

## “Let’s See What’s in There”: Unlocking the Containers of *Firefly* and *Serenity*<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Though some science fiction aficionados might deem it futile, in the *Firefly* universe resistance is paramount. Motivated by ethics honed at the Battle of Serenity Valley—during a war he fought on the side of the rebel Independents against the government Alliance—Malcolm Reynolds “aim[s] to misbehave” as he navigates his boat, its crew, and its oft-illicit cargo through his “crowded [...] sky” (*Serenity* 1:21:52-53; “Serenity” I.I, 0:56:43-45). Given its spaceship-centric plotline, *Buffy+* scholars have emphasized the significance of movement in *Firefly* and *Serenity*. Matthew Hill, for example, highlights “resistance through mobility,” exploring Mal’s penchant for “travel and motion as a means toward both physical and psychological freedom” (491). “[W]ithout maintaining constant motion,” contends Hill, “one becomes subject to the powers in the Verse and the traumas that they perpetrate” (501). *Firefly*, agrees Jes Battis, “is very much a show about perpetual motion”

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(par. 5). We must remember, however, that this perpetual motion relies on one primary vessel: “a transport ship, *Firefly* class” (“*Serenity*” 0:08:58-0:09:00). Yes, *Serenity* is a spaceship continually on the move, but at its most basic and most pertinent here *Serenity* is a container.

In their introduction to “On Containers: A Forum,” Andrew Shryock and Daniel Lord Smail define *container* as “any object that can hold something else inside itself for an indefinite period of time, isolating the contents from the give and take of the world outside” (1). As a cargo ship, *Serenity* contains (and thereby indefinitely isolates) myriad containers from various worlds. Granted, Mal and crew are smugglers, so containers may simply be deemed a practical necessity for the job or even mere prop decor. Consider, however, where the *Firefly* creative team could have had *Serenity*’s crew regularly trading in goods far too large for the average container, such as cows or “black market beagles” (“*Safe*” 1.5, 0:05:47-48). Instead, they regularly engage with containers of varying shapes, sizes, and functions, the contents of which range from the seemingly innocuous to the ethically complex. Consider, too, that *container* includes “things that are not quite containers, and, in some cases, not even tangible”; for example, “[m]ental constructs [...] readily function as intangible containers” with “tremendous holding power” (Shryock and Smail, “Introduction” 2). “My sister’s a ship,” says Simon of River Tam (“*Objects in Space*” 1.14, 0:33:21-22). Thus, when considering *Serenity* as a transport vessel, we must also consider its human cargo—River in particular—who, physically and mentally, both acts as and associates with containers.

From *Firefly*’s premiere episode onward—from the crate containing the Alliance-marked foodstuffs to the cryogenic chamber containing River who, in turn, contains Alliance

secrets *Serenity*'s crew engages not only with the containers but with the contained. If one chooses, as Mal repeatedly does, not only to transport containers but to "see what's in there," one simultaneously chooses to confront the consequences of opening the box ("The Message" 1.12, 0:22:56-57). Mal is not simply a drifter outpacing the Alliance; he is a former Sergeant of the Independent Army, one who continues to live independently thanks, in great part, to his engagement with containers. These engagements, when viewed through contemporary container theory, arguably reflect what *Buffy+* scholar Joseph Foy posits as Whedon's primary "philosophical message" in *Firefly* (40): that is, "individual freedom from external control" (39). If, as container theorist Sarah Hirsch posits, the container is "a place of transgression" that "unsettle[s] notions of borders" (18), then Mal perpetually transgresses. He does so not only because of his ship *Serenity*'s ability to traverse interplanetary borders but also because *Serenity* is a moving container transporting other containers. "Though the container functions as a form of storage," explains Hirsch, "it is not rooted but rather routed" (18). By exploring multiple episodes of *Firefly* and the film *Serenity*, I posit that for Mal and crew, the act of continually routing containers (that contain illegal or otherwise transgressive goods) functions as a means of resistance to and independence from "external control," particularly by the Alliance.

