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**River Tam as Schizoanalysand in Joss Whedon's
Firefly Narratives**

It isn't mine. The memory, it isn't mine, and I shouldn't have to carry it. It isn't mine. Don't make me sleep again.

–River Tam, *Serenity*



[1] In 2002, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) creator Joss Whedon unveiled his the-past-is-prologue vision of the future in the acclaimed series *Firefly* (2002). In a future five centuries hence, Humanity is forced to abandon the Earth having depleted its resources and rendered it unsustainable. Life on Earth ends, not in a nuclear holocaust, but through a catastrophe of appetite and consumption.

[2] *Firefly's* diegesis was wholly unique and distinct from *Buffy*—a tale of space navigation and freedom-fighting in far flung, wild-west interplanetary territories. *Firefly* had a brief run; only fourteen episodes were produced, of which three never made it to air. Fans demanded more. In 2005, Whedon wrote and directed the feature film *Serenity* (2005) affectionately dubbed the Big Damn Movie or BDM by cast, crew, and fandom alike. A major preoccupation, first in the series and then in the BDM, is the progressively problematic character of River Tam: a mentally unstable body of limitless potential. In anticipation of the October 2005 BDM release, Whedon produced the exclusively online *The R. Tam Sessions*, depicting archival excerpt footage of River's deteriorating mental state at the hands of the Alliance behavioral psychiatrists. Taken together, these three texts ("the *Firefly* narratives") form the substrate of a schizoanalysis of River from a Deleuzian perspective. River is a figure of perilous madness, hyper-feminine vulnerability, post-human mechanistic terror, and vulnerable little girl. She is a creature of contradictions: subtle graces and unspeakable violence; naive child and sleeper assassin; psychotic and soothsayer. (Editors' note: As Alyson R. Buckman says, River is of "complex constructions," showing the "fluidity of women's language" [41, 45]). River is the quintessential female flow, at once purifying and contaminating: a being of relentlessly expanding complexities, continually producing *assemblages* and re-*assemblages*. From the outset, she is described as a being elevated above the merely human.

SIMON: I am very smart... "Gifted" is the term. So when I tell you that my little sister makes me look like an idiot child, I want you to understand my full meaning. River was more than gifted, she was a gift. Everything she did—music, math, theoretical physics, even dance—there was nothing that didn't come to her as easily as breathing does to us ("Serenity" 1.1).

[3] In the main, what follows explores River's flows via channels of schizoanalysis: the Body Without Organs (BwO), lines of flight, and post-human becoming (Sterritt 11). This essay will consider these channels on two strata of narrative structure: popular culture and the philosophical.

[4] Before addressing River as schizoanalysand, it is necessary to gloss two notoriously difficult Deleuzian and Guattarian concepts: 1) the *Body without Organs* (BwO) (Deleuze *The Logic*); and 2) desire and difference as an intense "germinal or

germinative flow" (Deleuze and Guattari *Anti-Oedipus*). Deleuzian concepts are replete with complex neologisms, evolving definitions and concepts, and philosophical switchbacks. Prolific Deleuze scholar Claire Colebrook describes the BwO as an undifferentiated, not-yet-organized body of limitless potentiality that defies exchange, "such as mothers and sisters from one family to another" (130-131). The BwO is the locus of perpetual flow. She adds, "Deleuze and Guattari posit an intense germinal flux where bodies are not yet differentiated into coded forms—mother, father, child—but are intensely different" (130-131). A body is only differentiated when it connects to another in an affective way. Colebrook's take on these concepts is lucid and accessible:

A body is made up of powers to differ and these powers are actualized in productive encounters. A child becomes a child when its body encounters a breast that is a part-object of a 'mother' who only has *this* identity because she, in turn, is connected to a social field.³The condition for these social relations is an intensive life that *exceeds* the relations it produces. There is, in life, a potentiality for mother-child organizations, but such potentials might have been actualized with different relations . . . (131, emphasis original)

River Tam's "productive encounters" are fascinating for their potential to create "different relations" beyond the familial.

