Desperados: Crypto-Mexicans and *Firefly's* Mutation of the Western

Agnes Curry and Josef Velazquez

Introduction

As the television series *Firefly* (2002) enters the third decade since it aired, the critical literature on it and the movie *Serenity* (2005) is replete with readings linking both with diverse genres. These include horror, crime stories, and environmentalist critique.[1] Our work, however, continues to explore their links to the Western.

We remain interested in *Firefly* and *Serenity* as Westerns because the Western genre and specific films from twentieth-century Western cinema inspired *Firefly*'s most basic framing. These include John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) and 1970s

Agnes B. Curry is Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Core Curriculum at the University of Saint Joseph in West Hartford, Connecticut. She teaches introductory philosophy, ethics, and social philosophy, plus interdisciplinary courses on issues related the earth, immigration, violence, racism, and women. Along with work in Buffy+ studies, she researches topics in ethics, contemporary European philosophy, and Indigenous philosophy. She is Managing Editor of the American Philosophical Association's *Studies in Native American and Indigenous Philosophy* and has co-edited a volume on the philosophical legacy of phenomenologist Karol Wojtyla and one on representations of terror and evil in popular imagination.

Joe Velazquez has been teaching philosophy at Stonehill College, a little Catholic school south of Boston, for the past twenty odd years. He has also taught, more briefly, at UMass Boston, the Ateneo de Manila, Fordham in New York, and Xavier High School in Micronesia (this last in mathematics). During the last few years his old grad school friend Agnes has been kind enough to pull him into various projects at the intersection of philosophy and popular culture.

Westerns, particularly, as Amy Pascale notes, the "the immigrant stories" from that era (199, quoting Whedon). *Stagecoach* offers a blueprint for much of *Firefly*'s nine-member cast as well as a 'verse in which social systems are inevitably flawed (Erisman, Wilcox and Cochran). Wilcox and Cochran characterize the space travel and science fiction elements as factors that "contribute to (among other things) the fast-action fun of the series" (6), while a 2002 news story on *Firefly* by Robb Owen also suggests that in this blend, the Western genre is the primary ingredient: "During a visit to Stage 16 at the Fox studios, Whedon explained his concept for the series: a Western in outer space." The ordering of the terms, 'a Western' and 'outer space,' in this sentence prioritizes the Western genre. Indeed, Owen's reportage and Pascale's quotation of Whedon's remarks on the series origin make clear that a main attraction of doing a space story was so that Whedon could explore "that classic notion of the frontier" (199) through a focus on "the people for whom every act is the creation of civilization" (199). This opposition between the "classic" frontier and civilization places us in the imaginal landscape of the "classic" Western, as does Whedon's remark that he wanted to do a show imbued with "a sense of history" (Owen) and in which we have not solved our human problems. While science fiction is motivated at least in part by a desire to escape history by opening utterly new imaginal possibilities, the enmeshment in history is part of the Western genre's DNA.

On the other hand, through comparing *Firefly* and *Serenity* to numerous Western movies and television shows, we have come to believe that there is an interesting, subtle way in which *Firefly* and *Serenity* break the mold of the Western. This is not because of its science fiction, horror, or

crime-story elements, and not because *Firefly/Serenity* are what some scholars call "post-Westerns." When faced with the variety of Western genre films, it is tempting to posit a chronology that focuses on how post-World War II films question the grounding assumptions of earlier ones. Yet *Stagecoach* questions some of these assumptions, particularly about the possibility of a just social order, and its pre-war production date suggests that a historical boundary between Westerns and post-Westerns is unstable. In his work on what he calls "late Westerns," Lee Clark Mitchell argues that there is no such thing as a post-Western; instead, threaded through the genre from the start is evolution and cross-fertilization, and the genre continues to reinvent itself (31). Neil Campbell uses the term "post-Western" but argues in good Deconstructionist fashion that perhaps the better term is "ghost-Westerns," as the movies he calls post-Westerns are haunted by the legacy of conquest that is a part of the Western's DNA (353-4). At the same time, Sara Humphreys shows how the most retrograde elements of the Western genre, namely its celebration of conquest and its racist version of what she calls an "individualist" and "predatory" masculinity, have migrated seamlessly into the realm of video games (17). We agree with scholars who argue that the Western genre has always been complex and that what may distinguish a Western from something else depends on a host of factors that have different weights in different specific works. As co-author Agnes Curry has argued previously ("'We Don't Say Indian'"), given the Western's importance in US self-understanding and self-questioning, attempts to transfer its elements into other places usually come with baggage. In this article we argue that to understand the significance of the mutation of the Western operative in *Firefly/Serenity*, we need

to look in a surprising direction: at its baggage of hidden Mexicans.

Methodology and a Few Acknowledgments

Although questions about Mexicans in Westerns had been flitting around the backs of our minds for a while, we owe the fact that we finally took a stab at answering them to two family elders. Co-author Joe Velazquez's late father, who came to Pennsylvania from Puerto Rico in the 1950s, enjoyed Westerns. One day, on a long drive, Joe found a DVD collection of old Westerns at a truck stop and bought it for his dad, but also decided to preview them before handing them off. This resulting immersion in the tropes of the decidedly B grade films in this collection, an immersion initially undertaken taken merely as late-night entertainment, then spawned questions about how those same tropes might be functioning in *Firefly*. Agnes Curry is Latina of Mexican ancestry and is married to an American Indian man.[2] Growing up, she and her brothers had been discouraged from watching Westerns. Neither parent saw value in Western movies or television shows: her Anglo, science-oriented father because he disdained fiction altogether; her *Nuevomexicana* mother because of their violence and distortion of the region that has been her family's home for four centuries. Agnes's perspective has thus tended to focus on the negative in Westerns. But her American Indian father-in-law is quite knowledgeable about Westerns and a fan of some. It was he who introduced her to *Shane* (1953) and *High Noon* (1952). These men's appreciation of at least some Westerns has prompted us to take more seriously how the genre functions positively, presenting ideas that are entangled with the legacies of colonialism, conquest,

and other problematic issues, but that are also deeper and more universal.

In our investigation we first proceeded inductively, by watching movies and television shows and tracking patterns. We watched a little over a hundred Westerns.[3] We then compared our own observations of stereotypes to descriptions by scholars such as Aldama and González, Berg, Cortés, Pettit, and Woll. On the surface, *Firefly* and *Serenity* are devoid of Mexican characters, but since we are trained in philosophy, we just took the surface absence to be a fun challenge. More seriously, once we developed the lens, we found Mexican subtextual coding to be apparent, not just to us but to another scholar whose work we now discuss in some length.

This scholar is Daoine S. Bachran, whose chapter "Mexicans in Space? Joss Whedon's *Firefly*, Reavers, and the Man They Call Jayne" appeared in Iatropoulos and Woodall's *Joss Whedon and Race.* We heartily salute Bachran's work while also noting how ours differs. Bachran focuses on what we can, following Fredric Jameson, call the "political unconscious" of the Whedonverses (*The Political Unconscious*). She uses the work of Jameson ("Reification and Utopia"), which focuses on socioeconomic class, supplemented with work by Clyde Taylor on the primacy of race in the US context, to explain how works in popular culture use representations to both express social fears and defuse them in ways that feel highly satisfying to audiences, but that also serve the economic and racial status quo. From this frame, the chronic and conspicuous absence of Mexicans across the Whedonverse, especially from those shows set in southern California, is questionable indeed. Bachran argues that this absence, combined with defining plot elements (like Buffy's very mission to protect Sunnydale from hordes of monstrously liminal beings), unmasks these shows

as sites for working through repressed anxieties about the immigration of Mexicans. Turning to *Firefly*, Bachran notes how both its source-genres, both science fiction (which she takes as its more primary inspiration) and Westerns, use aliens, borders, and spaces beyond the camera's lens to represent, in disguised form, our sociopolitical fear of Others. As such, *Firefly*'s 'verse too can be read as inherently structured by the intense anxieties about Mexican immigration operative in California at the time of the show's production.

Bachran argues that anxieties about immigration are represented in *Firefly* in two ways: the Reavers and Jayne. With respect to the Reavers, Bachran focuses on *Firefly* and reads their invisibility as a projection of fears of undocumented immigration; she admits this reading of the Reavers does not hold for *Serenity*. Turning to Jayne, Bachran reads him as coded for "a Mexican cowboy, a vaquero," (Loc 4154), a contemporary migrant worker ("The Message" 1.12), and a borderland folk hero complete with a *corrido,* or folk ballad, celebrating his exploits ("Jaynestown" 1.7). Unlike the Reavers, who represent the horror of these fears, Jayne's character is designed both to present and allay these fears through comic containment. In this psychoanalytic reading, the Reavers and Jayne are necessarily tied together: If fear of the Mexican immigrant is largely a fear that we repress (by "we," we mean viewers, perhaps especially viewers whose fears may conflict with their overt political positions on immigration), then in line with Freudian theory, we will develop two images of the Mexican. The first is an unconscious one that will become monstrous because all repressed fears grow monstrous. This unconscious monstrous Mexican is the Reaver. Secondly, we will develop a neurotic image of the Mexican that is designed to help us deal with the first monstrous image. This neurotic

image is Jayne, who helps us deal with the monstrous image by making it appear comical and non-threatening. (It is not that the Mexican or Jayne are neurotic; rather, it is our own neurotic adjustment to our fears that causes us to project these figures.) Bachran reads Jayne as having heroic potential, "but *Firefly* doesn't let Jayne be a vaquero *and* a hero" (Loc 4353). Instead, "The use of comedy to undercut Jayne's heroic potential echoes the marginalization of those to whom he is figuratively and cinematically tied: the current Chicano/a, Mexican American, and Mexican residents of North America" (Loc 4366).

We find Bachran's reading interesting and insightful. Before reading Bachran, we, too, had picked out Jayne as one of the show's crypto-Mexicans based on our own method of using Western cinematic tropes. Bachran's points about Jayne as representing contemporary migrants are well worth pondering. While we would distinguish the figure of the vaquero from the figure of the bandito and argue that Jayne is mainly a bandito, we agree that one of the uses of stereotypical Mexican men in Westerns is indeed to allay anxieties by representing them in a comical and therefore non-threatening way. Whether the threat is always about immigration is less clear, however. And, crucially, whether Jayne's character arc in *Firefly* should be described *only* as a tale of marginalization and undermining of the sociopolitical power he represents is likewise unclear. In this respect, Jameson's final thoughts in the essay Bachran uses to anchor her critique are pertinent. In "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," Jameson characterizes all contemporary works of art, including popular media, as being motivated, even if in distorted and repressed ways, by "our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now, and as we feel in our bones it ought

rather to be lived" (46). Going further, he claims that even the most banal works of mass culture have buried within "some sense of the ineradicable drive towards collectivity" (46) in other words, what he characterizes later in *Archaeologies of the Future* as a "Utopian impulse" (1-9) towards meaningful community. As we will suggest later, it makes sense to read Jayne's arc as not just about disempowerment, but as also expressing a more positive, if desperate, Utopian impulse.

