"I Believe in Something Greater than Myself": What Authority, Terrorism, and Resistance Have Come to Mean in the Whedonverses

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[1] Beginning with *Firefly*'s original run in 2002, the creation of its sequel film *Serenity* in 2005, and the prints of various narrative prologues and sequels that followed in comic book format within the same universe (hereafter collectively referred to as the *F/S* 'verse), and the more recent shift to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) with the big budget film *The Avengers* (2012) and its offshoot series for the small screen, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-), the Whedonverses have seen the resurgence of ideologically parallel narratives regarding the dangers of a totalitarian state. In much the same manner as the crew of *Serenity* function as independents, not solely in terms of their political thinking but also in terms of their links to statehood, the agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. under the leadership of Agent (and now Director) Phil Coulson act as a small, covert group seeking to change the balance of power. The parallels are striking: both are sets of multi-ethnic found families battling a controlling body-politic, both are mobile aboard a primary form of transport that is their home as well as their means, both function within a platoon narrative, and both are led by a white male patriarch once haunted by a traumatic battle and seemingly trapped within the cycle of those memories.

[2] However, while these parallels allow for a comparison between the narratives of these 'verses, it seems clear that the shift from the *F/S* 'verse to the MCU has also indicated a significant shift in terms of the subtext that underpinned each franchise. Despite a growing internal critique of the militarism evident in American

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foreign policy within these 'verses, there remains an underlying textual justification in which the continued need for this militarization, and indeed, the devotion of further resources to this militarization, is evident. In this manner, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and its associated MCU movie franchise manage both to critique and disavow the totalitarian policies that underlie this militarized state, while insisting on the need for a continued and increased military presence: that S.H.I.E.L.D. has led to the resurgence of Hydra acts as a secondary excuse wherein those agents under now-Director Coulson must re-arm themselves and seek better weapons. The viewer is assured that eventually these will no longer be required, and this echoes the rhetoric of American foreign policy with regard to wars waged after 9/11 regarding the withdrawal of troops after the purported end of terrorism.[1]

[3] The Whedonverses have always largely been coded by anti-establishment rhetoric, suggesting that any presentation of the way authority, terrorism, and resistance is presented is intended to both expose and undercut any precise reading of these terms. However, the shift in tone between the creation of the *F/S* 'verse and the current run of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* suggests a far more complex interplay of alliances and personal culpability within these broader terms that simultaneously critiques the totalitarian state while subtly reinforcing its structures. Reading the parallel concerns of these two 'verses against each other forms the focus of this paper, as *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s reinterpretation of many of the *F/S* 'verse's themes indicates new ways in which to interrogate the manner in which these narratives have changed or eventually strengthened beyond their original ambiguity.

[4] As Andrew Martin notes, popular culture in the United States reimagines and propagates the lived experience of war, thereby allowing for narratives of culture and society to be constructed and, often, returned to prevailing structures of authority and control. It is through this process that the lived experience of insecurity, of uncertainty about the motives and aims of outsiders (the possible evil ones), is best viewed both as constructs and as constructed (Martin 108). Susan Faludi's analysis of the media's reaction to the events of 9/11 traces much the same pattern, and draws attention to the manner in which these narratives often reinforce anxieties or antagonisms that were already evident within society. The growing

media furor over nationalism and immigration in the aftermath of the so-called '"War on Terrorism"' has seen women's rights heavily affected as women's bodies became positioned as representative of their communities solely in the private sphere while being absented from spaces traditionally seen as masculine. Feminism was seen to have queered traditional gender roles and conflated pacifism with passivity, resulting in "feminized" men and women who, having demanded access, were inevitably unequal to the physical tasks normally the purview of men, thereby leaving the U.S. vulnerable to attack. Women's contributions to male-dominated spaces such as the armed forces and fire-fighters were elided in media narratives or produced as problematic, such that equality hiring services ensuring that women had entry into traditionally male-dominated workforces was undercut. Women in these services returned to being the exception rather than the rule. Additionally, People of Color were persecuted beyond the pre-existing social and systemic biases already evident, turning each of them into a localized version of a threat on home soil.[2] Notably, both these factors are evident within the *F/S* 'verse and the MCU, though this paper focuses more closely on the racial biases evidenced within these.[3] Therefore, this paper will trace the manner in which the war rhetoric within the Whedonverses begins with the critical disavowal of militarization rhetoric and its increasing reappropriation over time, as well as the manner in which People of Color, and more specifically, Black people, are particularly penalized within these 'verses.

Re-reading History in a New 'Verse

[5] Writing in November of 2001, Orhan Pamuk spoke of the tension generated between the "West" and the "East" both preceding and in the aftermath of 9/11. He argued that neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism on the one hand, and a growing resentment for repeated humiliation and presumed inferiority on the other, would no doubt exacerbate a situation already at a breaking point unless calmer heads prevailed. He wrote:

> At no time in history has the gulf between rich and poor been so wide. [. . .] But far worse, at no other time have the world's rich and powerful societies been so clearly right, and "reasonable." [. . .] The Western world is scarcely aware of this overwhelming feeling of

> humiliation that is experienced by most of the world's population; it is a feeling that people have to try to overcome without losing their common sense, and without being seduced by terrorists, extreme nationalists, or fundamentalists. [. . .] The problem facing the West is not only to discover which terrorist is preparing a bomb in which tent, which cave, or which street of which city, but also to understand the poor and scorned and "wrongful" majority that does not belong to the Western world.

