

## **Joss Whedon and the Problem of Nothing: River Tam and Existential Identity**

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[1] One consistent element of Joss Whedon's commentary tracks on his work is his apparent dislike of commentary tracks. Indeed, unlike most others, his commentary tracks sometimes have little to do with the action on the screen at any given moment.<sup>1</sup> We can see this propensity clearly in Whedon's commentary on the *Firefly* (2002-2003) episode "Objects in Space" (1.10)—the final episode of the series and the effective series finale. The episode is remarkable for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that in 2012, Whedon claimed that it represents his entire body of work better than any other of his efforts ("I Am"). His commentary on the episode is no less remarkable, for rather than comment explicitly on what is happening on screen or on the particular writing or directing techniques involved in the production of the episode, Whedon often discusses the ways he used the episode to explore certain existentialist concepts.

[2] "Objects in Space" is arguably the only episode in *Firefly* that centers mainly on River. As Lisa Lassek notes in *Firefly: The Official Companion*, "the entire opening of the show is from her perspective. We gently increased that feeling, so at the beginning you're in reality just watching Simon and Kaylee talk, so that when it jumps into what River's perceiving, and then jumps back out, you're surprised. As she moves through the ship, it gets more and more surreal and we get more and more into her head" (187). The opening scene culminates in River picking up what she imagines to be a stick but is in reality a loaded gun with the safety off. Before the camera returns us to "reality," River quietly says "Just an object. . . . It doesn't mean what you think" (188). As Whedon explains in the DVD commentary, this scene demonstrates the ways we impute to objects a meaning or an intent not inherent in them. This notion of imposing meaning on the world is of course a

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central theme in *Firefly*, and although we have seen Mal and Simon impose narratives onto River, here Whedon explicitly claims that objects in space exist independently of any moral or narrative component; the moral or narrative component is something we have imposed on them.

[3] We see this idea articulated most clearly as a question after bounty hunter Jubal Early makes his way onto the ship. After searching the crew quarters, he wonders, “Is it still her room when it’s empty? Does the room, the thing, have purpose?” (195). Early’s comments extend the existentialist ideas from the opening scene and thus amplify Whedon’s interest in what objects are independent of their context or purpose or history. But bound up in this episode is another question about whether identity is fixed or contextually determined—a question that, interestingly, has garnered insufficient attention in Whedon scholarship.<sup>2</sup> This is a question that Whedon has returned to repeatedly over the course of his career. Indeed, the questions that the crew—and Jubal Early—have about River are the same questions that Whedon has about many of his characters. What is River when she is removed from the context of her familial history with Simon? When she is unable to remember her personal history? When she cannot discriminate between what is real and what is imagined? These are the existential questions Whedon seems to be asking about River—and other characters—throughout *Firefly* and *Serenity* (2005) and, later, *Dollhouse* (2009-2010). What are individuals when the context, the history, the meaning, is stripped away? Is there a core from which we cannot be separated, or are we all empty vessels that can be filled with different identities? Such questions preoccupy Whedon, and echo similar concerns he engages in *Alien Resurrection* (1997), *Toy Story* (1995), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Dollhouse*, *Cabin in the Woods* (2012), and both *Avengers* (2012, 2015) films.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, I use an analysis of River to examine the ways that Whedon engages these questions about the nature of identity within this existentialist framework. I especially attend to the ways that Whedon uses River as a vehicle for exploring the concept of “nothing” as it relates to existentialist questions about identity.

[4] A fair amount of criticism has been devoted to the influence of existentialism on both Whedon and the episode “Objects in Space.” It is not my intention here to discuss the ways that the episode engages