With respect to the Bachran reading of the Reavers in *Firefly*, we fully admit that the Reavers are polysemic and can be read in multiple ways (Curry "The Indians Ride"). We thus find no inconsistency in allowing for Bachran's reading of the Reavers as Mexicans in *Firefly* while also holding to our own readings of them as mainly Hollywood Indians (Curry "'We Don't Say,'" "The Indians Ride"; Rabb and Richardson), with additional signification as Afro-Caribbean for yet more racist-colonialist fun (Curry "The Indians Ride"). Both Bachran's and our readings of the Reavers cohere in that we both see them as representations of racialized Otherness in the US colonialist frame. Our reading has the benefit of holding more consistently across both *Firefly* and *Serenity*, and it is more suitable for our current project.[4]

If pressed for a critique of Bachran and a further justification of our own project, we have two lines of response. First, even if we stay within Bachran's political-psychoanalytic framing, we would argue that anxieties about Mexicans and *Mexicanidad* raised in Anglo-American imaginaries are due only in part to current immigration and border issues. Bachran does try to take a historical perspective in spots, mentioning the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago that established the current US/Mexico border (Loc. 4335-6), but her main concern is current immigration. However, for the

political unconscious, Mexicans and Spaniards, too (DeGuzmán) represent anxieties, transgressions, and possibilities that extend much further back than the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago. If, as Bachran would agree, 'border' anxieties are also about the construction of Anglo-American whiteness as a subjectivity, then at a deeper level, the problem of the Mexican is not the fact that the denizens of the border are out there, looming to engulf or violate, but that the conflict is already (and has always been) interior and suffused with desire as well as fear. Insofar as both Westerns and *Firefly/Serenity* function not just at the sociopolitical level but also at the level of myths and archetypal symbols, we think there can be additional things to say about the operation of Mexican stereotypes in these works that are not in conflict with Bachran's analysis per se, but that psychoanalytic methods are less helpful in describing. In our analysis we therefore use structuralist methods instead of psychoanalytic ones, and we focus less on the political aspects of what we find and more on the mythological and quasi-religious ones. Second, we take things one further step by identifying a second specific and very important "space Mexican" in the *Firefly* cast besides Jayne, and it is not clear how Bachran's analysis is set up to understand her.

As noted above, Westerns have a complex history, and the genre changes over time. To narrow things down, we focus on the period that stretches from when John Ford's *Stagecoach* moved Westerns beyond merely B grade fare (1939) through the flourishing of the spaghetti Western (roughly until the middle 1970s). This is the most important period for considering the development of *Firefly* and *Serenity*. It also seemed to us, through all our viewing, that the Mexican

stereotypes we will be discussing in this article are generally stable across this period.[5]

Who the Mexicans Are

The typical Western from this heyday period pictures the Mexican man and the Mexican woman in very different ways. We will therefore focus on each separately, starting with the Mexican man.

The Mexican man appears in a few stereotypical guises, but the stereotype we want to focus on here is what we can call the "earthy bandit for hire."[6] We most often find this character in the pay of the capitalist villain, and though both are greedy, they are greedy in very different ways. The capitalist villain (almost invariably Anglo) has a rational and long term greed: he is always pursuing some plan that will add still more wealth to an already large bank account. His Mexican subaltern, in contrast, is too unsophisticated for anything like this, and his greed is direct and visceral: he just wants a handful of gold that he can touch.

The Mexican man, if we might put it this way, has not yet reached the stage of spiritual sin, but he is very good at the physical ones. His humor is ribald. He has a fondness for drink. His sexuality inclines to women of what is sometimes called 'easy virtue.' One example of this mix of venality and humor is when the Mexican lieutenant in *Wild Women* (1970) explains that "I'm not married but I have many children" (50:50-54). There is also something improvident about him. And he is notably lacking in polish, politeness, and the social graces.

In those few cases where the Mexican man is not an underling but the head villain, he will often be motivated not by long term financial gain but by a familial reason: he will be breaking his brother out of prison or avenging a family

member's death.[7] He will also be one of the gang, living and fighting with the other gang members, unlike the Anglo villain who will most often be a banker or businessman directing the violence from afar. There is even a movie where the gang of Mexican bandits is controlled by the head bandit's mother[8] a comic element to be sure, but also a joke that seems hardly likely to be made of Anglo bandits.

The Mexican man as bandito is given to cruelty and finds a kind of low humor in it. For example, in *Sartana in the Valley of Death* (1970) we find a Mexican man in a bar making salacious jokes about the prostitutes and bullying the barkeep. The Mexican man is, however, capable of kindness as well, and there are cases where he thinks that things have gone too far and so speaks out for mercy or fair play or an end to carnage[9] again in contrast to the Anglo villain who is cold and ruthless to the end. Both the Mexican man's cruelty and his kindness are depicted as the result of natural impulse rather than settled principle.

The Mexican man is macho, of course, and he performs this machismo in a theatrical and somewhat overdone style: both menacing and comical. Although he is macho, he is not inclined to self-sacrifice or to unnecessary risk. He knows how to bluster but he also knows when there is nothing in it for him. He is motivated (this point cannot be emphasized too much) by self-interest rather than by noble causes, as is most clearly seen by the simple fact that he is a mercenary, fighting for money rather than out of any actual belief. If he expresses or acts on any beliefs, they are most often based on religious superstition. For example, in *The Hellbenders* (1967), a group of banditos is so spooked by a coffin on a wagon that they fail to look inside it; instead they stand there crossing themselves and miss the fact that the coffin is filled only with loot. In

Westerns, if there is a character (man or woman) exhibiting outward signs of religion, that character will usually be Mexican. Finally, it is the Mexican man who, of all the characters, we are most likely to see casually singing or playing a guitar.[10]

It should be clear that the Mexican Man on *Firefly* is Jayne and that he aligns with the bandito stereotype. Jayne's earthiness, lack of polish and politeness, and enjoyment of cruel humor are repeated motifs. Jayne is, moreover, simple and macho in just the way the cinematic Mexican bandito is simple and macho: given to violence but not to noble causes. Although by his accent Jayne is more overtly aligned with denigrating depictions of white 'rednecks,' he is subtly marked as even more foreign from early in the series. In the first episode that aired on television, "The Train Job" (1.2), we first see Jayne hulking center-screen at a table in a bar, observing a game of Chinese Checkers between Mal and Zoe. When Mal makes a move that Zoe then counters to demolishing effect, Jayne impolitely tells Mal, "Nice work, dumbass" (1:30-31), while also studying the board as if he cannot quite understand either move. In the next moment, when the supporter of Unification makes a toast and announces that today is an "ass-picious day" and that "we all know what day it is" (1:53-57), Jayne asks, "suspicious….what day is it?" (1:58-59), signaling that he does not know the word "auspicious" and so cannot recognize its garbling. While the grubby, working-class toast-maker whom Mal characterizes as unschooled (2:59-3:00) mispronounces the word, he uses it in correct context. Jayne, however, is not just unschooled but a little stupid or, at a subtextual level, not quite fluent in spoken English.[11] In addition, Jayne is so concerned with the immediate that he does not know the day, or even the month (2:23). Mal and

Zoe's allegiance to the rebellion and their compulsion to remember the day mean nothing to Jayne. When Mal and Zoe find themselves at the start of a brawl that Zoe later pegs as a "reenactment" (4:48-9), Jayne reminds them that he "didn't fight in no war" and wishes them the "best of luck, though," signaling both his questionable personal loyalty and avoidance of unnecessary risk with a hint of a smirk (3:45-49). Whereas both "The Train Job" (1.2) and the intended series pilot, "Serenity" (1.1) take pains to align Mal and Zoe with the more typical Western genre backstory for American outlaws as ex-Confederate soldiers, Jayne's backstory is flagged as different from the outset. A moment later, in the midst of a melee that is not going well for Mal and Zoe, Mal asks, "Is Jayne even awake?" (4:19) and on cue, Jayne enters the scene, his capacity for violence highlighted as he employs a metal bar chair as an all-purpose weapon. This chair is noticeably large, as is Vera, his favorite gun, as is his favorite knife. Jayne's machismo is represented in ways that are both unnerving and comical, as when he eats an apple with his giant knife in a scene reminiscent of an iconic sequence from *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966) ("War Stories" 1.10).

From the intended pilot onward, viewers know that Jayne is a hired gun, loyal to Mal only until the "interesting day" that a better offer comes along ("Serenity" 1.1, 1:26:42). He had not only abandoned but also shot his former partner, Marco (another "space Mexican") simply because Mal has promised to pay him better ("Out of Gas" 1.8). Of all the characters on *Serenity*, Jayne is the one most consistently motivated by self-interest. Though he repents of it afterwards, he is the one who sells out Simon and River because, in his words, "the money was too good; I got stupid" ("Ariel" 1.9, 41:33-35).[12] As far as salaciousness and the pleasures of the

flesh go, "Serenity" (1.1) features an insult to Kaylee that shows he does know the term "gynecologist" (33.29), while in "Heart of Gold" (1.13.), Jayne is reluctant to participate in a mission of assistance with merely speculative payoff until Mal informs him that the people in distress are whores, at which point he is all in. Once at the brothel, Jayne is the one who immediately heads upstairs with one of the ladies, Helen.

Yet Jayne also has his moments of natural human kindness. In "Heart of Gold" (1.13) he is shown combing Helen's hair in a gesture that registers as affectionate rather than simply lewd (15:11). He takes a childlike delight in the hat his mom knitted for him, and he sends money home for her support (while these are the points Bachran uses for her reading of Jayne as contemporary migrant worker, we use them here to emphasize how he enacts the natural impulses of both cruelty and affection, particularly familial attachment). Remorseful over his betrayal of Simon and River, he shares his apples with the crew. Such flashes of good are not unknown for the stereotypical bandito. In the series, Jayne even has occasional flashes of friendship and loyalty, as when he joins the mission to rescue Mal from Adelai Niska ("War Stories" 1.10). It is important to note that, even in his typical self-interested and mercenary mode, Jayne is not nearly so cold and ruthless as the men with hands of blue, i.e., the agents who work for the Alliance. Jayne also matches up with the stereotypical bandito in that he is superstitious, as when he initially refuses to enter the ship devastated by a Reaver attack because the dead bodies there give him the willies ("Bushwhacked" 1.3). And finally, Jayne is the one we see, in good Mexican fashion, casually playing a guitar around the campfire on Haven in *Serenity*.[13]

We turn now to Western stereotypes of Mexican women. Westerns contain several different stereotypes of Mexican women, but as with the Mexican man, we focus on one: the main one operative when the Mexican woman is more than background scenery or sexy eye-candy. When she is a part of the story, Westerns tend to picture the Mexican woman very differently from the Mexican man, much more positively in some respects. This pattern surprised us at first.

