Agnes B. Curry

"We Don't Say 'Indian'"[1]**: On the Paradoxical Construction of the Reavers**

"This show isn't about the people who made history; it's about the people history stepped on."

Joss Whedon on *Firefly*[2]

Introduction

[1] Faithful to conventions of both the space epic and the Western, *Firefly* and *Serenity* depend on the lurking presence of frontier savages to create narrative tension and moral order. Whedon is explicit about the parallels between the Reavers and Hollywood Indians, noting, "Every story needs a monster. In the stories of the old west it was the Apaches" (Arroyo 2005).

[2] On the other hand, reports of the appearance during which Whedon noted the parallel interpret him as claiming to have "removed the racial aspect of the Apache metaphor" (Arroyo), and further specifying that rather than ascribe the worst in human behavior to a specific ethnicity, he constructed the Reavers to make it clear that darkness was a part of human nature in general (McCaw). The conjunction of these claims, with what I will argue are clear instances of racial coding of the Reavers as Hollywood Indians in both *Firefly* and *Serenity,* makes interpreting Whedon's purposes with respect to the Reavers quite problematic. Either the replay of Indian stereotypes is occurring in spite of Whedon's intentions, or he's up to some other project and misleading his public about his aims.

[3] J. Douglas Rabb and J. Michael Richardson argue in the forthcoming *Investigating Firefly and Serenity* collection that Whedon is indeed up to a project; they claim that "Whedon is attacking and deconstructing the 'savage Indian' found in 1950's 'B Westerns' and some early contact accounts of the Native Peoples of the Americas. It is, of course, necessary to present such stereotypes in order to deconstruct them." If this is the case, however, then why does Whedon claim to have de-racialized the reference? What, precisely, does it even mean to have removed the racial aspect of a racial stereotype? Even if we can make sense of that idea, it remains the case, I argue below, that rather than deconstruct anything, Whedon merely exchanges an explicitly savage stereotype for a seemingly sweeter one. Further, by the time a possibly deconstructive moment takes place —late in the climax of *Serenity*—previous scenes have inculcated the savage stereotype so effectively at the subliminal level that one possibly revisionary scene could hardly trouble it.

[4] Rabb and Richardson point out, quite rightly, that Whedon understands himself, and is commonly understood, to be operating at the level of metaphor. And Whedon's

viewers understand themselves to be savvy consumers, comprehending the distinction between representation and reality and finding pleasure in the play of multiple layers of allusion. Catching the references and seeing through the representational conventions can even lead to a sort of moral self-satisfaction, as detectable in the response of reviewer Paul DeAngelis: "And the Reapers [sic], savages that strike fear into travelers and settlers alike, are stand-ins for Indians—not Native Americans per se, but Hollywood's version of Indians. Whedon is too progressive to confuse the two."

[5] However, I think confusion between metaphor and reality in the case of "Injuns" and Indians reigns, even for progressives, insofar as Hollywood remains a prevailing mode of constructing real Indians. Living Native Americans, to a peculiar degree, continue to have a social unreality that cannot be accounted for unless we understand the importance of cinema and the Hollywood Western in light of earlier framings of this hemisphere's indigenous peoples. Hollywood stereotypes are tropes of the discourses operative long before the 19th-century events and figures depicted in Western movies and television shows. More to the point, the Hollywood Western is a chapter in the long project of constructing U.S. identity as premised on the abjection and disappearance of the native. And it remains a particularly powerful chapter in the ongoing project of solidifying and exporting a colonialist form of identity.

[6] I thus find the instances of coding of the Reavers as Hollywood Injuns to lead, more or less directly, to instances of racial coding that construct, and constrain, perceptions of living Indian people. Whether occurring by accident or (veiled) design, those pesky metaphors refuse to stay at the level of metaphor.

[7] In interviews, Whedon has stressed the place of popular media in social change (Nussbaum 2002): "The idea of changing culture is important to me, and it can only be done in a popular medium." On the other hand, works by Kent Ono, Lynne Edwards, Naomi Alderman and Annette Seidel-Arpaci, and Jes Battis support the contention that features of *Buffy* and *Angel* are less subversive about race than about gender and sexuality. My argument furthers this line of criticism. Ewan Kirkland is particularly illuminating on the way the shows' filmic and aesthetic conventions remain, with the ambivalent exception of martial-arts action films, within Euro-American norms. I think it is safe to say that *Firefly* and *Serenity* remain within those norms as well. If the Western genre supports forms of political identity and outlook that are arguably problematic, then the choices of both genre and filmic style are both politically loaded and suggest that Whedon and associates are indeed more concerned about gender and sexuality than about race and neo-colonialism.

What Indians? Aren't They All Gone?

[7] In most Americans' daily lives, actual American Indians are invisible. In vast stretches of the U.S., the only known Indians are the stereotypical Indians of movies and television. But this invisibility is due not merely to their relatively low numbers compared to other racial and ethnic minorities, or even to patterns of poverty and the isolation of reservations. Many American Indians live in cities and suburbs. Many clearly and repeatedly identify themselves as Indian to friends, neighbors, workplace acquaintances, etc. Yet they find that they are often either perceived stereotypically no matter what pains they take to present themselves otherwise, or dismissed as not really Indian because they do not match the Hollywood images. This pattern of misperception would be simply another instance of social stereotyping if it were not for the fact that American self-identity *as American*, i.e. as the rightful residents of U.S. national territory, depends on the destruction (either through assimilation or extermination) of the peoples who were here first. The invisibility of Indians has also to do with many Americans' psychological investment in their vanishing. For if Indians have in fact vanished, through death or assimilation, then the moral complexity of Europeans possessing the territory can be rendered a historical problem rather than an ongoing challenge.[3]

