

‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore: Postfeminist Prostitution in Joss Whedon’s Firefly?
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Introduction

Joss Whedon has been praised for his positive representations of women, and the way he has sought to challenge the negative portrayal of marginalized members of society. In the short-lived series Firefly (shown on the US cable channel Fox between September and December 2002) these aspects of his work have the potential to come together in the character of Inara, whose occupation as ‘Companion’ is, as the text makes clear, that of whore. With Inara, Whedon is seeking to incorporate perhaps the most marginalised of women into the text in an ostensibly non-pejorative way. This is more problematic than his earlier attempts to rewrite the role of women, as the discourse around the commercialization of sex has been a constant source of tension within feminism, with heated debate as to whether prostitution is crucial to the patriarchal affirmation of masculinity or can - in some instances - offer women the possibility of empowerment.

In this paper I argue that while, on the surface, Firefly may suggest the rehabilitation of the prostitute, with its insistence on Inara as one of the most respectable inhabitants of the spaceship *Serenity*, the show – in respect of both its form and its content – nevertheless draws on a patriarchal and colonialist discourse to reinscribe the body of a woman of colour as a site of white (predominantly male) hegemonic privilege. While at one level Inara is the embodiment of what might be called the postfeminist prostitute with the power to say who, when, and how much, her agency is undermined by the extent to which she is subject to limitations placed on her through regulation, discursive violence and her construction as the racialized ‘other’. This paradox makes problematic any progressive reading of the text. Instead, I want to propose that while, as what Matt Hills (2002) has termed scholar-fans of Whedon, many of us may want to think of Whedon as opening up a new and radical discursive space for the representation of women, what we actually get in Firefly is a return to a more traditional world. The pity of Inara is not that she’s a whore, it is that she completely fails to embody any of the possibilities that a valorisation of whoredom might open up, thereby paving the way for a postfeminist politics of prostitution.

It could be argued that it is unfair to expect Whedon to offer such a valorisation. Why should an individual man (moreover a white, heterosexual man) be the one chosen to stand alone against the forces of media patriarchy? (Forgive the Buffy allusion). My answer would be that Whedon has become so venerated (see David Lavery 2002, 2004) that we now hold him to higher standards of feminist sensibility that we would other producer/creators. Indeed, Whedon has consciously established his own set of expectations against which all of his future work will be judged. It is therefore fair to evaluate Firefly and Inara within a framework which Whedon himself has had a hand in creating.

Whedon is what Pearson (2005:15) has described as a ‘high-profile hyphenate’, one of a small number of producer/auteurs whose work is the hallmark of what has come to be known as quality television (Jancovich and Lyons (eds.) 2003), who have a high degree of creative control over their programmes. Whedon also enjoys an intense relationship with his audience characteristic of cult TV (Pearson, 2005:18). His name functions not only as a guarantee of quality, but also as a brand that enables links to be formed between a media text and a range of spin-off products (Lury, in Johnson, 2005:111). So while this article draws on a close reading of the text of Firefly this is made possible by the availability of the DVD box-set of the series. This offers not just the opportunity to view the text repeatedly and study it in depth, but also provides a range of ‘extras’ including commentary from Whedon on a number of episodes in which he makes his authorial intention explicit. Another secondary source drawn on for this article is The Official Visual Companion to the spin-off film Serenity (Whedon:2005). The existence of such secondary texts not only offers access to the script and full shooting directions, but also offers knowledge of scenes that were deleted during editing as well as providing a range of commentary material. Such riches enable scholars to approach texts with a degree of understanding of the intention of their creator not possible in previous television eras.

Back to the Future

Joss Whedon considers himself a feminist (Lorna Jowett, 2005: 2, 18). Yet as Jowett notes, Whedon’s work is structured within a context that is not so much feminist as postfeminist and postmodern – describing Buffy [the Vampire Slayer, 1997-2003] as “an ideologically and formally ambiguous postfeminist artefact, one that is characteristic of postmodern cultural production. It is both a product of and a response to our postfeminist and postmodern society.” (2005:2). This distinction between feminist and postfeminist is critical to my engagement with the character of Inara, as I want to argue that within a feminist-influenced text Inara stands out as the supposed embodiment of the postfeminist woman – able to combine feminism with femininity, but drawing power more from the latter than the former.

