

4. The Threat of the 'Good Wife'

Feminism, Postfeminism, and Third-Wave
Feminism in *Firefly*

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Personal choices, personnel decisions

In 'War Stories' (1.10), Mal and Wash find themselves captured and tortured by Niska, a Mafioso-like businessman whom they have crossed before. After gathering money from the crewmembers, Zoe goes to bargain for 'her men.' Niska, hoping to inflict more pain, declares she can only purchase one. Denying Niska the sadistic pleasure of watching her struggle, Zoe immediately points at Wash and impassively says, 'him.' She then says, 'I'm sorry. You were going to ask me to choose, right? Do you want to finish?'² The episode illuminates Zoe and Wash's relationship by beginning and ending with discussions about who should go on particular missions. In the beginning, Zoe and Wash argue over who will accompany Mal to sell drugs the crew stole in the previous episode. Upset by Zoe and Mal's close, war-forged bond, Wash refuses to wait behind as usual and instead insists on going with Mal.

In contrast, the mission that closes the episode involves Zoe and Wash, both of whom want and need to rescue Mal, leading the crew back to Niska's space station. Zoe understands that Wash must participate because Mal kept him from breaking under torture. She tells Wash that she 'got a good look at the layout on my way in last time. You let me lead,' but then adds that she expects him to cover her back, which requires complete trust. Zoe is willing to take Wash into battle although she claims point for practical reasons; Wash agrees

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instantly. The episode ends with Zoe cooking for Wash, tucking a napkin in his shirt, and serving him what he calls 'wife soup,' inferring from this that he 'must have done good.' She agrees and kisses him. The gender roles in their marriage are unconventional and flexible, and both partners, despite Wash's earlier insecurity, are satisfied. The differences between the two missions highlight the strength of their marriage: both respect the other's strengths and, even when they disagree, their love and commitment are strong.

'War Stories' foregrounds Zoe and Wash's relationship in a way that not many other episodes do, and looks into the dynamics between them. While she may not often cook or serve food to her husband, these actions can sometimes play a part in their marriage: when they are reconciling after a disagreement, when she saves him from imprisonment, when he is surely still recovering from his wounds, then she cooks for him and he feels nurtured. This moment also comes after she has led Wash into battle; this is no indication of inferior status or assumption of traditional gender roles.

This stands in contrast to 'Our Mrs. Reynolds' (1.6), an earlier episode in which Saffron, Mal's unwillingly acquired wife, seems to assume that cooking—along with washing her husband's feet and serving him sexually—are essential components of the role of a 'good wife.' After cooking for Mal, she tells Zoe that everything is 'laid out if you'd like to cook for your husband.' Zoe declines. In fact, during Saffron's attempted seduction of Wash, she claims that Zoe 'didn't seem to respect you.' Wash doesn't take the bait; Saffron must resort to physical violence to overcome him: a moral victory for Wash if not a physical one. Similarly, Mal and Inara are conquered only by Saffron's drugs, not her manipulation (Mal has reinitiated his resistance before he passes out). Indeed, the regular characters (except Jayne), rather than seeing Saffron's 'good wife' role as normal, perceive Saffron as being in need of re-education; Mal tries to teach her to stand up for herself. A submissive woman tempts many of them, but the 'good wife,' it turns out, is a threat to the moral order of the ship.

These examples demonstrate *Firefly's* complex negotiations of gender and sexuality within a context of our own moment of feminism and postfeminism, even though the show never explicitly uses those terms. In order to illuminate how the series can be used to delineate the complicated relationships between feminism, postfeminism, and third-wave feminism, I analyze three female characters—Zoe, Saffron, and Kaylee.

Feminism, postfeminism, and third-wave feminism

Several shows that aired around the time of *Firefly* explored issues of feminism, either directly or indirectly. For instance, *King of the Hill* (1997–present) has Peggy, the main female character, explicitly declare that she's not a feminist, although she sometimes acts in functionally feminist ways, such as agitating for working women's rights in the episode 'Just Like a Woman.' On the other hand, *That 70s Show* (1998–2006) has Midge and Donna explicitly engage in feminist actions like attending feminist rallies and feminist classes. Unlike these shows, *Firefly* presents itself as entirely outside the contemporary moment of feminist/postfeminist consciousness.² Set in 2507 CE, *Firefly's* female characters, as complexly gendered as they are, seem blissfully unaware of any feminist concerns as such in their actions, lifestyles, and gender expression. Many other television shows that have garnered 'feminist' buzz—both pro and con—are postfeminist as the term is used by critics like Charlotte Brunson, who demonstrates how *Pretty Woman* (1990) and *Working Girl* (1987) are shaped within the discourses and legacies of second-wave feminism, while simultaneously rejecting feminism.³ *Firefly* is more complex; created by Joss Whedon, an avowed feminist, the show never directly addresses feminism per se, but does create some of the most diverse, powerful, and interesting female characters on television. Although they probably wouldn't describe themselves as feminists (a word apparently not in use in 2507), many of the *Firefly* characters could be described as feminists in the second-wave sense: they believe in and enact equality in opportunity, ability, and rights while pursuing self-defined emotional and professional satisfaction.⁴

The very word 'postfeminism' itself can be used in contradictory ways. On one hand, it can mean a rather regressive vision in which the goals of second-wave feminism have been achieved; therefore, women should overcome the alleged victim mentality that is, according to writers like Katie Roiphe, the legacy of the 1960s and 1970s.⁶ The same term can simultaneously indicate a stance in which feminism can no longer be theorized as entirely separate or separable from other postmodern discourses that question what Jean François Lyotard calls the metanarratives of Western society—those schools of thought that posit one underlying structure of oppression that is 'the root' of all other problems and therefore theorize one solution. Rather than try to state definitively what postfeminism is or is not, I prefer to use the term

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to identify those representations that enact these very contradictions, as I believe *Firefly* does.

Despite the lack of explicit feminist/postfeminist discourse in the show, it nevertheless participates in current and enduring debates surrounding women's roles, particularly that of wife. Zoe and Saffron are the only two wives that are given much narrative space and, as such, highlight my central question: what makes a 'good wife' in the *Firefly* 'verse? These two versions of wifehood illuminate the show's generally positive, though occasionally ambivalent or problematic, gender relations by examining two competing narratives of wifehood—egalitarian versus helpmeet⁷—that have again surfaced. As Elspeth Probyn notes, when non-academic writers discuss postfeminism, they often cast it as allowing women either to compete in the public realm with men or to be 'truly' cutting edge by following a more traditional model of woman as homemaker (151). These debates continue with books like Steiner's *The Mommy Wars*, which contrasts stay-at-home mothers with working mothers, and *New York Times* articles like Story's 'Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Course to Motherhood,' which interviews privileged young women who plan to quit work to stay at home.⁸