In working to describe and account for the differences we observed, we found the work of Carlos E. Cortés in his 1983 article "Chicanas in Film: History of an Image" especially useful and most in accord with our observations.[14] In his chronology of the US film industry to 1983, Cortés divides representations of Chicanas and Mexicanas into four main periods. In the first, from around 1900 to 1930, they were generally passive sexual objects whose roles supported narratives of Anglo superiority (99). During this time, depictions of Mexican men could be so bad that in 1922, the Mexican government banned the import of movies from offending studios ("Mexico's Ban"; Woll). In the second period, spanning from the Depression through World War II, the representation of Chicanas and other Latinas was shaped by political policy, including the 1932 Latin American Good Neighbor Policy. While this resulted in more screen presence of Latinas, particularly Mexicanas, their depictions were marked by frivolity and sensuality (99). Whereas Latina sensuality could vary from hot (as characterized by Carmen Miranda or Lupe Vélez) to cool (as in characters played by Delores Del Río) their shallowness was a constant. The next period, from around 1945 to around 1970, is a marked contrast. The silly or tempestuous sexpots never exit the stage, but there was also an opening into much richer depictions. Cortés

emphasizes the role of Westerns in that shift: "Out of the west, literally, rose strong, intelligent, resolute, active Mexican-American women. Their destinies and screen futures were inextricably linked to the fortunes of that particular film genre, the American Western" (101). While praising this era's depictions, Cortés also notes their limitations, particularly the tendency to link Mexican women with prostitution or other sexual ill-repute and the penchant for making them suffer loss and abuse (102). Writing in the early 1980s, Cortés sees films after 1970 as a mixed bag, with a proliferation of token but undeveloped Latina characters across all genres and more developed characters confined to urban gang films where, as was often the case in Westerns, the Chicana character serves as a moral conscience to the Anglo hero (103).

Returning to Westerns: In contrast to the simplicity and earthiness of the Mexican man, the Mexican woman is typically the most elegant and refined character in the story. Not only is she classier than the Mexican man, which is after all a low bar, she is also classier than the Anglo women we typically see. Their beauty is usually of a somewhat homespun variety, while hers is of a more foreign and sublime sort.[15] Helen Ramirez from the movie *High Noon* (1952) is perhaps the paradigmatic example of the elegant Mexican woman.[16]

Yet the Mexican woman is almost invariably (this point is implicit in Cortés's article) introduced in a sexualized way. For example, we first meet Helen Ramirez in black boudoir clothes, with her lover. In *My Darling Clementine* (1946), Chihuahua is introduced in a gambling hall, where after whispering in the ear of one card player, she moves to the other end of the table and inserts her leg into the camera view. In an episode of *The Rifleman* (1958-1963) called "The Vaqueros" (4.1), Maria is first shown from the waist down,

walking across the screen in a short floral skirt while the requisite flamenco music plays after which we are treated to a shot of her torso in a skimpy white blouse.[17]

As noted explicitly by Cortés, the Mexican woman often experiences sexual exploitation or at least some kind of sexual irregularity. She may be loved but then abandoned by the hero.[18] Or she may be forced into a sexual relationship with a villainous character whom she does not love.[19] She may, like Helen, have a series of lovers. If she was a virgin, it will often be her rape or seduction that is a turning point in the story.[20] Even an exception, like the successful marriage between John Cannon and Victoria Montoya on the television series *The High Chaparral* (1967-1971), starts out irregularly, as a business agreement between a reluctant Cannon and Victoria's father, and by the end of the episode that introduces Victoria to the series, the audience has seen her half-undressed ("The Arrangement" 1.2). Whatever the particulars, the Mexican woman nevertheless typically surmounts the exploitation by intelligence, dignity, and personal grace. There is something almost spiritual in the way she carries herself in this, and we at least are reminded here of the sublime serenity we see in images of the Madonna and other Christian saints a serenity they maintain through their suffering and tribulation. Some Westerns, moreover, actually prompt this comparison by including statues of Mary in key scenes.[21] Even in cases where the Mexican woman chooses a disreputable life, the choice is framed as noble in some way.[22] She has, beneath her elegance, a tremendous strength of mind.

We think it is important that the Mexican woman is often pictured with a religious dimension. And in contrast to the bandito, the Mexican woman will have religious attitudes that are more sophisticated than mere superstition. In *The*

Desperate Mission (1969), for example, Claudina gives passionate and thoughtful speeches about the importance of religion for the villagers' courage and sense of purpose.[23]

The Mexican woman will typically have a relationship with the male hero, but this relationship usually does not last. Sometimes the male hero leaves her because he is too much of an outsider to ever settle down.[24] Sometimes she will be stolen from him by a powerful villain.[25] And sometimes, as with Helen Ramirez, the reason why the hero leaves her will be unclear.[26] But whatever the reason, her great love will usually be lost a loss she bears with the same transcendent dignity that she bears all else.

Besides Helen Ramirez, a second example of all this would be Luisa from *One Eyed Jacks* (1961). She and her mother, Maria, are far and away the classiest and most elegant people in the town of Monterrey. Luisa is seduced by Rio, who lies to her about who he really is. When she finds out the truth, she forgives him and continues to love him. When she finds out she is pregnant, she accepts this too with the same quiet dignity, and even accepts it when Rio kills her stepfather in a gunfight. She is dignified and not at all angry when, at the end of the movie, he flees to escape the law, leaving her behind.

One last item: a scene which recurs in Westerns with some regularity is the scene where a Mexican woman pulls a child away from the street where a gun fight is about to break out. This is always a very quick scene, not a major part of the movie. What is interesting, though, is that it almost always seems to be a Mexican woman who does the pulling away and sheltering.[27] The tenderness Maria shows to Luisa upon learning of Luisa's pregnancy in *One Eyed Jacks* fits into this

theme, as does Helen's inviting Amy to stay in her room while waiting for the train in *High Noon*.

The Mexican woman on *Firefly* is Inara. She is — as the Mexican woman typically is — the classiest and most elegant character on the show. She is also possessed of the Mexican woman's personal dignity and grace. We trust that these facts are so obvious as not to need further confirmation. There is also a whole series of small signs that align Inara with the Mexican woman. Her name — actually both of her names, Inara[28] and Serra — sound Hispanic.[29] The actress who portrays her is Brazilian, which is different than Mexican of course, but still within the Latinx world.[30] Furthermore, Inara's speech patterns are marked by a subtle accent, meant perhaps to express her refinement, but nonetheless different from those used by fellow core dwellers Simon and River. And in the opening credits she appears wearing a shawl that can register as Mexican.

It is also the case that Inara is introduced in a sexualized way, just like so many of the other Mexican women appearing in Westerns: in "Serenity" (1.1) the first time we see her she is naked, under a client, during the sexual act. Shortly after, we see her from behind as she is bathing herself, topless, from a basin with a sponge. We also think that, because of her occupation, Inara fits into the theme of sexual exploitation, though the show sends contrary messages on this point. On one hand, we are told that, in the 26th century, Companion is a high status profession. We see the social clout Inara's profession gives her when in "The Train Job" (1.2) she is able to just walk in and extract Mal and Zoe from the police station in Paradiso. On the other hand, Mal — and as the hero of the show his opinion matters — makes snide comments about her work and repeatedly refers to her as a whore.[31] It seems, then,

that the viewer, having imbibed both of these messages, would come away feeling that Companion was a high class profession that nonetheless had something sexually disreputable about it.[32] And the viewer's own attitudes about sex work attitudes that may not be as enlightened as those of the 26th century are liable to come into play as well. [33] In fact, Inara's profession apparently generated enough semi-titillated ambivalence that the marketers of an early book on *Firefly* included the term "space hookers" in its sub-title.[34]

Inara also fits the pattern of the typical Mexican woman in that she has an ambiguous relationship with the male hero, a relationship that ends. There is, however, a slight irregularity in that it is usually the male hero who leaves the Mexican woman, while here it is Inara who leaves Mal. We will consider this irregularity at some length in the next section of this paper. But for now we think that, irrespective of who exactly leaves whom, the fact of this relationship between Inara and Mal is already enough to further solidify Inara's identity as the Mexican woman on *Firefly*.

We mentioned earlier how the Mexican woman is often pictured in religious terms. While Inara is not surrounded with Judeo-Christian symbols, she is surrounded by a mélange of Eastern ones.[35] They combine to characterize her as both exotic and diffusely religious. A Buddhist, her shuttle décor also includes statuary reminiscent of the erotic art of the Hindu-Jainist Khajuraho temples in India.[36] She describes the shuttle as a "consecrated place of union," ("Jaynestown" 1.7, 19:23-25) where clients' time with her starts with a ritual tea service ("Jaynestown" 1.7). Such items as statues and tea have become, in our contemporary western world, symbols of the "spirituality of the east."[37] In a detail that both scrambles and reinforces Orientalist associations, we learn that the school

where she trained as a Companion is named "House Madrassa," where her promise was such that she could have become House Priestess ("Heart of Gold" 1.13).[38] Throughout the show, Inara's shuttle is repeatedly figured as a place of sanctuary.

The depiction of Inara also echoes the Western genre trope where the Mexican woman is the one to shelter a child. In the original series pilot ("Serenity" 1.1) Inara is the first and only one to speak forcefully in favor of sheltering River and Simon. She allows "little sister" Kaylee into her quarters and not only dispenses comfort and counsel but, in a touching maternal or big sisterly gesture, does her hair ("The Train Job" 1.2). She shelters: the Shepherd in the pilot when he is feeling lost; Simon in the same episode; River in "Bushwacked" (1.3) and *Serenity*; the Councilor who is overwhelmed at work and whose visit to Inara in "War Stories" (1.10) is a moment of both pleasure and respite.[39] Her Companioning, as others such as Pascale have remarked, is not just sexual but psychological, as when in "Jaynestown" (1.7) she takes on the young man who has been browbeaten by his domineering father, and, with delicacy and kindness, helps him find his confidence and maturity — so much so that, by the end of the episode, he is strong enough to defy his father and free the ship.

