

**“Dangerous Edge of Things” - Pushing the Frontier to a New *Mestizaje* in *Firefly***

**Keywords:** *mestizaje*, frontier, palimpsest, hybridity, *Firefly*

**Abstract:** My article is related to the use of Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of *mestizaje* and Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis in analyzing the possible hybridity in Joss Whedon’s *Firefly*, where an intergalactic Sino-American federation called the Alliance recreates the palimpsest of civilization of the kind described by Turner, but also forges a new cultural mix: a Wild West backdrop with Chinese characteristics. I examine the ways in which Whedon’s show differs from other space opera settings like *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*, but also how it ends up reproducing certain orientaling tropes that feature in science fiction. I aim to see how *mestizaje* is mirrored in linguistic, sexual, and religious ways through the show’s engagement with in-betweenness, especially in the guise of its adoption of Chinese culture, and whether Whedon’s *Firefly* enables the creation of Anzaldúa’s type of hybridity.

Imagined futures in science fiction series sometimes present new combinations in which the world’s cultures can be brought together. This cultural and racial assimilation had its precedents in history, especially during the Spanish Conquest of the New World. Science fiction might then portray this imperialism in new forms and new environments, such as the vacuum of space. The vision in which this is achieved can be either utopian, as in the *Star Trek* series, or dystopian. There have also been science fiction worlds where a balanced view of the future is depicted, and where an interplanetary government gives way to a constantly expanding frontier in space. This is relevant with respect to the similarities between Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis as used by Hillary A. Jones in connection with Joss Whedon’s short-lived science-fiction

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series, *Firefly* (2002), especially in the way it depicts the savage/civilized dichotomy on a cosmic scale. In this essay, I expand on that idea, using borderlands theory to make the point that *Firefly* not only recreates the frontier myth, but also redefines *mestizaje*. Because *Firefly*'s world depicts a Sino-American alliance which has given way to new forms of expressing cultural, sexual, and religious *mélange*, I employ Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *mestiza* consciousness from her *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Serge Gruzinski's ideas of syncretism from the *The Mestizo Mind* to highlight these traits, and also to explore how the series differs from other space operas in this regard.

Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis and its connection to Joss Whedon's vision is relevant in this discussion of cultural in-betweenness. I acknowledge the fact that Turner's treatment of Native Americans in his thesis represents a mix of "Spencerian inevitability, acknowledgment of injustice, and regret at past policies, but hardly moral outrage" (Bogue 53), and my engagement with his ideas strictly concerns its influence on *Firefly*. Hillary A. Jones uses Turner's frontier thesis to point out that *Firefly* reflects Turner's idea that American expansion to the West created a temporal palimpsest, where civilization is re-engaged with every new settlement (232). This notion of palimpsest comes across in Turner's idea that, "as successive terminal moraines result from successive glaciations, so each frontier leaves its traces behind it" (para. 6). From the East to the West Coast, this can be read in terms of technological advancement, as more modern cities are always preceded by the "wild frontier."

In *Firefly*, this idea is recreated in the same manner, with the added complexity of space travel and planetary expansion. In the show, Captain Mal Reynolds commands the spaceship *Serenity* for illegal activities like smuggling and theft, together with: 'Wash' Washburn, the pilot; Zoe Washburn, the second-in-command; Jayne Cobb, a hired mercenary; Book, a traveling

preacher; Kaylee, the ship's mechanic; Inara, the professional courtesan; and two sibling fugitives, Simon and River Tam. Together they travel to the outer rim of the galaxy, to the lesser developed colony planets, which resemble a Wild West-type society. By contrast, the core planets are highly developed, and the Sino-American government called the Alliance attempts to hunt down the *Serenity* to recapture the two fugitives. Hillary A. Jones has pointed out the similarity between core planets and the technologically-advanced East, and, consequently, the edges of the known galaxy as the "unpredictable" Wild West (238). I would go further and connect this to Salman Rushdie's suggestion about the "dangerous edge of things" (354), where people are in a constant struggle: "the wake-up call of the frontier is also a call to arms" (354).