Zoe, married warrior woman; Saffron, very married white devil woman

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Zoe's version of 'good wife' involves being a partner and companion; she offers Wash playful affection, a steady hand at his back, and passionate sex. In the words of Michelle Sagara West, 'they fill a need for each other that isn't based on need alone' (100). Zoe's tasks often necessitate leaving Wash on the ship, going with Mal and Jayne to face danger. In theory, this is fine with Wash, who understands his role as pilot is crucial in making their outlaw existence work: he often flies to their rescue or manages to accomplish a difficult escape. However, theory does not always match reality, as seen in 'War Stories,' in which Wash is both jealous of Zoe's close relationship with Mal and appalled that Mal would put her in such dangerous situations (of course, Mal doesn't drag Zoe along; she chooses to put herself in harm's way, which Wash well knows, although he briefly forgets this in Niska's torture chamber). Zoe's version of wifehood is based on the egalitarian model particularly, though not exclusively, embraced by second-wave

feminists like Betty Friedan and Alix Kates Shulman, who critiqued gender roles and inequality in marriage.⁹

Saffron, who (we learn) is married under many names to many men, performs the role of wife differently from Zoe. On one hand, Saffron overtly assumes the guise of 'good wife,' a concept often endorsed by those who celebrate what they usually call 'traditional family values,' which typically denotes a man-as-breadwinner and woman-as-home-maker family structure. Saffron appears eager to serve as dependent helpmeet to Mal and assumes the pose of submissive femininity.

Unlike Serenity's crew, Saffron is a woman without enduring relationships. In the two episodes she appears in—'Our Mrs. Reynolds' and 'Trash' (1.11)—Saffron has three husbands: Mal, Mal's old buddy Monty, and Durran Haymer, the rich Alliance officer whose antique gun is the target of Saffron's most recent plotting. Despite her guise of helpmeet wifedom, her multiple marriages mount a critique of this version of wifedom. Saffron assumes different identities for each husband; with Mal she is Saffron; with Monty, Bridget; and with Durran, Yolanda. This leads Mal to refer to her, in 'Trash,' as Yo-Saf-Bridge, an acknowledgment of her multifaceted self. None of her husbands knows who she 'really' is; therefore, none of the relationships is 'real,' though there is some indication that Saffron might care about Durran's opinion of her. When Mal realizes that Saffron could have freely accessed Durran's house, he knows something is amiss. The calculating Saffron he knows would have walked in, been welcomed, and then coldly knocked Durran on the head and taken the antique herself. He tells her 'unlike all the other—I'm gonna go with—hundreds of men you've married, you actually want this one to think well of you when you've gone . . . My god, could it be I've actually met your real husband?' However, when we finally learn that Saffron has again double-crossed Mal and the crew, all of Saffron's motivations and statements become questionable. The multiplicity of Saffron's marriages negates the permanent pair-bond dynamic of helpmeet marriage and instead echoes Inara's profession as a 'Companion,' who entertains numerous clients. In fact, both women were trained as Companions. The model of helpmeet marriage was often critiqued as institutionalized prostitution by second-wave feminists, and *Firefly* makes this explicit by depicting Saffron's exploitation of marriage and sexuality for her own gain.

Saffron, like postmodern theory, refuses to espouse (you should excuse the pun) one final subject position that claims 'mastery.' A

more academic usage of the term postfeminism, as mentioned above, posits that it results from the crossing of feminism with other postmodern discourses that refuse totalizing gestures. Saffron enacts a postmodern embrace of the play of surfaces in service of her goals, which emphatically reject 'traditional family values.' As part of this slippage, she assumes the very traditional role of 'good wife' strategically as a disguise, thus playing Mal and the other crewmembers' assumptions about gender against them, though they try to avoid engaging in the 'good wife' paradigm. The crew underestimates her and thus allows her to take them by surprise and initiate her nefarious plan to steal their ship, their home. Saffron likewise refuses any easy answers as to her motivations; unlike many villains, her character is not driven by any particular overarching goal or desire. When Mal corners her at the end of 'Our Mrs. Reynolds,' he asks her why she bothered with all the machinations; after all, there must be an easier way to steal. Her reply, 'you're assuming the payoff is the point,' is no answer. Rather than provide a key to her character—troubled childhood, mental illness, Iago-like spite—she cannot be pinned down to any one identity but instead cycles through numerous possible identities that deny the surface/depth model in favor of contradictory and strategic surfaces.

The rest of Saffron's relationships are more clearly designed to further her own ends while taking advantage of those who trust her. Despite its brief time on screen, her relationship with Monty is clearly exploitative. She never mentions Monty again; not exactly the love that spanned the ages. Saffron's presumed village seen early in 'Our Mrs. Reynolds' is nothing of the sort. Neither does she have any clear relationship with the men whose ship-trap is finally destroyed; even her villainous associates aren't loyal sidekicks.

Saffron's rootless, lone existence is contrasted with the development of family ties between Serenity's crewmembers: while Mal and Zoe have a long-standing bond, the series also depicts the trust and affection that slowly grows among (most of) the crew.¹⁰ Jayne never really gets along with River or Simon. Even after Simon finds out that Jayne sold them out on Ariel, he assures Jayne that he will never be harmed while on Simon's table:

I'm your medic, and however little we may like or trust each other, we're on the same crew. Got the same troubles, same enemies . . . Now, we could circle each other and growl, sleep with one eye open

but that thought wearies me. I don't care what you've done. I don't know what you're planning on doing, but I'm trusting you. I think you should do the same. ('Trash,' 1.11)

After this speech, however, River cheerfully reminds Jayne that she can kill him with her brain. Simon is no dummy—he means his speech but also knows that, with Jayne, nothing works like a believable threat. This is not the only difficult relationship. Mal and Inara argue frequently. Mal and Book have their issues. Despite all this, though, they often operate as a family. After discovering Jayne's treachery, Mal is fully prepared to blow him out of the airlock; Jayne agrees death is the appropriate punishment. Mal only relents when Jayne begs Mal not to tell the others of his perfidy. Despite his betrayal, Jayne's shame indicates to Mal that Jayne can operate as part of the family because he cares about the others' opinions. Love for every other member is not required; trust and ability to work together is.

The ending of 'Our Mrs. Reynolds' further differentiates Serenity's crew from Saffron. The crew must work together to repair the ship and disable the trap. While Kaylee and Wash attempt to restore navigation, Zoe preps spacesuits for Mal and Jayne. Simon and Book hook Simon's encyclopedia to the com console to provide visuals. Mal opens the hatch; Jayne fires his favorite gun, Vera. The trap is disabled and the navigation controls are repaired. All must work together to survive; each member has a role and must trust the others to cooperate. In contrast, Saffron has no one to watch her back, and Mal eventually catches up with her. After his warning about not playing him again, she retorts: 'Everybody plays each other. That's all anybody ever does. We play parts.' Her postmodern play of surfaces does not serve her well here; her role-playing comes to nothing, despite her cunning. As Mal says, 'You got all kinds of learnin', and you made me look the fool without tryin', and yet here I am with a gun to your head. That's 'cause I got people with me, people who trust each other, who do for each other and ain't always lookin' for the advantage.' Mal's assertion of the importance of what sounds very much like a family rejects Saffron's player mentality. Saffron's deceptiveness can be read as an extreme version of the distortion of personality that can result from the submission of the 'good wife'; and the crew of Serenity successfully refuses the temptation such a character offers.