The Meaning of These Mexicans

Although it does turn out, then, that there are two "space Mexicans" on *Firefly*, the show also makes two changes to the typical role these Mexicans play. First of all, in the typical Western neither the Mexican man nor the Mexican woman is part of the hero's group. The Mexican man is typically an underling in the villain's rather than in the hero's

employ. The Mexican woman, while she has a relationship with the hero, is not a member of his group either. She does not, to put it in Western terms, ride with him the way that Inara rides with Mal. And so the first change is that the symbolic Mexicans on *Firefly* have switched from being outside the hero's group to being inside.

An odd fact – a fact which, though it might appear a little contrary at first, actually fits in with our analysis – is that the inclusion of both Jayne and Inara is gradual. Both are marked as not completely inside through much of the series. Jayne, in good bandito fashion, is shown repeatedly as incapable of loyalty beyond self-interest until something starts to switch in "Ariel" (1.9). Inara lives in one of the shuttles and has her own business, and so she always has the option of leaving, a fact pointed out many times from the pilot onward.[40] Nevertheless, her arc through the series is one of deepening ties, and she eventually works with the group on a caper in "Trash" (1.11) when they foil the false Mrs. Reynolds. This fits with our analysis because this kind of gradual inclusion is just what we would expect if Jayne and Inara, the Mexican man and the Mexican woman, were being pulled out of their normal Western locations outside the hero's group and then being relocated within it. This relocation, like all relocations, takes time and is a little incomplete at first.

The second change is the one we mentioned above, i.e., that in the typical Western it is the male hero who leaves the Mexican woman, while on *Firefly* it is Inara who leaves (or at least is set to leave) Mal at the end of the series. There is also a change in the reason for this leaving. Inara decides to leave Mal for a very unusual reason. She has come, she tells him in "Heart of Gold" (1.14) to rely on his strength so much that she is afraid she is losing her own. And it is for this reason, she

says, that she must leave. This is not a reason we remember from any of the Westerns we have seen.

At this point we should admit that there are actually a variety of reasons why the male hero leaves the Mexican woman in Westerns. But we want to go out on a limb and suggest that the "classic" reason why he leaves is that his gunfighter past disqualifies him from settling down into a respectable married life. This is the reason why Rio cannot stay with Luisa. It is also why his old partner, Dad Longworth, cannot stay with Maria: although they do marry, Dad's violent past catches up with him and gets him killed, thus ending the marriage he had thought of as an escape from his past. Perhaps we can even see a version of this reason in *High Noon*; the movie does not explain the Marshall's motives, but it seems likely he has decided that, in order to settle down, he must become someone different, and so he gives up marshalling and becomes engaged to a pacifist; he cannot, in other words, settle down while he is still the same man who was in love with Helen.[41] As we said, there are movies where the reason is different but nonetheless, we want to focus on this reason as being the "classic" one because it fits in with the stereotype of the hero riding off, lonely, into the sunset.[42] There are, in fact, many Westerns made during this time when the hero does not manage to settle down with the Anglo woman either.[43]

But to sum up, we think there is a switch here from "empty" to "full." In the classic Western, the hero leaves the Mexican woman because his violent past makes him too "empty" to settle down. On *Firefly*, it is just the opposite: Inara leaves Mal because he is too "full" too strong, too solid, too much an absolute support for everyone on the ship. She

leaves him because he is so full that his strength overshadows her own.

These inversions from outside to inside and from empty to full are so neat and simple that we felt they must mean something. We felt we were holding a clue written in giant block letters. But how to read that clue was another matter. We did not know of any method designed for exactly this kind of thing. What we ended up doing was taking a method originally designed for interpreting mythological stories and adapting it to our issue here.[44] This method comes from Claude Levi Strauss, and it has two steps. In the first step, the characters in a story are interpreted as symbolizing various values. In the second step, the plot of the story is then interpreted as making statements about those values.[45] Our adaptation follows these same two steps, but with an alteration in step two. Whereas the original method uses step two on the plot within a single story, we will focus instead on the changes from the typical Western to *Firefly* on the plot, so to speak, of the transition between them. If the first step, where we interpret the Mexican man and the Mexican woman in symbolic terms, can be carried through successfully, then the second and slightly altered step should make sense to the reader.

Step One: Nature and Grace

The first step is to identify the values symbolized by the Mexican man and the Mexican woman. We think that the Mexican man represents the human being in a state of nature, and that the Mexican woman represents grace in a theological sense. We will discuss each symbol in turn.

The Mexican man is depicted as driven by natural impulses: simple acquisitiveness, physical lust, that sort of

thing. He lives by simple self-interest, unmodified by higher principles or larger causes. He is not interested in the cultivation of virtue. He is lacking in social polish. This constellation of characteristics suggests that this stereotype is being used in the genre as a symbol of the human being who is still in a state of nature the state of nature that social contract theory posits before the formation of the first society. Even those few Westerns where the Mexican man is the head villain are consistent with placing the Mexican man into the position of being in the state of nature, for as we noted earlier, the Mexican man as head villain is most often motivated by a familial reason rather than a financial reason. This motive fits since the family is the earliest and most natural of social arrangements an arrangement that at least some theorists (John Locke for example) include in the state of nature.[46]

It is important to note that the Indian man in Westerns of this period is not pictured as natural in quite this sense. He might live in a society that is closer to the natural world than the society of the settlers, with wrong beliefs and heathen ideas, but this is still a society and not the pre-social state of nature which contract theory posits and which we think the Mexican man symbolizes. The Indian is depicted as having culture and virtue: a culture and virtue stereotyped as taciturn and centered on honor. The Indian is not driven by solely natural impulse as this is a culture that prizes self-control; lapses into mayhem are often balanced by an Indian character who retains his stereotypical stoicism. The Indian, moreover, does not live by self-interest but by loyalty to the tribe, where the tribe is a larger and more complex social unit than the individual family. This is clearly no longer an image of a natural, in the sense of a pre-social, state. This Indian, to put

it simply, is not nearly so primitive a character as our friend the bandito.[47]

There is also a more subtle reason why the state of nature aligns with the Mexican bandito and not with the Indian. The state of nature is what we might call an outside/inside concept: although we are outside the state of nature now, it is still inside us as a possible state we might slide back into. In fact, classical contract theory, by which we mean the work of early modern theorists like Thomas Hobbes and Locke, describes the breakdown of governmental authority as a slide back into the state of nature. And since the state of nature is an outside/inside concept, it requires an outside/inside signifier, i.e., a signifying group that is both somewhat outside and somewhat inside the dominant white group the viewer of the Western is supposed to be identifying with. Now this outside/inside group is clearly the Mexican, rather than the Indian, for the Indian is simply outside.[48]

When it comes to the Mexican woman and grace, we want first to note that we are not theologians and so do not want even to try defining what grace is or how it works. Fortunately, though, for our purposes here we do not need to do this; all we need to do is to describe the way grace is pictured: not its reality, in other words, but only its iconography. And what we want to say is that grace at least in the Catholic tradition we grew up in is often pictured as the transformation of suffering into personal dignity and depth. One example would be the face of the Madonna in Michelangelo's *Pietà*: this is a moment of terrible suffering, and yet Mary's face, although grief-stricken, is sublimely beautiful, almost serene. Another example would be the hugely influential story of St. Thérèse of Lisieux that depicts

her as becoming only more sweet and more angelic even as she died slowly of consumption at age 24.[49]

We suspect that some readers will find this image of grace to be problematic, and we do as well. It seems clearly ideological in Marx's sense: it is a seemingly positive concept that can and be used that has been used to render the faithful passive, suffering patiently instead of acting to redress the social roots of that suffering. The gendered nature of this image is obviously troubling as well, though the way men's suffering is so often framed religiously as an ignominious defeat or just a stage to an eventual triumph is no less problematic. On the other hand, however, there also seems, mixed in with all the problems and misuses, something that cannot simply be dismissed as ideological. For the transformation of suffering into dignity and depth does seem to be a kind of redemption. Not the only kind; maybe not the best kind; certainly a kind vulnerable to misuse. But a kind of redemption nonetheless. It is so easy, after all, to respond to suffering with resentment or anger or complaint or despair. To see someone respond to suffering with a spiritual deepening instead there really does seem to be, despite the quietism, something gracious and redemptive about that: something, in its own quietistic way, liberating.[50]

In any case, however, the current question is only whether this is a traditional image of grace, and we think the answer to this question is (for better or worse) clearly yes. And we think it is the Mexican woman who matches up with this image. Her life is marked by suffering. There is the sexual exploitation and also the loss, through no fault of her own, of her relationship with the hero. Yet this does not turn her into a complaining or resentful person. Rather, it does nothing so much as make her, in her sadness, still more dignified and

sublime. It is this transformation of pain into depth, rather than the elegance of her manners and dress, which is the real source of her great personal grace. A particularly clear example of such redemptive suffering would be Chihuahua from *My Darling Clementine*. At the start of the movie, she is depicted as a jealous seductress. But then she gets shot accidentally and that drastically changes how she is depicted: in her injury and through her surgery she becomes elevated, with shots of her gracious suffering.[51]

Maybe we should add, even though it does not exactly fit into what we have been saying so far, that the Mexican woman's role in sheltering a child (and Inara's actions in sheltering so many people) also fit into traditional ideas of grace. Moreover, both Helen Ramirez and Luisa have redemptive effects: Helen Ramirez convinces the marshal's new wife to suspend her pacifist beliefs so as to act concretely in the only way possible in the context to save her husband's life; Luisa convinces Rio to no longer live merely for anger and revenge, but to imagine a future based on happiness and love. Finally, there is the simple fact that the Mexican woman, in all her elegance, looks as if she hails from a different world than the rough and tumble world in which all the other characters in a Western live.

One last thought: we are a little worried that this interpretation in terms of grace might seem as though it is an over-large intellectual leap, or even the crazed output of minds deformed by too much Catholic education. So what we would like to do now is just add the thought that, whatever else might be true, this idea of grace does have the advantage of taking all the different characteristics of the Mexican woman (her elegance, her foreignness, her suffering, her serenity, her kindness) and combining them into a single coherent whole.[52]

Step Two: Utopianism

Now that we have figured the symbolism out, we will proceed to step two and consider the meaning of the changes *Firefly* makes in the typical Western set-up. The first change is that while in a typical Western the Mexican man and the Mexican woman are outside the hero's group, on *Firefly* they are inside. We want to interpret this change in terms of *Firefly's* utopianism. It seems clear to us that *Serenity* is a utopian community. It is its own little self-contained world, having no permanent associations with any other group. It is a little world held together by its own vision of what life should be: a vision, in its case, of freedom (Foster and South). This is a vision which sets it apart from the larger society. And it is led by a charismatic individual who embodies that vision.