existentialist questions.<sup>4</sup> In this essay, I want to extend those analyses to reveal Whedon's interest in interrogating whether identity functions in a similar fashion. This idea seems to have a particular resonance for Whedon; he returns often to questions about the nature of individual identity in his films and television shows. In *Firefly*, River serves as the primary vehicle for Whedon's exploration of these questions. Unsurprisingly, then, a great deal of critical attention has been devoted to River. For instance, Stephanie R. DeLuse describes River as epitomizing "the synergy of neuroscience and soul, by taking control of her own explosive neural potential and turning it into something miraculous and powerfully human" (186). Catherine Coker labels her one of Whedon's broken women whose "recovery is presented as the ultimate will-to-power to save her family and friends" (229). Alyson Buckman reads River as an example of the seeming "hysterical child" (43) who turns out to be "an exemplar of *l'écriture féminine*" (45).<sup>5</sup> Lorna Jowett suggests that, unlike her brother, River is profoundly comfortable in the "expanse of the Black" (111). Jeffrey Bussolini reads River as a "laboratory animal" (151) and the victim of the "Janus face of the Alliance" (151). Rhonda Wilcox draws connections between River and the Biblical Eve (157-59) in *Serenity*.<sup>6</sup>

[5] Whedon's interest in "nothing" as a philosophical concept has not gone unnoticed. In "Humanity in a 'Place of Nothin': Morality, Religion, Atheism, and Possibility in *Firefly*," Gregory Erickson examines the significance of "nothing" as a mechanism for exploring the ways that "nothing" functions as a threat to conventional binary thinking, concluding that "nothing" allows River to look "away from the defined self, away from the teleological straight path of history, and away from absolutes. Meaning is not in things, as both Mal and Book want to insist, but between them, in the interplay, the connections, the empty space" (179). Erickson's reading of nothingness in *Firefly* hinges on the ways Whedon deploys the concept as a way of first exposing the limits of those binarisms and then as a means of complicating them; for Erickson, the "nothing and blackness" are, for most of the characters, an "evil represented by the Reavers" (179). Only River and Jubal Early are capable of embracing nothing as a space "open to new possibilities" (179) and to accept "a form of meaninglessness . . . as she discovers the

contradictory layers that make up who she is” (179). While I do not disagree with Erickson’s conclusions, Whedon’s treatment of nothingness is not limited to River’s general comfort with “nothing” as a space “open to new possibilities” (179). In *Firefly*, River does not simply encounter “nothing” and respond differently than the rest of the crew; River is consistently associated with nothingness, and attention to that association reveals other dimensions of Whedon’s concern with the concept of nothing.<sup>7</sup>

[6] The most obvious way that Whedon associates River with nothingness is by associating her with infancy. When we first encounter her, River lies curled in the fetal position inside a container. The fetal position suggests both infancy and potential. Like an infant, River is all potential; her fate is undetermined and her options are potentially limitless (indeed, as we will learn later in the series, River can seemingly become other people). Whedon’s stage directions make this association explicitly: “The box is clearly a cryo-chamber of some sort, perfectly conformed to her body, a sleek metallic womb” (“Serenity” [1.1] 37). As clarified by the reference to the container as a womb, River’s emergence functions as a kind of traumatic or premature birth. This birth metaphor is further established by Mal’s suddenly opening the box over Simon’s intense protestations—“I need to check her vitals. . . . She’s not supposed to wake up for another week! The shock could—” (“Serenity” 37)—as River emerges from the “womb,” naked, screaming, and cold, like an infant.

[7] Just as infancy suggest potential—infants’ futures are not yet determined and so ideally they could become anything or anyone—so, too, are they a kind of absence of person. Because they could potentially be anything, they are therefore nothing. This is, of course, nothing more than a modern version of John Locke’s theory of *tabula rasa*, which dictates that human identity is the result of the individual’s experiences. River’s status as “nothing” hinges on her experience at the academy. Before the Alliance experimented on her at the academy, she was a person; after that experimentation, her personhood has potentially been stripped from her and she is largely defined by the absence of a clearly defined and demarcated personhood—a question that Mal will address directly in *Serenity*. But in this first episode, the conundrum of River is

perhaps best articulated by Mal's initial response to seeing her naked, in the box: "Huh" ("Serenity" 37). While certainly comical, Mal's line (inarticulately) expresses an inability to comprehend what it is that he is seeing; for him, River is literally unspeakable.

[8] River is also indeterminate, and so other characters must impose narratives on her in order to comprehend her. Unable to determine what River is (and also what she represents), Mal imposes a narrative on her, suggesting that she is a sex slave being trafficked by Simon.<sup>8</sup> This attempt to impose a narrative on River fails once Simon explains that she is his sister. But even this simple declaration is fraught with problems of interpretation. Once River awakes, screaming, and Simon consoles her, Whedon plays on the multiple meanings of the word "this" in a way that emphasizes River's indeterminacy:

MAL: What the hell is *this*?