Kaylee: SWE, likes sex, likes engines, abhors conflict

In contrast to Zoe and Saffron, Kaylee is no one's wife. Through Kaylee, *Firefly* also engages with third-wave feminism,¹¹ which asserts female sexuality openly, playfully, and boldly. For instance, in 'Out of Gas' (1.8), viewers discover that Kaylee was not Serenity's original mechanic but, instead, was on board for a sexual rendezvous with the original mechanic. Despite catching the two *in flagrante delicto*, Mal nevertheless listens to Kaylee's diagnosis of Serenity's engine problems and, after a short but convincing demonstration, hires her immediately. Kaylee's healthy, unashamed sexuality is on display through both the series (via her long-standing crush on Simon) and, more overtly, in the film *Serenity*; in mortal danger and on the brink of losing her nerve as the crew prepares to hold off the Reavers, Kaylee is overjoyed to hear Simon finally admit that he regrets not 'being with' her. His admission revitalizes Kaylee's flagging courage, and she returns reinvigorated to the fight; in the 'verse, sex is not just fun, it's a reason to live. Furthermore, Kaylee appears to have no plans to be anyone's wife. As Nancy Holder notes, Kaylee is 'not hoping that Simon will marry her so she can stop working and make strawberry pie and calico dresses' (152). Kaylee seems happy with her family on Serenity, provided she can enjoy sex now and again.

Kaylee's standard coveralls and stereotypically masculine job notwithstanding, she nevertheless demonstrates many stereotypically feminine, even 'girlie,' traits that in no way diminish the respect she commands from the others. While she is a natural-born mechanic, Kaylee also likes feminine clothes and accoutrements; in 'Shindig' (1.4) she admires a pink, ruffled dress and takes obvious glee in wearing it, despite the catty mockery from the other women at the party. Kaylee's taste runs, as does that of many girlies, to overdone and exaggerated femininity: not only is the gown in 'Shindig' bubble-gum pink, with tiers of layered ruffles, but it also includes little white gloves and a parasol.¹² Still, Kaylee's reveling in her girlish clothes takes nothing away from her competence. Even in her frilly gown, she is shown at the party engaging knowledgeably, even expertly, with fascinated men about various spaceships. In this respect, Kaylee's tastes resonate with third-wave feminism's ideal of reclaiming stereotyped versions of femininity in the name of subverting and complicating them.

Another traditionally feminine quality that Kaylee possesses is seen in her role of ship peacemaker. Kaylee treats the crew as a contentious

family, and she often soothes hurt feelings. For example, in 'Serenity' (1.1), when Mal attempts to needle Shepherd Book and simultaneously humiliate Inara by sarcastically introducing her as an 'ambassador,' Kaylee smooths everyone's ruffled feathers and keeps Mal in line: she glares at Mal and declares that his joke isn't funny, informs Book that Inara's official title is 'Companion,' and walks away with Inara while engaging her in a conversation.

Despite her stereotypically feminine traits, Kaylee is nonetheless shown as a capable crewmember. However, it is also noteworthy that Kaylee's femininity not only includes the reclaimed, postfeminist type but also the stereotypical variety of femininity that mandates passive and mild-mannered women—precisely the version of femininity enacted by Saffron's downcast eyes and deferential speech. These traits compromise Kaylee's ability to stand up for herself, although she can defend others. Despite her reticence on her own account, she vigorously defends Serenity, even against Simon's derision. Kaylee's bravery, which she displays so vigorously to defend those in her family, does not extend to her own needs and feelings. Instead, she often hopes for, if not necessarily expects, other people to speak up for her. In the pilot, when Jayne humiliates her by crudely noting that she is 'lubed up' over Simon, Kaylee is shown looking silently down at her plate rather than angrily retorting or even glaring at him; it is Mal who responds quickly by ordering Jayne from the table.¹³ Likewise, although Kaylee twice tells Jayne to be polite to Simon, she is unwilling to do the same for herself.

Kaylee's stereotypically feminine traits sometimes paralyze her ability to act decisively to defend Mal and the other crewmembers: she simply cannot bring herself to shoot at a person even under dire circumstances. In 'War Stories,' she is the only one unable to pick up arms to rescue Mal. Left to hold the entrance to Serenity, she cannot fire her weapon, even to protect herself. She retreats into Serenity's cargo bay where she hides. River demonstrates a thus far unseen talent and manages to shoot all three of Niska's henchmen—a talent that frightens Kaylee. Kaylee's girliness and playful sexuality mix with her mechanical competence to create a complexly gendered character who cannot be adequately described via essentialist notions of masculine or feminine.

Firefly's complex representations of gender can illuminate current debates about feminism, postfeminism, and third-wave feminism. Whedon's work continues to provide not just 'good' or 'bad' images of

women but, as Patricia Pender shows in her work on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, complicated representations of women who fall into different categories of feminism. The characters are multivalent and can be read, depending on the viewer's perspective, in contradictory ways and thus encourage debate. An embracing of contradiction is, I would argue, the very heart of postfeminism. One such contradiction surrounds Inara: is she the typical hooker with a heart of gold who has it bad for the leading man? Or is she an empowered woman deploying her sexuality for monetary gain, yet doing so as a member of a dignified profession? Both, really. Is Kaylee a girlie girl who lets others fight her battles for her (see note 5)? Or is she an example of the third-wave feminism reclamation of girliness that does not lessen her mechanical competency and her own confidence in her chosen role? Both, really. Is Saffron a 'good wife,' or is Zoe? While Zoe is a 'good wife' to Wash, Saffron, who seems at first to be the ideal pre-feminist 'good wife,' is not a good wife, to Mal or any of her many husbands—although she undermines the very notions of identity in a postmodern way. *Firefly* offers rich ground for continuing discussions about how media can shape perceptions of the possible and the desirable for the future of feminism.

7. 'The Alliance Isn't Some Evil Empire'

Dystopia in Joss Whedon's *Firefly*/
Serenity

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In every television series he has created, Joss Whedon has shown himself a master of genre-blending. Each features a creative, surprisingly successful fusion of genres as well as an inversion of the norms typically associated with them. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *Firefly* all employ unusual combinations of two or more genres, and each develops a unique voice through inversion and juxtaposition of genre-driven expectations. *Buffy* established its voice through inversions of the generic expectations of high-school teen drama and the horror show.¹ *Angel* mixes motifs and allusions from the horror and film noir/private investigator genre with the archetype of the individual facing corporate evil.² In *Firefly*, Whedon locates his cast in the combined world of horror, science fiction, and Western,³ describing the fictional world of the series as 'Western noir' with 'a kind of a Hong Kong sensibility' (*Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 25). Yet a tradition more specific than the broad category of science fiction also informs *Firefly*'s world: *Firefly*, and its cinematic sister *Serenity*, fit comfortably within the tradition of twentieth-century dystopic fiction. In this chapter, we situate *Firefly* within the dystopic tradition and explore its debt to the classic and feminist dystopic themes of the twentieth century, as well as its contributions to twenty-first-century post-9/11 dystopic discourse. As part of this exploration, we consider the uniquely Whedonian concerns and inversions that are overlaid upon the traditional genre norms.

