

**“Bits, Fluids, what am I?”:  
Biopolitical Incursion and River’s Enduring Soul**

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[1] Your Amygdalae (plural form of the two amygdala you own) are located deep in your brain’s medial temporal lobe. Their central position means they have been a part of human development since before there were humans. It can be comforting to know that some things never change, but rather discomfoting that one of those things is the methodical excision of said brain tissue, which is still going strong in the Firefly ’verse five hundred years into the future. The result of multiple operations performed by the Alliance on River Tam’s brain is a traumatized, anti-social, adolescent fugitive aboard Serenity. Yet, despite her aberrant behaviour, Mal recognizes something in River that he understands. They have both been displaced, like flotsam in the path of a giant passing ship, and are trying to remain buoyant in its wake. While Mal and his crew have learned to ride that wake and survive off the chaos of the outer rim planets, River still struggles with internal discontinuity that perpetually defines her through a method of relation Michel Foucault, as explained in *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*, called biopower (Lemke et al). She is defined by her fellow crewmembers, her brother, and even we the audience as a damaged and deranged subject of this power. Only through a reenactment of her trauma, in an instance reminiscent of cognitive behavioural therapy, is she able to break the hold the Alliance has on her and begin to formulate a new and genuine persona as a member of Serenity’s crew.

[2] The Firefly ’verse is introduced to us in the context of an historical moment. A voice tells us that 500 years ago the earth was “used up,” and humanity is now completely divorced from the classic state rivalries that had, until then, defined it politically. What we are left with is a unilateral governing body with no history of its own, no identity or ethos of its own aside from aligning planets under a centralized authority. The Alliance, then, is a paper cut-out government; a crude amalgam of every state actor and every state action, from the benign to the malicious. It comprises space ships that look like one square block torn out of downtown Tokyo, but lacking any streamlining or panache—faceless behemoths. Its governmental structure is left to our imaginations, and no charismatic leader sits at its pinnacle, explaining away hypocrisies with rhetorical flourishes. Only the peripheral parts of the alliance expose themselves: officers, clad in grey, whose rank and insignia are indistinguishable from each other, and Federal Marshals who, I think, would not be able to tell you much of anything, under interrogation, about the people for whom they work.

[3] Included in this amalgam is the sort of anxious grasping after control indicative of a tenuous relationship with the status quo. The manner in which this faceless government entity perceives the world is similar to the way River does in the beginning of “Objects in Space” (F1014). Both River and the Alliance, presumably, have access to far too much information. The Alliance has its culture of overt and surreptitious surveillance, such that Gabriel Tam’s presence within a building goes on his permanent record, River has her stripped amygdala preventing her from pushing anything out of her immediate attention (“Safe” F1005; “Ariel” F1009). Both River and the Alliance are relatively young: it has been five years since the Alliance brought the independent Rim planets under its aegis. The daily problems of ruling dozens of planets and hundreds of moons are, no doubt, new and challenging to the Alliance, and they may be at a loss to understand the larger context of the social climate that they inhabit, just as River, at 15 years, is confused and disoriented by her psychic reception of a tactile and emotional communion between husband and wife (“Objects in Space” F1014). Finally, both must keep in constant contact with the world they inhabit: River stalks the halls of Serenity with a graceful arm outstretched, a finger running sensuously along the bulkheads, perhaps as an anchor for her turbulent mind. The Alliance, for its part, feels the need to stick its fingers into peoples’ brains.