The frontier planets in *Firefly* are poorly stocked and vulnerable to bandit attacks, playing on the trope of lawlessness that defines Westerns. In the very first episode, Captain Mal Reynolds states this by mourning the chaos on moon settlements, which are supplied with rudimentary tools to restart civilization, but most of the time end up as failed colonies: "Some of them make it. Some of them..." ("Serenity"). By comparison, core planets are highly-advanced, mimicking cosmopolitan mega-cities of today's Earth, like Hong Kong or Singapore. The crime levels on such planets are low due to enhanced security and prohibitive laws; in the "Trash" episode, segregated communities are shown as floating palaces with "paranoid and rich" tenants walling themselves off from the rest. Again, this can be linked to Rushdie's suggestion that those who stand and prepare obsessively for the barbarians end up becoming the barbarians themselves (58-9). This is true when one considers the wealth and behavior shown by residents of these floating palaces. For the characters on the *Serenity*, a sterile environment like that is suspect. A discussion on the merits of a successful colony between Wash and Zoe echoes that tone. Wash shrugs it off as "not that bad," but her reaction suggests otherwise: "It is. It's a core planet. It's spotless"

(“Serenity”). I contend that the *Serenity* acts as the “moving border” between these extremes (Rushdie 355), bringing their own notion of order to tiny pockets of the galaxy, and undoing the influence of the Alliance. The barrier that the crew of the *Serenity* erects is not physical: it lies in their “opting for a nomadic, liminal existence” (Jones 241) which prioritizes freedom above all. This sentiment is expressed in the show’s title sequence as well, in the lyrics to the song:

Take my love, take my land,

Take me where I cannot stand.

I don’t care, I’m still free,

You can’t take the sky from me. (“Serenity”)

Their world is an “in-between space,” refusing to ally itself with the less-civilized frontier or its high-tech counterpart (Jones 239). The “in-between space” refuses duality and embraces ambiguity (Gruzinski 22-3). It also connects with the American notion of freedom of movement expressed in such literary works as *Huckleberry Finn* (Canavan 183-184). This crosspollination effect brought about by the arrival of the *Serenity* also unearths the differences between Alliance-controlled planets and frontier planets. An example of this can be found in the “Heart of Gold” episode, where a Chinese shadow puppet theater is unfolding. The narrator of this play is heard speaking entirely in Mandarin Chinese, and is dressed in traditional Chinese garb. The shadow images shown are, appropriately, about leaving Earth in spaceships, and of the ecological disaster that plagued humanity, which could make this out to be a historical play (Telotte 69). Traditional art forms go hand in hand with high-tech technology, and this is apparent in the next scene where Captain Reynolds sees a quality laser pistol in an old-fashioned Wild West saloon.

One of the ways in which *Firefly*'s space expansion is a reconfiguration of 16<sup>th</sup> century imperialism lies in this graded development between planets. This development is not only a technological one, as I have explained above, due to the "spatial logic of periphery and metropole familiar to the postcolonial situation" (Canavan 181); the distance accounts for warped interpretations of original art and creatures from Earth, or "Earth-that-was" (Telotte 69). The scene is from the fifth episode, where Kaylee comes across an arts-and-crafts shop on a frontier planet and discusses its implications with Inara. The carved depiction of a swan brings out different reactions in each of them:

Kaylee: That's a swan. I like it.

Inara: You do?

Kaylee: Looks like it was made with, you know, longing. Made by a person who really longed to see a swan.

Inara: Perhaps they'd only heard of them by rough description. ("Safe")

The act of uncannily reproducing artifacts from worlds unseen is not something new, I argue. In Gruzinski's *The Mestizo Mind*, he describes how the Mesoamerican Indians would churn out objects like these and sometimes also add their own interpretation to these models in their "deritualized context" (58-9). For a people with a foreign and distant culture imposed on them, never even having seen the symbols reproduced meant instances of unorthodoxy in the cultural production. Similarly, the people born on border planets unconsciously propagate the same kind of transmutation and syncretism of cultural markers. Lacking the whole picture, they recreate false idols and folk heroes. This happens again in episode seven, "Jaynestown." The inhabitants of a

working-class colony raise monuments and write songs for a folk hero they believe to be one of *Serenity*'s mercenary characters, Jayne Cobb ("Jaynestown"). The "mudders," who live under a repressive regime as indentured servants, are eager to deify such a personage, to give their lives meaning. This impression stays with them even after they find out the truth behind the matter. According to Captain Reynolds, "every man ever got a statue made of him was one kind of a son of a bitch or another. Ain't about you, Jayne. It's about what they need." This connects to Mexican anthropologists' attempts to construct a cohesive national idea of Mexico in spite of the flawed reality around them (Lomnitz 210). In Jayne's case, the "mudders" refused to give up their idolatry of him; this mirrors Mexico's early history and its search for a grand narrative despite the former colony's paradoxical nature. The message becomes distorted due to unorthodox methods of interpretation and the limits of knowledge.