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Dystopia defined

A dystopia has been defined as a text with 'a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived' (Sargent 9). Most scholarly examinations of dystopias emphasize their political aspects: dystopias present less than perfect 'sociopolitical institutions, norms, and relationships between . . . individuals,' from the perspective of 'a representative of a discontented social class or faction, whose value-system defines "perfection"' (Suvin 170). A dystopia, then, is a view of an imperfect fictional society that utilizes the perspective of the outlaw to examine the political ramifications of its social ordering. As a preliminary observation, it is simple to see that *Firefly* fits well within this basic premise. Since losing the war, Mal and his crew (with the possible exception of Inara) live as outlaws, doing legal or illegal jobs for anyone willing and able to pay and constantly trying to avoid the Feds.

'You can't take the sky from me':⁴ Dystopic settings

The dystopic setting is commonly a post-apocalypse or post-holocaust world—the barren landscapes of *Logan's Run* (1976)⁵ or *Planet of the Apes* (1968), for example. In the rebuilding of civilization from a disaster or war, we see a reversion to the image of the frontier. In non-urban settings, it is common to see the forbidding landscapes that lend themselves to the Western genre. In this case, the selectively told backstory (another common conceit of dystopic fiction) tells us that 'Earth-That-Was could no longer sustain our numbers, we were so many' (*Serenity*). Emigrants from Earth-That-Was traveled to a new system where planets were terraformed to support human life. The lack of support for further development of the outlying planets resulted in unwelcoming 'Western' environments like those seen outside the dome in *Logan's Run*.

In *Firefly*, Whedon visually and thematically connects the post-apocalypse worlds of dystopic film and the frontier plains of the Western. Combining the barren, open imagery of the two genres viscerally underlines the thematic links between two genres that examine the individual on the outer fringe of society. To this mix, in his typical fashion, Whedon also imparts a 'Hong Kong sensibility'

(*Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 25). He describes that sensibility as a mixing of genres without the predictability of clichés:

There is a convention in American cinema to fall back on clichés— or on time-honored structure . . . And in these [Hong Kong] films, where you thought you were going to be terrified, the broadest comedy might appear. Wherever you thought this guy has been defeated, he might suddenly come back and kill everybody in the room and *then* suddenly be defeated. You just never knew. (25)

The 'Hong Kong sensibility' is imparted into the setting of *Firefly* through the Asian influences in the city scenes. The visual cues suggesting a strong Asian influence are many and various—everything from the animated characters that speak subliminally to River Tam via a giant screen to the kimonos seen on some of the female characters and the repainted lettering of *Serenity*—reminds the reader of this Asian inspiration. The Asian influence also spills over into the language of *Firefly*, which is uniquely and evocatively flavored with Mandarin.⁶

'Ten percent of nuthin' is . . . Let me do the math here':⁷ Classic dystopian themes

Usually a dystopic society is specifically linked to the society of its creator: the dystopic society carries tendencies from current society to their logical, and usually terrifying, extreme (Harmon and Holman 171). Dystopias reflect and examine current power structures that create and maintain social organization. The classic dystopias—e.g. the early novels of Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell—resonate with the concerns of the early to mid-twentieth century. In particular, those works were deeply connected to a fear of totalitarianism: the European experience during the wars and fears concerning the rise of fascist and socialist states led to a focus on totalitarianism and societal evils like the repression of minorities, gender disparity, state violence, war, and genocide. The dystopic visions of later times impeach similar evils, but the shape of the repression and social ills shifts through the century in response to the specific concerns of each era and place. Themes that reappear in dystopias throughout the century include state control of economic activity; social stratification, often including rationing or food shortages for some parts of the population; militarized police forces;

the state's insistence that 'outlaws' are causing problems through their own actions; and state propaganda and control of education.

Each of these classic dystopic concerns is part of *Firefly's* world. The state's control of economic activity is evident in the contrast between the wealthy inner planets and the impoverished outer planets. The inhabitants of the inner planets, who supported the ultimately victorious Alliance in the war, are rewarded, while those on the outer planets, who fought against the Alliance, are cut off from supplies, economically depressed, and often enslaved by whoever has adopted the most successful 'might-makes-right' approach. The rationing and food shortages for these inhabitants and for the crew of *Serenity* are obvious: we see the preciousness of a single strawberry when Shepherd Book is able to barter it (and a little money) for passage onto *Serenity* ('*Serenity*,' 1.1), observe the crew's lusty satisfaction when Book serves them fresh tomatoes ('*Serenity*'), and hear Kaylee's apologies to Simon for the taste of the birthday cake she made without benefit of flour ('*Out of Gas*,' 1.8).

The militaristic enforcers of the regime police the borderlands with a goal of capturing smugglers like the *Serenity* crew who try to service this disregarded frontier land. Those enforcers and the Alliance itself believe it is smugglers like Mal and his crew who are the cause of problems in the outer planets and consider them carrion eaters. More than once, the Alliance members refer to *Serenity* and its crew as 'vultures' or describe them as picking off the bones of the dead ('*Serenity*'; '*Bushwacked*,' 1.3; *Serenity*).

State control of education is vividly rendered through the opening scene of *Serenity*. The film begins with a voiceover from a woman we soon see is a teacher. The teacher explains to her students,

The Central Planets were the first settled and are the most advanced, embodying civilization at its peak. Life on the outer planets is much more primitive and difficult. That's why the Central Planets formed the Alliance, so everyone can enjoy the comfort and enlightenment of true civilization. That's why we fought the War for Unification.

After some discussion amongst the class, the teacher asks why the Independents would want to fight against the Alliance which brought them so many social and medical advancements. A pupil (our heroine River Tam) replies that the Alliance 'meddles' and 'people don't like to be meddled with.' Her teacher corrects her and explains that they

are not telling people what to think; they are showing them how. The teacher then suddenly and violently plunges a stylus into River's head, and the scene flash-cuts to River strapped in a chair with needles in her head as technicians monitor her. The message is abundantly clear: the state has won the war and will not tolerate questions as it teaches its children its version of history.