Charlotte Brunsdon (1997) and Angela McRobbie (1994, 1999, 2004) have both engaged with the way in which feminism has been transformed over the course of the 1990s into the discourse of postfeminism, and the ways in which this transformation has manifested itself in popular culture. In ‘Pedagogies of the feminine’, Brunsdon argues that the time has come for scholars who identify as feminist to recognise the historical specificity of 1970s-1980s feminism and in particular the way in which “[F]eminist identity was, in some ways, understood as an identity for women which transcended – and by implication, put an end to – traditional femininity.” (1997:186). She goes on to state, however, that the time has now come to jettison “a certain kind of politically correct feminist identity which constructs other feminine identities as somehow ‘invalid’” (ibid.). This is the point picked up by McRobbie when she argues that young women of the 1990s “[F]ar from having to relinquish their femininity to achieve ‘equality’ ... have demanded their right to hold on to it intact, even excessively” (1994:166).

McRobbie is drawing attention to a specific postfeminist discourse that questions the stark opposition between feminism and femininity, proposing that this

has given way to something far more fluid (1999:47). Sarah Projansky (2001) has termed this discourse (hetero)sex-positive postfeminism which, she argues, includes women's choice to engage in heterosexually attractive bodily behaviour. It is this alignment between feminine and feminist discourses that has come to dominate the representation of women in the key texts of popular culture that emerged in the late 1990s and continue to dominate the TV schedules of today (see Rachel Moseley and Jacinda Read, 2002¹).

For readers unfamiliar with *Firefly* a brief introduction is necessary. Set notionally 500 years in the future when descendants of Earth inhabit a range of planets, it nevertheless draws on a discourse of late nineteenth century America – in particular the post Civil War era. A 'frontier' mentality dominates – there are a number of 'core' planets, but the show focuses on the inhabitants of those planets on the border – the new Wild West where the law of the gun prevails. Based on Whedon's view that the last great superpowers on earth will be the USA and China, the show also invokes a US-Oriental hybrid culture. The Oriental influences in the world of *Firefly* are less of a melting pot and more the re-emergence of the fantasy of a generic Orient, echoing Teresa de Lauretis' (1999) reading of *M. Butterfly* as drawing on an 'Orientalist pastiche' of Chinese/Japanese culture that perpetuates the conflation of histories and cultures within the discourse of Orientalism. This colonialist move paves the way for Inara to embody a similarly generic fantasy of the woman of colour as a source of libertine and guilt-free sex – a point to which I will return.

The show is based around the crew of the cargo ship *Serenity* (*Firefly* is the make of the ship) captained by Malcolm Reynolds (Mal), a disillusioned soldier who fought on the losing side of a 'civil' war between the Alliance (the victors) and the Independents. Other members of the crew are Zoe, a fellow soldier and Mal's second in command, her husband Wash (the ship's pilot), Jayne (a male mercenary) and Kaylee (the mechanic). This crew make their living by taking whatever jobs they can – some legitimate, but more often petty theft and low-grade smuggling. *Serenity* is also the home of Inara, a 'Companion' who – the text alleges – is the most respectable of *Serenity*'s inhabitants, the only one able to make a living without resorting to illegal activities. In the first episode of the series (as intended by Whedon, rather than as shown on Fox²) *Serenity* picks up three passengers: Book (a 'shepherd'/preacher), Simon (a doctor) and his sister River, a child genius who Simon has helped escape from a secret Alliance facility where she was being held prisoner.

This 'back to the future' universe clearly invokes a world that takes account of the equality supposedly achieved by the second wave feminist movement. No one questions Zoe's credentials as a front line soldier. In flashback she is seen fighting alongside Mal on the battlefield, including being at his side during the crucial Battle of *Serenity* that marked the defeat of the Independents. Throughout the series she is seen fighting alongside Mal and Jayne, shooting her way out of trouble and, in Mal's absence, taking responsibility for strategic decisions. Similarly there is no question of Kaylee's competence as a mechanic, able to keep the 'ship' 'afloat', although this is generally represented as a natural gift rather than an acquired skill, and her relationship with *Serenity* draws on a discourse of nurturance (indeed, *Serenity* might be viewed as Kaylee's surrogate child). River draws on the Whedonesque discourse of the gifted girl. The series hints that she is the most powerful person on board the ship

– or would be in the event of being able to harness her power. Indeed, the film *Serenity* (released three years after the series) focuses on the story of River and includes two set-pieces that showcase her spectacular fighting skills.⁴ All three of these female characters draw on a second wave feminist discourse in that they enjoy a seemingly equal relationship with the male crew members and do not trade on their femininity as a source of their power.