Simon pulls the weeping River to him, looks at Mal, unashamed of the tears in his eyes.

SIMON: *This* is my sister. ("Serenity" 38, emphasis added)

The repetition of the word "this" is important here, for Mal clearly wants Simon to explain what is happening; Simon uses "this" to refer to River, turning Mal's dehumanizing pronoun into a barb. But considering the broader question of what, precisely, River is now that the Alliance has experimented on her, Simon's pronoun is appropriate. "This"—without an articulated referent—allows for the possibility that River is not actually a person anymore.<sup>9</sup>

[9] We encounter River's indeterminacy later, when Simon explains River to the crew. Simon explains that "River was more than gifted. She was . . . a gift" ("Serenity" 38). The ellipsis—which is actually contained in the script—interrupts the thought and indicates how Simon lacks the vocabulary to describe River—indeed, that the vocabulary to describe her may not exist at all. Language fails again in "The Train Job" (1.2), when Simon describes the difficulty of understanding River when Mal asks about River's condition:

SIMON: The same. One moment she seems perfectly cogent, the next. . . she speaks nonsense. Like a child. It's so difficult to diagnose; I still don't know what the government was trying to do

with her. So I have no idea if they succeeded. (“The Train Job” 76)

Language consistently fails to describe River. Simon’s description of her as someone who “seems perfectly cogent” may seem unusual, as “cogent” might suggest relevance, but the next clause clarifies what Simon means. He is not describing River; he is describing her speech. In the absence of a diagnosis—which is to say, in the absence of a narrative that defines River—all Simon can do is describe River in terms of language (cf. Buckman). Thus, River is “like a child” in terms of her speech. But even this fails to describe her, as she is only “like” a child.<sup>10</sup> River can only be described in terms of what she is like; in order for the crew to apprehend River, she must be placed within a context—the alternative is to confront River as she actually is.

[10] We see Simon’s difficulty describing River again, in “Bushwhacked” (1.3). As Inara and Simon watch the chaotic game the crew is playing in the cargo hold, Inara asks about River:

INARA: How is she?

SIMON: She’s . . . good. Better. She has her days.

INARA: Don’t we all.

SIMON: There’re even moments when she seems like the little sister I used to know. . . but then it passes. She still won’t talk about what it was they did to her at the academy.

INARA: Perhaps she’s not so sure herself.

SIMON: She dreams about it. I know that much. Nightmares. (“Bushwhacked” 85)

Simon’s halting response here again indicates River’s unspeakableness. Inara’s question, for Simon, is not as simple as it seems, as the ellipsis following his contraction of “She is” indicates. But Simon does not know what she is and thus cannot describe her—or even qualitatively describe her condition, and so River is, for Simon, not good and not better. She “has her days,” although what, precisely, that means is unclear. Unable to define River in terms of some kind of narrative, Simon can only discuss her vaguely. Her status does not conform to any narrative, and thus she defies categorization.<sup>11</sup>

[11] Simon’s pivot here to describing River in terms of what she once was (“the little sister I used to know”) is important. On one hand,

Simon is simply saying that, sometimes, River seems to have returned to lucidity. But on the other, Simon is happy that she is again like something he “used to know”—with “know” playing on its double meaning of “to be acquainted with” and “understand.” Now, River is not what he used to be able to understand. There is a degree to which we can simply read River’s transformation as a metaphor for puberty and adolescence: just as Buffy’s transformation into the Slayer echoed her transformation from girl to woman, River’s transformation into something unspeakable and unknowable conjures up similar comparisons. Before she went to the academy, Simon *knew* River and River was knowable. Now that she has been victimized, experimented on—and is a bit older and thus is no longer a child—he does not, and cannot, know her anymore; the context that made River knowable to Simon is no longer operative.