[5] Whedon scholarship takes notice of the "created family" (Koontz 65) represented in the *Firefly* narratives and powerfully circulating in the fandom (Jones; Rowley; *Done the Impossible*). Mal Reynolds's conspicuous role as *pater familias* especially encourages Freudian deconstruction and interpretation (Waggoner; Curry and Velazquez; Davidson). Working beyond and against Freud, Deleuze and Guattari mount a revolution against psychoanalysis in their *Anti-Oedipus*. They reject a psychotherapeutic approach predicated upon incestuous desire and lack. Deleuze and Guattari instead insist upon a materialist unconscious; conceived of as a mechanized collective populated with desiring-machines. Desire is not pathological but life-affirming and productive. "Desiring production," write Deleuze and Guattari, "is situated at the limits of social production; the decoded flows, at the limits of the codes and the territorialities" (*Anti-Oedipus* 192). River's unconscious *id* is schizo. Her desiring machine is over-productive. Bogue (*Deleuze & Guattari*) articulates the power of the schizophrenic *id* this way: "Deleuze and Guattari argue that all desire is social rather than familial, and that the best guide to social desire is the schizophrenic *id* rather than the neurotic *ego*. They propose to replace psychoanalysis with a 'schizo-analysis,' which focuses on subindividual body parts and their supra-individual, social interconnections..." (83). River is a nexus of Deleuzian desiring machines: a being of pure schizophrenic *id* whose *ego* has been subjected to "neural stripping" (Whedon *Serenity*). Productive desire flows over and through her, saturating and intensifying, ebbing and flooding, informing, complicating, and subverting her social matrix.

[6] There exist two internally consistent, discrete strata to the *Firefly* narratives: one readily visible, the other discovered through excavation. These are the loose granular popular culture layer and the deeper, densely compacted philosophical stratum. River flows downward through the one to the other. The popular culture layer resembles Deleuze's *actual* as described by Bogue (*Deleuze's Way*): a domain of "commonsense, spatiotemporal entities and processes" (37). It bears all the hallmarks of Whedon-smithing: manipulation of television and film conventions; exploitation of popular culture intertextuality; moral and ethical ambivalence; subverted genre and dialogue

expectations; characters played against type; clever, engaging writing: and a meta-awareness informing it all. Within this layer lies the discernible detritus of every Whedon technique to establish a confederacy with his audience and celebrate their shared mastery of the meta. Is it, for example, the Operative or Whedon himself telling us: "Nothing here is what it seems. ... He's not the plucky hero. The Alliance isn't some evil empire. This isn't the grand arena" (*Serenity*)?

[7] Whedon popular culture texts are thus replete with anti-heroes, the morals and ethics of expediency, and slippery, self-destructing semiotic systems. River's character must, therefore, fulfill the narrative imperatives of the popular culture layer. She must be a complication on the order of "Whatever shall we do with River?" She must subvert other characters' and the audience's expectations governing what a seemingly frail, mentally unhinged female body can do. She must be a mystery to herself and to others: always speaking a cryptic truth asynchronous to the main action. On this layer, the semiotics and metaphors encourage straightforward interpretations. A clergyman named "Book." A pilot who is "a leaf on the wind." A girl named River in perpetual flow. Whedon structures his narrative by establishing differentiated and oppositional binaries and then loosening their semiotic ties to let meanings slip around. Examples abound, *inter alia*: good (*Serenity's* crew) versus evil (the Alliance); freedom versus oppression; wakefulness versus oblivion; interiors (core planets, ships, mental states) versus exteriors (border planets, the vacuum of space, and overt actions); and masculinities versus femininities. (Editors' note: Cf. Sutherland and Swan, "'The Alliance Isn't Some Evil Empire.'") Whedon exploits such tensions to drive his story and character development. As a result, the *Firefly* narratives are superlative works of popular entertainment.