We think that one aspect of this utopianism is the great variety of people on board the ship. This variety contributes to the utopianism because it makes the ship into its own complete little world. If everyone on board were of a similar type, they could still be a heroic ship's crew, but not a complete little human world. Just as Noah's ark is depicted as having preserved the natural world by having two of each type of animal on board, so Serenity preserves the human world by having one of each type of person on board.[53]

Jayne and Inara contribute, just as the people they are, to this utopian diversity. They contribute still more through their symbolism, for as the Mexican man and Mexican woman they bring into the ship not just themselves but also what they symbolize: both the state of nature and the realm of grace. This movement makes the little world of the ship still more complete, still more utopian which is, in one way, a positive thing. We can read this as a reconciliation: as different or even

opposed as grace and the state of nature might usually be, they have here become shipmates. As such, this reconciliation of grace and the state of nature is more than just utopian: it is almost the definition of salvation.

In another way, however, this utopianism seems a little extreme. For grace and the state of nature are not so much human conditions as limits that define the boundaries of the human. Human life occurs in what we might call a "middle zone" positioned between these boundaries. This is certainly true of the hero in a typical Western: he is neither so uncivilized as to be in a state of nature, nor so pure as to be a manifestation of grace. But on *Firefly* the lone hero of the typical Western has expanded to become the hero's group, and this hero's group does contain, at least symbolically, both grace and the state of nature. It is as if the utopianism of *Firefly* is not content with being just a complete human world, but feels it must contain even the boundaries or preconditions of that world.[54]

An odd little fact which fits in with all this is that we almost never see Jayne and Inara interacting with each other: in the fourteen episodes of *Firefly* they have exactly one interchange, of no great importance, consisting of a single sentence each.[55] Now there are many reasons in terms of plot and characterization for why this is true. But it is also appropriate on the symbolic level. Jayne and Inara are symbolically on opposite sides of the middle zone: Jayne below and Inara above. Hence, each is symbolically able to interact with the characters in the middle zone but not, because the reach would be too far, with the character on the other side of it.

Let us move on now to consider how the romance between the hero and the Mexican woman ends. The point we

want to focus on here is not who leaves whom, but the reason why the leaving occurs. As we said before, in a typical Western the hero leaves the Mexican woman because his life of violence has left him too empty to settle down, while on *Firefly* Inara says she leaves Mal because his strength and underlying kindness make him so full that she is afraid she relies on him too much. What we want to say now is that this switch from an empty hero to a full one mirrors the utopianism we have just been talking about. Not only is a full hero a more utopian character in himself than an empty one, but it is also only the full hero who can found the utopian community. It is the fullness which makes him into a sort of "sun," able to attract and then warm a little utopian "solar system."

In contrast to the full hero, the empty hero of the typical Western never founds a community, utopian or otherwise. He puts a few bullet holes into whoever is oppressing the already existing community, then rides off alone. He rides off alone because his own violence has left him so empty that he is not only unable to found a new community but is even unfit to join the pre-existing community he has just saved.[56] Even though he almost always wins, the typical Western hero is not at all utopian, but tragic even in his moment of triumph.

A Desperate Domestication

Including these symbolic Mexicans in the hero's group has the effect of domesticating both grace and the state of nature. Let us start with Jayne. In the typical Western, the Mexican man remains unreformed. But we see Jayne becoming domesticated in a couple of ways. In "Jaynestown" (1.7) he learns about perseverance and loyalty and self-sacrifice. In "Ariel," (1.9) when he betrays River and where Mal

nearly kills him for it, he learns about loyalty again and about remorse. Gradually, then, the constant self-interest which is a salient trait of the state of nature is being transformed into something more civilized and more virtuous. Then in the movie, when Mal asks the crew if they are willing to undertake a dangerous mission not for monetary gain but simply to free the world a little bit from Alliance domination, Jayne is the first to volunteer.

When it comes to Inara, the domestication occurs because she is no longer pictured as out of reach. In the typical Western, it is clear to the hero that he is too empty ever to possess the Mexican woman a situation which, with its emphasis on human unworthiness, fits perfectly into the way grace is traditionally understood. But on *Firefly* the situation is reversed and Inara leaves Mal because he is too full and she relies on him too much a situation which domesticates grace by bringing it down and making it dependent on the human. Once again, by the end of the movie, we see this process playing out still more clearly, for when she talks this time about whether she is going to stay or go, Inara finally sets her control aside and allows herself to appear vulnerable and confused, i.e., fully and touchingly human.

All of this amplifies the utopianism of *Firefly/Serenity* still a bit more. For it is now a utopia strong enough to transform the state of nature a utopia so strong that an unreachable grace is no longer required for its redemption. And perhaps *Firefly* shows us here the two-sided definition of what a utopia truly is: a world which the beast within no longer threatens, and which the tears of the Madonna no longer bless.

However, behind this utopianism is a sense of desperation. In comparison to the world of the typical Western, the world of *Firefly* is desperate in a couple of ways. First of all, in a typical Western, the hero wins, while in *Firefly*, the hero does not. There are many Westerns where the villain is a banker or large rancher who is oppressing some small frontier community a small frontier community that is a little rough around the edges, perhaps, but fundamentally peaceful and hardworking. This is a community, moreover, whose work has the blessed purpose (blessed by whatever deity is secretly presiding over the world of the Western) of bringing the vast latent potential of the Western landscape to its appointed fulfillment. And the villain is not only oppressing the community but also shamelessly exploiting the land itself and destroying its promise. But then the hero arrives on the scene and uses some judiciously placed violence to free the community from the villain's oppression and the land from his rapacious designs. We are mentioning this particular kind of Western because it plays out in a similar way to *Firefly*: in both cases we have a hegemonic villain (banker/rancher or Alliance) and a hero who resists that villain. But the thing is that, unlike the hero of the typical Western, our heroes on *Firefly* are not saving the outer planets from the grip of the Alliance. Mal attempted that when he was part of the rebellion, but the rebellion failed, and *Firefly* takes place in the aftermath of that failure. The goal of our heroes is no longer to liberate the world from its oppressor, but simply to keep flying, for to keep flying means to keep intact the little utopia that is the ship. This is not just a utopian goal, but a desperate utopian goal: desperate because it is the impossibility of reforming the world which has now become

the motive for creating a utopian community in separation from it.

Of course, there is more than one hint on *Firefly* that River might somehow be the key to overcoming the Alliance's dominion, hints which achieve at least a first fulfillment in the movie. Yet even this fits into the theme of desperation. For the hero of the typical Western was not a magical person and had no special powers. His courage and his skill with the revolver were extraordinary, but they were still human traits. The hopeful message of the typical Western is that these human traits – at least if cultivated to the extent that the hero cultivates them – are enough to re-establish justice. However, if we look to River as a source of hope, the desperate message of *Firefly* is that human traits are no longer enough and only the magical powers of someone like River will now suffice.

In some ways, the movie *Serenity* seems to be a little different than *Firefly* when it comes to who wins and who loses. In *Serenity*, Mal and the crew do act directly to put a dent in the Alliance's domination. Yet even here all they achieve is a small and temporary dent – nothing like an overall reform. The end result from their actions is that they are still outlaws, still confined within their own little utopian community, still focused on their previous goals of avoiding the Alliance and managing simply to keep flying.

Another difference between the typical Western and both *Firefly* and *Serenity* – a second difference which underlines the desperation – is the difference in the physical environment. In the typical Western there is a landscape that although harsh is also, as mentioned above, big with promise. What we want to add now is that the promise of this land becomes a kind of natural faith for the community living there. Since this community is in a symbiotic relationship with

the land, they can depend on the goodness of this land, hidden for a moment perhaps but ever-present, to support and sustain their own goodness. Hope is all around them because hope is built into the land itself. An iconic image of this is John Wayne, in the movie *Chisum* (1970), looking out from a small rise at the landscape spread out, idyllic, before him.

We do not want to be naïve: Of course we recognize that, in actual rather than cinematic fact, this "natural faith" has been misused in terrible ways. "Manifest destiny" is the name under which it trampled a continent, and its peoples, underfoot.[57] We worry about the extent to which the traditional Western has been complicit as an apologist for these abuses. We also worry that the type of Western we are talking about here might be ideological in a more subtle way: this type of Western usually pictures the villain as an outsider, which has the effect of absolving the simple frontier community of any truly serious villainy, thus allowing it to retain a purity and goodness that does not reflect historical fact.

Yet despite all the problems and misuses, there also seems to be something positive in this hopeful attitude to the surrounding, earthly world. Implicit in this is an important insight about human dependence and the importance of land and locality an insight resisted by much philosophy and a good bit of science fiction (Bussolini), but retained in Indigenous thought (Burkhart). It is of course horrifically ironic that this insight undergirds a genre so tied up with justifying the displacement of the Indigenous peoples whose thinking retains this insight. But it is an insight nonetheless. In contrast, in *Firefly* and *Serenity*, the physical environment of the typical Western has become the black: a terrifying

emptiness. It goes without saying that this black is no longer able to sustain human life. To gaze deeply into this black can bring, we are told, not hope but madness.[58] Moreover, as Jocelyn Sakal Froese and Laura Buzzard point out, the human habitations dotted here and there throughout this space are not much more hopeful. The core planets are surveillance societies. Further out, there is the world of the Mudders: a world filled with a constant stench and backbreaking labor ("Jaynestown" 1.7). There is the world of Paradiso, another world of backbreaking labor and also a world where everyone contracts a potentially fatal degenerative disease from the gases issuing from the mines ("The Train Job" 1.2). This is not a universe that is about to bloom, but a universe that is being exploited for its natural resources by a labor force that is exploited itself.

The black also represents freedom. As the song at the start of each episode of *Firefly* tells us, "you can't take the sky from me." But this is a freedom that is now unsupported by the natural faith that sustained the Western. It is an unmoored freedom, designed to still exist even if, as the song also tells us, they "burn the land and boil the sea" desperate freedom in other words, a freedom unsupported by the environment it moves in, that becomes utopian. It becomes the freedom to create a freedom no longer capable of doing anything else except creating a tiny community, safe only in its isolation. This tiny community, in its desperate need to become complete, takes within itself, in the guise of the Mexican Inara and the Mexican Jayne, both grace and the state of nature.