Pamuk's plea finds particular resonance in the *F/S* 'verse, where the gap between Core and Border planets is a distinct representation of the gap between the wealthy and the poor, as is the portrayal of each planet's own society. As Linda Jencson has noted, the planets within this 'verse are metaphors for nations, which then brings inequality to a global scale in which capitalism is all, and negative reciprocity tends to be the norm ("Aiming to Misbehave").

[6] The cultural hierarchy that permeates this 'verse has distant colonized planets populated largely by the poor, shown to be economically and socially backward, and who are often exploited by the wealthy and by the system (though race is absented herein favour of a largely white populace). Conflict is ongoing in this 'verse, regardless of its presumption of peace, and the viewer is introduced to this conflict through the crew of the Serenity, a particular faction of this 'verse's resentful, defeated, and marginalized. This establishes a position in which systems of authority within this 'verse are to be mistrusted in favor of the rougher, yet seemingly more truthful systems of authority on board the ship; the viewer is led to believe they are seemingly on the outskirts of the system while being very much a part of its functioning.

[7] The viewer thus begins from a position wherein the popular historical tale has failed these outliers, being written by the victors, and where competing versions of this history are made evident simultaneously. On the one hand, as the teacher informs us at the start of the film *Serenity*, the Alliance is what the civilized world has to offer and unification was an attempt to bring the best of this world to those who might need it most; while on the other, as the student River puts it, the Alliance are "meddlers," big government gone awry. As Sharon Sutherland and Sarah Swan note, the Alliance's civilized

world is one in which society is increasingly forced to query the rights of the individual versus the concerns of society as a whole; the growing control of the government with regard to education, the economy, and militarized forces; and the increasingly grey territory between the path to a goal and the veracity of the goal itself (99-100). Those who either choose not to be complicit in, or are persecuted by, that existing structure have no part in the propaganda taught as history within this classroom, and are either marginalized by the system (as we see of the border planets, particularly in "The Train Job" [1.2] and "Jaynestown" [1.7]), or erased from this history like the planet Miranda. Yet the world of the Alliance and, in particular, life on the core planets, do in fact depict preconceived notions of a more "civilized" capitalist world, where medical care is state of the art, cutting edge technology is available, and the standard of living appears far higher. The viewer encountering these contrasts begins from a position wherein they may be willing to invest in this motley crew of outliers on the vessel *Serenity*, yet they themselves would likely far prefer the comfort of the core planets, regardless of the dystopian conventions in play (Nadkarni, "This is Where I Am").

[8] The 'verse is haunted by the events of the Independents-Alliance war and its aftermath, as this is played out repeatedly over the course of the series. Alyson R. Buckman notes that Malcolm Reynolds, in particular, seems trapped in the aftermath of the event, so much so that:

> [T]he ship, which consciously represents freedom to Mal ("Out of Gas"), works as a symbol of his stagnancy: "There's no place I can be since I found Serenity," sings Sonny Rhodes in the series theme song. "Serenity," a word that represents a state of peace and equilibrium, instead is a sign of the battle [of Serenity Valley] never fully left behind: Mal carries it around with him through the sky. (178)

In the deleted scenes of "Serenity" (1.1), Zoe explains much the same thing, stating, "Once you enter *Serenity*, you never really leave," implying that much as Mal is entrapped in this echoing moment that he consciously re-enacts periodically, so is Zoe. Mal is compelled to seek out an Alliance-friendly bar every Unification Day in order to get in a fight he might be able to win this time ("The Train Job"), while Zoe continues to act within in the roles established between them

during the war (so much so that Wash objects in "War Stories" [1.10]). The name is a warning for those who choose to come aboard of not only the crew's political alliance, but also of the haunting feeling of being trapped in a specific historical moment that underlies it. While the 'verse's trauma is this failed battle for independence—a period that the show constantly returns to as a defining yet incomprehensible moment for Mal—the viewer's own interpretation of the event has multiple cultural lenses, each drawing on distinct historical moments in its evocation of a totalitarian state—the American Civil War, the events following 9/11 (Greene 90-92; Sutherland and Swan 96-97 ; Hill 484-488), and the Nazism of the Second World War with its continued presence in the contemporary world.

Tracing Out the Historical Allusions

[9] It is worth noting that each of these events is coded with distinct elements of American history that are themselves interlinked and referenced as parallels. Matthew B. Hill draws on Faludi's *The Terror Dream* and links this to the "cowboy" terminology used by George W. Bush in his speeches for retribution following the events of September 11, arguing that the use of this retributive cowboy persona is itself drawn from popular culture, and has retreated into the same. Thus, popular culture displays increasing depictions of a frontier hero "cowboy" persona being pitted against an increasingly Middle Eastern "Indian" (488). The legacy of 9/11 that emerged for the American populace was not simply one in which retributive and racialized violence was promised, resulting in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also concerned itself with the distinct change in terms of certain fundamental rights. These are two-fold—the rights of American citizens, linked specifically to the right to privacy, and the encroachment of the increasingly regulated public sphere into the private; and with the rights of the prisoners of war or those penalized by this supposed War on Terror. Faludi's analysis of the media's rebranding of the aftermath of 9/11 and the consequent War on Terror resonates in the *F/S* 'verse not only in terms of the depiction of cowboys and new global frontiers, but also with the Cold War in its representation of Niska (Jencson, "To Vampires") and the wish fulfillment of his subsequent downfall, as well as Inara's growing need for a more traditional femininity of heterosexual romance and

patriarchal control as per popular culture portrayals of women as returning to housewives in the 1950s (Amy-Chinn 180-182).

