

**Conversation, Reflection, and Shared Alienation:  
Forming Relationships with the Spaceship *Serenity* in Joss Whedon's *Firefly***

©Jordyn Wear  
Vancouver Island University, BC., Canada

[1] When examining connections between the crew of the spaceship *Serenity* and the ship itself, most scholarship focuses on the relationship between *Serenity* and her mechanic Kaylee Frye, with particular emphasis placed on their ability to “converse” with one another. Kaylee and *Serenity*'s relationship is noted consistently throughout the series with a frequency and emphasis befitting Kaylee's role in the ship's operation. This relationship, however, is only one of many possible forms of kinship that exist between the ship and her crew members. *Serenity*'s interactions with the crew are not just limited to instances where she projects a need for repair and the crew responds accordingly. In addition to the dialogue-based relationship that Kaylee demonstrates, *Serenity* also forms relationships that are based on characteristics that she shares with certain crew members and different forms of expression and communication. These shared characteristics are exemplified by *Serenity*'s first mate Zoe Washburne, while the alternate forms of expression and communication are portrayed and utilized by River Tam, a young genius and passenger who is on the run from the Alliance. Depending on which character *Serenity* interacts with, these varied connections can involve certain levels of conversation, reflection, and a shared state of alienation. This flexibility solidifies *Serenity*'s designation as a multifaceted character in the show by suggesting that she possesses the ability to form complex and diverse relationships within the environment in which she simultaneously provides and resides.

[2] The conversational aspect of Kaylee and *Serenity*'s interactions both defines and limits their relationship. *Serenity* is posed as an active speaker and Kaylee as the listener who attempts to meet *Serenity*'s professed needs; in other words, “this mechanic works with her machine, and the machine works with the mechanic” (Hager 186). There are several instances when Kaylee talks about *Serenity* as though the ship is capable of speech. The most obvious ones are in “Out of Gas” (F1008) when she laments “Usually she lets me know when something's wrong” and in “Heart of Gold” (F1013) when she says “I'll talk to *Serenity*, see what she's got we might use.” Though this relationship is definitely important for the continued maintenance of the ship and the safety of the crew, Kaylee and *Serenity*'s connection is not as intensive as it might be perceived. For example, she is rather detached from the ship in terms of physical contact or casual ministrations. Besides the instance in “Serenity” (F1001) when she strokes *Serenity*'s hull and murmurs, “That's my good girl,” Kaylee's contact with the ship is rarely immediately tactile. She is usually touching the ship with her tools and with a specific intent; conversely, River is the character that is the most casually tactile with *Serenity*. This difference

can be observed in “Objects in Space” (F1014) in relation to Kaylee’s and River’s footwear (or lack thereof). River is constantly barefoot and therefore always physically in touch with the ship. She utilizes this tactile connection to locate herself within the ship’s environment and experiences sensual joy in doing so (Zynda 91). Meanwhile, Kaylee is shown barefoot when engaging with Simon Tam, the ship's doctor and the object of her affections, but wearing sandals when she is lying tied up near *Serenity*’s engine (“Objects in Space” F1014). Therefore, Kaylee's ability to engage in this tactile relationship with the ship is present but impeded. This impediment shows that even though Kaylee’s relationship with *Serenity* is the most blatantly portrayed, there is still room for alternative and deeper relationships between the ship and other crew members. Likewise, Kaylee can choose to redirect her openness and tactile connection towards her relationship with Simon, rather than the one she shares with *Serenity*.

[3] Before continuing to address the implied close relationship between *Serenity* and River, it is important to consider another relationship that has not often been explored—the one between *Serenity* and Zoe. While Kaylee and *Serenity* are related through conversation, Zoe and *Serenity* are related through their commonalities. Both serve similar roles in relation to the other crew members, especially Captain Malcolm “Mal” Reynolds and the ship’s pilot Hoban “Wash” Washburne, who is also Zoe’s husband. Zoe and *Serenity* act as Mal’s partners; they help him achieve and retain the freedom for which he constantly strives. His survival on the edges of the ‘verse would not be possible without either of them. For example, in “Out of Gas” the loss of both Zoe and *Serenity*’s steady presences as a result of a catastrophic engine explosion greatly affects Mal's confidence; he lashes out at Wash and acts harshly when Kaylee conveys her inability to fix the ship. This episode also illustrates that Zoe and *Serenity* share similar connections with Wash, since they are essentially the two characters to whom he is most loyal and with whom he has the strongest connection. Wash’s skills as a pilot have given him many options for employment, but he has chosen *Serenity* because he was “starting to get a feel here” upon his first introduction not only to the ship, but to Zoe as well (“Out of Gas” F1008). His additional musings about adding a few modifications to get some maneuverability out of the ship could also reflect his subsequent courtship with Zoe; she is a stalwart character, and he would have had to employ a few choice tactics to sway her in his direction. Meanwhile, Zoe’s skepticism is not just reserved for Wash. She shows doubt towards *Serenity* as well, as indicated by her initial remark about the ship looking like “a piece of *fei-oo* [junk]” upon their introduction to one another (“Out of Gas” F1008). Zoe and this “piece of junk,” however, are equally desirable in Wash’s eyes. By first falling for the ship, he is given a chance to eventually fall for Zoe as well; by relinquishing her trepidation about both *Serenity* and Wash, Zoe is awarded that same chance.