For readers of classic dystopias, this scene resonates with the dystopic vision of Orwell's *1984* and its central character's concerns about the rewriting of history by the ruling party. A common concern of dystopic fiction is the construction of a fictionalized view of reality that the population is coerced to believe or raised from childhood to accept. Jowett refers to this as the 'traditional dystopian regime's alteration of history to produce a sugarcoated utopian version of events' ('Helping' 81). Early education is a common means of controlling the population's view of reality, and it is common for dystopias to present a populace—here represented by the obedient children in River's class—that is generally accepting of the state's version of reality. Mal, himself, is aware of the dynamic between the elite ruling class and history. When the crew seems surprised that they cannot find an accurate record describing the planet Miranda, he reminds his crew: 'half of writing history is hiding the truth' (*Serenity*).

Serenity provides a more dramatic exposition of the evils of state control, and the control of information, through the Reavers. Throughout *Firefly*, Reavers are the dark and little-known evil of the star system. As is their pattern, the totalitarian Alliance government denies their existence, but those who live at the outskirts of the system know that Reavers are real and that they are so animalistic in what they do to their captives that their victims will almost always attempt suicide: the murder of a person who has been captured by Reavers is viewed as a mercy killing. When *Serenity* successfully sneaks around Reaver warships to land on the outer-rim planet Miranda, they find amongst a mass of dead people a videolog describing the creation of Reavers. Reavers are the result of Alliance experiments in controlling an entire planetary population with a chemical substance to suppress aggression. Instead, the chemical caused the majority of the population to simply stop everything and let themselves die. A small segment of the population had the opposite reaction: those who turned hyper-violent became Reavers.

The horror of mass behavioral control like that attempted by the Alliance on Miranda and individual mind control as attempted on

River are important themes in countless dystopias. This is the primary concern of the film adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), for example, which uses the aversion therapy its delinquent protagonist undergoes to explore the morality of removing free will, even where free will is used to choose evil. Scenes of River strapped to chairs and connected to machinery for Alliance experimentation evoke scenes of Alex similarly strapped down for experimental therapy in the screen version of *A Clockwork Orange*. In *Serenity*, however, Whedon changes the question from whether it is moral to remove one's free will to choose to do evil to the even murkier question of whether it is moral to deny an individual's free will in an effort to accomplish a greater good.

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'Start with the part where Jayne gets knocked out by a 90-pound girl . . .':⁸
Feminist dystopias

Given that dystopic literature reflects the political and social concerns of its time, it is not surprising that by the 1970s and 1980s, dystopic themes began to fall into two dominant categories of work: feminist dystopia and cyberpunk. Feminist dystopia is distinguished by its focus on genderized power structures and repression, whereas cyberpunk explores concerns of rapidly developing technology and the social structures emerging in this hi-tech world. Jowett examines the cyberpunk aspects of *Firefly* in the following chapter, so we focus only on Whedon's debt to feminist dystopias.

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It is not novel, of course, to suggest that Whedon's work has strong feminist elements. In addition to his playful use of genres, his feminist themes are among his most characteristic traits.⁹ In *Firefly*, Whedon draws on prevalent feminist dystopic themes in much the same way that he uses the classic dystopic themes: he chooses to evoke the genre, but inverts some aspects to avoid the cliché. For example, the feminist dystopia is almost always characterized by a world in which genderized repression forms an aspect of the social ills depicted. A natural consequence is that the protagonist—the person struggling against the unjust system—is nearly always female, drawing attention to the female perspective on social ordering in the world. If we view *Firefly* as a feminist dystopia, then the female protagonist of the greater dystopic tale that flows through the series and film is River. River offers a typical voice for this form: a young woman

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victimized by the repressive society. But whereas the protagonists of dystopias like Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* or Tepper's *The Gate Into Women's Country* remain weak and find hope only in the existence of a small and hidden resistance movement, River breaks loose of genre expectations in butt-kicking, Reaver-slaying glory. Admittedly, after seven television seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Whedon fans would have been more surprised had River not had hidden strengths to draw upon. Nonetheless, through River's unusual skill set, Whedon makes use of the genre's traditional protagonist in non-traditional ways.

Whedon also chooses his other female characters to make specific statements and to ensure a balanced female and male perspective to the crew's adventures: the audience hears the voice of River, and Zoe, the soldier and highly competent fighter; Kaylee, the girlie gifted mechanic; and Inara, the Companion who holds the most ambiguous of the female roles as a member of a generally honored profession. Each of these characters plays with specific expectations around the character; however, Inara is one of the women whose characterization draws most strongly from feminist dystopia.

Like many characters in feminist dystopias where reproductive politics are often an issue, Inara acts as a courtesan. She is respected in society because she is a highly placed Companion able to select her partners and to control her relationships with them. Yet in 'Heart of Gold' (1.13), we see the other side of her choice of careers, and a more typical depiction of the courtesan in feminist dystopia (and Westerns, for that matter), which speaks to the inequalities of women's positions in some parts of this universe. The women who inhabit the brothel in the episode are whores because, unlike Companions, they are not registered with the Guild. The parallels between women in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the women in 'Heart of Gold' are obvious: in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the few fertile women that still exist are sent to live with elite men and their wives so that the handmaids can become pregnant and carry the children as surrogates for the infertile wives. In 'Heart of Gold,' Pedaline serves as a handmaid: a powerful man impregnates her in lieu of his 'barren prairie shrew' wife, and he intends to take the baby, even if he has to 'cut it out' of her. In the Whedonverse, the women are able to fend off the attack through a violent war with many casualties and much sacrifice. Pedaline and the other women emerge victorious and reclaim their reproductive rights when Pedaline un sentimentally shoots the man who fathered the child. Although their position is certainly improved at the episode's end, the

women are still very much on the outskirts of society, both literally and figuratively. We do not gain a picture of frontiers where women's places are secure and equal. Similarly, while in 'Our Mrs. Reynolds' (1.6) Saffron ultimately shows herself to be a wily and dangerous villain, she begins by 'marrying' Mal and relying on his sense of duty driven by very pre-feminist notions of marriage to trick him further. The ploy simply couldn't work in a world in which marriage is always like Zoe and Wash's. Instead, we see the gender differences that do exist in this star system.