[10] Furthermore, the manner in which propaganda, both educational and in the media, has been used to justify the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq finds parallels in *Serenity*'s evocation of a classroom and the Alliance's stance that it was bringing civilization to those that needed it. One only needs to consider the media blitz in the aftermath of 9/11 that chose to rebrand the Iraq and Afghanistan wars as either rescuing people from tyranny or rescuing Arab women from an oppressive patriarchy (thereby "civilizing" these cultures and rebranding American soldiers as "male saviors") to see the neo-colonial underpinnings in common between the two events. While Deepa Kumar recognizes the ironic imperialist propaganda implicit in the call to supposedly "save" Arab women whose rights were severely curtailed as a result of these wars, Faludi notes that women's rights in the United States simultaneously came heavily under fire with the nonsensical suggestion that women had somehow unmanned the man in their search for equality (Kumar 41-63; Faludi 1- 22). This concern with civilizing the natives of another culture is often the manner in which imperialist and colonial expansions are justified, and its aftermath rarely if ever sees any of these promises carried to fruition.

[11] The *F/S* 'verse undercuts much of this attempted propaganda by stating, through River, that the Alliance are "meddlers," and by linking this attempt to force a particular notion of what would constitute a more civilized world with Nazism. That is, a totalitarian government that locates itself at the Core, whose population is almost exclusively white within the show, and whose propaganda is linked to both the media and its educational body, all evoke parallels to Nazism. This was clearly an intended effect as Shawna Trpcic modeled her original sketches for the Alliance's costumes on Nazi Germany (*Firefly* 66), and eventually costumes were repurposed from the 1997 film *Starship Troopers*, itself a satire of Nazism and the post-Second World War U.S. that was evolving rapidly towards a totalitarian state (as noted by Paul Verhoeven and Ed Neumeier in the commentary for *Starship Troopers*).

[12] Moreover, the Alliance's experiments on the populace of Miranda, subjected to gas without their knowledge or consent in the pursuit of a supposedly "better world," evokes a parallel to prisoners

in the camps of Nazi Germany, as do the experiments conducted by the Alliance on River Tam. It is possible to question whether the experiments on River, visually inducing parallels to Joseph Mengele's experiments on the women of the camps, were also intended to suggest hierarchies within whiteness, and the manner in which Jews were culturally othered and tortured by the Nazis. River Tam has a name that indicates Chinese ancestry, though the role is played by Summer Glau who is of Scots-Irish and German descent, raising questions of whether the character's depiction of non/whiteness or culturally othered whiteness might have been a factor in this scenario.

[13] A totalitarian state that is itself linked to a retreat into the nostalgia of cowboy personae and debating the failed notion of the right to self-governance thus forms a core concern within the *F/S* 'verse. Thus, the thematic use of the American Civil War is one that focuses on the right to self-governance and secession, and seemingly strips it of the popular association with the issue of slavery, thereby encouraging the viewer to invest in the Independents' evocation of the Confederate army, its struggle and eventual loss. Using self-governance as the anti-thesis to the erosion of rights, the 'verse also repeats the myths linked to "cowboy" personae, such as the myth of the "savage war" and the Frontier myth, though these are manipulated so as to be employed against the state's agenda rather than on its behalf. The critique and true narrative horror thus locates itself not specifically in the threat of the Reavers—the seeming "savages" or "Indians" of the piece—but in the fact that their very existence is the result of the Alliance's experiments with control (as Rabb and Richardson emphasize), and the lengths to which these events are then concealed.

[14] The Reavers, as beings that have lost any sense of self-preservation and been driven to extremes of rage by the actions of a neo-colonial power, are willing to destroy themselves in a bid to reach their prey. The terror they inspire in the populations that know of them simply by their reference, and the warning images of their ships or the possibility of them boarding a ship (such as in "Bushwhacked" [1.3]) finds strong parallels not only with racist depictions of Native American stereotypes in Westerns (Curry; Rabb and Richardson) but also with the threat of terrorists in the aftermath of 9/11. The Alliance is shown to be a neo/colonizing influence whose (potentially good) imperialist intentions have unforeseen repercussions which

have resulted in both genocide and the creation of an angry force bent on nothing but domination and chaos. Following this, the Alliance secretly invests a nameless, rankless Operative with seemingly absolute power in order to ensure that the truth of this event is not made public, thereby condoning murder and yet another massacre wherein Shepherd Book and his entire settlement are slaughtered.

[15] Here, perhaps most damningly, lies the *F/S* 'verse's "truth"—that the growing totalitarian propaganda of post 9/11 America is eerily reminiscent of the rhetoric and actions undertaken by Jihadists, and that this doubled imagery is present in any attempt to view the Alliance. As Eric Greene notes, both seek what they term a "better world," both believe that their aim is laudable, both believe in employing any measures possible to achieve these ends, and both intend increasing control of the state (89-91). Both, the blind rhetoric of the devoted follower who cannot be reasoned with and the mindless violence of a people driven beyond sanity by the actions of a state-sponsored violence in the form of control, are linked back to the Alliance, and to their seeming veneer of rationality, indicating that at its heart, the Alliance's actions are simply the pretense of purpose in search of control. The crew, grief-stricken by the massacre on Haven, disguise their ship as a Reaver ship in order to make the trip to Miranda. It is worth noting that they share with the Reavers their history of being fallout in the Alliance's quest for control,[4] and this false or disguised "becoming" results simultaneously in an appropriation of the history of the Reavers, a castigation of the Alliance's actions, the crew being positioned as saviors by dint of being truth-tellers, and continues to underscore the irrationality of the Reavers and therefore the need for them to be killed. That is, the exposure of the Alliance's imperialist actions allows for the crew to be representative of the "true" cowboy in terms of this particular frontier story, but the Indians of this story continue to be painted as savages that must be dealt with even as the state is sanctioned for its actions. The result is a semi-congratulatory fantasy in which Americana is lauded even as the totalitarianism that underlies this mythos is called into question.