Okay, Here's My Subtext

[8] Since of course we all "bring our own subtexts" (as Whedon recommends) to our viewing, I should be forthcoming about mine. I am Latina, albeit one whose surname, general physiognomy, accent and social position do not immediately locate me as such, particularly outside the southwestern United States. As a Mexican-American, it bothered me that through seven seasons, Sunnydale remained almost utterly devoid of any Latino flavor in spite of the fact that one of three California residents is Latino (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Yet I tended to suppress my annoyance and make excuses for the show's creators. I was delighted with the Season Seven opener, when it looked like Dawn might find a cohort of friends of her own and that one of them included a kid named Carlos Trejo; I was happy in spite of the fact that in the episode he was little more than a cliché[4] (Hispanic kid, in trouble, possibly a gang member) and thus a reminder to me of the fact that my viewing pleasure is usually also a continuing investment in my own social marginalization. And I'm not alone here—my unscientific sampling of friends, family, students and acquaintances suggests that *Buffy* and *Angel* have a decent contingent of Latino and Native American fans. Indeed, I came to *Buffy* late in the third season, and probably wouldn't have if not for the fandom of my then-boyfriend, now-husband, who is American Indian. While my association with my husband and other Indians has afforded me further acquaintance with the odd patterns of perception to which they are subjected, my own experiences as a non-stereotypical Latina and other experiences, particularly as a teacher,[5] have piqued my interest as well. But now, faced with raising a child I find the contradictions between my viewing pleasures and my responsibilities even more unresolvable—and the stakes immeasurably higher.

[9] From the side of my own identity, having long maternal roots in the annexed territory of New Mexico has meant that my relationship to U.S. racial categories and discourses of Anglo nationalist self-justification has always been a bit uneasy and confused. More recently, having been seduced by writers like Cormac McCarthy and films like *Unforgiven*, I have become interested in the significance of the Western genre and its connection to my unease. When I heard about plans for *Firefly,* I was particularly excited not merely because it was another series from Whedon, but also precisely because it involved elements of the Western. I looked forward both to seeing what he would accomplish with the form and to the prospect of a Western I could enjoy existentially and politically as well. I did find it enjoyable and interesting, and for this reason it took me a while to admit my misgivings about the Reavers to myself. Initially, it's easy to dismiss the references to classic Indian stereotypes as a sort of surface clutter, particularly given the origin story in the series. Thus both Mary Alice Money in her *Slayage* Conference presentation, and my friend, *Buffy* scholar Reid Locklin[6] in personal conversation, suggested that Reavers, at least in *Firefly*, are more compellingly interpreted to stand for white settlers going into the wild and losing themselves. But research in cognitive psychology and cultural studies suggests that this interpretation is problematic even if that was Whedon's intent.

A Little about Stereotypes

[10] One of the central concepts in cognitive psychology is that of a mental schema. Most psychology texts (e.g. Weiten 2005) characterize a schema as an organized cluster of knowledge or information about an object or event, built by abstraction from previous experience with the object or event (213). While there is some variance in theorists' definitions of a schema, Perry Thorndyke and Barbara Hayes-Roth isolate the assumptions common to the notion. They include: first, that the information encompassed by a schema is organized and conceptually related so that the schema forms a prototype; second, that a schema is developed on the basis of experience; third, that an existing schema guides the organization of new experience. As Steve Thoma notes, schemas are highly contextual, thus triggered by similarly structured situations, and often operate automatically and without the subject's explicit awareness (72).

[11] Schemas are basic elements in cognition and the creation of meaning. They facilitate combination of information into meaningful units that speed up inferential processes and provide bases for interpretation, prediction, emotional response, decision-making and action. Schemas can prompt mis-perception and mis-interpretation; Darcia Narvaez notes that readers of written material will often distort information to conform with preexisting schemas (17). In turn, schemas guide emotional response. As Dan Stein notes, while work on schemas opens many challenges to classical Freudian understandings of the mind, schema theory nonetheless maintains the Freudian emphasis on insight and the modern analytic emphasis on empathy. And Shaun Gallagher argues that while cognitive science has many things to offer to hermeneutics, the reverse is true as well. Thus I believe that schema theory can relate usefully to some work in hermeneutics and psychoanalytically-inclined literary criticism, with insights about dialectical oppositions and the logic of paradox as it operates in texts and other cultural productions perhaps enriching our understanding of some schematic operations at the individual level.

[12] Schemas are learned not only through personal experience but also by initiation into social groups. Social stereotypes are a particular class of schema. As widely-held cognitive and evaluative schemas linking people to characteristics because of their membership in specific social groups, social stereotypes are results of normal cognitive process. As stereotypes are highly accessible and frequently automatic, John Bargh argues that our minds don't have to do a lot of work to access salient social stereotypes and that this work occurs without conscious control. James Hilton and William von Hippel note that stereotypes speed up mental processing, but prompt overgeneralization and can foster inaccurate perception of individual cases. And, as Scott Plous summarizes, the media is a major disseminator of stereotypes, with even fleeting re-activations of stereotypes cumulating and re-enforcing chronically stereotypical thinking (27). Several experiments, including work by Patricia Devine and Margo Monteith, indicate that prejudicial stereotypes are readily activated even in people who renounce prejudice.

[13] Research by Daniel Gilbert, Susan Fiske, and Gardner Lindzey indicates that stereotypes affect memory recall, with individuals readily forgetting information that does not fit in with their pre-existing schemas unless it is really shocking. When people encounter ambiguous information, they will interpret it in line with their expectations,[7] a reaction with which I am personally quite familiar. When people encounter truly disconfirming evidence to stereotypes, they may remember it and categorize it as atypical, but integrate it into the organized schema by creating a new subcategory of the exceptional case that is still subsumed under the overall schema without change of the stereotype.

[14] This suggests some epistemological conundrums. How does one enrich her schemas enough to get beyond stereotypes? Plous notes that research suggests that mere contact between people of different social groups is not enough, especially under conditions of social stratification (37). As both Fiske and Cornel Pewewardy note, unlike the less powerful, for whom nuanced perception of others, particularly those in power, can increase personal survival possibilities and is thus worth the effort, the powerful have little motivation to move beyond stereotypes, particularly those that support culturally promoted fantasies. On the other hand, acknowledging the operation of schemas within our perceptions, thoughts, and emotions can generate self-awareness and allow the prefrontal cortex to override subconscious operations to arrive at a fuller and more nuanced perspective.[8] Insofar as popular media is a primary teacher of stereotypes, representations of various and enriched characters—like Buffy—that *both* trigger schemas and then motivate us consciously to see beyond them and empathize by strongly representing their complex points of view, can be helpful.