### **Part One: *Firefly***

Containers, declares Hirsch in an article on "the container phenomenon": "Just the visual of them alone is enough to be tantalizing to audiences" (19, 26). Certainly, *Firefly*'s premiere episode engages its audience with a few such tantalizing visuals—containers that (like the wooden box Shepherd Book

gives to Kaylee) initially leave the audience to guess what is inside (“Serenity” 1.1). But let us first consider the container to which the series offers pride of place: *Serenity* itself. The role of *Serenity* as a shipping container is made explicit through exterior shots on Persephone—the planet on which Mal and crew dock in the episode “Serenity” (1.1). Initial shots of Persephone feature traditional shipping containers forming a virtual border to the marketplace. Fiona Greenland argues that ports (such as, I would add, the Eavesdown Docks on Persephone) provide, “a legitimated space of illegitimate concealment” via “the standard shipping box or ISO,” whose sheer numbers secure “the improbability of detection” (19, 15, 18). To conduct their illegitimate business, Mal and others navigate a maze of shipping containers until they arrive at Badger’s headquarters, itself apparently housed within one of the myriad standard shipping containers. Notably, several of these containers visible as the crew walks through the marketplace port feature the “Blue Sun” logo. Michael Marek posits, “The Blue Sun Corporation, referred to only in the background visual elements not central to the story, is an undeveloped element of the conspiracy in *Firefly*. It is apparently intended to be an interplanetary mega-corporation with its fingers in every element of daily life” (110). “The implication,” asserts Marek, “is that the Blue Sun has ties to the Alliance” (110). One shot of *Serenity* features her docked directly amidst the other shipping containers of Persephone—a symbolic gesture to Mal and crew’s overt transgression of established corporate borders. Alliance borders are likewise transgressed whenever *Serenity* transports containers holding both legitimate Blue Sun products (such as the food cans visible in “Shindig” [1.4]) and illegitimate goods (such the food supplements in “Serenity” [1.1]).

These transgressions against the Alliance are emphasized throughout “Serenity” (1.1) via containers, their movement, and their contents. Immediately after the flashbacks to the Battle of Serenity Valley, the opening (current day) scene features Mal upside down in a spacesuit. He is thus *contained* yet floating in space—simultaneously restricted and free. He is attempting to open another container, an abandoned ship: “The vault’s sealed,” he announces (0:05:12-13). The focus shifts to the locked hatch, and we witness its breach. Inside the abandoned ship are cargo boxes, which we then watch being routed back to *Serenity*. On the one hand, through purposeful breach and transport of the containers, Mal and crew successfully transgress Alliance regulations against “illegal salvage” (0:09:02-03). On the other hand, the Alliance is visually present during the operation—not only via shots of an Alliance ship in space but also via the ship’s reflection in the glass of Mal’s pressure helmet. Metonymically, through his container (the spacesuit), Mal is marked by the Alliance—a branding comparable to that on the stolen goods (within the cargo boxes) which, as Badger explains on Persephone, are marked by a “government stamp on every molecule” (0:19:58-59). Thus, the opening (current day) scene, focuses on and thereby establishes Mal’s relationship with the Alliance through images of containment—he is free, as Foy explains, to commit “defiant acts of rebellion in the form of illegal transport of goods” (goods routed *in containers*), yet he is in perpetual danger of *being contained* himself since his actions are, as Foy notes, “violations of the sovereign authority of the state” (43). This illegitimate cargo also works to establish Mal’s ethics in relation to what is inside the box. Though Zoe suggests dumping the cargo since they could “lose the ship” if “the Alliance catches [them] with government goods,” Mal refuses (0:24:07-09); he is willing to

take the risk of routing the illegal cargo to Patience in Whitefall. After all, the Alliance-marked food supplements symbolize the Alliance itself, the organization responsible for hindering Mal's freedom and necessitating his perpetual motion.