[16] The Alliance, its agents and effects of its control, whether advertent (its various soldiers, the Operative, and the men with hands of blue) or inadvertent (the Reavers) produce a system wherein

terrorism, the state, and its civilizing methodologies are conflated. At various points in this 'verse, Zoe, Mal and, at one point, Book, function on behalf of the Independents, the Operative functions on behalf of the Alliance, and River seemingly lies within and outside of these structures: Core-raised, tortured by the Alliance, speaking for the inhabitants of Miranda, yet within the family-crew of the Serenity that are themselves largely identified as Independents on the outskirts of the Alliance's control. At various points in the 'verse's narrative, each of them is identified as either terrorists or resistance fighters (as will be argued below), and these terms function as two sides of the same coin, such that the state is simultaneously civilizer and repressive terror apparatus, while those that refuse its control are simultaneously terrorists or resistance fighters. This doubled view creates a space wherein the silencing of the terrorist—as one incapable of being reasoned with—is presented, but also undercut by the role of soldiering for a cause, be it the state's or independent political motivations. Gayatri Chakravorthy Spivak notes:

> Where "terror" is an affect, the line between agent and object wavers. On the one hand, the terrorists terrorize a community, fill their everyday with terror. But there is also a sense in which the terrorist is taken to be numbed to terror, does not feel the terror of terror, and has become unlike the rest of us by virtue of this transformation. When the soldier is not afraid to die, s/he is brave. When the terrorist is not afraid to die, s/he is a coward. The soldier kills, or is supposed to kill, designated persons. The terrorist kills, or may kill, just persons. In the space between "terrorism" as a social movement and terror as affect, we can declare victory. Although civil liberties, including intellectual freedom, are curtailed, and military permissiveness exacerbated, although racial profiling deforms the polity and the entire culture redesigns itself for prevention, and although, starting on September 28, 2001, the UN Security Council adopts wide-ranging antiterrorism measures, we can still transfer the register to affect and say, "We are not terrorized, we have won." (92)

Winning *Is* about the Race

[17] "Winning" in this 'verse then sees that those creating and affected by terror are re-humanized, though the manner in which this occurs has its own complications. Regardless of intent, the racial hierarchy coded into the choice to see the Alliance in *Firefly* as a primarily white neo-colonial force whose capitalist economy has forced a tiered structure upon those not privileged by the system, and the contrast of this to deliberate acts of mass murder carried out by a self-professed "monster" played by a black man in *Serenity*, cannot be without its own explicit subtext. That is, the reinforcement of the (often invisible) systemic prejudice is depicted almost exclusively by white actors playing Alliance soldiers, yet deliberate violence to uphold this same state is the first time a black actor is brought to the forefront as an Alliance soldier, reinforcing racial (and racist) stereotypes. Desiree De Jesus notes that while the Operative differs from the prototypical violent, black buck stereotype, the seeming rationality and intelligence that would distinguish him are extremely compromised as the irrationality of fundamentalist violence seems to be his given state (94). Nameless, rankless, interchangeable, and given no place in the supposed "better world" that he is helping to build, the Operative functions on behalf of the Alliance as a seeming slave to their ideology. His entire place and purpose within the 'verse appears linked solely to his duty to return the Tams to the Alliance before the secret of Miranda is revealed; lacking that purpose, he claims there is "nothing left to see" of him.

[18] While Mal is often seen as a contrast to the Operative, the later *Serenity* comic *Better Days* places Zoe in a far more comparable position (Whedon, Matthews, and Conrad). In contrast to Mal's own choice to volunteer for the Independents' cause and his subsequent loss of faith following the battle of Serenity Valley, and highlighting his *choice* to fight, Zoe's own back story has her declare that her attachment to the Independents' cause was not personal, and that she continued to fight on behalf of that cause as a soldier long after the Independents surrendered. The decision to contrast Mal's own personal choice versus Zoe's seemingly less personal yet more sustained investment in soldiering thus positions Zoe as possibly career military, but also suggests an investiture in the Independents' state apparatus beyond Mal's own. This continued allegiance to the Independents' cause is complicated by the fact that Zoe chooses to

leave the fight for her role as second aboard Mal's ship without any explanation whatsoever being provided to the reader. These antithetical actions of continued support as a soldier or a postwar fighter alongside her lack of personal investment in the Independents' state's long term agenda that would see her abruptly leave the cause suggests an inherent contradiction in representation, and the lack of explanation provided does subordinate her narrative to Mal's own. Moreover, Zoe's act of rebellion/terrorism as a Dust-Devil (i.e. members of the Independents Army who continued to attack the Alliance forces even after the war was declared to have ended, choosing to continue their fight against forced unification) is depicted as ineffective within the narrative, while Mal's later act of aggression carried out against the state in *Serenity* (as per this 'verse's timeline) is validated by his eventual accomplishment in terms of 'getting the signal out.'