[8] Beneath the popular culture layer, however, lies a deeper philosophical stratum the nature of which maps onto Deleuze's concept of the virtual: "a field of vectors of potential development and metamorphosis, each vector a line of continuous variation, along which an actual process or development and metamorphosis might unfold (Bogue, *Deleuze's Way* 37). Here Whedon's oppositional binaries and their slippery conventional semiotics are overcome by their philosophical implications. Here operates a completely *undifferentiated* economy of power wielded by any and all in the same mode and for the identical reasons. This deeper, more fundamental stratum reveals the Popular Culture layer's binaries to be false and illusory. *Serenity's* crew (most notably Mal and Simon) and the Alliance wield the same executive bio-power (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 141). In subjecting River to constant surveillance and invasive, advanced interventionist clinical medicine, Simon becomes indistinguishable from Dr. Mathias. In her ferocity, her becoming-animal, and conditioning River *is* Reaver. (More below on River's intimate connection to the Reavers.) Everywhere, agents and brokers of bio-power and keepers of the Law seek first to capture and define, then to control, and finally to exploit what River's body can do. This collapse of the binaries is hastened by Whedon's deliberate and engaging subversion of conventional morality and ethics, and his invitation to the audience to identify with *Serenity's* "created family" (Koontz 65) of outlaws. (Malcolm Reynolds meets Robin Hood, The Scarlett Pimpernel, and the cast of *Ocean's Eleven*.) We are seduced by engaging writing, a talented ensemble cast, and the novelty of exploring a future that looks and feels like our frontier past. Nevertheless the diegetic conceit that drives the narrative's subversive qualities collapses under the weight of its philosophical implications.

[9] In the end, despite his overt attempt at establishing (albeit problematic) differentiated opposites, Whedon delivers a single undifferentiated system. Both social units, Serenity in the micro (and familial and Oedipal) and The Alliance in the macro, exert control through the same conduits of bio-power, discourses of loyalties, hierarchical social organization, and the concentration of economic, political, military, and ideological power in the hands of the few (the Alliance Parliament) or the one (Mal Reynolds) (Mann). In his drive to assemble his crew of rebels, he's constructed a Ship of Fools. In his need to condemn the Law, he strengthens it: an idea explored by Richardson and Rabb (139). In his desire to understand River's hyper-feminine nature, he renders conventional morality, ethics, and compassion irrelevant and supplants them with a profoundly different Deleuzianguattarian moral and ethical system in which an ethical act is one that preserves or enhances a body's potentiality.

[10] To wit, in philosophical essentials, there is nothing to choose between the Alliance (as the Law) and the Serenity crew (whose actions are entirely bound by an imperative to evade the Alliance). Both the Alliance and Serenity's crew are organisms of the same species, one that would impose "forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organizations, organized transcendences" (Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 179) upon River's BwO. Both are implacably hostile to what River represents and both are desperate to subsume her becomings, her BwO, into their respective hegemonies. This desperation is evident in their identical responses to River's madness: a rush to impose an institutional super-ego on to River's fractured psyche. Dr. Mathias, in the Alliance facility holding River prisoner, explains:

MATHIAS: See most of our best work is done while they're asleep. We can monitor and direct their subconscious, implant suggestions... . It's a little startling to see at first, but the results are spectacular, especially in this case. River Tam is our star pupil. ... She'll be ideal for defense deployment, even with the side effects. ... Well obviously, she's unstable. The neural stripping does tend to fragment their own reality matrix ... manifests as borderline schizophrenia She's not just a psychic; given the right trigger, this girl is a living weapon. (*Serenity*).

In due course, Simon will subject River to the same system of psycho-pharmaceutical interventionist medicine. By way of example, consider Simon as physician/brother. In "Serenity" (1.1) River endures a premature, traumatic "birth" and emerges from physical stasis and psychological oblivion naked, screaming, and helpless. Simon immediately checks her vital signs, leads her to the infirmary, and sedates her. Simon's aims are therapeutic but his methods and his executive power are little different from that of Dr. Matthias and the Alliance.

[11] Simon immediately acts according to his limited understanding of what River's body can and should do. He continually attempts to restore and rehabilitate her brain and body into his conceptions of girlhood and innocence determined by the social relations of brother and doctor. Simon's attempts are unsuccessful. He fails to contain River's becoming a healthy BwO. In other words, River is flowing towards becoming what Deleuze and Guattari term the healthy BwO (*A Thousand Plateaus*). She produces altered states of humanity and explodes semiotics. By contrast, *both* the crew of Serenity and the Alliance are cancerous BwOs in that they are adhered to the symbolic order. They are not productive but instead bound to continue the futility of hunt and evade in a deluded belief that freedom is found in enduring relentless pursuit of or from

one's enemies. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari describe how a healthy BwO is achieved:

This is how it should be done. Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continua of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times. It is through a meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight, causing conjugated flows to pass and escape and bringing forth continuous intensities for a BwO. (178)

[12] A further example centers on River's extra-sensory perception. River's psychic ability is exploited by the super-ego of the military complex. River's psychic abilities are also exploited by Mal through the super-ego of the *pater familias*.