[4] Besides sharing similar roles with the ship, Zoe can occasionally embody it and become reflective of its state. This reflection occurs in one particular instance—when *Serenity*’s engine explodes and Zoe is struck by the resulting fireball (“Out of Gas” F1008). Throughout

this episode, references to Zoe's and *Serenity*'s ailments are laden with dual meaning. For example, when Kaylee remarks "She's not movin'," her comment is at first taken as a reference to Zoe. Even when Kaylee qualifies it as a comment about *Serenity*, Mal's response—"I know. Which is why we need to suss out what it was that happened so we can get her going again, right?" – is just as indicative of Zoe's state. Additionally, *Serenity*'s and Zoe's injuries mirror one another (they are internally based with no signs of outer burning), as do the catalysts for their recovery (the adrenaline for Zoe's heart and the catalyzer for *Serenity*) ("Out of Gas" F1008). Zoe and *Serenity*'s reflections of each other's state and their shared roles provide the same conundrum for both Mal and Wash. The two men must decide with which "woman" their loyalties lie. Though Mal eventually chooses to remain with *Serenity* and Wash ultimately abandons his post to tend to his wife, this quandary speaks to *Serenity*'s status and worth as a character. It shows how she can be reflective of and equated with other characters, which also indicates just how valued she is. This act of equation also helps the viewer understand and accept *Serenity* as a character by connecting her with the human elements of the show.

[5] While Zoe provides an alternative relationship to Kaylee's, River portrays a heightened and inclusive one that embodies characteristics of both conversation with the ship and occasional reflection of the ship's characteristics. River's most blatant interaction with *Serenity* is her deceptive "embodiment" of the ship in "Objects in Space." Here, she speaks for the ship by equating their wishes for a common result—the removal of the bounty hunter Jubal Early and the intrusive threat to the crew that he represents in his quest to capture Simon and River and return them to the Alliance ("Objects in Space" F1014). There have been other instances, however, both before and after this episode in which River and *Serenity* either enter into a dialogue or reflect one another. This ability could be due to the fact that they both occupy similar roles among the crew; they embody different forms of an "other." In her book chapter "Burning River: Witchcraft and the Other in *Firefly*," K. Dale Koontz argues that River's "otherness" makes her "very much a blank slate on which others project their own understanding of what a young girl *should* be, as well as providing a place to scrawl their own fears" (160). The crew also performs a similar action with *Serenity*—they use her as a blank slate to develop and practice their ideas of what the concept of freedom should consist. She is not just a vehicle that takes them "farther out to the borders of civilized space" and "to the frontier" (Sturgis 30). Even though *Serenity* provides them with a form of escape, they must contend with the consequences that result from this reliance on her, which are especially exemplified when her engine and life support systems fail them ("Out of Gas" F1008). Lisa Hager explores the form of "otherness" that *Serenity* herself embodies. She posits that *Serenity* is an "other" in terms of her place as a machine within a human-based environment, though she is still considered an integral link within this shared space (185). Significantly, though she is necessary for maintaining the balance of that generated human/machine system, she can never completely be repaired. Hager argues that the part that flies off the ship at the end of the film *Serenity* (2005) illustrates that "despite being fixed up with the help of the Alliance, *Serenity* here asserts her otherness, but also her

personality, her refusal to be 'fixed,' to be made in any way into the perfect machine" (191). River, too, has resisted the Alliance's attempts at "fixing" her in accordance to their needs, as well as her brother Simon's attempts to undo their "reparations." River shares *Serenity's* trait of never being done and always in a state of becoming, with the continuous efforts of Simon—akin to Kaylee's tinkering with *Serenity*—making this state possible.

[6] River is constantly *framed* on the outside of the group as well, seeming more at ease being in physical contact with the ship than in verbal contact with the crew. Loni Peristere, a visual effects supervisor on *Firefly* and *Serenity*, describes the ship as "a place of quiet, a center where one can focus, where one might find peace or love" (120). It is certainly feasible to think of *Serenity* as the character that provides the least amount of mental anguish for River; the ship serves as a place where she can find not only commonalities but also a solace that is comparably easy to access. Their shared position, as "others" allow them to operate outside of the crew's all-encompassing environment, while still remaining integral parts of the system. For example, the whole crew is involved in repairing the ship after the final battle in the film *Serenity*. Much like they band together to employ different forms of aid and make *Serenity* herself again, they also have to contribute to River's rehabilitation by trusting her and accepting her position as an "other." By the end of the movie, *Serenity* is once again accepted as a home and an integral member of the crew, as is River (*Serenity*). Though they are still considered "others," they have been accepted because of this designation, not in spite of it.