[19] In a similar manner, *The Shepherd's Tale* reveals Shepherd Derrial Book's back story as an Independents spy who infiltrates the Alliance, and whose actions have led to the deaths of four thousand people during the Independents-Alliance war (Whedon, Whedon, and Samnee). Book's narrative shares parallels with that of Zoe and the Operative in terms of taking up the role of a soldier on behalf of a body politic, engaging in acts of aggression on their behalf, and eventually choosing to walk away from this role. Notably, much like the Operative, Book's change comes in the aftermath of a defeat that forces him to reassess his own role in the politico-military machine. The complicated doubling of soldiering/heroism and terrorism/resistance thus sees three people of color unable to accomplish their ends (regardless of the associated morality of terrorism or soldiering), while a white male more closely associated with the element of choice is validated in this by the narrative. Regardless of intent, the observable default strategy associates terrorism more closely with persons of color—the fundamentalism of the Operative, Book's complicated history that sees him inhabit elements of the violent buck stereotype as well as enable a massacre on behalf of the Independents, as well as Zoe being actually referred to as a "terrorist" in *Better Days* (Whedon, Matthews, and Conrad) and the contradictory nature of her socio-political investment in the Independents' cause—while being contrasted with a white savior who

becomes more closely associated with the moral right; i.e. Mal, and later, to a certain extent, River.

[20] In essence, while it may seem facetious to link the *F/S* 'verse deliberately to 9/11, given that the *F/S* 'verse has no Middle Eastern characters and avoids the issues of immigration and racial difference that then became one of the focal points of post-9/11 American society (and indeed, the Western world at large), the actual racial issues in play are far more complex. Faludi notes Geeta Rao Gupta's statement of any conflict at a time of unrest revealing fault lines already present in society (26), and it is possible to apply the same reading to the *F/S* 'verse with regard to racial stereotyping exposing existing fault lines within Whedon's representation of a supposedly post-racial society. There is no overt Middle Eastern threat within this 'verse, because outside of Inara's clothing and reference as a courtesan, those cultures and their people have been absented, their presence erased from this future. In fact, Chinese people having been erased in favor of their culture as well, the only remaining coding in this 'verse in terms of societal formation tends toward a perceived representation of American societies that sees its representative majority as white, Black Americans, and in the singular case of Inara, Brazilian American (though her representation is more "Oriental" than anything else). And while both white and black people commit bad acts within this 'verse, the actions of black people are specifically coded as more transgressive and violent, and more closely conflated with the issues of terrorism with few if any mitigating factors being involved. The depiction of black people within this 'verse falls into one of two categories: either subordinate to the control of a white male, or else violent and/or otherwise transgressing the bounds of so-called civilized behavior, thereby playing into an existing set of prejudices within society. This binary is further complicated by the Operative who, apparently free from mechanisms of control, is likely to have been granted that role by a white man, given the racial representation of Alliance officials. As such, racist histories of black hypermasculinity are brought into play but operate for a white elite instead of/while inspiring fear within them.

[21] Moreover, while Mal proposes a choice in going up against the Alliance in the aftermath of discovering their experiment on Miranda rather than producing the sort of simplistic propaganda that

would see people as either with him and his cause or against them (as George W. Bush and Hillary Clinton suggested in the aftermath of 9/11), that does seem to be, in large part, the underlying premise of the 'verse itself. Mal has no need to rely on such heavy-handed tactics, since the events of the 'verse play out in such a manner as to assure the viewer that to be against the crew of the *Serenity* is to be complicit in multiple acts of mass murder. Additionally, River's choice to repurpose the Alliance's experiments on her in order to save Simon and the crew sees her positioned as a savior at the close of the film. The manner in which choice is seemingly stripped from persons of color (the Operative), left contradictory and unexplained (Zoe), or produced as the result of guilt and exclusion (Book), in comparison to the valorization of Mal and River's choice to fight, does indicate a hierarchy in which race is implicitly a factor, and in which the privilege of choice is both valorized and associated more closely with whiteness.

Resistance as Americana

[22] The *F/S* 'verse's critique is indeed a choice to code the Alliance as a post 9/11 American government that itself has taken on extremes very much like the extremes they claim to combat, reminiscent of Nazism and of Jihadists, thus detailing a scathing critique of imperialism, totalitarianism, and neo/colonialism. Yet this is in large part undercut by the manner in which race is used within the narrative to code "good" and "bad" resistance or terrorism, and the eventual manner in which a "just cause" is positioned as inevitably white-led. The stance *Serenity* thus seems to advocate at its conclusion is one of resistance to the state's body politic in any form, yet this resistance is itself coded racially such that the two primary "saviors" of the piece are white (speaking for themselves and for the Others of the piece; i.e. the Reavers) and ideologically similar persons of color are either subordinated within the narrative (Zoe) or sacrificed to be later avenged by these white saviors (Book).

[23] Problematically, the 'verse's critique of an overtly authoritarian government and a depicted sympathy for those penalized by this totalitarian regime retains a stance wherein the narrative itself is concerned with US history as a monolith and its saviors are distinctly coded by Americana (Nadkarni, "This is Where I Am"). Its critique relies heavily upon signifiers that would see the

concerns of an American society as paramount, and wherein the inhabitants of disenfranchised colonized worlds are themselves stripped of an agency that is never restored to them. Thus, the two primary heroes of the piece, Mal and River, are themselves specifically coded as white saviors within the platoon narrative and this occurs alongside the use of the frontier myth and the myth of the savage war. Simultaneously, this cowboy theme is linked to the exposure of the truth of a massacre whose representation is linked to Nazism, reappropriating the Greatest Generation myth even while it is contradicted.