The effects of the Alliance's primary conviction – which is, as Foy states, “Individuals are to be contained and controlled” (43-44) – is emphasized explicitly in “Serenity” (1.1) through another prominent container and its contents: the cargo box brought aboard by Simon Tam. Initially, Mal does not know (or appear to care) what's inside this prominent box; that's the point. Later, suspecting duplicity by an Alliance spy, Mal *chooses* to open the box, deciding that *not knowing* its contents is a greater threat than the risk of dealing with the consequences of those contents. Opening the box involves various physical manoeuvres on Mal's part, which emphasize his determination to oppose Alliance interference. Moreover, as with Kaylee and the small wooden box containing the strawberry,<sup>2</sup> Mal learns what's inside before the audience does, thus amplifying our anticipation for the importance of the contents. As it turns out, this box is a cryogenic chamber containing Simon's sister, River – certainly more of an ethical dilemma for Mal than the food supplements. What is Mal's ethical responsibility regarding the contents of the container he has opened? River is, as Michael Marano calls her, “[s]tolen goods walking on two feet” – goods once contained and now coveted by the Alliance. Though initially ambivalent, Mal eventually opts to help the Tams (43). Like other goods routed by Mal on *Serenity*, River represents a means to resist and transgress Alliance authority and control. As the series progresses, Mal offers her refuge on *Serenity*, transporting the Tams from world to world as he himself strives to maintain distance and freedom from Alliance control.

As with the chamber containing River, the cargo boxes in “The Train Job” (1.2) and “Bushwhacked” (1.3) work to establish Mal’s ethics. In “The Train Job,” the ship *Serenity* (one container) hovers over and moves in tandem with the train (another container) for cargo boxes to be illegally routed between the vessels using death-defying rope tricks. Despite the elaborate manoeuvres perpetrated to attain this illicit cargo, Mal later chooses to transport it to its rightful owners once he learns what’s inside the box: medical supplies required on a border planet. “Bushwhacked” likewise features illegally transported cargo boxes (in this case from an abandoned ship). Notably, both episodes include a shot of Mal and the crew standing with the cargo boxes, about to defend their possession thereof. In the “The Train Job,” they face Niska’s men and accusations of renegeing on a deal; in “Bushwhacked,” they face Alliance officers and accusations of “an illegal salvage operation” (0:29:32-33). Each scene also features a brief close-up specifically of the cargo boxes. In both cases, the boxes function as a physical reminder of the ethical stance taken by Mal and crew in their continual efforts to resist external control—whether from Niska or from the Alliance.

“Bushwhacked” (1.3) also features a notable image of River that expresses a paradox of containerization. She appears in a spacesuit outside but clinging to *Serenity*; she has been thus twice removed from a container, first from her cryogenic chamber and second from *Serenity* itself.<sup>3</sup> In her spacesuit, she gazes in wonderment at the vastness of space; like Mal, in the (current day) opening scene of “Serenity” (1.1), in “Bushwhacked” River is simultaneously contained and free—a nod, perhaps, to the bond between Mal and River cemented in both “Objects in Space” (1.14) and the film *Serenity*. Yet, in addition to being contained, River is also a container, one now

being routed by Mal. Of course, the body or “self-as-container metaphor” could apply to any one of the characters (Robinson et al. 148); however, implied throughout *Firefly* and as confirmed by *Serenity*, River contains Alliance secrets. As I will explore in the dedicated section on *Serenity*, Mal facilitates opening and, by ethical choice, revealing the Alliance secret(s) that River currently contains.

Perhaps in *Firefly* we are meant to ask of River, as she does of Petaline in the “Heart of Gold” (1.13) birthing scene, “Who do you think is in there?” the very question that the film *Serenity* will answer about River (0:20:26-27). In “Shindig” (1.4), when River tears the Blue Sun labels from the cans, she symbolically discards the corporate branding the Alliance has applied to her. Similarly, in the opening scene of “Ariel” (1.9), when River slashes the Blue Sun t-shirt (along with Jayne), the moment can be read as another attempt by River to disassociate from the Alliance-associated brand. “Not knowing what is inside the containers is intriguing,” posits Hirsch, “but also potentially alarming precisely because what awaits you is unknown” (20). Both intriguing and potentially alarming as a Blue Sun-adjacent container whose contents (like those of the “Shindig” cans) are currently unknown, River must eventually be opened, her contents disclosed.