MALCOLM: She's a reader. Sees into the truth of things; might see trouble before it's coming. Which is of use to me. ... I got one purpose here: keep this boat in the air. I take the jobs I get ...which is less and less, case you ain't been keeping track.... So here's us, on the raggedy edge. Don't push me and I won't push you. Things get gritty, I will keep her from the fray, but she's coming. Best you get her ready. (*Serenity*)

[13] River is a signifier sweeping madly past multitudes of signifieds like a compass needle resting on strong magnets. Those sweeps reveal the problematic nature of River's character—she is a one-to-many signifier. All her signifieds, howsoever contradictory, are simultaneously valid. The fluidity of River's semiotic status and identity is reflected in the descriptors assigned to her throughout *Firefly* and *Serenity*. River is, by turns: psychic, witch, albatross, precious commodity, prodigy, crazy, little one, killer woman, a creature of extraordinary grace, and a time-bomb. (Cf. Buckman 41.) For all that, River's psychosis is juxtaposed against the crew's relative sanity: "relative" since in the eyes of the Law, and according to the prevailing symbolic order, *Serenity's* inmates are a collective of the mad, the misanthropic, the naïve, and the foolhardy; denizens of Foucault's *stultifera navis* or *narrenschiff* (the aforementioned Ship of Fools) (*Madness and Civilization* 17). Who but fools would reject Alliance civilization, peace, prosperity, and hygiene and run towards the Frontier's dangers beyond imagining? Who but the insane would choose to move beyond the safety of the collective, to forge into the monstrous savagery of Reaver space? As Foucault says:

Navigation delivers a man to the uncertainty of his fate; on water, each of us is in the hands of his own destiny; every embarkation is, potentially, the last. It is for the other world that the madman sets sail in his fool's boat; it is from the other world that he comes when he disembarks. The madman's voyage is at once a rigorous division and an absolute passage ...He is put in the interior of the exterior, and inversely. (*Madness & Civilization* 11)

Is it a drive of the unconscious? Deleuze and Guattari frame the unconscious as "material rather than ideological; schizophrenic rather than Oedipal; nonfigurative rather than imaginary; real rather than symbolic; machinic rather than structural—an unconscious, finally, that is molecular, microphysical, and micrological rather than molar or gregarious; productive rather than expressive" (*Anti-Oedipus* 120).

[14] The machinic unconscious becomes a ceaselessly productive engine of desire that negates a single identity and instead imposes a schizophrenic state of being where

“machinic” is defined as “any point at which a flow of some sort (physical, intellectual, emotional, etc.) either leaves or enters a structure...” or another machine and “there is flow between these two machines” (Sjunnesson 10). River’s flow presents as clinical schizophrenia vulnerable eventually to psycho-pharmacological intervention and control. River is perceived as mad rather than as becoming. Both her shipmates, or her “created family” (Koontz 65) and the Alliance fail to recognize the true liberation River is moving towards made possible by her desiring machines. Whedon subtly explores the notion of a machinic subconscious by contrasting River’s waking / aware and unconscious states, subliminal triggers, trances and spontaneous *non-sequiturs*. River’s mind flows from states of hyper-awareness to coma; from extreme aesthetic affect to anesthetized pseudo-death. River is the flow to which all return. She is a continual series of assemblages; weapon, infant, psychic, assassin, protector, threat, witch, psychotic, and a Dayton Colony settler. She is the body where all desires traverse, some intensifying, others diminishing. Even in inert states, River is in perpetual motion, constantly moving towards new assemblages. River’s ethical becoming requires her to vector out of the systems of bio-power represented by both Alliance and Serenity crew. River’s productive desire flows around the fixed and limited organisms of her crew and the Alliance. She cannot be contained by the “entire assemblage, circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds, passages and distributions of intensity, and territories and deterritorialization” that are imposed upon her in any context (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 177).

[15] River’s birth and death are enacted and re-enacted, continually reinforcing her cycles of renewed potential and new assemblages. As mentioned above, she arrives on the ship as a BwO (“Serenity” 1.1) She awakens nude and traumatized from a fetal position and is immediately sedated. Her cerebral and cardiac functions are suspended and then restored in “Ariel” (1.9). She dies with every soul on Miranda and prays to be turned to stone (*Serenity*). River is a desiring molecular unconscious in flight enduring the metamorphoses of the becomings of a Body Without Organs (“BWO”). Deleuze and Guattari describe three states of the BwO: full, empty, and cancerous (*A Thousand Plateaus* 149-166). Full BwOs are healthy whereas empty and cancerous BwOs are not.