In contrast to Zoe and Kaylee who embody the gains of second wave feminism, and whose dress and behaviour reflect the universal valorisation of masculinity associated with this, Inara is not only feminine - but excessively so. Her appearance is always womanly and over the course of the series she appears dressed in a range of beautiful costumes all of which have an Oriental feel to them, and which are designed to showcase (and thus fetishize) parts of her body. As a Companion her appearance is her living, so her make-up is always immaculate, and her grooming meticulous. Within the text, her grooming rituals facilitate her location as the object of the male gaze. Perhaps the most voyeuristic scene in the episode ‘Serenity’ is that in which the camera lingers on the naked back of Inara as she ritually cleanses herself with a sponge bath. But this is the classic, rather than the heterosex-positive postfeminist, male gaze proposed by Projansky - as the text offers no evidence that Inara is aware of the camera’s gaze, or is deliberately playing to it in the way that (for example) the gaze is invited by Eva Herzigova in the now iconic Wonderbra ads from the mid-1990s. Hence the power in this scene with Inara lies unequivocally with the viewer, and Inara is cast as the traditional pre-feminist sex object - ensuring that both form and content deny the female viewer a progressive location for engagement with the text. This is also true of a highly voyeuristic scene that occurs in a later episode (‘War Stories’) in which Inara is shown with a female client. Shots of Inara massaging the other woman are followed by a close-up of the two women kissing. That no such parallel scenes are shown when Inara services her male clients indicates that the point of these shots is not to advance the narrative but to offer up pseudo-lesbian pleasure for the male viewer.⁴

Sex work/ Sex wars

In creating a major character whose profession is that of whore, Whedon attempts to engage with perhaps the most contentious arena of feminist theorizing – the role of the sex worker. Only debates around pornography and sado-masochism come close as rivals for this crown. As Brunsdon notes, the terms of the debate that structured second wave feminism centred on a desire to end sex-objecthood and housewifery for ever (1997: 186). This desire lent a particular virulence to clashes that occurred in debates between anti-sex and pro-sex feminists, and quite specifically in respect of the role of sex workers. Revisiting, briefly, the key terms of this debate, radical feminists have tended to see prostitution as the “absolute embodiment of male patriarchal privilege” (Kari Kesler, 2002:219) and called for its outright rejection, while pro-sex feminists, often drawing on the writing of sex-workers themselves, have seen prostitution as a form of erotic labour whose conditions require scrutiny, but which is not inherently incompatible with a feminist stance (Gail Pheterson, 1989; Wendy Chapkis, 1997; Jill Nagle, 1997).

In keeping with the postmodern drive to view the world in non-binary terms, recent engagements with questions of prostitution have sought to avoid the bad/good

dichotomy that structured earlier debates and instead engage with the conditions that might be required to make a feminist (or at least postfeminist) stance in favour of prostitution possible. Kesler concludes that not only is a feminist stance in favour of prostitution possible, but is, in fact, long overdue. She argues that *some* prostitutes, “the ones who exercise control and autonomy in their lives and who have both freely chosen and enjoy their work, can be held up as role models” (2002: 234). Following on from Kesler, Jane Scoular has argued that “Postmodern work ... considers prostitution as neither a subversive sexual practice nor an inherently oppressive one” (2004:348). Contrasting radical feminist perspectives of writers such as Kathleen Barry, Carole Pateman, Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin with those of sex radicals such as Pheterson, Chapkis and Nagle, Scoular cites Shannon Bell who states “the referent, the flesh-and-blood female body engaged in some form of sexual interaction for some kind of payment, has no inherent meaning and is signified differently in different discourses” (Bell, cited in Scoular, *ibid.*, emphasis mine). Scoular notes that many feminists are sceptical, if not hostile, to the idea of equating commercial sex with erotic diversity but goes on to say:

Sex work may more usefully be viewed with ambivalence given that it is an activity which challenges the boundaries of heterosexist, married monogamy but may also be an activity which reinforces the dominant norms of heterosexuality and femininity (*ibid.*).

Such ambivalence clearly opens the way for a reading of the body of the whore as a site from which to challenge binaries such as whore/Madonna, good/bad, victim/subject that have traditionally structured discourses around sex work.