Mal first condones figuratively opening River-as-container in “Ariel” (1.9) an episode replete with various containers, including the caskets (of a sort) that function both to transport River and Simon into the hospital and to smuggle medical supplies out. When Simon explains the hospital plan to River, he says, “Once we’re inside, we’ll wake up” (0:12:18-20). By “inside,” he literally refers to the hospital, but of course they must first be put inside the caskets, which in turn are put inside the crew-constructed ambulance, which in turn temporarily

resides within *Serenity*. “Like Russian dolls,” says Sasha Newell, “storage spaces are filled with containers of more containers” (40); this container-within-container effect has been dubbed a “Matryoshka chain” by Lokke Heiss. Taking this chain of containment one link further, the phrase “[o]nce we’re inside” could also refer to River’s brain, the exploration of which is Simon’s goal in this episode. Once he has seen inside her brain has figuratively opened it with the neuroimager Simon realizes that the Alliance had previously and literally “opened up her skull” (0:23:30-31). Only then does Simon (and by extension, Mal) have sufficient information to understand the extent of River’s containment and act accordingly to help her “wake up.” Symbolically significant, at the end of this episode, River draws Matryoshka dolls. They are pictured beside one another, no longer contained. Like the cows of “Safe” (1.5) who “weren’t cows inside” (0:06:13-14), River can now begin her journey out of containment a journey that reaches its destination in *Serenity*.

Recalling Hirsch’s concept of the container as “a place of transgression in the sense of national borders as well as in terms of what is legally permitted to go inside the box” (18), we could consider the primary container of “The Message” (1.12) as one of the most transgressive of the series. After all, it is routed through the Alliance postal service, presumably crossing various planetary borders during transit; most significantly, it contains what appear to be human remains. As Amnon (the postal worker) confirms, “Human transport on a postal route is very, very illegal” (0:11:32-35). This warning does not stop Mal from claiming the crate and transporting it first *onto* and then *via Serenity*. Elizabeth Rambo notes a parallel between Mal’s opening the “box containing [...] River” in “Serenity” (1.1), and Mal and Zoe’s “open[ing] the crate” containing Tracey in “The

Message” (192). Rambo observes various parallels between these two episodes, including that “each sleeper awakes screaming and struggling” (192). I would add a few additional parallels here. First, both River and Tracey can be associated with the Matryoshka chain—River as previously discussed, and Tracey through his multiple layers of containment. That is, Tracey arrives inside a postal station within a wooden crate, which in turn contains a metallic casket, which in turn contains Tracey who, as we gradually learn, contains manufactured human organs being routed within his body.

Second, River and Tracey are themselves containers which have been opened before and which must be opened again before they can move forward. In other words, both characters comprise layers of containment that require unpacking. In “The Message” (1.12), after Alliance officers demand Mal surrender the crate, he concludes there must be “something else in that box” (0:21:59-22:00). He and the crew tear the box and casket apart in a futile attempt to find what the Alliance is seeking. Finding nothing in the two boxes, Mal suggests an autopsy, noting, “Using corpses for smuggling is a time-honoured repulsive custom” (0:22:32-35). Mal’s decision to open this unconventional container once again involves an ethical stance: Tracey, after all, is a former comrade of Mal and Zoe. Mal is not prepared, even when he believes Tracey to be dead, to surrender Tracey’s containers (crate, casket, or body) to the Alliance. After Simon realizes and announces that Tracey’s body has “been opened before,” Mal insists, “Let’s see what’s in there” (0:22:47-48, 0:22:56-57). Once again Mal purposely chooses to open the container and consequently to contend with its unknown contents. Alarming, Tracey is very much alive; as with River, he wakes up once his body-as-container has been reopened, its contents thus revealed and examined.

Despite various complications that arise throughout the episode, Mal once again acts in good faith. That is, even after Tracey dies during the course of events, Mal takes responsibility for the contents within the container he chose to open: transporting Tracey (in open casket) to his family on St. Albans.

In addition to the parallels between the box-opening scenes in “Serenity” (1.1) and “The Message” (1.12), differences are notable. Rambo highlights a primary difference, associating River’s box-opening with “birth” and Tracey’s with “death” (192). Another significant difference involves the camera angles relative to the container. When the box containing River is opened, Mal sees its contents before we do. When the contents are finally revealed to the audience, we look down on the container from above, as if we are floating in space, temporarily free from containment. But when the box containing Tracey is originally opened at the postal station, the initial camera angle occurs from below; we look up at Mal and the others as if we reside inside the box. The same angle is used shortly thereafter when we watch Mal closing the box’s lid—a visual reminder of our containment. Along with Tracey, we too are enclosed in a figurative box by this point in the series; as viewers, fans, and scholars, we are invited by *Firefly*’s creative team to open the box and unpack the layers within the ultimate container here: the series itself.