[16] Here lies Whedon’s problem and promise. The problem: River’s healthy BwO versus the Serenity crew/ Alliance’s cancerous BwO. The seeming oppositional binaries of the popular culture layer have collapsed. Moral and ethical ambiguity arises from the lack of distinction between sinners and saints. There is only River’s powerful, intense flow of a productive desiring machine and the Alliance / Serenity crew’s attempts to stop that flow. River is a “continua of intensities” continually carving out “new land at all times” (Deleuze & Guattari *A Thousand Plateaus* 161).

[17] Dams to River’s flow are set up in opposition to one another despite Whedon’s morally ambivalent character development and diegesis. As mentioned above, Whedon’s Pop Culture layer posits two seemingly contesting sides battling for the right to capture, define, code, and perpetuate River’s potential. Through clever and engaging dialogue, the delight of subverted plot elements, a talented and likeable anti-hero and a brilliant ensemble cast, we are invited to pledge our allegiance to the Serenity crew. We are manipulated into ignoring Whedon’s philosophical problem, that, in the end, it matters not who “wins” the battle for River. Either side will perpetuate the greatest crime of all—interrupting River’s flow towards a healthy BwO (the realization of her post-human potential). Both Alliance and Serenity’s crew are on the wrong side of Deleuzian ethics.

[18] River insists on becoming a healthy BwO, on becoming machinic, becoming molecular just as her fractured *ego* insists on becoming non-human. River is morally problematic. Her becoming a BwO and her emancipatory line of flight from the Law is a product of *both* her innate sublime nature *and* her torturous Alliance conditioning. River moves towards becoming a BwO *because* of her trauma rather than *in spite* of it.

[19] River's exploration of her schizo, her own madness, is her potential liberation and line of flight into a new state of being. Deleuze and Guattari describe the aim of schizoanalysis as the

tirelessly taking apart egos and their presuppositions; liberating the personal singularities they enclose and repress; mobilizing the flows they would be capable of transmitting, receiving, or intercepting; establishing always further and more sharply the schizzes and the breaks well below conditions of identity and assembling the desiring-machines that countersect everyone and group everyone with others. (Lorraine 123-124)

[20] Throughout the *Firefly* narratives, River progressively deterritorializes expressions of normative femininity and specifically girlhood. Time and again River refuses to conform to habits of thought or action associated with the social conventions of girlhood: physical, mental, and emotional vulnerability and weakness; obsessive and conspicuous consumerism; and early and sustained sexual allure and prowess to name but a few (Hall and Brown-Thirston). By contrast, River is conspicuously chaste; the warrior maiden (the Parthenos). She lives in consumerist deprivation and mere subsistence. Hers is an asexual reproductive system, and, as we shall see below, one that is intimately connected to the Reavers.

[21] In *River Tam*, Whedon continues his counter-dialogue against the stereotypical teenage female identity he explored with wild success in *Buffy*. In raising the 90-pound girl to the level of indomitable physical force, Whedon subverts stereotypical gender roles and expectations. River is such another 90-pound powerhouse. At the mid-point of the BDM, River suddenly and without obvious provocation, flattens a small army of frontier thugs in a bar with the grace of a Bolshoi prima ballerina. It will soon be made clear that River's acts of super-human and lethal violence were triggered by subliminal code. It is significant that the moment of River's loss of innocence occurs at the Maidenhead bar, that her becoming woman is simultaneous with her becoming weapon. (Editors' note: Cf. Wilcox on the connection of this moment with the loss of innocence and Original Sin, 160-62.) From this point on, the narrative insists that Serenity's crew grapple with the question "Whatever shall we do with River?" She has revealed herself to be an imminent threat. The scene depicts an economy of becomings, where exchanges of territorialization and re-territorialization are put in motion. Let us re-stage River's becomings in the spirit of Deleuze and Guattari's famous orchid and wasp example where River is the orchid and the subliminal trigger is the wasp (*A Thousand Plateaus* 11). River deterritorializes the trigger by making it a part of her internal systems of activation, much like a key turning a tumbler lock. The trigger reterritorializes River by reinforcing her status as lethal and unstable threat to herself and her shipmates. She is reterritorialized also as the center of a newly-problematized representation of girlhood. As Deleuze and Guattari would say, a rhizome is formed from two "heterogeneous elements" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 11): trigger and River-as-albatross. Mal addresses the question: "Government's man, he says you're a danger to us. Not worth helping. Is he right? Are you anything but a weapon? I've