If we read Firefly in the light of the above debates around prostitution and the status of the prostitute we might conclude that Whedon adopts the ambivalence that is the hallmark of most recent discussions around sex work. At the most obvious level he presents the viewer with a world in which Inara has a choice in the work she undertakes. All her contracts are entered into freely and the text makes it clear that she is able to screen potential clients and exercise considerable choice over those to whom she makes her services available. Anne McLintock (1992: 91) argues that this is one of the key conditions of exchange that determine whether or not prostitution is demeaning. That Mal and Book both have moral reservations about Inara’s profession is clear – but these objections are presented as individual, and inappropriate as grounds from which to object to the profession *per se*. It follows from this that, within the text, Inara is able to exercise a degree of agency in all her sexual interactions, in keeping with the sex radical approach to prostitution that sees it as a viable form of employment for women - often preferable to the low-paid and unsatisfying jobs in which women find themselves. Her job may be that of whore, but she is a high-class whore at the top of her profession.

... please don’t let me be misunderstood

Before problematizing the representation of Inara I want to make clear that I think Whedon’s intention with the character is to revisit and rewrite the traditional media representation of the whore in the same way that he used the eponymous heroine of Buffy to rewrite the representation of the slim, white and blond young woman – recasting the traditional victim of the monster as the post-feminist kick-ass heroine. Much is made in the show regarding a Companion’s training in all the fine arts. The purpose of this is to link the profession of Companion with that of the geisha

(although a geisha's services stop short of sex). The emphasis is on education and refinement – albeit for the express purpose of pleasing men rather than the cultivation of such traits for their own worth. Nevertheless by drawing on a geisha-inspired discourse Whedon is alluding to a category of women with high social status, and who make respectable the idea of purchased company – however romanticized this notion may be.

In addition to drawing on the discourse of the geisha, Whedon is also alluding to the various discourses on the sacred prostitute. It is no accident that at the end of the episode 'Serenity' the Shepherd comes to Inara's shuttle where she offers both counselling and healing, and bestows a form of blessing. And in the DVD commentary to that episode Whedon himself dispels any doubt as to how he wants us to read Inara, describing her as "almost a religious figure". Joy Davidson locates Inara within an ancient tradition, noting how she is a teacher, healer and wisewoman, and that "erotic pleasure was only a fraction of the services she rendered" (2005:121). Perhaps influenced by Rhonda Wilcox (2002), who has consistently drawn attention to the significance of naming within the Whedonverse, Davidson references the sacred goddesses Ishtar and Innana as possible sources for Inara. She also notes that the highest class of sacred whore was known as hetaera [sic] – quite literally "companion" (116-118), and that such women were renowned for their refinement, wit, intelligence and artistry. Once again this is a romanticisation of a tradition that has been contested by more rigorous scholars such as Chris Fitch (1996) and Nikki Roberts (1992). But Whedon's intention is clear, even if his creative execution is questionable.

Whedon's intention is reinforced by several clear references in the text to Inara's status. In 'The Train Job' (the first episode to air on Fox) Inara's respectability works to the crew's advantage, enabling her to rescue Mal and Zoe. In 'Bushwacked' (the second episode to air) the Alliance officers refer to Inara as "a woman of stature". And in the flashback sequence in 'Out of Gas' that shows the first meeting between Mal and Inara, Inara says that Mal will rent her the shuttle for below his asking price precisely because she can bring respectability. These references work with one another to give us what we might call Whedon's preferred reading of the text as regards how we should view Inara and her professional status.

Yet we should note how few clients Inara manages to serve over the course of the series. Apart from her young male client from the episode 'Serenity' she has only three other sexual encounters. Only one of these is a sexually mature male (and he turns out to be the 'villain of the week'). Of her other two clients, one is a young(ish) man whose father is paying Inara to take his son's virginity. This draws attention to the discourse of the whore as offering a form of social service, a discourse that is played out in the text through the way in which Inara structures this encounter – starting off with a Companion tea ceremony that has "developed over centuries", drawing attention to ancient tradition. Her other client is a woman politician who seeks Inara's services as an escape from the need for masquerade. One can "never be oneself in the company of men" she tells Inara, a sentiment with which Inara agrees. This implies that all of Inara's encounters with her male clients involve a 'performance' of femininity at odds with Inara's true self. And though the excessive performance of femininity is often seen as a trope of post-feminism (see references to McRobbie (1994) and Projansky (2001) above) performed purely for the benefit of

the performer, I would suggest that this exchange of dialogue between the Councillor and Inara indicates a less pro-active style of performance, but one more reminiscent of Joan Riviere's (1929/1986) conception of the masquerade in which hyperfemininity serves to displace male anxiety about female power. This, once again, returns us to the pre-feminist world, denying both feminist and postfeminist viewers a progressive reading position. Moreover, by allowing the Councillor a space in which she can be herself, Inara is once again cast in the role of whore as social worker – providing a vital outlet for a performance for which there is no space in the 'real' world.