### **Part Two: *Serenity***

“Is the Earth a container?” ask Shryock and Smail (“Introduction” 2). *Serenity* opens with an image of “earth that was,” which, we learn via voiceover, “could no longer sustain our numbers” (0:00:32-34). In other words, earth as container had exceeded its storage capacity; consequently, populations were transported—contained in ships—to other planets; these

terraformed containers are themselves contained within “a new solar system” (0:00:40-41). As the film’s cold open continues, we watch and listen to young River provide her teacher with rationale for the Independents’ opposition to the Alliance: “We meddle. [...] We’re in their homes and *in their heads*, and we haven’t the right” (0:01:48-0:02:01; emphasis added). With a flash cut to the now-older River, we watch her own head (yes, a container) being forcefully breached by Alliance scientists who, as Simon learns, “implant suggestions” (0:02:26-27). We watch Simon and River, an open wound on her forehead, escape containment by literally breaking out of the Alliance complex. With the Operative’s sudden appearance through River’s image, we realize we were watching a film contained within a film. We then hear the Operative rebuke the Alliance scientist (Dr. Mathias) for leaving “[t]he minds behind every military, diplomatic, and covert operation in the galaxy [...] *in a room* with a psychic” (0:07:13-23; emphasis added). “Where are you hiding, little girl?” asks the Operative (0:09:25-30), and the cold open ends with a cut to the name of the film—the emblem on the ship *Serenity* that now contains, and thereby hides, both Simon and River. In other words, with its focus on galaxies, solar systems, planets, ships, buildings, rooms, bodies, and heads, the first ten minutes of *Serenity* highlight, as did *Firefly*, a virtual Matryoshka chain of containers. Moreover, as a group, these containers illustrate not only layers of containment but the possibility of breaching, breaking, or escaping. “The desire to contain,” write Shryock and Smail, “exists in an uneasy relationship with the inevitable failure of the container”; containers, moreover, are “vulnerable to breach” (“Concluding Remarks” 49). Only by exploiting both the security and vulnerability of containers do Mal and River finally outmanoeuvre the Alliance.

Who, according to *Serenity*, is River Tam? Literally, as Simon says, “She’s a 17-year-old girl” (0:13:08-10). But to Mal, River is much more than a girl: “She’s a reader. Sees into the truth of things” (0:13:13-15). Later, Mal refers to her as “a gorramn timebomb” (0:38:12-13) and subsequently asks, “Who we gonna find in there when she wakes up the girl or the weapon?” (0:38:16-22). In reference to River, Mr. Universe asks Mal, “Do you know what it is you’re carrying?” (0:41:53-55). In that instance, as initially in “Serenity” (1.1), River is cargo. The Operative calls River “an albatross,” a term that, based on his tone, alludes to a burden (0:51:57). Yet, at the end of the film, Mal turns the Operative’s poetic allusion into a term of endearment, calling River his “little albatross” (1:52:09) a burden Mal once carried that now helps him to fly free.<sup>4</sup> River, *Serenity* suggests, has varied and complex identities. However, though never directly named as such, River’s most significant identity in *Serenity* is as a container.

As in *Firefly*, the literal containers of *Serenity* are various and plentiful, ranging from the seemingly innocuous — such as the cargo bay’s omnipresent storage containers — to the highly symbolic — such as the safe and vault featured in the crew’s first job. When Mal and Zoe open the small safe, the camera angle momentarily allows us to view them over a pittance of pecuniary reward from the back of the safe, as if we are looking through the container. Unwilling to accept such meagre compensation, Mal reaches in, releases a hidden latch, thereby opening a room-sized vault from which he and the gang pilfer a virtual fortune. Arguably, the breach of containment in this scene can be read as a precursor to the plot’s primary breach and priceless treasure: the secrets contained within River that, once freed, Mal exposes to the world as revelatory truth. In relative terms, if the events of “Ariel” (1.9) signal the figurative

opening of River as safe, then the events of *Serenity* signify the figurative opening of River as vault.