Firefly and post-9/11 American society

Ultimately, a dystopia provides social commentary on the ills of the contemporary world by ensuring that, however dire and exaggerated, those ills are recognizable to its audience. Given its development shortly after the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11 2001, we would expect *Firefly*, in the tradition of dystopias, to reflect the sociopolitical concerns of that specific time. As Hillegas writes of earlier dystopic works, our visions of dystopia are 'one of the most revealing indexes to the anxieties of our age' (3). *Firefly* is no different. In addition to its references to typical, twentieth-century dystopian themes, the worlds of *Firefly* and *Serenity* also link specifically to the society their creator and first audiences live in: post-9/11 American society. The events occurring in America after the terrorist attacks have been the source of much criticism, thought, and debate. Some of the actions of the Alliance can be viewed as a horrifying extension of the allegations of outsourcing torture, mistreating prisoners of war, and initiating devastating wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have been levied against the American government. *Firefly* taps into the concerns prevalent in the post-9/11 world: through its portrayal of a fictional world, the series explores today's power structures and comments on our current preoccupations with just leadership, laws and legal systems that create or maintain injustice, and the conflict between individual rights and the protection of society. Through the subversion and inversion of the antagonist and protagonist of the series, *Firefly* and *Serenity* also reflect a moral ambiguity common in post-9/11 television series. Whereas the lines between good and evil were previously clear, the shows of the new millennium take place in gray areas where the distinction between right and wrong is slipperier.¹⁰

A Whedonian dystopia: Inverting the antagonist

An important Whedonian feature of the *Serenity*/*Firefly* dystopia is that the government is not completely evil. In a recent interview, Whedon downplayed the sinister nature of the Alliance. While he acknowledged that the audience reads the series as a show in which the crew fights against an evil empire, he commented:

And I'm like, 'Well, it's not really an evil empire.' The trick was always to create something that was complex enough that you could bring some debate to it—that it wasn't black and white. It wasn't, 'If we hit this porthole in the Death Star, everything will be fine!' It was messier than that, and the *messiest* thing is that the government is basically benign. It's the most advanced culturally . . . (qtd. in Russell)

The fundamentally good intentions of the Alliance are evident in the ideologue discovered on Miranda. The Alliance worker insists that the scheme was a way to help people, not hurt them ('We meant it for the best, to make people safer'). Even Mal knows that most of the harm the Alliance causes derives from its belief that it can make people better, which is why he also knows he must alert the public to the realities of what happened on Miranda before the Alliance decides it can make more people better through a similar protocol (*Serenity*). Other Alliance citizens clearly believe in the good of their governing bodies, and we learn that even members of the crew's inner circle, like Inara, supported Unification ('Out of Gas').

It is not the Alliance's end of bettering people and their lives that makes it terrifying: rather, it is the means the Alliance chooses to employ which are indefensible. The act of sending an Operative forth to kill River is appalling, as are the many killings he commits in pursuit of her. The indiscriminate mass killing of every man, woman, and child on the planet that Shepherd Book resides on, the brutal slaughter of Mr. Universe, and the tragic death of Wash all demonstrate that the Alliance has no qualms about killing innocents to achieve its ultimate purpose. As the Operative insists while murdering the doctor responsible for the failure of the River project, the Alliance believes 'we're making a better world. All of them, better worlds' (*Serenity*). The cost of the Alliance's mission is simply unacceptable to the crew of *Serenity* as well as to the audience.

A Whedonian dystopia: Inverting the protagonist

In addition to its theme of moral ambiguity, *Firefly* also connects to another prevalent post-9/11 concern, the trampling of individual rights for the perceived benefit of society as a whole. A concern over the conflict between the rights of the individual and the protection or benefit of society is not unique to post-9/11 thought, though the counter-terrorism measures implemented in the wake of 9/11 have given the debate new significance. River's plight when she has been taken away for scientific experimentation against her will is a vividly dystopic vision similar to images we see repeated through the dystopic canon: Winston Smith's helplessness to retain his beliefs against physical and mental tortures in *1984*, the efforts of the Valans to torture the Sharers into conceding their values in Slonczewski's *A Door Into Ocean*, and Alex's 'rehabilitation' by the Ludovico technique in Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*. Dystopic novels and films are rife with images of individuals immobilized and facing forced reconditioning. In these works, individuals are not permitted their personal beliefs, and may be made into agents of the state—as is clearly the intention of River's captors. Although we do not learn until the end of *Serenity* that River's captors have created in her a tool against the Reavers (and even then their target is uncertain), we have many clues that she has been programmed for some purpose she cannot access.¹¹

Whedon's world makes use of the dystopic trope of individual versus collective, but interestingly inverts the perspective by presenting us with a collective of outsiders—rather than River—as the lens for our examination of the world. We only slowly begin to see that River's personal story is central to the overall narrative. Interestingly, one of the objections to *Firefly* that the Fox network reportedly had was that the 'nobodies' who 'get squished by policy' are the focus of the show (DVD commentaries for 'The Train Job' (1.2) and 'Serenity'). For Whedon's many admirers, it is the fact that he uses these nobodies as his lens that is most interesting. Jowett makes the point in reference to *Angel* that an element of both the Whedonverse and the critical dystopia is collectivity. In a dystopic world where individual rights are at stake, *Firefly* continues the Whedonian fascination with 'collective heroism and teamwork' as the source of hope for change (Jowett, 'Helping' 82).

Whedon's characterizations inevitably contain some elements of moral ambiguity: in *Firefly*, this aspect of his heroes is emphasized. Losers in the Battle of Serenity Valley, Mal and Zoe set the tone against

a backdrop of frontier justice: they do what they have to do to survive, not always taking the moral high road. For example, Mal shows his utilitarian colors in the duel scene from 'Shindig' (1.4) where he succeeds in bringing down the superior swordsman, Atherton Wing. With Atherton pinned to the ground, Mal is told he must 'finish it':

Harrow: . . . For a man to lay beaten . . . and yet breathing? It makes him a coward.
Inara: It's humiliation.
Mal: Sure. It would be humiliating. Having to lie there while the better man refuses to spill your blood. Mercy is the mark of a great man.
(Very quickly, offhandedly, Mal STABS Atherton!)
Guess I'm just a good man.
(He STABS him again!)
Well, I'm all right.
(Firefly: The Official Companion 1:124)

Mal does not kill Atherton as Harrow suggests would be both wise and appropriate in the circumstances. Instead, he chooses to humiliate him. When Harrow tells him 'You didn't have to wound the man,' Mal replies, 'Yeah, I know, it was just funny.'

In numerous other scenes throughout the series, we see Mal making rather unheroic choices (e.g. his killing of Niska's henchman in 'The Train Job'). His choices, though, are in line with the tradition of morally ambiguous Western heroes like Clint Eastwood's William Munny in *Unforgiven* (1992). *Firefly's* 'leading man' is a soldier, a killer, and a 'petty crook' ('Heart of Gold'). When he protests the choices of the Alliance, he does not speak from the moral high ground. With Mal as the example of Browncoat ethics, one cannot easily conclude that the star system would be better for all if the resistance had won the war.

Firefly is squarely grounded in the dystopic tradition. The series reiterates many of the themes of the classic dystopias, including state control of the economy and education, state violence and militarized police forces, and the scapegoating of the fringe population for any shortcomings of the state. Additionally, *Firefly* connects to the late twentieth-century feminist dystopia, through characters like River, Inara, Saffron, and the whores of 'Heart of Gold,' who each highlight issues of gender inequalities and repression. Yet *Firefly* is also the product of its unique age: the series speaks directly to a new set of

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concerns and preoccupations prevalent in post-9/11 America. Of paramount concern in this era is the tension between means and ends, between a laudable goal and the less laudable path that leads to it. In the spirit of the moral ambiguity currently imbuing politics and popular culture, Whedon gives us a benevolent government using means we cannot approve of, opposed by heroes who also use means we cannot fully support. *Firefly* captures the moral ambiguity inherent in a world of polarized politics where no one is a simple villain, and no one is a pure hero. It does so by making use of characteristic elements of the dystopic genre, but twisting some of its norms and combining others with the traditions of typically unrelated genres in a creative pattern that has become a signature of a Whedon series. Whedon says of his usual mixing of genres: 'This is both my gift and my curse. I'm never satisfied with one genre. I never want to do one thing for two hours. The movies I make are bits of genre mashed up' (*Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 24).