[24] In doing so, the critique of the U.S.' primacy and increasingly abusive foreign policies is placed alongside the subtextual assertion that "saving" the world from this totalitarianism (the Alliance's policies) and its results (the Reavers) is also the prerogative of the independently minded within the U.S. (the crew of the *Serenity*). The process itself is internal despite the clear representation of its effects on the neo/colonized who remain disenfranchised through the entirety of the narrative. Thus, the Reavers remain dehumanized, and are more symptom of a dystopian regime that must be overthrown than representative of a people penalized by neo-colonial policies regaining any agency. They are slaughtered by the dozens at the close of the piece to indicate the strength of a new faction of marginalized resistance, itself coded as American retributive justice. This coding suggests that the state's totalitarian policies, despite their effect on those it ultimately considers outside of its bounds, is most effectively fought from within—an assertion that both invests a certain faction of its American viewing public with power (in a positive manner) while continuing a history wherein those outside of or unrecognized by this body politic are heavily penalized by it (including Persons of Color within the U.S.).

[25] Most tellingly, the film is clearly aware that this is an issue that needs to be addressed: Mal greets the Operative's choice to withdraw gracefully in defeat with continued rancor as it fails to address any of the actions undertaken by the Operative in his defense of the state's agenda. The moment is positioned as a meeting of equals, yet it remains that both of them are coded as American, suggesting that the reparation due is to the American public in particular, playing out the racially coded tropes of white savior versus dark villain, and excluding the Reavers who represent (in part) those

most marginalized and affected by the actions of this body politic. That this follows on from a scene wherein River regains her agency yet the Reavers do not, continues to underscore the preservation of a particular strain of American neo-imperial cultural power even as it claims to destabilize the same.

Twelve Years After 9/11 and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*

[26] This conceptual structure, wherein resistance to an oppressive American-identified regime is provided by an internal faction, most prominently repeats itself in a Whedonverse in 2013's *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* The MCU franchise sees the reappearance of the Second World War coinciding with a post 9/11 America, bringing to the forefront the choice to paint Afghanistan as a "good war" as well as to critique that action. In *The Avengers*, Steve Rogers/Captain America, much like Mal, carries a static sense of his cultural past with him, collapsing his own past as representative of America in the Second World War into the present. (See Ensley F. Guffey on *Avengers* as war film.) His antagonistic ally in the film is Tony Stark/Iron Man, a fast-talking, good-looking, proud, white, smart, rich head of a multi-national corporation; or as he terms it, a "genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist." Stark's origin story in the MCU is distinctly tied to terrorism associated with war-torn Afghanistan post-9/11, and his role as capitalist entrepreneur and media-savvy vigilante who symbolizes the 1% indicates his representation as the modern capitalist America. The simultaneous presence of Captain America and Iron Man creates a temporal play in which the events of the Second World War and 9/11 are made co-incident. This brings into focus the "Greatest Generation" myth that grew in the aftermath of the Second World War and the US' current position as a global superpower in the aftermath of those events.

[27] As previously noted, Faludi has traced the media propaganda that linked WWII and the wars that followed 9/11 in order to portray American retributive justice as a "good war" despite the ongoing outcry against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This portrayal in popular culture underscores Martin's point regarding these displaced war narratives as being reworked for an audience in order to both justify the ongoing militaristic rhetoric as well as enforce systems of authority and control (108). In doing so, the MCU continues within the creation of a popular culture narrative that links

the war in Afghanistan and the Second World War to the rhetoric of American foreign policy that would see Afghanistan as the "good war" in comparison to Iraq or the "bad war," and in which the military action and policy making of President Bush are contrasted with those of President Obama, and where media propaganda increasingly depicts the need for this war as "civilizing," particularly in terms of Western feminism. It is not chance that Tony Stark's own origin story is linked to Afghani terrorists rather than Iraqi, since at the time *Avengers* was released the Iraq war was already strongly coded within the media as the "bad" war and Donald Rumsfeld had resigned his post as U.S. Secretary of Defense as a result in November 2006. As Geoff Martin and Erin Steuter note:

> The notion of the "good war" comes from the noble cause of World War II, a war that garnered tremendous popular support because the United States and the world faced a clear threat from the aggression of Germany and Japan, and in victory the United States was rich, powerful, and magnanimous. The opposite of a "good war" is one in which the reasons for U.S. involvement are not clear and victory was not achieved. (6)

This set of historical referents then finds particular focus in the figure of Loki, who seeks totalitarian control by brainwashing his followers into blind obedience and stripping them of their own rationality, an assertion often applied to terrorists who "cannot be reasoned with." Loki's actions evoke not only the cultural memory of the Holocaust due to the events in Stuttgart, Germany, but also provide a metaphorical parallel to the events of 9/11 in his choice to attack Stark Tower.