Moreover, the vault in the robbery scene, though first established as a vulnerable-to-breach container, subsequently offers protection. “Get them inside the vault!” Mal orders one of its guards before escaping to save himself and his crew from a Reaver attack (0:20:25-27). We later learn, via the Maidenhead newsfeed on Beaumonde, that the “only survivors of the massacre [...] locked themselves in the train station vault” (0:30:59-31:02). River, another breached container, likewise saves people from Reavers near the film’s end. During the final battle scenes, Jayne’s suggestion to use “crates” as “cover” (1:31:22-24) provides little more than a brief reprieve from impending doom. But River, prompted by Simon’s near-fatal injury (a breach to his body-as-container), runs past Kaylee (also wounded and lying atop a storage container), enters a room replete with Reavers, tosses Simon his medical bag containing life-saving supplies, and triggers a door mechanism, thereby locking herself into the Reaver-laden chamber. During the earlier Reaver-attack scene, people locked themselves into a vault to keep Reavers out; by the end of the film, River purposely seals herself into a room with the Reavers, thereby confronting the enemy both *as* and *within* a container over which she now has control. After several crosscut shots of battle scenes – River with the Reavers and Mal with the Operative – a door opens through which Mal, successful in his mission to broadcast the previously contained Alliance secret, rejoins the crew, who lie strewn amidst the crates. Shortly thereafter, another door opens to reveal the (now iconic) shot of River standing triumphant, axes dripping in blood, backlit and centred in the room amidst dead Reavers. Moments later, *that* room is breached from behind River by Alliance soldiers who,

a few fraught moments later, are ordered by the Operative to stand down. These room-as-container scenes provide filmic bookends to a storyline that illustrates the journey taken by River (and, thanks to River, by Mal) from being contained to securing control of the container.

As discussed earlier regarding *Serenity* amidst Persephone's shipping containers, a key scene within *Serenity/Serenity* links River inextricably to containers. This scene occurs immediately after the nearly botched robbery and all-too-close first encounter with Reavers. River enters the scene as she steps over crates in the cargo bay. Sitting on one and appearing contemplative, she says, "He didn't lie down. They never lie down" (0:25:43-48). Given that she utters these words while looking at a dead Reaver, a first-time *Serenity* viewer might hear them as mere filler or nonsensical remarks uttered by a brain-damaged character regarding the attack. However, these lines offer us a truth about the Reavers when taken in conjunction with words spoken much later in the film. That is, on Miranda, in relation to the corpses of (what appear to have been) office workers, Inara says, "They didn't fall.... They just lay down" (1:16:28-32). As the crew discovers on Miranda, the people who "just lay down" are among the 30 million who were rendered immobile by the Pax. The remaining "tenth of a percent of the population had the opposite reaction" (1:19:15-18); they became the Reavers, those who (in River's words) "never lie down." Thus, River's cargo-bay utterance is a critical clue to the "secrets she might have accidentally gleaned" (as Dr. Mathias told the Operative in the cold open), secrets "buried beneath layers of psychosis" (0:07:42-50). Using, once again, the terminology of Shryock and Smail, these secrets represent what the Alliance "desire[s] to contain"; their release from River illustrates "the inevitable

failure of the container” (“Concluding Remarks” 49). “[L]ike a Facebook page whose privacy settings have gone awry,” quips Newell regarding storage containers, “accumulations spill out of the closet and make uninvited public appearances. They resist containment” (38). Such is the case with the contents of River-as-container in this scene.