As we tie up this line of analysis, we make one final structuralist conjecture. Recently, Joe Velazquez re-watched some episodes of *Firefly* with his wife, who had not seen them

before. She found the combination of horses and spaceships a little incongruous funny even. Why, she asked, would anybody combine these two things? It is a pretty deep question. Once we get past facile answers like "because Joss Whedon was a fan of both Westerns and science fiction," or causal reasons like, "well, he was reading a novel about the US Civil War and space is the only frontier left…" we are left wondering, "why indeed?" Although we do not have anything like a complete answer to this question, our analysis suggests a partial answer. Maybe the deeper reason for combining these two things is that the association with Westerns, and the natural faith that Westerns have, will help to take the edge off the dystopic world of *Firefly*. Although the transposition of the natural faith of the Western to the world of *Firefly* is not really legitimate from a logical point of view, all the horses and revolvers ensure that it will be a natural transposition for the viewer's mind to make. This transposition then lets us watch the show in an upbeat way that the actual world our heroes are living in does nothing to justify. The *Firefly* universe should, logically speaking, swallow the viewer in an abyss of despair: the fact that it does not is due in part to the way that *Firefly* uses the natural faith of the Western to surreptitiously fill up at least a little bit of that abyss.[59]

Final Thoughts

We have found that when we work together on a problem, we often put some ideas forward and take them as far as they will go, then we stop and reconsider them, and then we head off in some other direction. This is obviously not a method that leaves us sure of the answer, but (strangely perhaps) it is a method that always leaves us feeling that we understand things a bit better.

First, a reconsideration: perhaps, on reflection, we have been, in a way, wrong about all this or at least incomplete. We have been picturing *Firefly* as illustrating a utopian community, held together by desperation on the one hand and a vision of freedom on the other. And of course this vision of freedom is what the characters (at least some of them) talk about. Yet that is not what really holds the crew together. It is not even clear that it is really freedom that is the deep desire of all the characters. Kaylee seems less focused on freedom than on her love of engines and of Simon. Simon has lost many of his illusions about his former life, but he still seems as though he might be happy to be back in it, except that he needs, before all else, to keep his sister safe. Inara, we find out, actually voted for unification. Book seems to have been searching not for freedom but for wisdom or deeper meaning and redemption.

What holds the crew together is love. As sentimental as it is to say, what holds anything together is love, and an even deeper natural faith in love a faith that can weather, silently, through disillusion, death, and at least some forms of madness. And perhaps the point of the show is to give us an image, an unsentimental and unromantic image, of what the love that holds the world together is really like. As James Rocha and Mona Rocha argue, this seems, in fact, to be the actual point of all of Joss Whedon's work a point they find imbued with a positive political vision. So often in American popular culture, love is imagined in terms of a dyadic relationship between two people. But here, as elsewhere, Whedon and company seem to be returning, almost despite themselves, to an older Christian truth which imagines love primarily in terms of community. For the primary image of love in Christianity is not the wild passion that so often

attends experiences of pair bonding, but the working relationships between a carpenter, several fisherman, a tax collector, a thief,[60] a revolutionary,[61] and a few others of occupations unknown as they traveled together on a very risky mission in Roman-occupied Palestine.[62]

And, at the very end of the movie, we hear something extraordinary. As Mal talks to River about the ship, we hear that this love has the power to transform the physical world itself and convert what would seem to be a mere mechanical device into an embodiment of hope. Instead of the typical Western's faith in the promise of the natural world, the series and the movie end with a faith in the promise of a human community. But we should let Mal speak for himself:

> Love. You can learn all the math in the 'verse, but you take a boat in the air you don't love, she'll shake you off just as sure as the turning of worlds. Love keeps her in the air when she oughta fall down, tells you she's hurting 'fore she keens. Makes her a home. (1:52:19-39)

Now, we head off in a new direction. Previously we compared *Firefly* to the typical Western where the villain is a big businessman or banker oppressing a simple frontier community and where the hero then overthrows this villain and liberates the community. But maybe it would be more instructive to compare *Firefly* to the movie *Stagecoach* (1939) instead, especially since *Stagecoach* was one of the movies that inspired the show.

In *Stagecoach*, the frontier communities are not sites of simple virtue or natural justice. They are instead sites of intolerance, greed, and vice. It is only the travelers on the stagecoach itself who form a community based on democratic

values like equality, responsibility, and solidarity.[63] However when the stagecoach ride ends and the passengers return to civilization, the community dissolves, and with it, the tolerance and democratic ethos that they had built. Dallas, the noble whore, seems fated to return to the brothel, while Ringo, the noble outlaw, is headed either to a gunfighter's death or prison.

But then, in a surprising reversal that is very interesting for the themes we are discussing here, our heroes Dallas and Ringo are spared their fates by a few friends who enable them to escape to Mexico. As Richard Slotkin describes, in *Stagecoach* Mexico functions as a mythic space of hope and renewal, a "new and better frontier, a recovered Garden of Eden for an Adam and Eve soiled by history" (310). If the fate of Anglo settled society is to lapse into injustice, then hope is found only by pushing out even further. The parallels with *Firefly* are striking. In the *Firefly/Serenity* 'verse, however, there is no possibility of finding a mythic Mexico out of reach of the Alliance. The only place to retreat is to the ship. Thus, *Serenity* itself *is* the mythic Mexico a place where nature and grace finally agree to dwell together, a place unsullied by history despite its age and mileage. In this light, Mal's last words in *Serenity* are unsurprising. As Mexico itself, *Serenity* becomes a place that is magical enough to respond to love.

Along with our families, we wish to thank the conferees to whom we first presented a version of this work at the *Slayage* Conference #9 in July 2022. We also thank Sherry Ginn, Heather M. Porter, and our anonymous readers for their great suggestions, and Rhonda Wilcox and those doing the final copy edits.

Notes

[1] Some articles we found especially interesting are by Bachran, Battis, Benson, Brickley, Froese and Buzzard, Gamel, Lecoq, and Sturgis.

[2] 'American Indian' is his preferred term and the preferred term of most of his family and tribe.

[3] We selected most of these Westerns by checking the DVD bins at highway rest stops and convenience stores for boxed sets of old Westerns boxed sets with titles like *Fist Full of Westerns* (Pop Flix Studios, 2012) or The Eight Movie Western Pack (Echo Bridge Home Entertainment, various dates). We also ordered a similar box set or two from Amazon. We spent some time watching whatever Westerns we could find on YouTube that had Mexican characters in them. We watched a couple of Westerns that were recommended to us by a colleague who is interested in philosophy and film. Besides these movies, we also watched episodes of the television series *Bonanza* (1959-1973), *Gunsmoke* (1955-1975), *The High Chaparral* (1967-1971) and *The Rifleman* (1958-1963). We imagine that this method of selection gave us a more or less random sample of what the genre is like. A complete list is available from the authors.

[4] This leaves open the question whether, from a more psychoanalytic perspective, the Indians in the traditional Western also represent Mexicans.

[5] Many of the Westerns we watched were decidedly B grade. We think this was actually a good thing. The idea of watching mostly B grade Westerns came from a colleague, Christian Martin, who pointed out that if one wanted to know what a genre was like, it was better to watch B grade items since these would follow the standard codes of the genre pretty closely, while A grade items would take creative liberties with those codes.

[6] Besides this "earthy bandit" stereotype, there are two others which recur with some frequency: the Mexican man is sometimes also pictured as a peasant and

sometimes as a soldier. In both cases, he is pictured in a sheep-like way. As a peasant, he is passive and innocent and victimized and not revolutionary. As a soldier, he is obedient and not creative; he is always outwitted by the Anglo hero because he always just follows the standard procedures. Although very different from the earthy bandit, these two other stereotypes share a certain fundamental trait with him, which is his simplicity. We think it is telling that, in all three of these depictions, the Mexican man is decidedly unsophisticated. More complex depictions of bandits do occur but are much rarer. Examples include the noble gentleman thief like Joaquin Murrieta in *The Desperate Mission* (1969) and the lovable rogue, which is how Manolito from *The High Chaparral* starts out in the series. Both are aristocrats. Occasionally Mexican military commanders are depicted as both superficially polite and brutal. An unusual and sympathetic depiction of a bandito is found in John Ford's *3 Godfathers* (1948); Pedro, aka "Pete," is part of the outlaw-hero trio whose efforts to save a newborn infant while also on the lam enact a variation of the Christmas tale of the three Magi. Notably, Pete is the one who helps the baby's mother give birth. And of the three heroes, only John Wayne survives.

[7] *Death Rides a Horse* (1967), *Powder Keg* (1971), and *Revenge of a Gunfighter* (1968) all fit the pattern. Some exceptions are *Blindman* (1971), *The Desperate Mission* (1969), and a *Bonanza* episode titled "The Spanish Grant" (1.21). Not all of these exceptions, though, are as unambiguously exceptions as they might like. In *Blindman*, although the villains are a group of Mexican military officers, they nonetheless return to the earthy Mexican stereotype, for the goal they are focused on throughout the movie is hijacking a wagon load of (European) prostitutes. Also, Joaquin Murrieta from *The Desperate Mission* is only ambiguously a villainous figure, being often referred to as a sort of Mexican Robin Hood and, at least according to legend, being driven to his outlaw activities by the murder of his brother-in-law and rape of his wife.

[8] *Red Blood, Yellow Gold/Professionals for a Massacre*. Directed by Nando Cicero, 1967. We seem to remember this trope coming up in a second movie too, but our notes do not record this.

[9] A scene like this occurs in *Massacre Time* (1966), *Valdez is Coming* (1971), and *Chino* (1973).

[10] There are the Anglo singing cowboys too, like Roy Rogers or Gene Autry. But what we are talking about here is not the musical male lead but just a regular character singing casually, on the side as it were.

[11] Bachran uses the much later episode "The Message" (1.12) to build her argument that Jayne is coded as a migrant worker. In that episode, we learn Jayne has been sending money to his family, that his family communicates with him by letter, and that he struggles with written literacy.

[12] If further examples are needed, we learn in "Jaynestown" (1.7) that, some years before he joined *Serenity*, Jayne threw another of his partners, a man named Stitch, out of a spaceship in order to lighten it as it was struggling to take off — threw him out rather than throwing out the heavy boxes containing the cash they had just stolen.

[13] Adam Baldwin, the actor who played Jayne, mentioned as one of his inspirations the "down and dirty" character played by Eli Wallach in *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* (1966). This character is Tuco the Mexican. "*Firefly* Special Features 2/5," 0:2-0:16, available on youtube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JfIaoUba9M.