[7] River and *Serenity* also share the distinction of becoming significantly weaponized. River is significantly weaponized by the Alliance; this weaponization is hinted at when she efficiently shoots three of the vengeful gangster Adelai Niska's henchmen with her gaze averted ("War Stories" F1010) and subsequently confirmed when she is triggered in the Maidenhead bar by subliminal coding in a Fruity Oaty Bars commercial (*Serenity*). Though her transformation into a weapon is something that horrifies the crew and prompts them to alienate her, it also becomes an integral part in their survival of the Reavers, a cannibalistic humanoid group that lurks on the outer edges of the 'verse (*Serenity*). Likewise, *Serenity* becomes a pseudo-weapon when she loses her catalyzer—posing a deadly threat to all those aboard—and she is physically weaponized in the film *Serenity* so that she can pass as a Reaver ship ("Out of Gas" F1014; *Serenity*). *Serenity* has never been in possession of weaponry before this instance; as crew member Jayne Cobb notes, she is "a transport ship" that "ain't got no guns on it" ("The Train Job" F1002). Loni Peristere asserts that "*Serenity* doesn't have any guns. Her best offense is defense and those who live inside of her" (123). This quality is certainly true of River as well; for most of the series, River comes across as a helpless individual who is in need of protection. It is in the instances when she has to *defend* the people whom she loves that her weaponization seems beneficial; the trouble occurs when she acts for purely *offensive* reasons, such as in the Maidenhead bar and in her battle against the Reavers (*Serenity*). Michael Marano argues that "the threat of the Reavers to her domestic reality" is what "fully [realizes] River's potential as a

human being and weapon” (47). *Serenity*’s weaponization also keeps her crew protected despite the moral quandaries it puts them through, while simultaneously helping define who *Serenity* is as a character: she does not have weapons, she does not bear bodies or splashes of red paint, and she is a home, not “an abomination” (*Serenity*). Likewise, River is not an assassin, nor a mindless killing machine. She is a bright and troubled young woman. Sometimes she and *Serenity* have to embrace the uglier identities bestowed upon them in order to keep their crew safe.

[8] This connection through weaponization is indicative of another shared trait. River and *Serenity* are constantly quantified and considered in terms of their parts; these parts can be meddled with, taken away, and replaced. This potential for dismantlement is seen in the Alliance’s removal of River’s amygdala. This action is, in their eyes, as inconsequential as Kaylee’s decision to remove *Serenity*’s reg couple because it “serve[d] only to hamper the proper workings of the other engine parts” (Sturgis 25). The Alliance thought River’s amygdala was “gumming up the works” and its removal would provide them with “freedom from obstacles” (25). Their stripping of her amygdala, however, proves to be more akin to the removal of *Serenity*’s catalyzer—both are a small but integral piece in a huge system. Just as the amygdala is “one structure in a series of related structures throughout the brain” (Daniels 133-4), the catalyzer is a “nothing part” that is really only “nothing til you don’t got one. Then it appears to be everything” (“Out of Gas” F1008). Consequentially, River and *Serenity* become a danger to themselves and others when these parts are removed and tampered with. By thinking about them in terms of their parts, the Alliance and the crew are able to quantify them despite their deviant state as “others.”

[9] These traits and experiences that River shares with *Serenity* help her to realistically embody the ship when the occasion calls for it and to facilitate conversation between the two at a deeper level than Kaylee is able to achieve. In some instances River even goes so far as to conceivably speak on behalf of the ship. Unlike the performance that River directs at Early, these instances seem to involve less predetermination on her part and come across as primarily instinctual. One example is rather ominous. After *Serenity*’s engine blows, Kaylee remarks that *Serenity* usually lets her know when something is wrong; she goes on to muse, “Maybe she did. I just wasn’t payin’ attention.” Prior to this explosion, River mutters “fire,” which is dismissed as a remark about Simon’s neglect of his birthday cake (“Out of Gas” F1008). Instead it can arguably be read as the warning from *Serenity* that Kaylee feels she has missed; the ship “speaks through” River in an attempt to warn the crew of the impending disaster. In contrast, the next example is more humorous. In the film *Serenity*, upon successfully escaping the Reavers thanks to the execution of the “Barn Swallow” manoeuvre, River remarks “I swallowed a bug” (*Serenity*). This observation is both a lighthearted comment on something she has been subjected to and an expression of what *Serenity* herself has metaphorically just done in her role as the “barn swallow” – she swallowed up the mule as though it was a bug. Despite the drastically different

circumstances that surround them, both of these instances serve to illustrate River's ability to manifest the ship in a way that goes beyond a simple performance for ulterior motives. She has moved away from speaking *with* the ship to anticipating its feelings and formulating expressions based on this insight. Their many similarities facilitate this deep understanding of the ship.