As a container, River is both vulnerable and valuable; she has been used and abused by the Alliance, but she now holds information that potentially renders the Alliance itself vulnerable. Thanks to Simon’s freeing his sister from containment in the Alliance complex in *Serenity*, bringing her aboard the ship in a cryogenic container in “Serenity” (1.1), and helping to unlock the mysteries contained in her brain in “Ariel” (1.9), River now sits among containers in *Serenity*’s cargo bay speaking bits of accumulated secrets that she, as a container, can no longer contain. Printed on the container directly behind River when she offers up her fragmented secret are words in white block caps and visible in triplicate: “REUSABLE CONTAINER: DO NOT DESTROY” (0:25:40-48). Conceivably, this warning refers not only to the metal vessel on which the words appear but to River herself, whose body is visually framed in the shot by the words. Like the cargo container, River is vulnerable to destruction. After all, as Inara says to the crew, the Operative is “devout in his belief that killing River is the right thing to do” (0:56:46-49). His goal is to destroy her, rendering the container of Alliance secrets unusable. After the incident in the Maidenhead, Jayne too suggests “put[ting] a bullet to her” (0:39:02-03) a comment to which Mal replies, “It’s crossed my mind” (0:39:05-06). But if Mal heeds the symbolic warning not to destroy the container, River will eventually repurpose herself, using her contents to expose the truth about Miranda and the Alliance.

River represents a paradox: she is not only the one contained (in the Alliance complex, in the cryogenic chamber) but also the container (holding Alliance secrets); moreover, she is not only released from containment (from the Alliance complex, from the cryogenic chamber) but also the one who opens the container (releasing Alliance secrets). In this complex role, particularly as both contained and container, River exemplifies additional aspects of contemporary container theory. As John Robb argues, “The container and the thing contained? They relate as intimately and problematically as body and soul” (32).<sup>5</sup> “As material culture,” imparts Robb, “[containers] cannot be understood on their own, apart from their contents” (32). As a container, River’s brain not only holds the Alliance’s intentionally “implant[ed] suggestions” but also the inadvertently garnered secrets (0:02:26-27). Until she releases the Alliance secrets, she remains both the container of and contained by the Alliance.

The Operative hunts River not for *herself* (to be used, as intended, as an Alliance weapon) but as a container whose contents comprise classified information. A secret, explain Shryock and Smail in their discussion of containers, is “a technology for hiding, or obscuring, aspects of reality,” one that “can be found out and stolen” (“Concluding Remarks” 50). In that sense, the secret itself is a figurative container, which adds another link to *Serenity*’s Matryoshka chain. For as long as she contains the Alliance secret—one vulnerable to release from or breach of its container and its self-containment—River will remain bounty to be found and destroyed by the Alliance whose Operative aims figuratively to contain (and literally to destroy) the container(s) and secret(s) permanently. Hence, as Shepherd Book says to Mal regarding the Alliance, “Much as they want her, they want her hid” (0:45:21-23). In other words, River,

hidden within (contained by) *Serenity*, simultaneously, as a container herself, contains the very thing (Alliance secret) that restrains (contains) her freedom. In this sense, River exemplifies a figurative Klein bottle, described by Hunter Dukes in relation to containers throughout the works of Samuel Beckett: “the Klein bottle is a cousin of the Möbius strip [...]. Because the bottle dissolves the distinction between inside and outside, everything that contains the Klein bottle is also contained by it” (83). The Alliance contains River, but River also contains the Alliance.

To free herself from this paradoxical containment, River must release what she contains. Or, to put it another way, the secret itself *as a container* must be opened. During their initial conversation about Miranda, River tells Simon, “The memory. It isn’t mine. And I shouldn’t have to carry it” (0:43:24-27). These memories-not-her-own are figurative baggage; picture a suitcase that is a burden until opened; its contents once unpacked become useful. “Make them stop,” pleads River on Miranda (1:16:36-37). “They’re everywhere. Every city, [...] every house, every room, they’re all inside me” (1:16:38-45). After Mal and crew watch the video found at the beacon within the crashed Research & Rescue ship, River vomits; symbolically, with the release of the secret, she expels what she formally held inside. Only then can she finally say to Simon, “I’m alright” (1:20:36-38). Regarding the video report, hidden for over a decade, Mal tells the crew, “Parliament buried it, and it stayed buried till River dug it up” (1:20:50-53). Thereafter, he tells the Operative, “I know the secret – the truth that burned up River Tam’s brain” (1:37:25-30). Once her brain has been emptied of the Alliance secrets, River is free from Alliance containment free from being a container that contained the always-already-contained secret. Just as a secret told is no longer a secret, “a

container that cannot be opened or emptied ceases to be a container” (Shryock and Smail, “Introduction” 2).