staked my crew's life on the theory that you're a person, actual and whole And if I'm wrong you'd best shoot me now... [She cocks the gun she's trained on him]... or we could talk some more" (*Serenity*). The trigger scene is both characters' and audience's first deep insight into the potential of what River *can* do; a limit, Deleuze would argue, River herself has an ethical duty to define, having deterritorialized her identity from a highly coded femininity to something new. The style and scope of the violence foreshadow the BDM's final battle, the so-called bloodbath scene, in which River moves from the ethical question of what she *can* do, to the moral question of what she *must* do.

SIMON [grievously injured, dying]: I hate to ... leave ...

RIVER: You won't. You take care of me, Simon. You always take care of me. ... My turn.

[Script notes] She's running so fast, nobody has time to react til she DIVES through the hole in the doors...River lands in a perfect roll, comes up in a room full of Reavers. Without a moment's hesitation, she makes it to the panel, gets the doors closing...but at the last second, her ankle is grabbed and pulled out from under her. The last thing we see is her being dragged back as they swarm over her. [We see ...] River. She is bloodied but not killed. She's as she was in the bar—moving faster and more efficiently than anyone can, ducking and weaving and gutting and kicking and there are piles of Reavers already, she never breaks concentration as she uses their own blades against them, throws them, does everything in her power to stay one step ahead of—or above the mob (Whedon, "Serenity: A Movie" 119).

[22] In another sense, we could argue that the narratives are driven by the tension between Alliance morality (the dominant symbolic order, the Law) and Firefly's immanent ethics of survival and freedom as delineated by Deleuze. Daniel W. Smith explains:

[Deleuze] uses the term 'morality' to define, in general terms, any set of 'constraining' rules, such as a moral code, that consists in judging actions and intentions by relating them to transcendental universal values ("This is good, that is evil"). What he calls 'ethics' is, on the contrary, a set of 'facilitative' rules that evaluates what we do, say, and think according to the immanent mode of existence or possibility of life that implies. ("Critical" 191)

In the Deleuzianguattarian system of immanent ethics, River must be adjudicated as more or less ethical according to her ability to create new assemblages through her BwO; that is, to fulfill the "tenor of existence, the intensification of life" (*What is Philosophy* 74). As Smith continues elsewhere:

The fundamental question of ethics is not 'What must I do?' (which is the question of morality) but rather 'What can I do, what am I capable of doing?' (which is the proper question of an ethics without morality). Given my degree of power, what are my capabilities and capacities? How can I come into active possession of my power? How can I go to the limit of what I 'can do'? ("Deleuze" 6).

[23] To be ethical, River must free herself from the macro-oppression of the Alliance and the micro-oppression of the crew's surveillance and fear; Simon's constant medical intervention; and Mal's patriarchy. She must discover a space where she is at liberty to answer the questions: what is the nature, limit, and potential of my personal

power? What can my body do? Neither the Alliance nor Serenity can create such a space. In other words, she must achieve the status of the Deleuzian *nomad*.

The nomad has a territory; he follows customary paths; he goes from one point to another; he is not ignorant of points (water points, dwelling points, assembly points, etc.). But the question is what in nomad life is a principle and what is only a consequence. To begin with, although the points determine paths, they are strictly subordinated to the paths they determine, the reverse of what happens with the sedentary. The water point is reached only in order to be left behind; every point is a relay and exists only as a relay. ...The life of the nomad is the intermezzo. Even the elements of his dwelling are conceived in terms of the trajectory that is forever mobilizing them. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 380)

[24] In the more literal sense, Mal pursues a nomadic life to escape what he perceives to be Alliance oppression.