[15] And here's my problem with *Firefly* and *Serenity* with regard to the Reavers. Whedon does some interesting stuff scrambling gender and race associations in the case of the characters. Working in popular media within the conventions, it's at least arguable that he provides cognitive and affective motivations to take second looks at assumptions about women warriors, rebel sergeants, randy ship's mechanics,[9] and interracial marriages.

That this can operate ambiguously is clear; Joy Davidson's and Nancy Holder's contrasting interpretations of the women characters in *Firefly* is an example. But I think subversion can still be possible here. On the other hand, when stereotypical elements operate without foregrounding, at the edge of awareness, with no critical space opened up by emotional investment in the characters being stereotyped, they run a greater risk of merely triggering pre-existing schemas. And I think this is the case with Reavers and stereotypical Indians.

On the Construction of Native Americans: Not Just Another Stereotype

[16] The claim that identity is stabilized through exclusion is, I'm assuming, a familiar one, argued from the perspective of both social psychology and psychoanalysis. The claim that American national self-identity is in important respects premised on the abjection and "extermination" of the Native in particular is likewise quite broadly argued. (By this claim I am not ruling out other important exclusions, such as of blackness, Mexican-ness, the feminine, etc.). Finally, the claim that the repressed returns and remains an object of desire is a familiar basic tenet of psychoanalytic theory. Thus, as Karen Gagne notes, while the first move, of Indian-hating, has been culturally dominant, it has always been dialectically related to Indian-loving—the fascination and appropriative romanticism that, in its guilt-ridden ambivalence about the perceived costs of civilization, identifies with Indians and with wild and free Nature. Both elements are indicative of an American psyche that is haunted, and neither actually takes account of Indigenous peoples as real and surviving (Neale 9) in their own right. In this respect, post-structuralist work by Renee Bergland on the Native as the undead, haunting and thereby at once constituting and destabilizing American national literature, reflects what Lakota theorist Vine Deloria said at least twenty years before:

> Indians, the original possessors of the land, seem to haunt the collective unconscious of the white man and to the degree that one can identity the conflicting images of the Indian which stalk the white man's waking perception of the world one can outline the deeper problems of identity and alienation that trouble him (x).

What does this have to do with the Western genre? Four centuries of Europeans' writings of all sorts—scientific, philosophical, legal, religious and literary—built a rich store of images of Native Americans for eventual deployment in film. Here I'm going to touch on some of the ones relevant for analyzing *Firefly* and *Serenity*.

[17] The fantastical dichotomy between the good, noble, peaceful Indian victim ("fluffy Indigenous kittens, 'til we came along" [*Buffy*, "*Pangs*," 4008]) and the evil, ruthless marauder goes back as far as Columbus's encounters with the Tainos and Caribs (which became Canibs, then Cannibals, a development that, as Harry Salwall reminds us, tells us more about European paranoia than about the Caribs). But Jacquelyn Kilpatrick credits Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* (for example, *The Last of the Mohicans)* with uniquely entrenching it (2). In Cooper we find not only the dichotomy but the also the figure of the "Indianized white intermediary," the new, post-European, authentically American hero, who is a better Indian than the Indians (who are, of course, the last of their kind) (Kilpatrick xv). This figure is a staple of the Revisionist Western *Ulzana's Raid*. The shadow accompaniment of the new American hero is the person who has actually "gone native," lost his or her balance and interiorized Native consciousness. The presence of this trope renders problematic Whedon's claim to be using the Reavers to represent the darkness of human nature in general; historically, the view that darkness is a part of human nature was entirely compatible with the view that Indians were particularly malign representatives of this general principle. Indeed, the fears of 'going native' depend upon it.

[18] The savage rapist is likewise a figure several centuries old, while the "dumb Indian" is a more recent reversal of earlier framings of the savage as intelligent (endowed with Reason) but ignorant. The dialectical tension between these codes lives on in filmic

portrayals of Indians as both inarticulate and primitive in their beliefs *and* demonically crafty.

[19] John O'Connor notes that film (and television as an outgrowth of film) is both heir to and a promulgator of cultural constructions, while Kilpatrick notes that visual media strive for the status of authoritative discourse, implicitly and often quite explicitly (xvii). And, precisely as visual, film has enormous epistemological privilege. Simply put, we naturally tend to believe what we see, and we are further trained into such habits by prevailing practices and institutions.

[20] The Western is characterized by critic Tim Dirks as "the major defining genre of the American film industry," and the connection between the Western and film goes back to film's very roots. Some of Thomas Alva Edison's first Kinoscope recordings were of what he took to be an *authentic* Sioux Ghost Dance (Kilpatrick 17), and the projects of silent film often centered around white directors trying to get the story of the Indians right. In fact, it was the Indian and not the cowboy who was the first subject of silent Westerns (Halnon). While initial representations were relatively benign compared to later ones, the circulation of endlessly repeated ideas about general "Indianness" has had peculiarly powerful repercussions for Native Americans. Blatant distortions have sedimented into phantasmagoric cultural orthodoxy. Living, breathing tribal persons are projected into a sort of hyperreality, becoming, in Deloria's words, "a pale imitation of the real Indians of the American imagination" (xvi) forced to confront present institutions that remain premised upon fantasies of the past. As work by Jason Edward Black, Pewewardy, Thomas Norton-Smith and others makes clear, the bizarre intransigence exhibited by many college and professional sports teams when faced with tribal people's requests that the teams change their mascots is a case in point.

[21] That the Western as a film/television genre occupies a uniquely powerful place in the construction of national identity is a point made by numerous scholars; I worked with analyses by Armando José Prats, Edward Buscombe and Roberta Pearson. That this has also had global consequences is nicely underscored in a comment by Gary Johnson: "The iconography of the Western is the largest and richest of all the film genres, and Hollywood has burned it into the minds of moviegoers from Dodge City to Timbuktu" (1). In turn the narrative of cowboys and Indians has shaped the colonial narratives of self-justification and modern identity in other contexts of settler colonialism like Canada ("Common Portrayals of Aboriginal People") and Australia, where, as Ann McGrath notes, it replaced the more homegrown figure of the bushranger.