[12] Whedon’s interest in imposing narratives on others, and on interpreting others as texts, has not gone unnoticed. Alyson Buckman, writing about the ways that River challenges stereotypes of both the damsel in distress and the hysterical woman, notes that “Simon is the author of River’s narrative at this point, constructing her as pre-symbolic (and thus lacking the subjectivity gained through language) and as a victim to be cured . . .” (43). Simon’s attempt is to define River—to diagnose, to explain, to interpret, and to impose meaning on—rather than to apprehend her as she is. The result is that attempts to define her often fail. Indeed, as Buckman points out, neither Simon nor Mal are able to impose a narrative on River that accurately defines her, and thus neither “the man of science [nor] the man of action is able to understand River fully” (Buckman 44). To “understand River fully” would be to understand her within the context of a narrative that Mal and Simon do not know.

[13] Such insistence that meaning is determined by context—as opposed to essence—plays into key existentialist themes that emerge in much of Whedon’s work, and especially in *Firefly*. As Lyle Zynda explains in his analysis of “Objects in Space,” existentialism claims that because “there is . . . no necessity in things. . . . that things have no *essence* that necessarily makes them the way they are. They exist first as . . . bare facts; later it is determined ‘what they are.’ In particular, whatever *meaning*

(in the sense of significance, value or function) something has is not intrinsic to it, but is *conferred* on it freely by beings, like us, capable of valuing” (89, emphasis original). We see these matters of meaning and context writ large in “Objects in Space” as both River and Jubal Early “relate to their surroundings in similarly ‘odd’ ways” (Zynda 89). River’s openness to interpretation allows her to embody a wide range of possible meanings. Buckman, for instance, claims that River functions as an embodiment of feminist resistance to patriarchal culture:

It is understandable that Simon would have difficulty expressing River’s talents, since, through her representation, she enacts resistance to the Western system of language and logic; this system is anchored in patriarchy and may be referred to as masculine discourse. To speak of River is to communicate the unspeakable within a patriarchal culture; rather than taking up a masculine position—the only position for a woman to inhabit if she is to speak within a system that denies her subjectivity—River takes up the feminine position and thus refuses the former. As a result, she is an exemplar of *l’écriture féminine*, or feminine discourse. (45)

While I am sympathetic to such feminist readings of River—especially in light of the ways that the men around her attempt to impose meaning on her—I contend that Simon’s inability to describe and understand River is a function of River’s nothingness: the “River” that Simon “knew” has been removed—and what is left is, potentially, a void. As Buckman notes when discussing “Objects in Space,” “. . . River doesn’t ‘mean anything.’ Her essence isn’t predetermined: she doesn’t have to be the paranoid schizophrenic her brother has labeled her—or the victim, the aggressor, or . . . . It is this indeterminacy that allows the temporary possibility that she has indeed melted into the ship . . .” (47). River is a distinctly female emptiness waiting to be filled with meaning—and in the context of *Firefly*, the agents who might fill that lack are just-as-distinctly male (and include Whedon himself).<sup>12</sup>

[14] This is, of course, not a new theme in Whedon’s work. As Michael Marano points out in “River Tam and the Weaponized Women of the Whedonverse,” there are a number of examples of Whedon exploring “the idea of a woman created by a weapon-maker” (37).



Marano's discussion ranges from Ripley and Call in *Alien Resurrection* to the First Slayer, Buffy, Anya, the Buffybot, Darla, and River as examples of women created as weapons. This element of creation is important, for it allows Whedon to explore what happens when these women reject the purpose of their design and attempt to self-determine. What is particularly interesting about Marano's discussion is his consistent reference to the women's "inner capacity": "Even the Buffybot . . . had an innate quality of 'Buffy'ness' that made her tactically useful. . . . It's this inner capacity that makes River and the other weaponized women *useful* as weapons. This capacity is subverted and rewritten by Patriarchal authority into something useful to that authority and that is lethal" (43). Marano's analysis tends to assess this "capacity" solely in terms of the ways that these women reject patriarchal authority. While this rejection certainly happens, I want to point out that there is a more fundamental inquiry at work here on Whedon's part.