> Given Stark's own coding as the America of the present and hopeful future, and Stark Tower as the centre of his enterprise, Loki's choice to attack it and use it in his invasion then seems to once again evoke the Twin Towers. This evocation is underlined by the fact that the attack is airborne for the most part, and is aimed specifically at New York, America's cultural capital and, in the aftermath of the attacks, ground zero of the event. (Nadkarni, "Months After")

Following this attack in *Avengers*, the viewer is informed of the infiltration of Nazis into S.H.I.E.L.D. in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, the plot of which coincides with the narrative of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and further ties these two events together, linking S.H.I.E.L.D.'s oppressive and neo-colonial actions with a history of Nazism that has only just begun to come to light.

[28] The critique that began with the *F/S* 'verse thus repeats itself here, in that a repressive state apparatus associated with the "civilized world" is shown to be an oppressive authority that evokes Nazism in its actions and manner. And much like the *F/S* 'verse, the focus is structured around American history as a monolith and with the only real resistance to this attempted supremacy being US-centric. By doing so, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* plays into what Boggs and Pollard term the "good war" formula, wherein:

> (1) the military campaign is a wholly noble one, which makes combat possible to bear; (2) that the war is a struggle between good and evil and the opponent is therefore devoid of human qualities; (3) that the conflict revolves around predominantly white, male heroism; (4) that military units are diverse in ethnic and class terms, and that the military goals are widely accepted among the groups they represent; (5) the soldiers possess professional and stoic heroism in the face of battle; and (6) the armed unit is cohesive and has its own set of rules, which an outsider must adopt to be accepted. (Martin and Steuter 9)

As per this set of conditions, patriotism, male heroism, and the essential goodness of this military action are part of its givens, and these are coded by Americana.

[29] In this manner, the neo-imperialist and neo-colonialist underpinnings of the show continue to be valorized, the assumption being that these events occur for the world's greater good, and that this faction of saviors will be Western-world-identified and white-led. That is, while the revelation of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s infiltration by Hydra leads to its being disbanded officially, Agent Coulson leads a faction of resistance that still identifies as S.H.I.E.L.D. and continues to act on its behalf in taking action against Hydra and continuing to secure dangerous artifacts. The group's choices to locate and remove artifacts from Peru against the wishes of the Peruvian army ("0-8-4,"

1.2) or control the use of powers in other countries (such as Chan Ho Yin's in "Girl in the Flower Dress" 1.5) are seemingly justified by the show in its first season, and the ongoing second season appears to confirm the continued need for the control of these artifacts to be located within the control of this group of patriot-outlaws. Despite the MCU's proposed critical stance wherein the increasing militarization of the U.S. and its covert military, S.H.I.E.L.D., are in fact representative of the sort of totalitarian state that is nothing but a foil for neo-Nazism, the critique fails to extend far enough to suggest reflection on the underlying neo-colonial and neo-imperialist actions that are so clearly mirrored within these two factions. The condescension of the text's assumption that S.H.I.E.L.D. is fundamental in policing the world, and that its face and structure within the show is U.S.-led and based, is itself the privileged arrogance of the imperial neo-colonialist. In effect, while the critique is turned inwards with regard to the infiltration of Nazi-themed totalitarianism across the world and in the US in particular, the attempt to combat this attitude within the series is based in the continued presumptions of militarism and neo-imperialism that were themselves the source of this critique. In fact, the threat of Nazis allows for the justification of increased militarization within this faction of resistance.

The "New" Americana and Race

[30] Much like the *F/S* 'verse, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* has numerous problematic issues in terms of its depictions of race. Aside from the manner in which a neo-imperialist American stance is often displayed in terms of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s claiming jurisdiction in numerous countries without any question of diplomatic relations being necessary, renaming in the show appears distinctly tied to a narrative of colonization and non-white ethnicity played out numerous times over the course of the show. For example, Chan Ho Yin, who originally wanted to retain his last name, was eventually convinced to adopt the nomenclature "Scorch" and seemingly lost his rationality the moment he embraced this change [1.5]. In yet another example, Michael Peterson is renamed multiple times in the course of the show with names ranging from his own, to the Hooded Hero, to Deathlok, and in each version is forced to be portrayed as subservient to white men in authority, whether this is his handlers in Hydra or eventually

Coulson who "saves" him ("Pilot" [1.1], "The Bridge" [1.10], "The Magical Place" [1.11], "T.R.A.C.K.S." [1.13], "End of the Beginning" [1.16], "Nothing Personal" [1.20], "Beginning of the End" [1.22], "Afterlife" [2.16], "The Frenemy of my Enemy" [2.18]).

[31] Notably, in the cases of both Mike Peterson and Akela Amador ("Eye Spy" 1.4), their bodies are modified without their consent, they are forced into slavery, and their liberation is brought about by an authoritative white male who then controls their fate (in a similar, yet more subtle manner). Their bodies become the site of a struggle between two forces, both seemingly white-led, and their futures are decided for them in a manner that indicates that they are non-negotiable. This arguably plays out a modern slavery narrative in which simultaneously, consent and choice are rarely the prerogative of the black person in question, and their gratitude for their eventual liberation is repeatedly expressed. The fact that this repeated representation enforces a particular racially coded subtext remains unexamined within the show and continues to provide problematic racial undertones within what is probably the most ethnically diverse project within the Whedonverse to date.