[22] Yet scholars such as Prats and Jane Tomkins have noted that while images of Indians have been ubiquitous in Westerns, their subjectivity has been notably absent. While I think Tomkins perhaps overstates the case when she reduces their role to that of "a particularly dangerous form of local wildlife" (8), she has a point, reinforced by Prats' analysis of more recent Revisionist Westerns as just a more subtle play on theme of the vanishing Indian. On the logic of abjection, this should make sense. A further explanation for the hollowness Tomkins notes is the fact that the Western genre has proven rather flexible in providing a frame for working out other problems of national self-identity. As Neale notes, Indians have thus sometimes functioned as signifiers for some other concern, such as black-white race relations (9). I cannot develop this rich theme here, except to point out that the link between Westerns and space epics should be clear; in the1970s, when racial tension and white guilt become a fairly evident theme in mainstream culture, science fiction presents the trope of the frontier generally unmoored from its historical associations. This point is relevant because here is one place where I believe Whedon missteps in his construction of the world of *Firefly*. His combination of the Western genre and space story triggers quite specific historical associations with the Western genre and, indeed with American history. But the futuristic framing encourages the move to explain-away the obvious deployment of specific images and codes as invocations of broader concerns without much reflection on how they're continuing to structure perception of current persons.

Indian Coding in *Firefly*

[23] I watched most of the series in the order it appeared on television; that put "Bushwhacked" (1003) as the second episode and "Serenity" (1001) much later in the season. But since "Serenity" was intended as the series premiere, I will focus on it first. Whedon's intended order is significant, because it suggests that the original conception was to introduce the Reavers in the very first episode and to have two episodes featuring the Reavers in the first four episodes. As noted above, order of presentation is important for reinforcement of stereotypes; once a stereotype is activated, subsequent disconfirming information is unlikely to be sufficient for breaking it.

[24] Starting with the series premiere, the first mention of the Reavers is left unexplained and takes place when Mal is deciding to unload a set of stolen food concentrate bars to Patience, the matriarchal leader of the moon, Whitefall. Given that she shot him during their last encounter, her trustworthiness is an issue. Jayne asks Mal whether he trusts her, and Mal's response is "'Bout as much as I'd trust a baby to a pack of Reavers." The term "pack of wild Indians" is at least 100 years old, and the formulation thus aligns the Reavers with Indians from the start. It's not explicit, however; perhaps upon hearing the phrase a viewer could imagine that the Reavers are sorts of animals. On the other hand, in ordinary language we don't have "packs" of aliens or soldiers; both of these possibilities are implicitly ruled out as threats from the start. In this context, the fact that the Reavers turn out to be savage humans coheres entirely with pre-existing expectations.

[25] The Reavers get their first visual much later in the pilot, as the Serenity crew encounters a Reaver ship in space. But first the mounting threat is signaled musically, and this is significant. Werner Wirth and Holger Schramm summarize a multitude of research on the effects of music and note that music can effectively influence the meaning of narration; not only does background music shape the interpretation of single scenes, its deployment in crucial scenes shapes the interpretation of subsequent scenes and the entire plot. "Finally, persuasive functions take place if the pictures are emotionally loaded with music independent of the other elements in order to foster the spectator's identification with the protagonists" (Section 2C). Christopher Hight goes further in arguing for the importance of musical elements in constructing racial identity and notes that diachronic harmony, with its specific scales and compositional conventions that emphasize a tonal center, is a system of representing the emerging modernist view of nature as mathematically ordered and reconcilable to a single scale of measurement (13-14). In the pilot scene, the threat is signaled with a change in tonal progression through various harmonically related but unresolved chords, rendered mainly in strings accented with some light chiming. Both the strings and the chimes remain with a distinctively European musical language, the chimes having a connection with the ominous tolling of church bells. The music continues its changes through the scene as Mal and Wash try to get a view of the ship approaching them. Then Mal utters, "Reavers," and the music changes immediately to, predictably, a drum beat with a stress on the first beat—updated to an extent with a metallic tone in there but still unmistakably stereotypical of Hollywood "Injuns." (Editors' note: Cf. Lerner and Neal's discussions of the implications of music in *Firefly.*)

[26] The first visual of the Reavers is of the ship. If things like ships are characters on science fiction shows, and the front of the ship is its face, then this one has "Injun" warpaint on, with a red stripe down the nose and stripes across each cheek. As the shooting script specifies, "everything about this vessel says, savage." While the Reaver ship is passing, we have a classic Western shot sequence of Indian encounter, with cross cuts between the scenes of the ship and Serenity's passengers. The most noteworthy shot is of Mal grabbing Zoe's hand, replicating countless Western shots of terrified settler-family members holding on to each other. This sequence of shots raises our emotional investment in the story and solidifies our identification with the crew.

[27] Mal's intercom announcement is noteworthy: "We're passing another ship.

Looks to be Reavers. From the size, probably a raiding party." The term "raiding party" certainly brings to mind stereotypical Injuns. Perhaps it brings to mind other groups as well, (though I'm not sure what); while the term "raiding party" is sometimes used in a military context, the term "pack" has already removed us from that set of associations. Returning to the dialogue, we have the conversation between Zoe and Simon that gives us the first origin story of the Reavers:

> ZOE: You've never heard of Reavers?
>
> SIMON: Campfire stories . . . Men gone savage at the edge of space, killing, and . . .
>
> ZOE: They're not stories.
>
> SIMON: What happens if they board us?
>
> ZOE: If they take the ship, they'll rape us to death, eat our flesh and sew our skins into their clothing and if we're very, very lucky, they'll do it in that order. ("Serenity," (1001)

The connection of cannibalism to Native American stereotypes should be clear. Mary Alice Money has suggested that in the Western genre, cannibalism also can be connected with white settlers, for example Alfred Packer and the Donner party. However, when we consider the connotations of "raiding party," the notorious cases of white settler cannibalism did not involve raids on other groups. Additionally, I think the links between white cannibalism and the fear/desire of "going native" need to be explored before settling into Money's interpretation.