Within the show the pre-text for Inara's limited encounters with clients is Mal's unspoken love for Inara, and his unease with her profession. This no doubt stems from the remnants of his (lapsed) faith for, as Rose Wu (2001) has noted, Christian theology makes the prostitute the archetypal sinner. In the episode 'Trash' Inara states to Mal that it is three weeks since they visited a planet where she could work, and suggests this is a deliberate ploy on Mal's part. While he denies this, by this point of the series the bond between the two characters is evident and it seems reasonable to assume that we should not take Mal's denial at face value. Rather I would argue that it is precisely the fact that as viewers we know that the verbal sparring between Mal and Inara is code for their deeper bond that allows us to overlook any ambivalence the audience feels towards her chosen profession. Indeed, in the commentary section of the *Official Companion* to the film Whedon (2005: 11) confirms that Inara was a foil for Mal and that their relationship would "inevitably become romantic".

The school of feminism known as whore feminism contends that prostitution is deeply destabilizing of heteronormativity, and that by performing heterosexuality for money prostitutes undermine its construction as the one true sexuality. Indeed, Eva Pendleton (1997) allies what she refers to as sex-worker feminism with queer politics, arguing that both share the goal of proliferating sexual deviancies in order to undermine the mechanisms through which women and queers continue to be subordinated. But Whedon is making no such radical gesture. On the contrary the point about Inara that endears her to the audience is not that she falls outside of what Gayle Rubin (1992) has described as the 'charmed circle' by engaging in sex for money; rather it is that she so clearly falls within it in her desire for a love-based, heterosexual, monogamous relationship with Mal. Lest we doubt this agenda there is an obvious contrast between the responses of Mal and Inara to Mal's sexual encounter with Nandi (the brothel madam in 'Heart of Gold'). When Inara encounters Mal leaving Nandi's room after having spent the night with her, Mal is clearly uncomfortable over what has transpired, while Inara dismisses the encounter. Yet almost immediately afterwards we see Inara collapsed on the floor in tears, distraught that Mal had sex with another woman. This, we are expected to note, is the truth about Inara - that, at heart, she poses no challenge whatsoever to the heteronormative matrix that demands monogamous love between two adults.

Bringing together these key observations – the way in which the text verbally denotes Inara as a respectable woman of stature, her very limited range of clients (and the fact that for most of these she appears to be performing a social service of which sex is only a minor component), her obvious love for Mal and an over-riding belief – despite her claims not to be puritanical about sex – that romantic love requires sexual monogamy – what we end up with is not a challenge to the way in which we

conceptualise the whore, or even the sexually active woman. Rather we get a traditional pre-feminist representation of femininity that places high value on artifice, nurturing, performing the role of care-giver, and that firmly endorses the link between romantic love and sexual monogamy, and views this as the site of a woman's fulfilment. Rather than challenge the audience to re-conceptualize their response to a character who is a whore, Whedon re-writes whoredom to circumvent any challenge the profession might offer to the heteronormative matrix. And lest this be not sufficient to assuage the anxieties of those inclined to condemn whoredom outright, Whedon makes further concessions that undermine the text's more overtly positive construction.

Legalisation/Regulation

In both Europe and North America contemporary debates around prostitution often hinge on questions of criminalisation. The issue, however, is not simply one of legality. It is also about regulation. Indeed the subtle difference between arguments for the decriminalization of prostitution (as opposed to its legalisation) centre on arguments that legalisation brings with it a patriarchal regulation of the prostitute body, with the creation of brothels and the institution of formalized health checks that take power over the prostitute's body away from the prostitute and place it in the hands of the state. As Judith Walkowitz (1992) notes in regard to first-wave feminist opposition to the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s enacted in the UK, while those in favour of regulation praised the supervision and inspection of prostitutes as a defence of public health, public decency, and public order the laws institutionalised the sexual double standard by imposing examinations on women, but not on the men who were their regular clients. Moreover Walkowitz cites the testimony of registered prostitutes in likening the regular examinations that prostitutes were forced to undergo to instrumental rape.

There is clearly a class discourse at play here, as the prostitutes regulated by the Contagious Diseases Acts were working class and not women of stature as is ostensibly the case with Inara. Nevertheless a discourse of regulation extends to registered Companions within the Firefly universe – constructing them as objects rather than subjects. In the episode 'Ariel', Serenity docks at a Core planet to enable Inara to undergo the annual physical examination necessary to enable her Companion's license to be renewed. While no details are given as to the nature of the exam it lasts 1-2 days, and Inara herself refers to "lots of needles and cold exam tables" suggesting a clinical procedure consistent with the public health discourse that governs most discussions of legalised prostitution in which women are deemed appropriate sites of medical regulation while their clients escape the scope of this disciplinary regime.