[14] Cortés is praised as pioneering by later theorist Ramírez Berg, whose work covers Latinx images more broadly and has a slightly different taxonomy for stereotypes of women: the harlot, the female clown, and the dark lady who is "virginal, inscrutable, aristocratic" (76) and often used as a foil to more boisterous and forthright Anglo women characters. Berg's description of the dark lady is built on the 1930s films featuring Delores Del Rio, however, and his book says little about Westerns. He attempts to account for later dark ladies who do not run true to type by analyzing them as oscillating between the dark lady and the harlot. This analysis does not account for the combination of sexual experience and nobility that we find repeatedly figured in Westerns.

[15] *High Noon*'s Amy (Grace Kelly) wears a lovely satin wedding dress throughout, but it is very demure, and its level of luxury for an Anglo woman is the exception rather than the rule.

[16] While the Mexican woman's elegance is sometimes linked to wealth, that is not necessarily the case, as exemplified by Soledad in *The Hanged Man* (1974).

[17] In *Death of a Gunfighter* (1969), Claire Quintana (Lena Horne) is first briefly shown boarding a train in widow's weeds and a coffin while the soundtrack features Horne singing a sad song ("Sweet Apple Wine"). The next time we see her, in the telling of the story leading to her boarding the train as a widow, she is being roused from her bed, where she has been sleeping in the nude. This is an interesting case of a character being doubly inscribed in a sexualized manner, as both Latina and Black. It is an especially striking contrast with a scene a few minutes earlier in which an Anglo prostitute with a man in her bed is nonetheless shown fully covered. Although Horne's character is given a Spanish surname, Horne's fame and her depiction of Claire as speaking without a Spanish accent prompted Roger Ebert to erase Mexican-Americans from the film entirely. Ebert found the setting an "amazing town, for a Western" because "it has Italians, Negroes, Jews and Greeks in it." Yet save for the light-skinned Horne, there are no Black people in the film. In addition, the only motivation for Ebert to claim there are Italians in the movie is because the

term "greaser" is directed at a character. This is a misattribution, however, since the character's name is Lou Trinidad and Trinidad is a Spanish surname.
[18] This is what happens to Luisa from *One Eyed Jacks* (1961).
[19] An example would be Maria, the young wife of the wealthy Anglo rancher who is the ultimate villain in *The Professionals* (1966).
[20] *Duel in the Sun* (1946) and *One Eyed Jacks* (1961) would both be examples.
[21] Claudina, the truly virtuous woman, is linked to the statue of Mary in *The Desperate Mission* (1969). Soledad, the girlfriend in *The Hanged Man* (1974), has a statue of Mary in her home.
[22] This is the case with Isabela de la Cuesta/Rosita Morales in an episode of *Bonanza* titled "The Spanish Grant" (1.21).
[23] Another example would be the way Carmela, in *My Outlaw Brother* (1951), explicitly distinguishes her foreboding about the villain Patrick O'Morra from simple superstition.
[24] Luisa in *One Eyed Jacks* (1961) is an example of this.
[25] Rosa from *And God Said to Cain* (1970) is an example of this.
[26] There is apparently some debate about who exactly left whom, as the actual separation is not shown but occurs before the time of the movie itself. One of us had always thought it clear, from the way Helen Ramirez talks to the marshal's young wife, that he had left her, while one of us always thought it was left purposely unclear. For an interpretation that she left him, see "What is the Significance of Helen Ramirez in "High Noon"*?*"
[27] According to our notes, a scene with a Mexican woman sheltering a child occurs in: *Between God, the Devil, and a Winchester* (1968); *Death Rides a Horse* (1967); *Sartana Is Here, Trade Your Pistol For a Coffin* (1970); and *They Call Me Hallelujah* (1971). This list is probably incomplete, though, because our notes are a bit spotty. In *Cry Blood, Apache* (1970), the child is sheltered by an Indian woman who speaks in Spanish. We have also recorded two instances where a Mexican woman and a Mexican man together shelter a child; these are: *Dig Your Grave Friend…Sabata's Coming* (1971) and *Powder Keg* (1971). And, as stated above in note 6, of the heroic trio in *3 Godfathers,* all of whom shelter an infant, only Pedro/Pete serves as a midwife.
[28] Her first name, Inara, while most immediately Arabic (where it means "shining" or "illuminating") nonetheless has a common pattern found in Spanish girls' names of having thee syllables and ending in "a." See for example, "Top Spanish Girls' Names." Anecdotally, Agnes Curry's maternal family exemplifies this pattern with the following names still in circulation: Bárbara, Casilda, Frederica (pronounced Fred-ric-a), Larissa, Loretta, Loyola, Lucia, Mónica, Oltilda, Regina, Verena.

[29] Her surname, Serra, is a surname found in Spain and includes such bearers as Fr. Junipero Serra, an eighteenth-century Spanish priest who established missions in what is now California.

[30] While the actress initially cast as Inara, Rebecca Gayheart, has light eyes, she was replaced by brown-eyed actress Morena Baccarin whose first name also reflects her dark hair coloring. Baccarin discusses her first name, Morena, in a Brazilian television interview ("Part 1 of 2 Interview Morena Baccarin").

[31] As David McGill argues, while *Firefly* works to present a slate of variations on masculinity, Mal's version, particularly its "ethical core," remains "a set of guidelines for masculinity today" (86). As such, Mal's judgements of Inara's profession, as his judgments on all else, are liable to carry weight with the viewer of the show.

[32] While Inara is depicted as rhetorically in control of her dealings with clients and as shrewdly bargaining with Mal in his flashback of their first meeting ("Out of Gas" 1.8), one can wonder why she nonetheless signed on after he had the temerity to call her a whore in their very first meeting. It is fair to say that, regardless of her previous life on Sihnon, dealing with some degradation is now part of her everyday life.

[33] We emphasize that we are not trying to make any judgments of our own about sex work and certainly not about sex workers. We are emphatically not in favor of the current double standard which stigmatizes sex workers but not their clients. All we are talking about at this point in the text is the socially current stereotype, because we think this stereotype will have a large influence on the way the show, and in particular its depiction of Inara, will typically be viewed.

[34] Espenson's *Finding Serenity: Anti-Heroes, Lost Shepherds, and Space Hookers in Joss Whedon's* Firefly. While the origin of the term "hooker" seems to be unclear and its use predates the 1970s context that formed our first impressions of it, we think it is safe to say that it registers as generally derogatory.

[35] One of the questions we asked ourselves was why the switch from Catholic symbols of religion in the traditional Western to vaguely Eastern symbols of religion here? We are not sure, but offer the following speculations. In the context of the series, the overall decision to depict a future Sino-US culture as a culmination of our current geopolitical situation opened a first door. Whedon's further decision to depict prostitution as an exalted profession is another step; while he mentions Renaissance courtesans as one example, he mentions geishas as the other. The key structural point here, though, is that what is being Orientalized has to have an inside-outside relationship to the dominant culture. During the time of the traditional Western, Catholicism, particularly Mexican Catholicism, was still sufficiently strange and exotic as to

be readily available for Orientalizing use in mainstream cinema. Now, however, that seems to be no longer the case, and so the Orientalizing urge has switched to a far eastern signifier as still being appropriately mysterious. But why an Orientalized portrayal of religion at all? Well, perhaps because Orientalism has always been a way to accept an item that you are at the same time pretending to reject and to reject an item that you are at the same time pretending to accept.

[36] The introduction to Inara in the intended pilot "Serenity" (1.10) opens first with a brief focus on these reliefs mounted above her bed. For more on the art of the Khajuraho Temples, see "Khajuraho Temples and Their Erotic Statues/India."

[37] As Rebecca Brown notes, although one analogue of Inara's profession is a geisha, the Orientalizing tropes used in relation to Inara's person and home do not reproduce a Japanese aesthetic but rather a mix of Chinese, South Asian, and Middle Eastern influences. Given the history of Spain, this further aligns Inara to representations of Spanish culture as a mélange of European and non-European elements in a representation of Spain that historian Sandie Holguin summarizes as "the not-quite European country with the Oriental-Gypsy soul."

[38] While the Arabic term 'madrasa' refers to a school of any sort, Western viewers are likely to associate it with Islamic schools in particular.

[39] Cynthea Masson, on the contrary, argues that Inara's seemingly genuine conversation with the Councilor is just another deployment of her artistry in seduction. One of us tends to agree with this while the other is less sure.

[40] Matthew Pateman also notes Inara's multiple points of outsideness.

[41] The Marshall, however, cannot escape the violence of his past. This violence comes back not only to threaten him, but also to damage the purity of his new marriage as it forces his Quaker wife to violate her own religious beliefs as she kills a man in defense of him.

[42] In *And God Said to Cain* (1970), the Mexican woman Rosa seems to have been in love with Gary Hamilton, who, for reasons unknown, took up with the blond and blue-eyed Mary instead the blond and blueeyed Mary who helps her other lover frame him, landing poor Gary in prison. When he comes back ten years later, it seems that Rosa is still in love with him and takes on herself a significant amount of personal risk to assist in his revenge. But at the end, after Mary and her dastardly lover are both dead, when we expect Gary to do the logical thing and throw himself into Rosa's arms, he just rides off alone as these words come onto the screen "And God said to Cain: Now art thou cursed, a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be on the earth" (1:39:36-1:40:04). On the lonely hero riding off into the sunset, see Jewett and Lawrence's early study *The American Monomyth*.

[43] Devlin in *The Hanged Man* rides off and leaves, first, Soledad, the Mexican woman who is obviously in love with him, and then second, Carrie, the Anglo woman whom he has just rescued from enormous peril and whose son clearly idolizes him. (Initially, it is Soledad who runs from him because she is horrified by the fact that, although hanged, he is still alive. But later as he leaves town, she stands looking mutely but appealingly up to him — and he just rides on by without stopping to speak to her.) The movie ends with a rival gunfighter riding after Devlin to challenge him to a duel.

[44] We made a couple of other attempts first. We tried a method we ourselves developed for a different issue. This proved useless. We tried the method Emiko Ohnuki Tierney used in her book *Monkey as Mirror.* This proved too vague, at least in our hands. We also tried the method of G. W. F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This proved inapplicable since the typical Western did not exhibit the sort of synthesis at a higher level that Hegel's method talks about.