“What comes out of the box is a different sort of thing than what entered the box,” declares Greenland (19). The River we see by the end of the film *Serenity* is certainly different than the one we first saw in the cryogenic chamber in the episode “Serenity” (1.1). “Let us not reify containers,” Robb reminds us; “containers change with their contents” (32). Or as Shryock and Smail phrase this concept, “the box itself is changed by its own experience of containing” (“Concluding Remarks” 49). Our final view of Mal and Zoe together is amidst the cargo bay containers now, perhaps, merely representing their livelihood; however, our final view of Mal and River is on the bridge. Yes, River is still within *Serenity*, but as a co-pilot she now controls that which contains her. She mentions that a storm approaches. “We’ll pass through it soon enough” says Mal (1:52:58-59). Though literally inside the ship, they are figuratively clear of containment. Ben Jervis, in a discussion of vessels used at a medieval trading port, argues that “social assemblage [...is] formed through a range of engagements with objects” (Jervis 254). He outlines the process by which “[a] ‘sense of home’ can be seen to have flowed through engagements” (Jervis 256). *Serenity* demonstrates such an assemblage characters whose engagements on and with objects in space bring them together. “This boat is my home,” Mal says to Simon early in the film. “You all are guests on it” (0:12:44-48). But to River, in the final scene, Mal speaks of love as “the first rule of flying” (1:52:10-11) the aspect that makes his space-voyaging transport container *her* “home” (1:52:47).

### Conclusion

“In a universe in which others hold the power,” writes Matthew Hill, “keeping in constant motion is perhaps one’s only option.... [T]he crew must always remain...on the move” (492-93). The containers of *Firefly* travel with the crew in their continual movement of resistance against Alliance control. If, as Gregory Erickson notes in his work on *Firefly*, “Space suggests an empty container,” then space itself may be yet another principal container of the series: one, as Mal says in *Serenity*, with a “raggedy edge” (0:14:06-07); one traversed by *Serenity* who, in turn, transports various and sundry containers, including the crew and passengers. Containers within containers within containers: this figurative Matryoshka chain epitomizes the paradox of containment in *Firefly* that one is always already contained and that freedom from containment entails both opening containers and dealing ethically with their contents. The penultimate scene in the final episode of *Firefly* features Kaylee and River playing jacks amidst crates in the cargo bay—a visual reminder of the prominence of containers in their lives. The ball River holds resembles *Serenity*’s opening shot image of “earth that was.” As the ball bounces, the shot moves downward through the floor, past multiple layers of the container of the ship, and out into the openness of space where the representative hunter has been contained.<sup>6</sup> From birth to death, we are all containers that are, in turn, contained whether on the earth or in the sky. Perhaps like River, when she hugs the box enclosing Tracey, we can opt to embrace the containers inhabiting our space or, like Mal, we can establish principles for the containers we transport and for those we choose to open.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at *Slayage Conference on the Whedonverses 6* in Sacramento, California, in 2014.

<sup>2</sup> In “Serenity” (1.1), as partial payment for passage aboard *Serenity*, Shepherd Book presents Kaylee with a box. Peering into the box, Kaylee reacts in delight; however, the contents are hidden from the viewer. In a subsequent scene, Kaylee opens the box and removes a strawberry, which she savors.

<sup>3</sup> As I discuss later in the paper, River is removed from the Alliance complex in the film *Serenity*. Therefore, in the chronology of the story, the “Bushwhacked” (1.3) scene could be considered a third removal.

<sup>4</sup> To the Operative’s initial use of the metaphor, Mal responds, “Way I remember it, albatross was a ship’s good luck ‘til some idiot killed it” (0:51:59-0:52:03). Glancing at Inara, he adds, “Yes, I’ve read a poem” (0:52:04-06), an allusion to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”

<sup>5</sup> The “body and soul” is a pairing oft discussed by *Buffy+* scholars regarding vampires – see, for example, K. Dale Koontz. Editors’ note: Dean Kowalski has written an article that surveys scholarship on this subject.

<sup>6</sup> Having been pushed off *Serenity* by Mal, Jubal Early floats in the container of his space suit, virtually imprisoned and awaiting death.

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