This discourse of regulation clearly invokes Foucault, and I wish to invoke him further in order to touch on an aspect of regulation to which Inara is subject as a 'registered Companion' but which goes beyond the scope of contemporary discourse regarding the regulation of prostitutes. In the first volume of his History of Sexuality Foucault notes the shift from seeing sexual acts as behaviours to viewing them as acts of identity. In perhaps his most quoted statement:

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (1990: 43 emphasis mine).

In the universe of *Firefly*, Foucault's discourse on 'species' extends to the registered companion in a way that it does not extend to the contemporary prostitute. This is not to argue that prostitutes are not seen as a class apart from other women - they are generally constructed as such in the media and popular debate. Yet for those women who choose to enter the profession through choice, the job of the prostitute is a job of work and remains separate from their non-working life; being a prostitute does not prevent a woman from having a private life and family outside of work. As Pendleton notes with regard to contemporary prostitutes who have chosen their profession, "Each of these women is very clear on the distinction between their working, economically-surviving selves and their private and truly intimate selves" (1997: 75). Moreover Sherene Razack notes that for prostitution to function as transgressive there is a requirement that what is sold is not the self, but a service (1998:347).

These key distinctions, between public and private, service and self, fail to hold in the case of Inara who is unable to separate her job as a whore from her identity as a registered Companion. Returning to the episode 'Ariel', when Kaylee suggests to Inara that she might meet a "nice young doctor" - and enquires about the Companion policy on dating - Inara replies that "it's complicated". Mercedes Lackey (2005: 69) has suggested that Inara will lose her license if she becomes emotionally attached to anyone before retirement (although I am not clear on Lackey's textual evidence for this statement), describing Inara's freedom as "as thin as the piece of paper her licence is printed on". This suggests that while Inara's job may be legal, and offers her a position of status, she nonetheless has less freedom than the whores (the distinction Inara makes within the text is that 'Companions' are registered with the Guild, while 'whores' operate outside it) who occupy the brothel in the episode 'Hearts of Gold'.

Inara's all-consuming identity as a companion also raises one final point of interest, particularly in regard to Whedon's work. *Firefly* offers up a range of romance narratives. Zoe and Wash function as a happily married couple, although in keeping with the heteronormative matrix that underlies the Whedonverse one episode 'sees them disagreeing over Zoe's desire for a child. Kaylee and Simon represent the younger generation - clearly attracted to each other but insecure in their negotiation of the first steps in their relationship. But over-arching both of these is the doomed central romance between Mal and Inara. Not only is this romance typical of the Whedonverse - one need only think back to Buffy/Angel, Buffy/Spike, Angel/Cordelia - but it parallels them in foundering primarily on the basis of the ontology of one of the characters. It is not merely Mal's moral objection to Inara's profession that inhibits their relationship - it is the fact that, as a Companion, she cannot escape her identity and have a private life outside her public profession. As the series makes clear she has a choice: to renounce her professional identity and financial independence or leave. There is no third way. By the time of the film, Inara has, indeed, left Serenity and is working as an instructor at a Training House for future companions. She is clearly no longer servicing clients, a fact that paves the way for a less contentious relationship between her and Mal when she does return to the ship mid-way through the movie.

Naming and Shaming

In addressing the question of whether a feminist stance in favour of prostitution is feasible, Kesler considers not simply the act of prostitution but the stigma associated with it: “If prostitution perpetuates a system of gender inequality” she says “I think it is important to ask if that is a function of prostitution or the stigma attached to prostitution” (2002: 227). It is whore stigma, Kesler argues, that functions to keep women in line. McLintock notes:

The whore stigma disciplines all women. As one prostitute told me in a private conversation, “It’s the stigma that hurts, not the sex. The sex is easy. Facing the world’s hate is what breaks me down. The license to despise a prostitute is a license to despise any woman who takes sex, money, and mobility into her own hands. ... Empowering whores empowers all women, and educating men to respect prostitutes educates men to respect all women” (1992:95).

As numerous second-wave feminists have argued, women are ‘kept in line’ by linguistic stigmatisation that condemns female sexual license or pathologizes the female body (Beverly Clack, 2000:116). So in Firefly it is noticeable how the women who humiliate Kaylee for her inability to perform femininity in line with convention in the episode ‘Shindig’ are quickly brought into line through an allusion to their leader’s promiscuity. In this incarnation of the Whedonverse whores may have high status – but ‘good girls’ are still those who only have sex within serious (heterosexual) romantic relationships (Jowett, 2005:29).