[28] When I first reviewed this scene, the phrase "rape us to death" seemed noteworthy as it reminded me of *Ulzana's Raid,* in which the Burt Lancaster character describes the Apaches as raping women to death. In the commentary on *Serenity*, Whedon specifically mentions *Ulzana's Raid* as an inspiration for a scene I'll discuss below. The idea of Indians wearing the scalps of their victims on their person is familiar.

[29] In "Bushwhacked" (1003), the other series episode featuring Reavers, the crew boards a ship that has been subject to a raid. Along with carnage, they find one survivor and we have the following dialogue between Jayne and Book:

> JAYNE: Reavers ain't men.
>
> BOOK: Of course they are. Too long removed from civilization, perhaps—but men. And I believe there's a power greater than men. A power that heals.
>
> MAL: Reavers might take issue with that philosophy. If they had a philosophy. And if they weren't too busy gnawing on your insides. (then)
>
> Jayne's right. Reavers ain't men. Or they forgot how to be. Now they're just . . . nothing. They got out to the place of nothing. And that's what they became.

A few minutes later, we have the crew find evidence of a booby trap:

> MAL: Booby trap. Reavers sometimes leave 'em behind for the rescue ships.

Here is the play of two important tropes with regard to Indians. One reflects the early debates about whether Natives were human and if so, what sort of responsibility Christians had for converting them. The other reflects the stereotype of Indians being somehow at once stupid and crafty—a stereotype with a lively ongoing life outside the cinema.

Indian Coding in *Serenity*

[30] In *Serenity*, the introduction to the Reavers is a bit different; gone is the "tribal" drumbeat. Instead, there is action music through the scene in the bank vault where Mal and crew are robbing the payroll. We cut to a flash of River's alarmed face and then cut to

outside, where a boy of about eleven is talking with his mother about hearing something. In the background, there are only some very light strings and natural sounds of crickets and a dog. The mother says she'll tell the "lawman" about the shots heard, placing us squarely in the Western, something that actually hadn't been all that strongly signaled before; the previous scene with the futuristic blue room has a more science-fiction feel to it. With the scene outside, we have some scrambling of the iconography with the little boy's hat, but the mother seems to be dressed in typical prairie fashion. She straightens up to turn around, and there's a slight pause in the background sounds. Then we cut to the Reaver's face and his slashing action; like "Injuns" of old, he is presented as having managed stealthily to sneak up upon the hapless woman and child. This first visual of a Reaver is noteworthy, not because all Reavers look like him, but because he is presented *first*. He has brown skin and long, straight, black hair. This glimpse is enough to activate the stereotype of the savage Injun. Further, viewers are placed into the position of the victims in this scene and we are thus invited to identify with them.

[31] The second Reaver we see initially from the legs down. With heavy boots, spikes, and what look like shin guards, he looks futuristic; subsequent shots show that he seems to have long, lighter-colored dreadlocks, but the shot sequence emphasizes his landing and his energetic run for the kill. The only color on his black clothing is red, which has racial coding but can admittedly also symbolize blood.

[32] Moments later we have a sequence in which a trio of Reavers grab a young man who had tried to board the hovercraft Mal and crew are using to get away from the raid; Mal had thrown him off the moving craft because they didn't have room for him. The Reaver shown first grabbing him has noticeably long, dark hair. Mal shoots the young man as he is dragged off. As noted above, in the commentary accompanying the DVD, Whedon explains he was inspired here by a scene in *Ulzana's Raid* featuring a Calvary officer escorting a woman and her son from their ranch to the fort for protection; they are ambushed, and when the officer attempts to outrun the ambush, the woman begs him to return to her side. Knowing it will do no good, he shoots her between the eyes in order to spare her the fate of being "raped to death."

[33] Following this scene of direct homage to a specific Western, we have fleeting glimpses of other Reavers in action. The first is a pair, one wearing fringe dragging off a woman (the angle of the shots suggests she'll be raped). The second is of a Reaver with a Mohawk diving after a fleeing victim under what seems to be an arbor. We then cut back to a scene showing the back of the fringe-coated Reaver dispatching a victim, shot through a row of umbrellas; what is highlighted in the shot is the movement of the fringe. Finally, we get another very brief—almost subliminal—full-face close-up of the Reaver with the long, dark hair, snarling directly at the viewers, and, by implication, attacking us again.[10]

[34] Other Reavers noticeably have long blond hair, long dreadlocks, or scattered patches of hair. One could respond to my placing so much significance on the first glimpse of the Reaver, the brief shots of Reavers wearing Indian-coded garb or hairstyles and the shots of the Reaver directly threatening the audience by noting the fact that some of the later shots, such as of the Reaver corpse on the ship, are clearer or more lingering. Perhaps these subsequent shots could motivate us to question our first association between Reavers and Hollywood Indians, and the longer time devoted to them is meant to spark such questioning. However, I argue that the first sequence, of the boy and his mother seized upon by the Reaver, is structured so as to garner a particularly empathetic and strong emotional response. First, the viewer's sympathy for the victims is fostered by the brief moment of pause and quiet conversation between the boy and his mother. The relative lack of background music in this instance pulls us in further. Then we have the startling, even terrifying scene of the Reaver's face from the perspective of the victim. I suggest that the strength of both emotional responses, and their order, contributes to the power (and the enjoyment) of the scene, and that this response is, in most instances of viewing, strong enough to subvert subsequent critical responses that may take place. We know consciously that in the story Reavers are of all racial types. But the socially

significant association continues unabated, based on activation of both the cognitive association between savagery and stereotypical Indian physiognomy and garb and a set of accompanying real sympathies and fears. Indeed, it's the conscious overlay ("Of course the Reavers aren't Indians. Look at the longer shots where they're shown not to be.") that makes the activation of the stereotype even more insidious.