MALCOLM: I tell ya Zoe, we find ourselves a mechanic, get her running again. Hire a good pilot. Maybe even a cook. Live like real people. Small crew, them as feel the need to be free. Take jobs as they come—and we need never be under the heel of nobody ever again. No matter how long the arm of the Alliance might get, we'll just get us a little further. ("Out of Gas" 1.8)

In Whedon's diegesis, however, both the literal and philosophical nomadic paths and safe harbors are wholly determined by the distribution of Alliance-held strongholds and territories. The intermezzo here is the void of interplanetary space. For Mal Reynolds the question is literally between nomadic principles and their consequences. In many ways, the *Firefly* narratives' momentum is generated by a search for answers to this question. River and Simon's presence on *Serenity* is continually reappraised by captain and crew in terms of principle and consequence. Recall Mal's line: "I'm staking my crew's life on the theory that you're a person, actual and whole" (Whedon *Serenity*). River and the crew's erratic progress through the intermezzo of space protects them to a point from the panopticon of Alliance surveillance. However, *Serenity*'s crew is as much a cog in the Law machine as the Alliance officers. *Serenity* routinely docks at Alliance ports of call, city-sized Alliance cruisers are on ceaseless patrol, and "Ariel" (1.9) features Inara reporting for annual state-mandated medical tests.

River navigates a philosophical intermezzo as her flows of intensity expand over immeasurable rational, emotional, and mental distances. To Shepherd Book, she says:

Bible's broken. Contradictions. False logistics. It doesn't make sense. So we'll integrate non-progressional evolution theory with God's creation of Eden. Eleven inherent metaphoric parallels are already there. Eleven. Important number, prime number. One goes into the house of eleven eleven times but always comes out one. Noah's Ark is a problem. We'll have to call it early quantum phenomenon. Only way to fit 5000 species of mammal on the same boat...it's broken, it doesn't make sense. ("Jaynestown" 1.7)

With dizzying speed, River's consciousness traverses distances of geography and history, the Bible being an artifact of Earth-that-Was with a history of 5000 years. She moves between the spaces of religious and secular magisteria. She creates distance between herself and Book while oscillating between lucidity and madness.

[25] River's actual mental deterioration and trauma is depicted in the third *Firefly* narrative text through *The R. Tam Sessions* (Whedon). These excerpts offer a glimpse of

River's deepening psychosis over the course of 416 "sessions" conducted by Alliance psychiatric staff. Whedon created *The R. Tam Sessions* in 2005 to promote the release of the BDM. The BDM reorients River to the status of central character and her experiences at the Alliance-sponsored Academy drives the film's plot. *The R. Tam Sessions* are a tantalizing record of River's becoming machinic and becoming animal. The text expertly prepares audiences for the BDM's heightened intensities of action, suffering, and personal sacrifice. Moreover, it was necessary to establish River's suffering at the hands of the Alliance for filmgoers who had not (yet) encountered the *Firefly* series. Actress Summer Glau's journey from gentle young woman to sleeper assassin is startling and gives evidence of the lethal efficiency of the Alliance's bio-power or "neural stripping." In typical Whedon style, *R. Tam Session No. 22* reveals a startling plot detail buried in what might legitimately be considered online marginalia to the main *Firefly* texts. *R. Tam Session No. 22* offers the forensically dedicated fan a reward of disproportionate value to its status as film promotion gimmick. In this relatively obscure text, Whedon reveals River's true nature. She is the product of the same process that produced the Reavers' incalculable savagery: she too has been administered the Pax. River is Reaver.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I can help you with that. You know how proud Dr. Mathias is of how you're progressing.

RIVER: I'm not progressing. (Static)...It's the Pax.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me what you see.

RIVER: You lost the first one. You cut too deep, he died on the table. One of your attendants cried and you comforted her. "We're doing such good work."

[26] This one utterance revolutionizes our understanding of the chronology of Whedon's story. In this single line buried in a promotional video production, Whedon establishes the full horror and depravity of the Alliance's bio-power ambitions. The Alliance discovered the Reavers' becoming animal by chance; now they seek to produce remotely triggered Reaver hybrid assassins at will. How do you make more Reavers? You make them watch—a fact established in the episode "Bushwacked" (1.2). River has been made to watch.

[27] In the BDM, River is compelled to lead the crew to a 12-year-old holographic recording revealing the past history of the Pax and the Alliance's experiment that created the Reavers.