The dystopic bits mashed up in *Firefly* allow Whedon to critique society in a special way: framing the show within a genre that questions social structures allows him to raise questions of social ordering, feminist philosophy, and human nature, while Whedonian elements ensure that the audience will be challenged, and as always, thoroughly entertained.

her points were the basis for much feminist film theory, and still are useful in interrogating the cinematic apparatus even as they require interrogation. Her points about the ways in which women visually are inscribed in film remain valid, although the position of the spectator remains in question. On the ways in which Whedon has revised the heroic monomyth, see Wilcox, *Why Buffy Matters*.

- 14 Blue Sun is a ubiquitous symbol in *Firefly*. Not just a product, Blue Sun may also have governmental ties. River clearly hates Blue Sun: in the scene referenced, she is destroying labels and crushing boxes with Blue Sun on them. 'Blue' is also associated with the blue-handed men.
- 15 By the beginning of *Serenity*, the crew understands and utilizes some of River's abilities.
- 16 Phallogocentric discourse, the term French feminists use to refer to this system, is a fixed and stable system of representation; it is the discourse of a rational, linear, privileged patriarchal culture.
- 17 Cixous' argument about female subjectivity ('Laugh of the Medusa') is similar to Mulvey's theorization of the role of female spectators in cinema. According to Mulvey, women must occupy both heterosexual and masculine positions as viewers; they must therefore either identify with male heroes against the female or sadomasochistically identify with the objectified female. See Mulvey (both essays) and de Lauretis for a discussion of the position of the spectator within cinema and Doane on female spectatorship. See also note 13.
- 18 The French feminist concept of *l'écriture féminine* has, like Mulvey's arguments about the gaze, been criticized for its essentialization of the female body; while this criticism is valid, the concept is useful in the ways it destabilizes phallogocentrism and enables female speech.
- 19 River's fluidity exists in her very naming: like a river, she is changeable, powerful, and potentially dangerous.
- 20 See e.g. Inara's bathing scene and Kaylee's delight in a strawberry in 'Serenity' (1.1).
- 21 This episode, like 'War Stories' (1.10), presents another character who resists normative behavior. However, while River is established as a sympathetic character, these other characters are depicted as psychotic. Thus Whedon avoids the trap of glorifying the hysteric without mediation: River is a particular type of hysteric. She eschews the pointless violence of Niska and Early and does not revel in causing pain. Due to space constraints, comparisons of River with Early, Niska, and the Reavers have been cut.

Chapter 4

- 1 See Huff's reading of Zoe's choice (109–10).

- 2 Our current moment is one of both consolidation and controversy as feminists attempt to deal with defining these very terms—'feminism,' 'postfeminism,' and 'third-wave feminism'—and the relationship between them. Writers including Yaszek, Baumgardner and Richards, Walker, Sommers, and Roiphe are engaged with definitional issues that have important implications for the future of feminism; their sometimes heated disagreements are testament to the continuing importance of women's issues.
- 3 This is certainly true for shows like *Ally McBeal*, a comedy full of high-powered female lawyers, which revolves around various legal cases involving women's issues, only to typically side with the forces of anti-feminism. For instance, *Ally's* law firm represents not the sexual harassment victim, but the perpetrator, as was the case in the episode 'Only the Lonely.' Likewise, even when the characters in *Sex and the City* espouse feminist ideas, the show diligently avoids the 'f word'—feminism. As Lotz notes, the characters in both shows 'came of age experiencing the gains achieved by second wave feminism' (94). But this does not de facto make the shows feminist.
- 4 Major statements of second-wave feminism can be found in Brownmiller, Friedan, Millett, and Morgan, to name only a few.
- 5 Baumgardner and Richards spend much time defining what they term 'girlie' culture: 'Girlies are girls in their twenties or thirties who are reacting to an anti-feminine, anti-joy emphasis that they perceive as the legacy of Second Wave seriousness. Girlies have reclaimed girl culture, which is made up of such formerly disparaged girl things as knitting, the color pink, nail polish, and fun' (80). Kaylee, with her pink frilly dress and butterfly-and-flowers sign for her room, clearly resonates with this notion.
- 6 Roiphe details her belief that feminists have created a culture of victimization by exaggerating male power and female powerlessness, particularly in terms of date rape.
- 7 Coontz chronicles the development of the companionate idea of marriage in the eighteenth century, in which the measure of a marriage was no longer 'How big a financial settlement was involved, how many useful in-laws were acquired, or how many children were produced, but how well a family met the emotional needs of its individual members' (146). By the early nineteenth century, 'Many men and women came to believe that wives should remain at home, not because men had the right to dominate them, but because home was a sanctuary in which women could be sheltered from the turmoil of economic and political life' (156). These changes paved the way to the conceptions of marriage and the respective roles and duties of husbands and wives that undergirded twentieth-century debates surrounding wifehood.

- 8 Such non-academic narratives usually minimize the role of structural issues—lack of subsidized and reliable child care, sufficient family leave, etc.—in favor of individualizing the issue.
- 9 Friedan's notion of the 'feminine mystique' famously described the emptiness of housewifery, and Shulman proposed a plan for dividing housework and childcare equally.
- 10 As Holder notes, 'this dysfunctional little wagon train began to learn how to function together, because in whatever form he works, Joss is interested in family' (145).
- 11 Unlike postfeminism, which has been associated at least in part with a rejection of the need for a continuing feminist movement, third-wave feminists have tended to see their work as building on the gains of second-wave feminism. As Yaszek notes, for authors like Walker, and Baumgardner and Richards, 'the phrase third wave feminism is preferable to postfeminism precisely because it invokes the long history of collective feminist action in America, including its continued importance.'
- 12 In fact, the costume designer who made Kaylee's ball gown describes it as a 'layer cake' because of its 'layers and layers of ruffles' (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:111).
- 13 Although the moment lasts for only a second or two, it seems clear that Kaylee is not leaping to her own defense immediately, while Mal does.

Chapter 5

- 1 I am indebted to a helpful audience at the *Slavage* Conference on the Whedonverses (May 2006).