[15] As Marano points out in his discussion of River, she is "the most unactualized" weaponized woman in the Whedonverse:

Throughout *Firefly* and most of *Serenity*, she didn't have full control of her body, her speech, her mind. . . . River's actualization, or her activation, as a weapon is at least partly an actualization of her self. Prior to her trigger through the Fruity Oaty Bar commercial, she had described her mental state in "War Stories" as a jumble of impressions, intimating that the jumble was keeping herself from being herself, from understanding her memories and controlling the functions of her mind. . . . Other-directed, family focused . . . domestic issues override River's Patriarchal, 'meddling' weaponization so that she can be her own person, and reclaim those unique attributes that had been hijacked. (46)

It is this notion of "unique attributes that had been hijacked" that I want to interrogate in this essay, for when read independently of feminist claims and examined solely in terms of what might simply be called "selfhood," we can see Whedon questioning whether the existentialist arguments about objects not having innate meaning also apply to people. Is our identity innate, Whedon seems to be asking, or is it contextually

determined? If it is contextually determined, then are people—essentially—empty?

[16] This question of what we are in existential terms carries with it the possibility that there may be no such core identity—and that, when stripped of our context, there may be nothing at the core of human identity. Indeed, nothing figures prominently in *Firefly* as a source of profound anxiety. For Simon—a man of science, of knowledge, and of logic—River’s unknowability is troubling. Simon seems to be particularly disturbed by the concept of nothingness. In an exchange with Jayne later in “Objects in Space,” Simon expresses his discomfort with the idea of a spacewalk:

JAYNE: Somethin’ wrong?

SIMON: Hmmm? Oh. No. I . . . I suppose it’s just the thought of a little mylar and glass being the only thing separating a person from . . . nothing.

JAYNE: Impressive what “nothing” can do to a man. (87)

Simon again hesitates when discussing nothingness, and although it seems that he is worried about the consequences of the space suit failing, it seems that the incomprehensibility of the nothing outside them troubles him more than the idea of his suit failing. For both Simon and Jayne, “nothing” is a not an absence, but a presence. It can act on and affect what moves through it. It can be entered into and escaped from. But the paradox is that despite its presence, it is an absence—of matter, light, heat, sound, air, and life. Furthermore, Simon here seems to imagine “nothing” as antithetical to personhood. For him, and for Jayne, people are to be kept apart from “nothing.” Thus, the possibility that people might have nothing as part of them is deeply disturbing to Simon.

[17] This anxiety about nothing in “Bushwhacked” reaches its zenith in Act Three, when Simon and River hide from the Alliance by donning spacesuits and clinging to the edge of the ship. The stage direction describes the juxtaposition of Simon and River:

. . . outside of the ship where WE FIND SIMON and RIVER both in spacesuits, clinging to the side of the ship.

Simon is just freaking out, his gloved hands the only thing keeping his sweaty palms from losing purchase on the side of the ship. He

touches the seam of his helmet, making sure it's connected properly. He looks to River, worried. But he reacts—

River stares off into the limitless void of space, seemingly taking a kind of deep comfort from the vastness of it. She's doing something that we haven't really seen her do . . . she's smiling. Off Simon, continually amazed by his sister . . . (99)

This situation forces Simon to confront his fear of nothingness, but contrasts his anxiety with River's exhilaration at the "vastness" of the nothing that surrounds them. As Lorna Jowett contends, River's response here indicates that she has accepted "her position in the Black and her wide-eyed expression suggests the sublime" (111). That River's expression might register to Jowett as sublime (or a reaction to the sublime) is understandable; like River, the vast nothingness of space is unknowable, unspeakable, and a place of potential. Perhaps River, already being nothing, looks at the nothingness of space and identifies with it.

[18] There are hints of River's unusual abilities in early episodes—particularly in "Bushwhacked," when River seems to be psychically linked to both the dead crew on the derelict ship and the survivor. For instance, in Act One, after the crew has discovered the derelict ship and decided to board it, River explains to Simon that she cannot sleep because there is "Too much screaming" ("Bushwhacked" 87), implying that she is connected to the horrors that happened on the ship. Later, once River sneaks onto the ship, the stage directions explain that she "haunts the place like a ghost herself, drifting along, drawn by something" ("Bushwhacked" 89). River, connected to the passengers on board, becomes figuratively possessed—which is to say, filled by them. We see River's connection to the Reavers again in Act Two, when her sleep seems connected to the survivor's:

INT. SERENITY - INFIRMARY

The tortured delirium of the survivor in his fever sleep. Somehow his distress seems to be affecting . . .