One of the notable linguistic turns of the late twentieth century has been the attempt to re-signify terms of derision (queer and nigger spring to mind most readily) as terms of empowerment. Whore is also subject to such an attempt at re-signification (Pheterson, 1989). Yet whore stigma clearly remains a trope of the Firefly universe. In the flashback to Inara’s first encounter with Mal in ‘Out of Gas’ (that recounts how she came to rent the shuttle) she tells him that he will not call her a whore. Yet he persists in doing so despite her discomfort with the term. And such naming does matter. In discussing the relationship between sexuality, identity and language, Cameron and Kulick have noted the tendency of some researchers to shift their enquiry from looking at how (gay and lesbian) identity is reflected through language to investigating the ways in which those identities are materialised through language. In other words, the focus shifts “from seeing identity as the source of particular forms of language, to seeing identity as the effect of specific semiotic practices” (2003: 78, emphasis in original). If we accept this way of looking at language – as constructing identity rather than merely describing it – then Mal’s use of the term whore with respect to Inara is not only insulting, but functions performatively (bringing into being that which it names). Of course, Mal’s use of the term whore also serves to construct him as insensitive⁵. But while this is fair, the fact that he will not allow anyone else to call her ‘whore’ indicates that he knows it is a term of abuse, and reinforces the argument that whore stigma is a key trope of the Firefly universe.

The Racialized ‘Other’

My final point of engagement with Inara is in respect of her representation as the racialized ‘Other’ within the text. This is not to say that she is the only character of colour on board Serenity - she is not. But her visual coding, in terms not only of her heavily Eastern-influenced costuming but also the sumptuous nature of her

quarters, with candles, incense and ornate furnishings marks her out as separate from the rest of the crew. She is also coded linguistically as Other. Commenting on the use of Chinese phrases within the text of Firefly, Kevin Sullivan (2005) has noted that Companions use more Asian references in their Chinese. Specifically he notes that when characters on Firefly use Chinese as their language of choice for exclamations, Inara references Buddha, while all other main characters reference God (2005:199). In this Whedon follows on from earlier work. As Lynne Edwards has noted, in Season Two of Buffy, clothing and speech are used to define the Vampire Slayer Kendra (who Edwards locates within the framework of the tragic mulatta) as the ethnic ‘other’ (2002:91).

I also want to position questions of Inara’s racialization within the context of previous commentary on the Whedonverse that has taken Whedon to task for his implicit racism. Kent Ono has argued in respect of Buffy the Vampire Slayer that the show re-establishes neo-colonial power relations, and links this to the heroification of white women (2000:164). He goes on to argue that Buffy villainizes people of colour through both complex media metaphors and literal racist representation and “shows violence by primarily white vigilante youths against people of colour in the name of civilization” (2000:168). Specifically in regard to Firefly it could be noted that almost the first act of the only Black villain of the series, the bounty hunter Jubal Early who appears in the final episode ‘Objects in Space’, is to threaten to rape a terrified Kaylee (a scene that appears shortly after one between Simon and Kaylee that serves to highlight Kaylee’s sexual innocence). The effect of this is to instantly demonise Black male sexuality and to invoke the spectre of the dangerous black man who threatens the innocent white woman. This is particularly poignant – and disturbing – given the post Civil War ambiance that defines the world of Firefly, because of the way this spectre has haunted the American imaginary and served as the justification for lynching.

A linking of race and sex permeates the world of Firefly. As just noted, Blackness in the character of Jubal Early is associated with the threat of the violation of white women. But questions of race and sex are also linked in a reading of the female characters. The most sexually active woman on the crew of Serenity (even if one includes Inara, who is woefully short of clients) is Zoe. On the one hand this makes sense as she is married to another of the crew members. At another level, however, it reinforces the stereotype of the sexually voracious black woman. Moreover her sexual relationship with Wash enhances his status within the show (where he is coded as less traditionally masculine than the other two core male crew members Mal and Jayne, both of whom are soldiers) by virtue of his prowess in being able to ‘satisfy’ a black lover – a point made by Edwards (2002:95) in respect of the relationship in Buffy between Giles and Olivia.