[4] Michel Foucault would refer to this intrusion as a “technology of discipline” (Lemke et al 36). Not technological in the manner of a synthetic contraption, but an advancement of the way the state exerts authority over the individual. It is part of an historic progression: from the power over *death*, wielded by monarchs of old who ruled by divine right, to the power over *life*, defined by benign state apparatus “that seek to administer, secure, develop, and foster life” (35). Instead of clumsily swinging axes and taking heads, state actors legitimized their rule via reason and mutual benefit by helping (increasingly urban) populations to stave off endemic deceases (35). Health and long life are administered by the state in return for partial dependence and a tacit—and insidiously logical—agreement from the people that they will discipline themselves to bodily improvement. Nikolas Rose describes the modern incarnation of this form of biopolitics:

“By the start of the 21st century, hopes, fears, decisions and life-routines shaped in terms of the risks and possibilities in corporeal and biological existence had come to supplant almost all others as organizing principles of a life of prudence, responsibility and choice” (18).

Lemke et al explain how Foucault elaborates on this first form of control by noting its contingency upon what today might be called personal growth. It works, ironically, through the expression of self-control. River is filtered into an experimental gauntlet in the guise of a highly elite education program because she wishes to attend the best school. This action toward self-betterment works to align and adhere subject to ruler as the subject is brought closer in line to the universally acknowledged “norm” (38). River’s experience diverges from Foucault’s scenario in

that her initial acquiescence to instruction, here framed as self-improvement, leads to a nightmare of state-conducted violence and bodily intrusion.

[5] Tampering with River's brain is only the most visceral example of over-involvement by the ruling regime in *Firefly*. Žižek's radicalization of Marx's dialectic in Tony Vinci's article "Not an apocalypse, the apocalypse': Existential proletarianisation and the possibility of soul in Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse*," positions the state—a willing participant in universal commodification—as participating in reducing the exploited subject "to the vanishing point ... deprived of all substantial content" (225). Nothingness is a concept Whedon plays with extensively (possibly due to its abundance in space) especially in "Bushwhacked" (F1003), where "nothing," repeated again and again, is posited as the primary danger and ultimate cause of insanity and loss of self. But a more formative power, in Žižek's terms, is expressed by the Alliance's control of all legitimate sectors of the economy, such that Mal and his crew are pushed to the rim spatially and socially, and forced to resort to jobs, such as the "famous wobbly-headed doll caper" ("Trash" F1011), which are perhaps unbecoming of an ex-militiaman.

[6] River is defined by the Alliance much more acutely. Serenity's crew enjoys self-control, of a liberated rather than Foucauldian manner, within the limits imposed by a life of criminal activity. But with River, control is tenuous and transitory: She plays with kitchen knives, loaded guns, and generally "makes things," in Mal's words, "not smooth" ("Objects in Space" F1014; "Ariel" F1009; "Safe" F1005). The intended effects of Alliance experiments, which manifest in *Serenity* in some spectacular ass kicking by a 17-year-old girl, do not compare to the unintended effects, which Bradley Daniels identifies as indicative of PTSD, and which dominate River's internal state (137). Her power to influence the world around her is stymied by these unintended effects. While Serenity's crew remain mobile, on the outskirts of Alliance control, and exercise some freedom of choice over the field of battle, River's much more personal struggle is contained within the limits of herself, constraining her choices.

[7] Since we, the audience, have never seen her whole and healthy except as a child, these side effects constitute much of what we think of as River's character. Briefly, they include hallucinations, introversion and standoffishness (not psychological deficiencies themselves, but also not characteristic of the happy and engaged young girl we get a glimpse of in "Safe") as well as anti-social and apathetic tendencies. Slicing Jayne's chest open or coolly informing Book of the nature of his impending death are not amoral acts, but they are also not what we expect from the picture Simon has drawn in the pilot episode of an exceptionally bright young girl ("Out of Gas" F1008; "Serenity" F1001). Based on Simon's description, the Alliance has violated something precious, and it is society's loss.