IN. SERENITY - INARA'S SHUTTLE

River, who is sleeping in Inara's bed. Her sleep becomes more and more fitful. . . . ("Bushwhacked" 93)

In many ways, this moment of psychic-connection-while-asleep is classic horror movie cliché. It is a long-running trope that we are most vulnerable—physically and mentally—when we are asleep.<sup>13</sup> Later still, it is River who realizes that the crew is not safe from the survivor, telling Simon that “he’s coming back” (“Bushwhacked” 102)—which Simon misinterprets as a comment about the Alliance officers. The implication of River’s abilities here is not that she is clairvoyant, but that River is somehow being filled up—sometimes against her will—by the consciousness of others.

[19] We see this idea more fully depicted in “Shindig” (1.4), where River seems to become someone else:

BADGER: Yeah? Why ain’t she talking? She got a secret?

SIMON: No, I’m sure not—

RIVER: (in Badger’s accent) Sure, I got a secret. More’n one.

River raises her head, looks Badger in the eye. She’s completely sane, unafraid, and she sounds like she’s from his hometown. She’s also kinda pissed.

RIVER (cont’d)

Don’t seem likely I’d tell’em to you, do it? Anyone off Dyton Colony knows better’n to talk to strangers.

She picks something off Badger’s lapel, looks at it, wipes it back onto him.

RIVER: You’re talking loud enough for the both of us, though, ain’t you? I’ve known a dozen like you. Skipped off home early, minor graft jobs here and there. Spent some time in the lockdown, I warrant, but less time than you claim. Now you’re what, petty thief with delusions of standing? Sad little king of a sad little hill.

BADGER: Nice to see someone from the old homestead.

RIVER: Not really.

(to Simon)

Call me f anyone interesting shows up. (“Shindig” 122)

This exchange goes undiscussed, for both the remainder of the episode and the series. It is possible here that River is merely assessing Badger, faking his accent, and then acting as if she were from the same colony as him.<sup>14</sup>

[20] An alternate interpretation is that River *actually* becomes a version of Badger. As we learn later in the series, and in *Serenity*, River is what Mal calls a “reader”—a quality explored in both “Shindig” and “Safe”—and this scene marks the beginning of the show’s attempt to establish this facet of River’s character. River’s speech is thus ironic; it is a response to each of the questions Badger puts to her: “Who’s this then?” “What’s your story, luv?” “Why ain’t she talking? She got a secret?” River’s response to “Who’s this then?” seems to be that she is either just like Badger or so much like Badger that she reveals the degree to which Badger’s identity is performative. Indeed, River’s response to Badger’s question “What’s your story?” is simply to tell Badger his own story, and in the process effectively become him. Despite this display, River seems to find Badger’s an uninteresting personality to assume. What I am suggesting here is that River is empty, waiting, potential, and her identity is largely a function of whatever context she happens to be in. Like objects considered in an existentialist fashion, River’s “self” is determined by her context.

[21] In this sense, River is like the cows with which she identifies in the episode “Safe” (1.5). After they have been offloaded, River communes with the animals:

RIVER: Little soul big world. Eat and sleep and eat . . .

Jayne appears, bringing another cow, sees her communing with the bovine. She’s reaching back toward the animals.

RIVER (cont’d): Many souls. Very straight, very simple...

...

MAL: Cattle on the ship three weeks, she don’t go near ‘em. Suddenly, we’re on Jiangyin and she’s got a driving need to commune with the beasts?

River looks at Mal very seriously.

RIVER: They weren’t cows inside. They were waiting to be, but they forgot. Now they see sky and they remember what they are. (“Safe” 128)

For River, without their proper context, the cows exist in some liminal state between cow-ness and waiting-to-be-cow-ness. Like River in limbo in her box—or even the metaphorical infant River in the box of the ship—the cows in space in the box of the ship exist apart from their

proper context, and thus, like River, in a liminal space between what they will be and nothing. As Zynda points out, River experiences the world with a “childlike sense of wonder” as she “examines things as ‘bare’ objects. . . . Thus, when River views things in a way that is divorced from the functions and meanings others give them, they appear benign; moreover, this is a source of joy for her. She experiences things (as a child does) that others miss, because they take things for granted” (90-91). Divorced from their “proper” context, the cattle exist as mere objects.