The similarities between history and the fictional world of *Firefly* stand out, but I would also point out the way in which it differs from other science-fiction worlds. At one end there is *Star Trek* and its united Federation. George A. Gonzalez writes that "the prime motive underlying the creation of the Federation is security and trade" (151). I argue that *Firefly* serves as the obverse of *Star Trek*'s brand of worldbuilding, as it suggests that government on an interplanetary scale is a restriction on personal freedom. This is again reminiscent of Turner's frontier thesis, especially in his treatment of the individualism of the frontiersman: "The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control. The tax-gatherer is viewed as a representative of oppression" (para. 47). The crew of the *Serenity* spend most of the show fleeing from the Alliance's grasp. Here, Whedon's Alliance fulfills the role the Federation had in every *Star Trek* incarnation, but this time seen from the outside : the kind of societies that the Starship

*Enterprise* would normally encounter in its explorations have now become the main setting of a space opera (Canavan 183).

The reason other science-fiction universes should be brought into question when discussing *Firefly* is the intentional homages Whedon pays to them. The core of *Firefly*'s aesthetic draws its inspiration from other science-fiction creations: the *Serenity* was consciously designed as the polar opposite of the clean and streamlined Starship *Enterprise* (183). This is true even with regards to the *Star Wars* canon: Whedon has stated that he wanted to tell the stories of ordinary people caught between political struggles greater than themselves, like Han Solo's role as a petty smuggler in the *Star Wars* series (Rowley 319). In the *Serenity* movie, Mal expresses his desire to be left to his own devices, which, according to scholar Gerry Canavan, makes the movie "an anti-*Star Wars* in much the same way that the series [is] an anti-*Star Trek*," due to its individualistic bent (188). In the past, Captain Mal Reynolds fought in the Unification War against the Alliance, on the side of the Independents, and he continues to show his conviction that interplanetary bureaucracy is designed to "get in a man's way" (Jones 238).

I contend that Gloria Anzaldúa's ideas of *mestizaje* can be used to explain the double consciousness Whedon's characters experience. This relates to their adopted Mandarin mannerisms and language, but also in terms of sexuality. A "mestizo/a consciousness" involves juggling between two, or even three, identities, and the result of their co-existence (Anzaldúa 77-78). Captain Mal Reynolds and his crew portray linguistic reflexes that suggest that they are bilingual, yet simply choose to communicate largely through the former global *lingua franca*, English. This choice may be evident as an intradiegetic element, but it is an obvious extradiegetic tool to appeal to English-speakers first and foremost. This *mélange* is not without its criticisms, though. Douglas Ishii has suggested that the creators of the show were more interested in the idea

of *mélange* than its actual rendering in the show (181). Mandarin Chinese is infrequently spoken, and its use is only limited to apparent expletives and insults.

While the code-mixing is one of the surface-level aspects of the show expressing *mestizaje*, the ways in which the characters on board *Serenity* express sexuality is another indication of Anzaldúa's philosophy of in-between-ness: "as a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races" (80). Whedon went in the same vein when he thought of Inara as a sexually-liberated courtesan, a role which was meant to explore the selfsame tendencies (Rowley 321). Despite Whedon's intention to create a feminist icon with Inara, subsequent revelations involving a scrapped rape scene have prompted a reevaluation of this claim. It involved a story arc where Whedon would have had Inara sexually assaulted by the Reavers, thus prompting Captain Reynolds to "stop slut-shaming her" (Anders para. 6), an idea that multiple write-ups were glad did not materialize (Gerber para. 7; Marss para. 3; Cronin para. 10). In an online article on the topic, Jamie Gerber noted that, "Whedon has made some questionable choices over the years in terms of what he puts his female characters through" (para. 7). This contradicts the claim that Christina Rowley made in an interview with Joss Whedon, but here she also noticed a disparity between the treatment of male and female characters, since there is more emphasis on breaking gender restrictions for the female characters than for the male ones (322). Whedon's vision of *mélange* is then criticized both for its cultural dimensions and for its treatment of sexuality, especially for his female characters.