[10] Though Kaylee, Zoe, and River all participate in various forms of communication with *Serenity* at different levels, all of these means of interaction are valuable in developing *Serenity* as a character within this familial environment. All three levels of kinship are addressed quite fittingly in the end scene of the film *Serenity*. Here, Mal shares his secret for flying: "Love. You take a boat in the air you don't love, she'll shake you off just as sure as the turning of worlds. Love keeps her in the air when she oughta fall down, tells you she's hurting 'fore she keens. Makes her a home" (*Serenity*). His words reflect what resides at the center of all of these previously discussed relationships that characters have formed with *Serenity*, whether they are related to conversation, reflection, or shared alienation. Love is what allows Kaylee to speak with *Serenity* and figure out what she needs. Love is what equates Zoe and *Serenity* in the eyes of Mal and Wash, who care for both of them in similar capacities. Finally, love is what will help River to pilot *Serenity*. River will be aided significantly by her ability to understand *Serenity* through her own open dialogue with her and also recognizing the ship's experiences and needs as similar to River's own. While providing River with an escape from the forces that try to exploit her and retool her to meet their needs, *Serenity* has also provided River with solace and kinship. Though both will never be completely fixed and will always be subjected to some level of disconnect from the rest of the crew, the crew still chooses to place their trust in both, therefore negating the need for that absolute reparation to take place. No matter how many times *Serenity* breaks down, she still remains their home. No matter how many times River transgresses, she will still be considered a valued and integral part of the family. Kaylee may be able to speak with *Serenity* and Zoe may be able to reflect the ship's characteristics, but River is the one who truly understands all the facets of the ship. These varying degrees of fostered relationships not only reveal and explore different characteristics of these three women, but also defend *Serenity*'s position as a character—one that interacts with, reflects, and connects with those around her.

© Jordyn Wear

Published Online in *Watcher Junior* 8.1 (Spring 2015).

ISSN: 1555-7863

<http://www.whedonstudies.tv/watcher-junior-the-undergraduate-journal-of-whedon-studies.html>

### Works Cited

Daniels, Bradley J. "Stripping' River Tam's Amygdala." *The Psychology of Joss Whedon*. Ed. Joy Davidson. Dallas: Benbella Books, Inc., 2007, 131-140. E-book.

Hager, Lisa. "Aiming to Misbehave at the Boundary between the Human and the Machine: The Queer Steampunk Ecology of Joss Whedon's *Firefly* and *Serenity*." *The Philosophy of Joss Whedon*. Ed. Dean A. Kowalski and S. Evan Kreider. Lexington: U of Kentucky Press, 2011. 182-93. Print.

"Heart of Gold." *Firefly*. Twentieth Century Fox, 2003. DVD.

Koontz, K. Dale. *Faith and Choice in the Works of Joss Whedon*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008. Print.

Marano, Michael. "River Tam and the Weaponized Women of the Whedonverse." *Serenity Found: More Unauthorized Essays on Joss Whedon's Firefly Universe*. Ed. Jane Espenson. Dallas: Benbella, 2007. 117-30. E-book.

"Objects in Space." *Firefly*. Twentieth Century Fox, 2002. DVD.

"Out of Gas." *Firefly*. Twentieth Century Fox, 2002. DVD.

Peristere, Loni. "Mutant Enemy U." *Serenity Found: More Unauthorized Essays on Joss Whedon's Firefly Universe*. Ed. Jane Espenson. Dallas: Benbella, 2007. 37-48. E-book.

"Serenity." *Firefly*. Twentieth Century Fox, 2002. DVD.

*Serenity*. Dir. Joss Whedon. Perf. Nathan Fillion, Gina Torres, Alan Tudyk, and Morena Baccarin. Universal Pictures, 2005. DVD.

Sturgis, Amy H. "'Just Get Us a Little Further': Liberty and the Frontier in *Firefly* and *Serenity*." *The Philosophy of Joss Whedon*. Ed. Dean A. Kowalski and S. Evan Kreider. Lexington: U of Kentucky Press, 2011. 24-38. Print.

"The Train Job." *Firefly*. Twentieth Century Fox, 2002. DVD.

"War Stories." *Firefly*. Twentieth Century Fox, 2002. DVD.

Zynda, Lyle. "We're All Just Floating in Space." *Finding Serenity: Anti-heroes, Lost Shepherds*

*and Space Hookers in Joss Whedon's Firefly*. Ed. Jane Espenson. Dallas: Benbella, 2004. 85-95. Print.