[8] Beyond bodily harm and psychological scarring, violence constitutes a certain transgression of identification. Karen Houle, in an analysis of Gail Mason's *The Spectacle of Violence: Homophobia, Gender and Knowledge*, surveys the damage that is transmitted and harbored at a societal level when a person is singled out as differing from the norm. Even as one is subjected to traditional punishment, with its "negating and destructive" effects, one is also defined by the "constitutive and productive" pressure of public discourse to the extent that this discourse permeates our lives (Houle 184-185). We are all privy to "[s]tatements [that] make events, moments, things 'visible' and 'sayable'; we notice violence and violence speaks in and through languages" so that victim, perpetrator, and bystander are all constructed by it (184). In River's case, the person who is best equipped to help her is most heavily engaged in this subtle form of violence.

[9] Simon acts as interpreter and confidant for his sister, but his interpretations highlight the fact that he is her doctor as well. "What am I?" River asks her brother in a poignantly unguarded moment during "War stories" (F1010). "You are my beautiful sister," Simon responds, glibly. But in other situations he describes River almost exclusively in medical terminology. When Mal asks after River's condition in "Objects in Space F1014," Simon replies, "her medication is erratic." Simon is culpable, along with the Alliance, of a sustained transgression of River's persona by continuing the narrative of "self-hood [that] has become intrinsically somatic" (Rose 19). As the caretaker and translator of River's fractured mind, he continues to constitute her first and foremost as a medical project, as opposed to the "gift" that he introduces to the crew in "Serenity" (F1001).

[10] As a trained doctor with the opportunity, his mother reminds us, to join the "medical elect," Simon is inculcated with the values and tenets of Foucault's biopolitics, specifically its second form of control: the "technology of security" ("Safe" F1005; Lemke et al 38). This control begins with an image of a population as a single organism, and results in that organism policing itself through a form of homeostasis. When homeostasis—feedback loops that stabilize the body's processes—is mobilized on a social scale, what's at stake is no longer an expendable appendage of the body politic, but the ontological existence of the population itself. This inevitably leads to continual reorientation, en masse, towards a point between extremes: a safe central point that fosters equilibrium within society.

[11] The benchmark that calibrates that equilibrium is the "norm" (Lemke et al 38). Like the "technology of discipline," this phenomenon works to displace overt forms of rule by divine right. What is right is replaced by what is logical and normal (Lemke et al 39). Rose adds: "Our very ideas of what it is to be a normal human being have been made possible by historically specific institutional and technical developments, not least by biopolitics itself" (19). Simon, standing on the cusp of the "medical elect," (a conjunction that highlights the intersect between

personal care and public determination) is steeped in this celebrated standard of the “norm,” and it frames, at all times, his perspective of River’s condition.

[12] Whether verbally or figuratively, Simon’s constructions of River speak louder than her own presence on the ship. With regret, he tells Inara that he has “selflessly turned [them] both into wanted fugitives,” taking responsibility even as he takes control (“Bushwhacked” F1003). In a scene in “Ariel” (F1009), pivotal to the River story arc, Simon conjures up an image of River using Alliance technology in order to see what they have done to her. In this scene the word “holographic” hovers above River, but in reverse, to remind the audience both that this is only an illusion and that Simon is not looking at River from the same perspective as the Alliance. But after so much obfuscation surrounding River’s condition, it is hard for the audience not to gawk as the fog clears and we are given our first untrammelled image of what is going on inside her. Even Jayne reaches out to touch River’s brain. Through the tension created thus far in the series by River’s mysterious personal abnormalities, the audience too is made complicit in her biopolitical objectification through our need to understand what is wrong with her and our hope that Simon can normalize it.

[13] This isn’t the only time Whedon laid a woman out on a medical couch in order to explore these themes. “Through his depiction of dolls,” Vinci writes of Whedon’s short-lived series *Dollhouse*, “Whedon explores not only the ineffability of identity but also the myriad possible relationships between[*sic*] body, mind, soul, culture and technology” (227). River’s original self is stripped through the direct violence of governmental control and reconstituted by the indirect violence of Simon’s attempts to define her somatically. Described in Rose’s terms, “the corporeal existence... become[s] the privileged site of experiments with subjectivity”: in *Dollhouse*, in Whedon’s oeuvre, and in our post-modern age (19). Where Žižek, as stated in the beginning, sees this playing out in the annihilation of the proletarianized individual, Whedon ends the first season of *Dollhouse* by hinting at the existence “of a stable, potentially transcendent notion of subjective identity: a soul” (228).