CARON: These are just a few of the images we've recorded [of corpses]. And you can see, it isn't what we thought. There's been no war here and no terraforming event. The environment is stable. It's the Pax: the G23 Paxilon Hydrochlorate that we added to the air processors. It was supposed to calm the population, weed out aggression. Well, it works. The people here stopped fighting. And then they stopped everything else. They stopped going to work. They stopped breeding, talking, eating. There's 30 million people here and they all just let themselves die. [Noises off.] I have to be quick. About one tenth of one percent of the population had the opposite reaction to the Pax. Their aggression response increased beyond madness...They have become...well, they've killed most of us, and not just killedh....they've done things.

WASH: Reavers. They made them. (*Serenity*)

[28] It is important that we get the chronology right. Approximately twelve years prior to the events of the BDM, the Alliance administers the Pax to an unsuspecting population on Miranda, a newly terraformed planet. The results are catastrophic; 30 million dead and the becoming-animal of the Reavers (a post-human state of being). The Alliance is aware of the Reavers' heightened aggression, superior physical strength, and incalculable capacity for violence. They understand what a Reaver body can do and they seek to capture and control those aspects of the Reavers' assemblage. The Reavers are deterritorialized from pacified, civilized settlers and reterritorialized as potential bio-weaponry. Research into creating Reaver-hybrid operatives begins and includes reformulating the Pax. The reformulated Pax is administered to the captive River in the two years prior to the events depicted in *Firefly* but reported on only in *The R. Tam Sessions*. The Alliance's recognition of the potential weaponization of Reaver traits is a reterritorialization of the post-human into the oppressive symbolic order. In those intervening years, the Alliance has buried the Miranda catastrophe and embarked on experimentation on its own citizens in an attempt to create controllable, deployable Reavers. And it works. River is profoundly problematic for the Alliance, being as she is both their greatest achievement and their greatest vulnerability. Even in a psychotic state, River's psychic abilities have enabled her metaphorically to conceive and carry to term the Miranda catastrophe. She is its surrogate mother until, at the scene of the crime, she is delivered of her burden by the exposure of the truth. In that moment, the virtual is made actual. Once she is so delivered, River is able to access her extraordinary abilities at will. As touched upon above, it is at this point, at the near-conclusion of *Serenity*, that River acquires a moral dimension and must at last concern herself with "what should I do" rather than the ethical question "what can I do" (Smith "Deleuze" 6)?

[29] It is only River's extraordinary abilities that preserve her psyche (howsoever damaged) through the ordeal of being the Alliance's secret-bearer relentlessly pursued by the Reaver visions and her war against becoming the same. Once again, how do Reavers reproduce? They make someone watch, an asexual neural stripping process of their own. What a post-human body can do is explored through both River and the Reavers. The same processes of the Law created them both.

[30] Throughout the *Firefly* narratives we are led to the understanding that River is on a trajectory to the post-human, be it becoming animal or becoming molecular/machinic. That sense of otherworldliness, of other-humanness makes River's disembodied possession of the ship in "Objects in Space" (1.14) seem less strange and more inevitable as the ultimate power of her BwO. The idea that River has *become* the ship is a culmination and consummation. It is an ethical fulfillment in that it preserves and enhances her potential while safeguarding the lives of her "created family" (Koontz 65).

RIVER: They didn't want her here but she couldn't make herself leave. So she melted, melted away. They didn't know she could do that, but she did...I'm not on the ship. I'm in the ship. I am the ship. ... River's gone...You're talking to Serenity and, Early, Serenity is very unhappy ("Objects in Space" 1.14).

[31] It is a profoundly eerie, schizo moment. Whedon has primed our expectations of River's ability to melt away in incorporeal union with the machinic. Much of viewers' fascination with River has its headwaters in Classical mythology and is bound up with notions of prescience, power, and the dubious gift of prophecy. Clearly positioned as an Athena Parthenos (the warrior maiden) and as seer (Pythia), River's interaction with the

crew often positions her as a cryptic speaker of truths whose wisdom washes over the uncomprehending shipmates too immured in the Law to make immediate sense of her utterances. The Pythia could be counted upon to deliver cryptic responses to pilgrims' queries of Apollo. But she was equally renowned for divinely-induced madness. River Tam is all this and more. She forces us to confront what living schizo might look like and demands that we reject the merely clinical, the actual, the socially-determined relations, and the pathological in favor of the posthuman, the virtual, and lines of flight.

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