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- 1 While Whedon does cast Reynolds' masculinity as marginalized, a move Jeffords sees as dangerous, he does not make the associated rhetorical move of posing 'survival—finally the survival of masculinity itself—as depending on the exclusion of women and the feminine' (168).
- 2 See Jowett, *Sex and the Slayer* (119–43).
- 3 I adopt the term 'genteel patriarch' from Kimmel, who uses it to describe one dominant pre-Civil War masculine identity formation; see *Manhood* (1–42).
- 4 See Jowett, *Sex and the Slayer* (119–43).
- 5 In addition, both series and film hint at Book's mysterious past, indicating his former connection to such violence but also revealing his rejection of that lifestyle.

- 6 For more on Zoe's marriage and status, see Chapter 4 and Huff and West.
- 7 Amy-Chinn notes, 'All three of these female characters draw on a second wave feminist discourse in that they enjoy a seemingly equal relationship with the male crew members and do not trade on their femininity as a source of their power' (177).
- 8 See Halberstam (1–43).
- 9 As such, Whedon aligns himself with those who argue that masculinity can be transformed behaviorally, leaving in place the patriarchal structures that naturalize masculinity. For more on this vision, see Mansfield (190–228) and Kimmel, 'Integrating.'
- 10 For more on masculinity's social construction, see Connell (35–8, 67–86) and Whitehead, *Men and Masculinities* (45–63).
- 11 Richardson and Rabb discuss Mal's 'ethics' as promoting freedom through existential choice. I connect this reading to American ideals of individualism and masculinity, as identified in Jewett and Lawrence; Kimmel, 'Integrating'; and Slotkin.
- 12 See Carrigan et al., and Traister for discussions of the current state of masculinity.
- 13 Whedon notes, '*Firefly* is about discovering strength through weakness . . . It's a triumph because they have no power, which is of course different than strength' (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:6).
- 14 Speaking of Early's rape threat in 'Objects in Space' (1.14), Amy-Chinn notes, 'The effect of this is to instantly demonise black sexuality and to invoke the spectre of the dangerous black man who threatens the innocent white woman. This is particularly poignant—and disturbing—given the post Civil War ambiance that defines the world of *Firefly*, because of the way this spectre has haunted the American imaginary and served as the justification for lynching' (188). See Chapter 14.
- 15 It is this repudiation that enables Whedon to say, 'Mal was supposed to be the hero, but in the loosest sense of the word, everything that a hero is not. . . . Mal is a person who believes very little and thinks he believes nothing, and is often conflicted, often does terrible things, runs away for most of the movie, shoots not one but three unarmed men in the course of the film, and is kind of a despicable guy half the time, but he's the only person who can save us from ourselves' (*Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 11, 21).
- 16 See Kimmel's 'Masculinity as Homophobia.'
- 17 See Mendlesohn (49).

Chapter 7

- 1 Whedon notes he developed *Buffy* specifically to invert the Hollywood formula of little 'blondes walking into dark alleyways and being

killed . . . I wanted . . . for her . . . to kick [the monster's] ass' (qtd. in Havens 21).

- 2 Abbott has explored film noir in *Angel* in 'Kicking Ass and Singing "Mandy"' and 'Walking the Fine Line.' See Sutherland and Swan on corporate evil in *Angel*, 'The Rule of Prophecy' and Jowett, 'Helping.'
- 3 These aspects are emphasized by at least three of the contributors to Espenson's *Finding Serenity*: Gerrold, Holder, and John C. Wright.
- 4 Theme song, *Firefly*.
- 5 Based on a book and movie of the same name, the television series *Logan's Run* ran (like *Firefly*) for only fourteen episodes.
- 6 A focus on language is a common characteristic of dystopias. For instance, all of Atwood, *A Handmaid's Tale*; Orwell, 1984; Slonczewski, *A Door into Ocean*; and Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* focus on the language of oppressors and/or oppressed as an important element of their critique. The language of *Firefly* most closely follows the pattern of language in *A Clockwork Orange*, which combined Slavic-rooted words with rhyming slang and English to create Nadsat. Since the novel was written in the midst of the Cold War, the choice of Russian as a root language evoked images of totalitarian social ordering. Whedon combines English with Mandarin to recognize the two remaining superpowers, China and the United States. The blend similarly underscores the power structures at play, and the difference of these structures from contemporary American ones. See Chapter 2.
- 7 *Serenity*.
- 8 *Serenity*.
- 9 Some scholarship suggests that Whedon's feminism is problematic. See e.g. Magoulick.
- 10 The argument that post-9/11 programming is increasingly morally ambiguous is made by a number of scholars including Sumser (155); and Sutherland and Swan, 'The Good, the Bad, and the Justified' (119).
- 11 As noted, it is interesting to think of River's story as the central dystopic narrative throughout the series and film: in an inversion of the typical dystopic narrative, we do not follow the 'protagonist' in this story—arguably River—through her conflicts with authority. Instead, we follow the group of outsiders that she joins. This group of outsiders is itself a trope of dystopias, but the classic presentation of the narrative has the individual protagonist fleeing to find a rumored group that is not under the control of the government. The group is usually a haven for the protagonist, though in many instances the protagonist brings destruction on the group by joining them. Of course, River does not actually bring destruction on the whole of the group, but she clearly

brings a significant risk of destruction to all, and arguably triggers events that lead to Wash's death.

Chapter 8

- 1 Steampunk Western television shows are mentioned by Holder in her discussion of *Firefly* (89).
- 2 *Serenity* implies that they want her knowledge but the disregard remains the same.
- 3 The Reavers are the ultimate Western savages (see Chapter 10) but cannibalism returns to the physical body. Taken with the excessive violence of the Alliance operatives, it suggests a return of the repressed.
- 4 See Joy Davidson for a slightly different view of Inara's shuttle (124).
- 5 See e.g. Leigh Adams Wright. Holder points out that previous television shows used a blend of Western and Chinese/Asian (144). See Chapter 2.
- 6 Arguing a different point, Lackey suggests that River 'knows' that the freedom she is experiencing now is temporary and illusory, and for that reason, while she has it, she lives absolutely and completely in the 'now' (70).
- 7 Of course, Book may have been a man of action himself.
- 8 One explanation of the Reavers, pre-*Serenity*, comes at this from the other end; they have been driven mad by the emptiness of the Black. See Chapter 13.
- 9 This may be influenced by the demands of popular television, though *Stargate SG-1* manages to balance action and diplomacy.
- 10 Arguably he is forced to. His mention of 'thirty pieces' might imply a payment or just his realization of his role as Judas.
- 11 Compare, for example, Logan in *Dark Angel*, Professor X in *X-Men*, or Oracle in the Batman comics.

Chapter 9

- 1 I presented an earlier version of this paper at the 2004 conference of the Popular Culture Association in the South.
- 2 Whedon interview, *Firefly: The Official Companion* (1:9); DeCandido (56).
- 3 In Kaveney's interviews of writers Espenson and DeKnight (100–31), both writers discuss Whedon's guidance of different stages of various scripts from the first idea through outline, notes, breaking the story, rewrites, shooting draft, and final version—even to such details as 'punctuation and word choice' (106).