[22] This liminality becomes significant later, when we learn in “Safe” that River’s memory has been affected by whatever the Alliance did to her:

RIVER: I know I did. You don’t think I do, but . . . I get confused. I remember everything, I remember too much and some of it’s made up and some of it . . . can’t be quantified, and there’s secrets and . . . (144)

River’s description of her memory here is crucial if we (or Simon) are to assess what she is. If, as Locke argues, our memory is essential to identity, the idea that River’s memory is “confused” and “made up” calls her identity into question.<sup>15</sup> The River whom Simon “knew” is now a confused jumble of (sometimes false) memories, and one of the implications of this change is that she is no longer the “River” of her youth at all. Indeed, considering that “Safe” establishes that River is a “reader,” and that Simon later describes River’s condition as feeling everything, it seems that River serves as a kind of a vessel for the memories, thoughts, and feelings of other people, too. If River’s “self” can be imposed or removed, does that mean that River possesses no “inherent” identity? What does that mean for Summer Glau, the actress who portrays River? Or any of Whedon’s actors and actresses?<sup>16</sup>

[23] Even after the heist in “Ariel” (1.9) provides Simon with both a scan of River’s brain and the medicine he needs to treat her, Simon still has difficulties explaining River. In “War Stories” (1.10), for instance, as Simon and Book—the man of science and the man of faith—examine River’s brain scan, Book sees River as a philosophical problem while Simon can detect patterns but not meaning:

BOOK: I'm just wondering if they put her through this just to see how much she could take. To "truly meet her," as Shan Yu would have said.

SIMON: No. The more I see, the more I think their purpose was very specific.

(He shows a readout)

Look at that. The pattern. Besides, if all they cared about was hurting River, they wouldn't still be after her. This isn't my specialty, but whatever they were doing, I gotta figure they were close to succeeding.

BOOK: But she's doing better?

SIMON: I've tried a couple of different medications. She's sleeping better, but nothing really stable. ("War Stories" 87)

The irony here is that even the ability to see *into* River's brain does not explain what River is. Instead, what Simon finds is the "purpose" and the "pattern" of others inside her. In other words, gazing into River's brain does not reveal River-ness; it reveals the trace of the presence of others.

[24] Later in "War Stories," River articulates a similar concern over her incoherence. After Simon finds her, sweaty and shaking, in their quarters, River is distressed about her condition:

RIVER: I threw up.

SIMON: I'm sorry, it's a side effect . . . . We just have to find the right treatment for you. How do you feel now?

RIVER: Going. Going back, like the apple bits coming back up. Chaos.

SIMON: But you felt okay this morning. . . .

RIVER: Played with Kaylee, the sun came out and I walked on my feet, heard with my ears. . .

(crumbling)

I hate the bits, the bits that stay down and I work, I function like I'm a girl. I hate it because I know it'll go away, the sun goes dark and chaos is come again. Bits. Fluids.

(really crying now)

What am I?

He takes her in his arms, calms her shaking.

SIMON: You're my beautiful sister.

River's response to Simon's initial question about how she feels is telling. River, insofar as she is the coherent girl who identifies herself as Simon's sister, perceives herself as "going back" to some other place where "River" is no longer present. Marano reads this scene as River describing herself as "a jumble of impressions, intimating that the jumble was keeping herself from being herself, from understanding her memories and controlling the functions of her mind" (46). Indeed, River seems to identify herself with the apple bits she has vomited up; like "River," they are ejected from the body, leaving behind only the chaos of pieces and remnants of what was there before. Those remnants of a whole, undamaged, River, she seems to be saying, are "the bits that stay down," and which allow her to know, to her horror, that her lucidity will "go away, the sun goes dark and chaos is come again." The anxiety over knowing that she will eventually descend into chaos thus sends River spiralling into a more literal association with the metaphor. Rather than being "like" the "bits that stay down," she is now a literal construction of "Bits. Fluids."—remnants and pieces of something larger and no longer present. Thus her question—"What am I?"—does triple duty, asking first about what makes up her physical body, second what she is if she is made of remnants, and third, *who* she is, given all of this. But just as seeing into her brain reveals nothing, none of this provides an answer.