To return to the question of Inara and the links between race and sex, Razack (1998) has argued that the regulation of female bodies in prostitution is as central to white supremacy as it is to patriarchy. Specifically she notes the way in which discourses of slavery and colonialism (both of which surface in the text of Firefly) presume racialized women to be sexually available outside of marriage. Even today, Razack argues, “Racialized bodies can seldom leave the space of prostitution in the white imagination; it is a space worn on the body” (1998:356). This sense of the woman of colour wearing sexuality on the body is drawn on by Edward Said in his

discourse on orientalism. Musing on the work of Flaubert, Said writes “Woven through all of Flaubert’s Oriental experiences, exciting or disappointing, is an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex” (1995:188). He goes on to suggest that this nineteenth century colonial discourse sees in the Orient a fecundity, an untiring sexuality and unlimited desires. The Orient is associated with “the escapism of sexual fantasy”, “the freedom of licentious sex”, “a place where one could look for sexual experiences unobtainable in Europe” and “a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden” (all p. 190). It is precisely this experience that, I suggest, Inara is offering to her clients. In *Firefly*, all of Inara’s clients are white, hegemonic, bourgeois subjects, and I would argue that Inara’s racialized body is essential – not incidental – in making sense of these encounters.

Conclusion

Nancy Holder is a four-time winner of the Bram Stoker Award who has written or co-written over three dozen projects in the *Buffy* and *Angel* universes. She was a keynote speaker at the international Slayage conference held in Nashville, Tennessee in May 2005. Under normal circumstances she would no doubt gladly align herself with those (Lavery, 2002, 2004; Candace Havens, 2003) who have described Joss Whedon as a genius. Yet writing of female representation in *Firefly* she notes “Alas, my cup runneth under ... *Firefly* is the most reactionary and traditional, a show in which Joss went backwards regarding the empowerment of women” (2005:140-1). And she is not talking just about Inara. She locates the relationship between Mal, Wash and Zoe within the framework of Rubin’s (1975) well-known exploration of the traffic in women (although, admittedly, she doesn’t theorize her point in quite this way). Kaylee becomes Calamity Jane (the Doris Day version without the singing) – a tomboy who just longs to be a proper girl if only she can find the right man. A true disciple of the cult of Whedon, Holder argues that all of this is not his fault –and she displaces responsibility onto the limitations of the Western genre. But any connoisseur of the post-modern Western would surely be able to contest this notion.

My inclination is to read *Firefly* via McRobbie’s (2004) recent work in which she proposes postfeminism as a way in which popular culture functions to undermine the achievements of feminism and work towards its undoing, while simultaneously appearing to engage in a well-informed and well-intentioned response to feminism. The character of Inara offered Whedon the possibility of breaking new ground in the representation of one of the most traditionally marginalized and despised groups of women – whores of colour. Successfully negotiating the myriad of obstacles that stood in the way of this representation would, indeed, have been a feat of genius. Whedon’s reconfiguration of the blond victim, helpless at the hands of the monster, would have paled in comparison.

As a scholar-fan of the Whedonverse, and an academic driven to seek out sites of popular culture from which to challenge the heteronormative matrix, what disappoints me is not that he embarked on such an ambitious sex-positive feminist project and failed – it is that he did not even try. Inara is not a potential feminist icon, nor a possible postfeminist one – let alone a positive role model for whoredom. She is the traditional Western’s ‘tart with a heart’ – a beautiful woman making her living from offering her artifice-adorned body as a site of (generally) male pleasure, a woman whose true gift is her ability to nurture, and function in lieu of any more

formalised system of social service. Most importantly a woman torn between her desire for independence and her realisation that true happiness lies within the framework of heterosexual romance. Therein lies the pity.

Endnotes

1. The text to which Moseley and Read refer is Ally McBeal. Other texts would include Sex and the City (Jane Arthurs, 2003, Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (eds.) 2004,) and Charmed (Moseley, 2002).
2. Fox rejected the pilot episode of the series and forced Whedon to write a new introductory episode. The network subsequently showed 12 of the 15 shows that were made in a very different order to that in which they appear in the subsequent DVD. Whedon subsequently raised the money to continue the story of Firefly in a feature film (Serenity) released in the UK in October 2005.
3. While the story of River was under-developed in the short run of the series, the focus on River in the film also made marketing sense. The publicity for the movie fore-grounded the character of River in a pose reminiscent of Buffy, and described the film as being ‘from the creator of Buffy and Angel’.
4. The screenplay of the film also indicates that Inara’s only kiss in this film was also to be girl-on-girl (Whedon, 2005: 78-79), although this scene appears to have ended up on the cutting-room floor.
5. I am grateful to Stacey Abbott for this observation.

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