Mal Goes Native

[35] As mentioned above, one of the fundamental tropes of the American narrative is of the person (i.e., white man) who makes himself anew by surviving on the frontier. To find his own place in the world, he frequently has to pass through enemy territory. To survive and flourish in this new land, this new man, as mentioned above, has to adapt himself to the frontier conditions and take up enough of the native ways to ensure survival in what is essentially another's world. Cinematically, this is symbolized sartorially, by the character's taking up of costuming that combines white and Indian elements. This life is a risk, of course; the Native monstrous threatens to engulf the white hero, and he frequently risks misunderstanding by other whites. These dimensions of the representation of the American frontier hero have to be employed when thinking about a major plot point in the movie, when Mal orders the crew to dress up the tenth character, Serenity herself, in warpaint. Mal is going to the edge, literally and figuratively, and the crew is horrified, because not only is he using the bodies of friends, he's desecrating Serenity. Yet he must go this far, into this frontier, to redeem himself and find his heroic moral compass.

A Deconstructive Move—Perhaps

[36] In *Serenity* the Reavers' true origins are revealed. They are the creation of the Alliance, an unintended consequence of their meddlesome social engineering. With this move, Rabb and Richardson argue, Whedon has shown his critical hand: "The Reavers are the worst result of technological dehumanization, and . . . also represent the dehumanized image of Native Americans." River, as a product of the Alliance herself, is a stand-in for viewers—at least those of British and European heritage—who, with respect to the savage images of Native Americans, should be brought to the "uncomfortable realization that 'we made them' . . ." In their reading, Rabb and Richardson emphasize River's exhibition of cultural guilt, symbolized by her vomiting, upon learning of the Alliance's role in creating the Reavers.

[37] Nevertheless, it is striking that River's regret is fleeting; of even more significance is the fact that she can now pick herself up and fight. Indeed, her single-handed slaughter of the Reavers is an emotional high point of the story and of her particular arc—the sign that she, like Mal, has come into her own and regained her psychic equilibrium. In this respect the moment of recognition of cultural guilt exhibited by a sympathetic character actually functions quite insidiously, prompting sympathetic identification with a mentality that can go on to say, "Well, we made this mess, now we must 'stay the course' and clean it up," at the further expense of mostly Others' lives.

[38] In contrast to the other villain of the movie, the Alliance Operative, who is given a free pass, the only good Reaver is a dead Reaver. This is not surprising; while the Operative, though evil, is given a range of recognizably complex human motives, the Reavers are predictably subhuman.

[39] Rabb and Richardson blame their subhumanity on us, because we are the ones who made them what they are. According to their reading, we are meant to see through the image of savagery and recognize the framing as our doing. But the lens offered merely reframes Indians with another dismissive stereotype—that of the noble savage who is too naïve to protect himself. Once again, the metaphor refuses to stay in its place and proceeds to construct reality. Indeed, the narrative of the entire fate of Miranda subtextually replays the familiar trope of Manifest Destiny; in the face of Western

intellectual, technological and immunological superiority, the peaceful ones laid down and died while the remainder are fit only for slaughter.

Conclusion

"A picture held us captive, and we could not get outside of it . . ."

Wittgenstein, Section 115

[40] My argument is that the way in which some representations of Reavers are employed in *Firefly* and *Serenity* serve, regardless of their intended function, to entrench rather than deconstruct their associated stereotypes of American Indians. This is because many occur quickly, and at the margins of awareness, accompanied by strong emotional responses sparking little motivation to raise initial sets of associations to the level of conscious examination. I argue further that the deployment of these images is noteworthy because of the uniquely foundational role that discourses about Indians play in the formation of American identity and the important place cinema and television have had in exporting that identity to other relevant contexts. To this extent, *Firefly* and *Serenity* function to continue structuring viewers' pleasures, moral frameworks and motivations in a way that paradoxically supports continued investment in colonialist mentalities, with their predictable geopolitical effects.

[41] In his paper about the phenomenon of *Buffy* Studies and the question of theory (presented at the 2006 *Slayage* Conference), Greg Erickson noted that television studies must now reckon with the interactive nature of visual-textual media. He mentioned that Whedon has acknowledged being illuminated by some fans' interpretations of his work that he hadn't considered. To me this signifies the legitimacy in *Buffy* Studies of questions about accountability in the production of these texts. I should stress that I am *not* holding Whedon to some pre-defined model of political correctness. But it is undeniable that Whedon has authority. While we're all caught up in the historical deployment of discourses, Whedon's agency is not negligible, nor is ours. Given our position as adults, at the very least, and often teachers and parents, this raises questions about our modes of complicity and responsibility.

[42] I am certainly not arguing that it is Whedon's intent to promote racism or a colonialist mentality; indeed, I think the evidence regarding his explicit intentions is to the contrary. However, I do think that in working with the Western genre he was playing with fire of a peculiar sort. The Western is not just another story form. Whatever we might wish to say about its connections to other forms and archetypes, and whatever its transmutations and ironic recastings, the Western continues to depend in a remarkably straightforward way on the continued abjection of a very specific group of people. In this respect, to be less than clear about one's deconstructive project—if that's what it was—is very problematic.

Works Cited

Alderman, Naomi, and Annette Seidel-Arpaci. "Imaginary Para-Sites of the Soul: Vampires and Representations of 'Blackness' and 'Jewishness' in the *Buffy/Angel*verse."

Slayage: The International Online Journal of Buffy Studies 10 (2003)
   <http://slayageonline.com>

Arroyo, Sam. "Joss Whedon Panel @ Wondercon: Full Report." Comic Book Resources. 1995-2005 Boiling Point Productions DBA Comic Book Resources. October 20, 2005. <http://www.comicbookresources.com/news/newsitem.cgi?id=4841>.

Bargh, John A. "The Cognitive Monster: The Case against Controllability of Automatic Stereotype Effects." *Dual Process Theories in Social Psychology*. Ed. S. Chaiken & Y. Trope. New York: Guilford, 1999.

