrated, for example, by Hurricane Katrina—constitute a crisis in American politics that cannot be explained by the frontier narratives of the past. In *Firefly/Serenity*, we see the "old formulas" of frontier traditions appear in new forms: Turner's model of the frontier hero is held up in the character of Malcolm Reynolds, while the "progressive" frontier narrative is reflected in the ideology of the Alliance. These old formulas are blended together with the twenty-first-century concerns of neoliberal politics and the new forms of biopower they encourage and enable.

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[1] On the question of Mal's placement as hero of the western genre, see Mary Alice Money, esp. 118-19; on his placement as western vs. science fiction, see Jes Battis.

[2] Though it is not explicitly stated in the show that Rim worlds were terraformed by the Alliance, it is likely that they were, as the Rim planets were terraformed much later than the Core ones, and some of them are still in the process of being terraformed. Mal seems to consider the Alliance responsible for the terraforming as

well as for the suffering of the colonists: "Once they're [the "border moons"] are terraformed, they'll dump settlers on there with nothing but blankets, hatchets, maybe a herd. Some of them make it, some of them ..." ("Serenity").

[3] See also Jencson's "All Those Apocalypses" on the news media's distorted depictions of those who suffer through disasters such as Hurricane Katrina.