[14] River looks on at the cows: “little souls, big world” she muses in “Safe.” Her definition of “cow” is contingent on a performative or ontological state. They aren’t cows until they are in cow places, doing cow things. They must “see the sky” before they “remember who they are”. Here, soul, as self, extends beyond the somatic to the actions, demeanor, and vocation of the subject. This is reminiscent of Amy-Chinn’s comparison of registered companions in the *Firefly* ’verse to contemporary prostitutes. Her argument—that Inara’s character doesn’t carry the same kind of sexually subversive power contemporary prostitutes wield—is based on the fact that unlike a prostitute, Inara’s work is inseparable from her life, and so she is defined by it (9). Corollary to this, River will never hold down a job in her volatile state, and is therefore utterly defined by Alliance medical intrusion.

[15] Yet the existence of a soul allows for a continuity of self beyond the reach of meddling medics and misplaced kindnesses, and the possibility of genuine, self-initiated convalescence. River's penetrating intellect, which often results in a questioning of authority figures, be they the author of Simon's textbook in "Safe" or the author of Book's *Bible* in "Jaynestown" (1007), positions her outside the spectrum of socially normal: it earmarks her as *homo sacer*, a person who falls outside the protection of the societal laws and is "reduced to the status of [her] physical existence" (Lemke et al 55). Her first step to getting well, then, is reclaiming that physical existence for herself.

[16] Those pursuing her often refer to River as an asset; this epithet euphemistically downplays her humanity and brands her as an object. It takes a visit from Jubal Early (who also questions authority: that of our normal interpretation of innocuous objects and occurrences) for River to first be able to incorporate herself and then re-substantiate as first the ship, and then herself. It's Early who first entertains the idea of incorporeal existence: "maybe I've always been here," he says to Kaylee: a tantalizing philosophical possibility which perhaps appeals to River. She is Early's negative; she has, indeed, always been on Serenity, since the day she arrived in a box, but only somatically. Her self, her attention, and her cognition have until now been stretched and deformed, atomized and distributed throughout the ship, always listening, often the subject of debate, but never included in the conversation. Now, with a threat aboard that only she fully understands, River sheds her old body, the site of institutional incursion, and takes on the proud mantle of Serenity, who is also on the run from violation at the hands of the Alliance.

[17] Like cognitive behavioral therapy, River relives the experience of past trauma, but with renewed powers of control. No one is "shoving twenty needles in her eye" this time; it's she that has the best vantage, seeing into Early's past, and into his ship ("Safe" F1005; "Objects in Space" F1014). When Early "crawl[s] inside [her] uninvited and hurt[s her] crew," he re-enacts the Alliance's biopolitical incursion into her deepest self. By facing down this fearful scenario and taking control of the outcome, River defines herself for the first time. Not, as Simon puts it, "a gift," but from her own mouth as her own choice: "I'll be your bounty, Jubal Early." We are all objects at some point, just as we are all subjects; but the power to choose and re-choose our own path—therein lies biofreedom.

[18] River does not deny her role as yet another object in space, with all the Newtonian, freewheeling motion that this implies. But by passing through the crucible of Jubal Early's attack, she is now an object of worth not only to the Alliance, but to Mal and the others as well. No longer simply a liability, River is finally able to take advantage of the therapeutic value of community offered by Serenity's crew. When she asks permission of Mal to come aboard, it is on her terms: not as cargo, to be secreted from planet to planet in paranoid fashion, but as a full-fledged member of the crew with a say in the path her ship will take. She is welcomed as a

fellow misfit, ready to misbehave. The end of “Objects in Space” sees River holding her future, confidently, between her fingers.

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