There is also the religious aspect in *Firefly*, represented by the preacher character, Shepherd Book. Book is introduced as a traveling Christian monk with a hidden past in the first episode. He had "been out of the world" and would "like to walk it a while. Maybe bring the word to them that need it told" ("*Serenity*"). His intention in boarding the *Serenity* is evangelization. I read his

connection to Christianity as being similar to that of Spanish missionaries sent to the New World; these friars unleashed a “mutual interpenetration” of their highly traditional Western belief system within an “exotic” society (Gruzinski 29). Additionally, Shepherd Book interferes in the ship’s affairs multiple times due to religious reasons, either by vetoing the crew’s idea of killing a prisoner, or simply saying prayers for the dead: “How we treat our dead is part of what makes us different” (“Bushwhacked”). This exteriorization of Christianity in Book’s case brings about conflicts with some of the beliefs of the crew. Whedon admitted to writing Book as the foil to the other characters’ beliefs (Whedon et. al 166). The character most resistant to religion, however, is Captain Mal Reynolds, who is also staunchly against the Shepherd’s proselytizing. In a conversation about Book’s motives for joining the *Serenity*, Mal confronts him about this:

Mal: What about you, Shepherd? How come you’re flying with us brigands? I mean, shouldn’t you be off bringing religiosity to the fuzzy-wuzzies or some such?

Book: Oh, I got heathens aplenty right here.

Mal: If I’m your mission, Shepherd, best give it up. You’re welcome on my boat. God ain’t. (“The Train Job”)

Although Mal Reynolds does not withhold judgment in his everyday encounters with Shepherd Book, the first scenes of Episode One reveal a different side to the character. In the battle scene with the Alliance, Mal is seen kissing the crucifix on his neck for good luck, and giving a pep talk to frightened privates: “We’re just too pretty for God to let us die” (“*Serenity*”). Viewers find out later that the scene showed the last battle of the war, with Captain Reynolds on the losing side.

The disappointment of defeat gives weight to his decision to take to space and never settle on any planet, which is revealed as part of Mal's backstory in the eighth episode.

In expanding the frontier thesis to include space, there has been no change in the handling of historical allusions regarding the experience of North American settlers. There is the case of the Reavers, who can be seen as stand-ins for the trope of the "savage" Native American in this Wild West setting (Canavan 184), but also as merely a proxy for the abstract concept of savagery and not as a racist deconstruction of Native Americans (Jones 238). For Reavers, humanity has been completely discarded, and raping, pillaging and cannibalism are par for the course. A "town hit by Reavers" is considered a cataclysm in which hardly anyone survives (Canavan 184). For this reason, there are few who have actually seen them in action. This is also suggested by the hushed tones in which the Reavers are mentioned in the series, even though they are never explicitly seen, except in the movie *Serenity* (2005). As seen from the movie, the Reavers carve their faces to deny themselves any semblance of humanity, signaling a border crossing between the world of normality and that of savagery; here, the face is the final border one can cross (Lugo 141). While the starship *Serenity* allows for a transcendence of borders, the world of the Reavers is stuck in one end of the dichotomy (Jones 239).

In conclusion, Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis can be used in conjunction with more recent borderlands theory to assemble an idea of *mestizaje* at *Firefly*'s frontier that includes language, sexuality, and religion. Westward expansion, in this case, takes place within the vacuum of space, and the historical empires of the early colonial Americas are replaced by the technologically advanced Alliance. The world government that started this interplanetary expansion is a result of a Sino-American alliance, ushering in a *mestizaje* of Far Eastern and Western cultural markers. Expansion also signifies a graded development between planets that are

farther from the core of human civilization, and the Wild West backdrop on rim planets are the result. Gloria Anzaldua's theories of double consciousness from her *La Frontera / Borderlands* and Gruzinski's ideas from *The Mestizo Mind* become relevant in looking at the futuristic *mestizaje* in *Firefly*, in the ways in which it impacts racial, cultural and also sexual boundaries of its inhabitants. Despite the series' attempt at *mélange*, there is a tendency to prioritize Anglo-American culture over its Far Eastern component, first of all in the way English is maintained as more or less the *lingua franca*, with Mandarin Chinese used only as swear words. In terms of sexuality, despite Whedon's attempt to write a "feminist" and "sexually liberated" character with Inara, his scrapped story arc surrounding her drew criticism from several write-ups and called into question his treatment of female characters. Taken together, the contradictions which surface with regard to *Firefly*'s vision of cosmic *mestizaje* signal an incomplete project, one more attracted to upholding an abstract idea than to its actual implementation.

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