[25] River seems to understand herself first in terms of parts and function ("I walked on my feet, heard with my ears . . . I work, I function like I'm a girl"), but even that is an insufficient description. She does not claim she is a girl; she merely says that she functions as if she were one. Girl-ness, in other words, does not define her. Simon's response to the question of what River is does not help. He cannot define or explain her; he can only describe how she relates to him, and in this case, he can only identify her as the object of possession, as an aesthetic object, and as someone located within a patrilineal relationship—none of which define her as a discrete individual. If River is unknowable, if she is a collection of parts and behaviors with nothing inside, she is also perhaps not even a person, a possibility explored explicitly in both "Objects in Space" and the film *Serenity*.



[26] It is important that Whedon has claimed that “Objects in Space” best represents his entire body of work. It is even more important that we recognize that the existentialist inquiries contained in “Objects in Space” are not an isolated instance. Such interrogations of the nature of identity appear consistently in Whedon’s work—what is Woody if he is not Andy’s favorite toy? What is Buzz if he is a toy and not a space ranger? What is Buffy if she is not a weapon? What is Ripley if she is not human anymore? What are the people controlled by Loki? What are the Dolls in the Dollhouse when they are without identity? Whedon, it seems, has spent a significant portion of his career exploring such questions, and it is important that scholars expand exploration of Whedon’s work’s consistent theme of existentialist interrogations of identity.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> We can see this disdain most clearly in the DVD commentary for *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along-Blog* (2008), which is also in musical form, where Whedon’s solo song—“Pick It Apart”—mounts a complaint about the apparent demands placed on artists to explain the origins of their art.

<sup>2</sup> Editor’s note: Consider the Ginn, Buckman, and Porter-edited collection *Joss Whedon’s Dollhouse: Confounding Purpose, Confusing Identity* and the seven chapters listed under the the “Human Identity” topic in *Reading Joss Whedon* (edited by Rhonda V. Wilcox, Tanya R. Cochran, Cynthia Masson, and David Lavery) among other scholarly works on the shifting nature of identity in Whedon.

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<sup>3</sup> Most obviously, Whedon will return to this issue in *Dollhouse*. But the issue of individuals having their identities removed or replaced appears again in both *Cabin in the Woods* (where the protagonists have had their identities altered so that they conform to the expected roles) and in *The Avengers* (where Loki's staff gives him the power to control people's minds).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, J. Michael Richardson and J. Douglas Rabb's *The Existential Joss Whedon* for a broad discussion of the ways Whedon engages existentialist problems in his early work.

<sup>5</sup> Much of Buckman's argument informs—if not directly, then in the periphery of—my thinking on this topic.

<sup>6</sup> Editor's note: See also Perdigo on River's identity as "poised between worlds: she is intuitive and cerebral . . . [but also] utterly corporeal" (64).

<sup>7</sup> For philosophical treatments of the concept of nothingness, see Sören Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Dread* (1844), Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), and Jean Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943).

<sup>8</sup> I will discuss this tendency to impose narratives on River in more detail later.

<sup>9</sup> It is particularly interesting, then, that to Simon, the familial relationship does not change even if River is no longer a person.

<sup>10</sup> This is not the last time that Mal will comment on River's personhood. In *Serenity*, Mal tells River that "The 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. . . ." (*Serenity: The Official Companion* 116).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Rabb and Richardson, "Adventures in the Moral Imagination: Memory and Identity in Whedon's Narrative Ethics."

<sup>12</sup> The irony, of course, is that however much Whedon may attempt to draw attention to the problems associated with the imposition of male narratives onto River, in the end, it is his narrative that will be authoritative. It is notable, then, that Whedon will refrain from imposing such a narrative, allowing River to be the "little albatross" opposite Mal's speech at the end of *Serenity*.

<sup>13</sup> Although this is a common element in horror films (e.g. *Nightmare on Elm Street* [1984]), Whedon has toyed with this trope in his work, perhaps most notably in the *Buffy* episode "Restless" (4.22), in which the Scoobies are haunted by the spirit of the first Slayer.

<sup>14</sup> Such a reading would be consistent with Whedon's fascination with having his actors represent actors acting.

<sup>15</sup> See Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, book II, chapter 27.

<sup>16</sup> These are questions that Whedon will explore more directly in *Dollhouse*.