Battis, Jes. *Blood Relations: Chosen Families in* Buffy *and* Angel. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2005.

Bergland, Renee. *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects.* Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999.

Black, Jason Edward. "The "Mascotting" of Native America: Construction, Commodity, and Assimilation." *The American Indian Quarterly*. 26:4 (2002): 605-622.

Buscombe, Edward and Roberta E. Pearson. "Introduction." *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western*. London: British Film Institute, 1998.

"Common Portrayals of Aboriginal People." Media Awareness Network. 2006 Media Awareness Network. http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/aboriginal_people/aboriginal_portrayals.cfm

Davidson, Joy. "Whores and Goddesses." *Finding Serenity: Anti-Heroes, Lost Shepherds and Space Hookers in Joss Whedon's Firefly*. Eds. Jane Espenson and Glenn Yeffeth. Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2005. 113-130.

De Angelis, Paul. "Firefly (2002-2003)." *Culturevulture.net: Choices for the Cogniscenti*. Editor and Publisher, Arthur Lazare. 1998-2005 Arthur Lazar. 20 October 2005. <*http://www.culturevulture.net/Television/Firefly.htm*>.

Deloria, Vine. "Foreword: American Fantasy." *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*. Eds. Gretchen M. Bataille, Charles L.P. Silet. Ames: The Iowa State University Press, 1980.

Devine, Patricia G., & Monteith, M. J. (1999). "Automaticity and Control in Stereotyping." *Dual-process Models and Themes in Social and Cognitive Psychology*. Eds. S. Chaiken and Y Trope. New York: Guilford Press, 1999. 339-360.

Dirks, Tim. "Western Films." *The Greatest Films.* Tim Dirks, 1996-2006. 10 Feb. 2008. <*http://www.filmsite.org/westernfilms.html*>.

Edwards, Lynne. "Slaying in Black and White: Kendra as Tragic Mulatta in *Buffy*." *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer. E*d. Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.

Erickson, Greg T. "21st Century Theory and Cultural Studies: A View from the Edge of the Hellmouth." Presentation at SC2 Conference on the Whedonverses. Gordon College, Barnesville, GA May 25-28,2006.

"Frequently Asked Questions." Project Implicit Demonstration site, 10 Feb. 2008.<*https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/background/faqs.html#faq13*>.

Fiske, Susan. "Professional Profile." 10 Feb. 2008. <*http://fiske.socialpsychology.org/*>.

Gagne, Karen M. "Falling in Love with Indians: The Metaphysics of Becoming America." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003) 205-233.

Gallagner, Shaun. "Hermeneutics and the Cognitive Sciences." *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. 11 (2004). 10 Feb. 2008. <http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~gallaghr/gall04h&cs.html>.

Halnon, Mary. "Indians and Mexicans: Alternative Cultures in the Silent Western." The Silent Western: Early Movie Myths of the American West. University of Virginia American Studies Department. 10 February, 2008. <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/hns/westfilm/west.html >.

The Handbook of Social Psychology. 4th ed. Eds. Daniel T. Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske, and Gardner Lindzey. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998.

Hight, Christopher. "Stereo Types: The Operation of Sound in the Production of Racial Identity." *Leonardo* 36.1 (2003): 13-14.

Hilton, James L., and William von Hippel. "Stereotypes." *Annual Review of Psychology* 47 (1996) retrieved from InfoTrac OneFile.

Holder, Nancy. "I Want Your Sex." *Finding Serenity: Anti-Heroes, Lost Shepherds and Space Hookers in Joss Whedon's* Firefly. Eds. Jane Espenson and Glenn Yeffeth. Dallas: BenBella Books, 2005. 139-154.

Johnson, Gary. "The West: An Overview." *Images: A Journal of Film and Popular Culture* 6. 10 Apr. 2006. <*http://imagesjournal.com/issue06/infocus/western.htm*>.

Kilpatrick, Jacquelyn. *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

Kirkland, Ewan. "The Caucasian Persuasion of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." *Slayage* 17. <http://slayageonline.com/essays/slayage17/Kirkland.htm>.

Lerner, Neil. "Music, Race, and Paradoxes of Representation in an Episode of *Firefly*: Jubal Early's Musical Motif of Barbarism in 'Objects in Space.'" Wilcox and Cochran.

McCaw, Derek. "WonderCon 2005: Finally, The Joss Whedon/*Serenity* Panel." 2001. Fanboy Planet. 10 Feb. 2008. <*http://www.fanboyplanet.com/derek/mc-2005WonderConWhedon2.php*>.

McGrath, Ann. "Playing Colonial: Cowgirls, Cowboys, and Indians in Australia and North America." *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*. 2.1 (2001). 10 Feb. 2008. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_colonialism_and_colonial_history>.

Money, Mary Alice. "The Reavers' Origin in *Serenity*: Whedon's Mistake or Masterstroke?" Presentation at SC2 Conference on the Whedonverses. Gordon College, Barnesville, GA May 25-28, 2006.

Neal, Christopher. "The Ballad of Jayne and Marching out of Step: Music and Otherness in the *Firefly/Serenity* Saga." Wilcox and Cochran 191-98.

Neale, Steve. "Vanishing Americans: Racial and Ethnic Issues in the Interpretation and Context of Post-war 'Pro-Indian; Westerns." *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western*. London: British Film Institute, 1998.

Narvez, Darcia. "The Neo-Kolbergian Tradition and Beyond: Schemas, Expertise and Character. *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation: Vol. 51: Moral Motivation Through the Lifespan*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006.

Norton-Smith, Thomas. "A Consideration of the Use of Indian Sports Teams Mascots." American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Indians in Philosophy 1:1 (Fall 2001): 16-17.

Nussbaum, Emily. "Must-See Metaphysics." *New York Times* 22 Sept. 2002.

Ono, Kent A. "To Be a Vampire on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* : Race and ('Other') Socially Marginalizing Positions on Horror TV." *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*. Ed. Elyce Rae Helford. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000. 163-86.