[32] The use of Orientalist imagery (produced as Chinese) that begins in the *F/S* 'verse (though absented of its people) can be paralleled to the choice to introduce Afterlife, a haven for Inhumans, in the second season of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Drawing on narrative parallels to the floating city (or cities) Tian in the Marvel comic 'verse, and not geographically located within the show in order to suggest its secretive nature as an outlier to ongoing global politics, Afterlife is strongly coded by Orientalist stereotypes that conflate the historicity and cultural specificity of multiple Asian nations into a narrative that sees them exist "out there somewhere." In the reality of a globalized world, the notion of a mysterious Asian city in the mountains whose inhabitants must be categorized by S.H.I.E.L.D. so as to ensure the nature of their threat reinvents spaces of colonial enterprise for the U.S.. The reality of their threat and the need for control is positioned on the basis of their being an unknown quantity, suggesting that the show's notion of a proportionate response to people socially defined as "alien" or "unknown" is constant monitoring and the threat of death. This occurs regardless of their willingness to consent and within a global landscape, such that no immediate option outside of this control is available. The original positing of those that inhabit

this city as uninvolved political outliers (in direct contradiction to both Hydra and S.H.I.E.L.D., who each seek to mobilize, map, or control Inhuman potential) is soon cast aside in favour of a manipulated declaration of war on the part of their leader, Jiaying (played by Australian-Tibetan actress Dichen Lachman). Her choice to force the issue of war is strongly portrayed as negative within the series, yet Jiaying's portrayal erases the complexity of the specific cultural markers it has introduced throughout the series. That is, the fact that Jiaying is kidnapped, her body viewed as a commodity and stripped of its organs (which is itself strongly coded by existing issues regarding Asians as being at high risk for trafficking), her child stolen to be raised in another culture, and her resurrection occurring only through the death of her previous community ties, each signals particular contextual markers regarding oppressions and marginalizations specific to Asian women in global capitalist frameworks. She is then informed, as a representative of Afterlife and the Inhuman community, that people under her protection would need to subjugate themselves to a global protocol set up without any input or consultation on the part of the people it claims to protect and by people who have already expressed distrust (if not outright xenophobia) towards their community. Each of these markers on their own suggest specific stances with regard to human rights in the global state, and Jiaying's refusal to comply with what is essentially the threat of compliance or attack by S.H.I.E.L.D. is stripped of its complexity with regard to the plight of less developed nations within global frameworks in favor of a narrative that privileges the morality of the American neo/colonialism embodied in Coulson's division of S.H.I.E.L.D.[5] Jiaying's act of resistance/terrorism, only glancingly situated within the historicity of her narrative's racial socio-cultural markers, is reappropriated to signal the importance of S.H.I.E.L.D. as a source of protection, and results in the creation of an Inhumans force mobilized under the control of S.H.I.E.L.D. to police its people. ("S.O.S." [2.21]). This narrative framing seems to explicitly argue that resistance that locates itself outside of U.S. constructs is inevitably misguided, thereby once more indicating a global hierarchy in which the U.S. retains its significance and the resistance to this framing is discredited.

[32] It would appear that if the *F/S* 'verse began with the need to get the signal out, then *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* is an effort to

examine the aftermath of such an event. But this aftermath, less than ten years after the release of *Serenity*, seems less concerned with the Whedonverses' more traditional challenge to the authoritarian status quo and the issues of self-governance, problematic as it may have been, than with a continuation of this policing wherein they are both the resistance to the regime and reinforcement of the regime itself (if not the creation of a new regime). The shift is palpable.

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[1] For instance, in "Shadows" [2.1], Phil Coulson states, "We have to fight on for [...] those we've lost. We have to take risks, so that the sacrifices they made were not made in vain, and then we'll disappear."

[2] While I am aware that there are numerous issues with the use of the term "Person of Color" as it uses whiteness as a monolith by which to define itself and subsumes all ethnicities as a singular other within the term, regardless of their specificities and historicity, the complexities of the ethnicities represented and the lack of time and space within which to flesh out a singular argument for each means that this paper must use the generalized term. I apologize for any offense caused.

[3] For instance, as I've previously suggested in "This is Where I Am," conflict between the crew of the *Serenity* who largely identify as Independents and Inara's own Alliance-identified clients are played out in narratives of her work and bodily autonomy, with Mal repeatedly transgressing boundaries she has set in place. Similarly, while the 'verse does not penalize Zoe for her role within what is a space more traditionally defined as masculine, the manner in which the storyline progresses in "Better Days" implies that Zoe's own agency within this role is less considered and deliberate. As this article goes on to discuss, this sidelines her own choices and narrative potential in favour of valorizing Mal's agency. The MCU has numerous issues, the most prominent of which is the choice to

subordinate female superheroes or characters to their male counterparts. Thus Black Widow's character is seen as incapable of sustaining a franchise film on her own despite repeated calls for one, and Phil Coulson's character in S.H.I.E.L.D. is promoted to Director despite numerous issues, paramount amongst which is his mental stability in Season 1. Though the argument within this paper cannot encompass the complexity of this aspect in full, I would argue that the 'verse both corresponds with, and at times undercuts, the reactions that Faludi describes in her books.

[4] I am grateful to my editors, Philip Smith and Michael Goodrum, for pointing to this possibility. I am also indebted to Erin Giannini and Shiloh Carroll for their help with drafts of this chapter.

[5] There are many additional factors that could be discussed here if not for the constraints of a word count, not the least the manner in which Jiaying is villainized while Calvin Zabo as a white, male patriarch is sympathetically reappropriated to the moral right and "saved." I discuss these in more detail in a forthcoming publication "'They Gave Him a Name': Explosive Identity Politics in Marvel's *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D,*" conditionally accepted to *Assemble!: The Making and Re-Making of the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, ed. William Svitavsky.