[45] As an illustration, let us summarize (in a way that is almost criminally brief) what Levi-Strauss says about the story of Asdiwal from the Tsimshian people of the Pacific Northwest. The Tsimshian are split into two tribes, one from the mountains and one from the seacoast. What happens in the story is that Asdiwal, who is from the mountains, travels to the seacoast and marries a young woman there. He then gets involved in a hunting competition with his new in-laws. When Asdiwal wins, these in-laws respond by marooning him on a small island. Then Asdiwal retaliates by conjuring a magical killer whale who devours them all. Unfortunately, conjuring magical killer whales to eat your wife's relatives can have a less than positive effect on a marriage, and Asdiwal's wife throws him out. He starts travelling back to the mountains but dies *en route* when he is only halfway there. He dies, in fact, on a small hill, halfway in height between the seacoast and the true mountains from which he came.

Levi Strauss begins (this is step one) by interpreting Asdiwal as not just Asdiwal, but as a symbol of the mountain culture more generally. And he interprets Asdiwal's wife as a symbol of the coastal culture. He then interprets (this is step two) the plot of the story as a statement about the impossibility of reconciling those cultures. And he interprets the odd location of Asdiwal's death as a statement about how any attempt to reconcile the two cultures is liable to leave the bold would-be-reconciler belonging, in the end, to neither.

That is the method itself. The idea behind this method is that mythologies are not just stories, but a way some cultures have of thinking about their values — a way of thinking and not just a way of illustrating a thought already formed. It is not as if the Tsimshian first formulate, in abstract terms, the thought that their two cultures might be incompatible, and then transpose

this thought into story form. Rather, telling the story of Asdiwal is their way of thinking this thought, a way of thinking it that just bypasses the abstract level all together.

This is important for the next question, which is whether it is appropriate to apply this method, a method developed for mythologies, to Westerns and to science fiction. This is a question that we want to answer with a tentative "yes." For we think that Westerns and science fiction both function as mythologies for us today. They have, first of all, created a series of mythological characters: Captain Kirk, Mister Spock, Darth Vader, Billy the Kid, and, of course, John Wayne in all his many avatars. Both science fiction and Westerns, moreover, are set in mythological landscapes: an outer space peopled with aliens to rival cyclops and hydra, and an Old West peopled with gun fighter heroes to rival Ajax and Hector. Finally, and most importantly, both science fiction and Westerns are not just stories but also ways we use to reflect on our values. *Star Trek*, for example, was (among other things) an extended meditation on the confrontation with otherness. Westerns are (among other things) a way of reflecting on what true manhood means. And it is not as if we first think about these things abstractly and then tell a Western or a science fiction story to illustrate what we have thought. Rather, it is the stories themselves which, in good mythological fashion, are our thoughts. Instead of thinking abstractly about real otherness, we tell a story about what Captain Kirk does when confronted with the Gorn. Instead of philosophizing about true manhood, we tell a story about what John Wayne does when he discovers that his niece has been kidnapped. See Levi-Strauss, pp. 146-197.

[46] We noted in an earlier endnote that the Mexican man sometimes also appears as a peasant or a soldier, and that in both of these guises he will be characterized by an almost sheep-like simplicity. This strikes us as also fitting into the state of nature theme since, once again, a lack of any sort of sophistication seems to be the *leitmotif*.

[47] Of course, the Indian is also pictured as savage. But we do not think this invalidates the point in the text, for the culturally other is often pictured as savage pictured as savage despite the fact that everyone knows full well that this culturally other comes from a social system of their own rather than from a state of nature. This is especially true when the cultures are in conflict, as has generally been the case in the Americas for the past 500 years.

[48] To put it in terms of *Firefly*, Jayne represents the state of nature because there is a continuum between his state and ours: it would not be too difficult to imagine ourselves sliding gradually back into the physical desire and self-interested motivation that are his salient characteristics. There is no such continuum, however, when it comes to the Reavers: no one becomes a Reaver

by sliding into it, but only by a forced transition from outside: forced by the drug G-23 Paxilon Hydrochlorate (known as Pax) or by the trauma of watching a Reaver attack. The Reavers, in other words, represent not a natural human state but a state that is separated from the human one. (We are here assuming that the Reavers are the *Firefly* equivalent of the Indians.)

[49] In mentioning this story, we do not assume that popular depiction of Thérèse (1873-1897) does justice to her life or the difficult questions it raises. In brief outline, she was born a sickly child into a super-pious and insular petit bourgeois family in Normandy, France, secured special permission to enter the convent at 15 and followed two of her older sisters into a Carmelite cloister. In 1895, one of her sisters, who was by then her superior in the convent, asked Thérèse to write down her childhood memories for them. Later on when she was ill with consumption, she was asked to write more about her more recent years because her life was so outwardly uneventful that there was little information with which to compose an obituary. Thérèse's writings in response detail both mystical joys and an unrelenting spiritual darkness toward the end of her life. They also describe her choice to respond to all these events with an unfailing love. But her writings are also rife with the formulations and imagery we would expect of a young woman of her milieu and she is often called "The Little Flower." Shortly after her death, a highly edited version of her writings (a version that emphasized the sugary aspects even more) went into circulation and sparked her immense popularity and rapid canonization as a saint. For a translation of her unaltered manuscripts see *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux,* translated by John Clarke.

[50] If we might be allowed to quote a mystical writer: "The false God changes suffering into violence. The true God changes violence into suffering" (Weil 122).

[51] For a clip, see "*My Darling Clementine* (1946) (Movie Clip) You're Gonna Operate."

[52] Carlos Cortés explains the various cinematic depictions of the Mexican woman in a historical way so that her sexuality in the period we are talking about, for example, is a holdover from the sexualized portrayals of the previous period. The fact that her romance with the Anglo hero does not last is a result of Hollywood's unwillingness to countenance a long term liaison across racial lines. In our discussion we do not want to downplay or argue against any of this. We are happy to accept all the historical explanations Cortés puts forward. But we also want to suggest that, in addition to explanations by historical causation, explanations in terms of what we might call semiotic coherence are also important.

[53] Our description of the crew as a diverse little community is not meant to be logically rigorous, and we certainly are not saying that the crew's diversity exhausts possible group configurations. We suspect that, historically, many utopian communities were in fact more homogenous than this. But we nonetheless think that, in theory at least, a more heterogeneous group would better represent the idea of a little world.
As Jameson (*Archaeologies*) notes regarding Robert Nozick's attempt to logically specify the sort of diversity a utopian community would need (*Anarchy, State, and Utopia,* 297-312), what becomes apparent is that the Utopian gesture is not a commitment to a specific model but rather "the commitment to imagining possible Utopias as such, in their greatest variety of forms" (217). When it comes to televisual science fiction, we think that, since *Star Trek* (1966-1969), the idea of a socially diverse utopia has become mainstream, reflecting a *Zeitgeist* one shared by both Nozick and Jameson in favor of pluralism (217), though, as Jameson notes (217), the notions of diversity and pluralism are also unstable and contain antinomies.
[54] To be clear, we are not saying that this extreme utopianism will be apparent on viewing the show by itself. In that case, it will probably still look utopian, but the extreme utopianism will appear only if we look at the show in terms of its relation to the traditional Western, and how it bends the symbolism of the Western into itself.
[55] This occurs in "Objects in Space" (1.14) near the start.
[56] We should qualify this, for in many early Westerns the hero does settle down with the heroine, though in these cases the heroine will usually be Anglo rather than Mexican. Later Westerns, though, roughly from the fifties forward, follow the pattern outlined in the text. We came across two movies from our period where the hero settles down with the Mexican woman: *My Outlaw Brother* (1951), a vehicle for Mickey Rooney in which it is emphasized that Mickey's character is Irish-American and thus stereotypically Catholic; *The Bravados* (1968), in which the hero, Jim Douglass (Gregory Peck) is a widower with a young daughter in obvious need of care, but who cannot start to imagine a future after his violent actions until his community intervenes to redemptive effect. Incidentally, the movie features a scene in church, replete with shots of a statue of Mary, at 1:31:57-8 and 1:32:34-7. There is also the television series *The High Chaparral*, which for all its progressiveness in giving us two Mexican leads and placing Victoria and John in a marriage that eventually grows into mutual love, nonetheless stays within racial code (and gives Victoria something to suffer about) by keeping the marriage childless.

[57] Jameson would likely object to the distinction we are attempting to draw between a non-utopian faith that rests on some recognition of dependence on the world and a Utopian impulse, particularly in the context of the Western. He notes in *Archaeologies of the Visible* that "Utopia is very much the prototype of the settler colony" (205) and colonial violence, particularly in the imagery of '"people without land' supposedly meeting the 'land without people,'" (205) is a repeated motif in North American framing. While he briefly mentions the importance of Utopias in Spanish colonial discourse, he does not interrogate whether they saw the land as empty in the same way; we suspect there are complications in making such an equivalence. While we hope that our concern, indeed ambivalence, is obvious, at the same time we are interested in a possible distinction between a grounded natural faith, Jameson's impulse to Utopia, and what we characterize as a desperate utopia. We agree overall with Jameson's characterization, in *An American Utopia,* of postmodern politics as a land grab stemming from commodification of land and forgetting our deeper relationship to it (13), but we may see more sophistication in Indigenous thinking as a response than Jameson would countenance.

[58] One of the ways River is marked out as both exceptionally gifted and not sane is that she can bear to gaze into the black with joy and fascination, as in "Bushwhacked" (1.3). See also Erickson, "Humanity in a 'Place of Nothin.'"

[59] We should note that Jameson's work focusing on science fiction is pertinent here. What we are characterizing as a sleight of hand, he might find to be its virtue. In *Archaeologies of the Future,* he claims science fiction plays an essential role in holding open the possibility of utopian imagining. While noting that idyllically optimistic scenarios are ideological, he cautions that the dystopic depictions so popular in Britain and America are no less ideological, no less an impediment to helping us grapple with our current situation (292). Interestingly, he even suggests that there can be a redeeming value in the recirculation of naïve plot structures and stereotypical characters that sometimes takes place in science fiction (300), a point relevant for considering popular television. Yet at the same time, for Jameson, the ultimate value of science fiction is its dual role, of representing to us our present reality in the form of the past histories of these imagined futures, and also, by its structural contradictions, pointing out to us our inherent incapacity to imagine Utopia (293). Science fiction thus operates at the unstable intersection of these opposed aims and needs. Our question, then, is what to make of a situation where the instability is quelled somewhat by the sort of genre-mixing we describe here.

[60] John 12:4-6 identifies Judas Iscariot as a thief.

[61] Simon the zealot.

[62] According to tradition, there was also an ex-prostitute who travelled at least part of the way with them, and a housewife, mother of the carpenter, who was present at the tragic end of that mission.
[63] As Slotkin notes, this little community, existing only in transit, has a boundary: both the Mexican host at Apache Station, and his Apache wife, are outside (310).

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