Pewewardy, Cornel. "Why Educators Can't Ignore Indian Mascots." *American Indian Cultural Support*. 1998-2006 AICS and Mike Wicks. 12 Apr. 2006. <*http://www.aics.org/mascots/cornel.html*>.

Plous, Scott. "The Psychology of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination: An Overview." *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination*. McGraw-Hill, 2002. 3-42.

Prats, Armando Jose. "His Master's Voice(over): Revisionist Ethos and Narrative Dependence from 'Broken Arrow' (1950) to 'Geronimo: An American Legend' (1993)." *ANQ* 3:3 (Summer 1996). Retrieved from InfoTrac OneFile.

Rabb, J. Douglas and J. Michael Richardson. "Reavers and Redskins: Creating the Frontier Savage." Wilcox and Cochran 127-38.

Salwall, Harry. "Cannibalism as a Trope in Colonial Discourse." *Proceedings of the 2004 Annual Conference*. Association of University English Teachers in Southern Africa. <*http://www.uwc.ac.za/arts/auetsa/HSewlall.htm*>.

Stein, Dan. "Schemas in the Cognitive and Clinical Sciences: An Integrative Construct." 1992. Posted 2000. *Cogprints Repository*. University of Southampton, 2000-2006. 10 Feb. 2008. < http://cogprints.org/1114/00/Schema.3.htm>

Thoma, Steve. "Research on the Defining Issues Test." *Handbook of Moral Development*. Eds. M. Killen and J. Smetana. Mahweh, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006.

Tomkins, Jane, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Thorndyke, Perry and Barbara Hayes-Roth. "The Use of Schemata in the Acquisition and

Transference of Knowledge." *Cognitive Psychology*. 11 (1979), 82-106.

Velazquez, Josef. "Dappled Things." Unpublished paper. 2005.

Weiten, Wayne. *Psychology: Themes and Variations*. 6th ed. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005.

Whedon, Joss. "Joss says." 29 January 1999. Bronze VIP Archives. 10 Feb. 2008. <http://www.cise.ufl.edu/~hsiao/media/tv/buffy/bronze/archives>.

Wilcox, Rhonda V. "'I Don't Hold to That': Joss Whedon and Original Sin." Cochran and Wilcox 155-66.

Wirth, Werner, and Holger Schramm. "Media and Emotions." *Communication Research Trends* 24:3 (Sep 2005): 3-40, retrieved from InfoTrac OneFile.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations.* Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. New York: Macmillian Publishing Co., Inc., 1958.

Notes

[1] "Pangs" (4008). *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Season Four. 20th Century Fox DVD, Disk 2. 2003.

[2] Joss Whedon, quoted on Fireflyfans.net forum on "Firefly's Inspiration." Fireflyfans.net Forum. 20 October 2005. <*http://www.fireflyfans.net/thread.asp?b=8&t=1710*>.

[3] In addition to the research cited further in the paper, part of my evidence for this claim is admittedly personal observation of a particular pattern of response manifested by non-Indian (usually white) US Americans when they're faced with situations where Indians make reference to land claims or sovereignty, or even when they simply attempt to assume control of their own cultural narratives. I was initially surprised to see this response but have seen it often enough, among people of various ages and social positions, to suspect it is indeed a pattern. The first phase of the non-Indian person's response is often polite and framed in terms of regret about past history, often using moral language of right and wrong. But if the Indian claimant presses the case in the present or persists even in maintaining narrative control about the past, the attitude and attendant language abruptly shifts. Veneers of politeness and morality drop away, and the response is predictably some variant of, "We won the war; get over it." When the person feels pushed into saying this, it can be quite discomfiting to the speaker, because such discourses of raw force are antithetical to the strong sense of moral exceptionalism that is also part of US political identity. It's easier to avoid the clash altogether by pretending, against all evidence, that Indians are extinct.

[4] Understandably, a single episode cannot afford much individual character development.

[5] Particularly when teaching environmental ethics. In the US context assumptions about North America as originally a "wilderness" are important to examine, as are patterns of environmental racism and tribal moves for sovereignty, which can sometimes result in Indian communities' decisions in favor of nuclear waste dumps, oil pipelines, etc. Students often have an overt investment in the Noble Savage myth, dialectically wedded to an underlying resentment. For example, upon learning that American Indians have *various* opinions about controversial environmental issues, one non-traditional student of roughly my age responded that I had "shattered" something precious to her, that she felt the exact same way she had when she learned that Betty Crocker wasn't a real woman and that now she really *disliked* Indians. (That she felt comfortable enough, and entitled enough, to voice this dislike is worth noting.) Another reaction, more common among younger left-wing students, is a posture of mourning and guilt, coupled with strong resentment of the US government for its part in destroying native cultures; what is intriguing about this response is that students persist in this attitude in spite of any and all evidence supplied that Native people are still here and their cultures are not completely

destroyed.

[6] Reid Locklin, "Buffy the Vampire Slayer and the Domestic Church: Revisioning Family and the Common Good, *Slayage* 6, <*http://www.slayage.tv/essays/slayage6/Locklin.htm*>.

[7] Stereotypes persist because people see what they expect to see. Weiden summarizes experiments that had white subjects evaluate an interaction on a television monitor. While it was presented to the subjects as live, it was actually a videotape of two people arguing where one person eventually shoves the other. Various versions were presented to the subjects. "The shove was coded as "violent behavior" by 73% of the participants when the actor was black but by only 13% of the participants when the actor was white" (482).

[8] Thanks to Elizabeth Vozzola, Ph.D., for her very helpful personal discussions on this issue. See also the FAQs about the Implicit Association Test designed by M.R. Banaji and Anthony Greewald to measure unconscious prejudice, at the Project Implicit Demonstration site, *https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/background/faqs.html#faq13*.

[9] Josef Velazquez, in an unpublished paper, analyzes the codes that account for Kaylee's appeal. He concludes that her attractiveness is built from juxtaposing codes about tomboy girls/women with religious iconography that positions her as not only the 'heart' of the ship but literally as a Madonna.

[10] Somewhat incongruously, this Reaver has what appears to be a hair clip on some of the strands on the lower left side of his face.