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Beyond: American Identity Intersected with the (Meta)physical Frontier

E60 Engr 310 11: Technical Writing

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i. ABSTRACT:

This report explores themes of Expansionism, American Exceptionalism, and Manifest Destiny, among others, through the notion of the "frontier" in American identity. Our vehicle of exploration is American popular culture, particularly the Western and Space Western genres of film and television. We shall see how the virtual frontier compensated for a reduced or absent physical frontier, evolving from celebrating a glorified past (Wild West / Westerns), to imagining a stellar future (Space Westerns), to inspiring an ambitious present (Mars colonization). This report draws parallels between our society and its entertainment, using the cultural relevance of the given genres to reveal more about the frontier themes and their topical nature. Primary texts include Joss Whedon's *Firefly*, Wilcox and Cochran's *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier*, and Frank Scheide's "Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis", Avatar (2009), and the Representation of Native Americans in Hollywood Film."

Table of Contents

ii. LIST OF FIGURES

I. BACKGROUND

On Wednesday, September 12th, 1962, approximately 35,000 people gathered in the stands of the Rice University football stadium to hear President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's "Address at Rice University on the Nation's Space Effort", pictured in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: President Kennedy speaks at Rice University
Image credit: nasa.gov

Newspapers across the country shortly reclassified it as the "We choose to go to the moon" speech (JFKLibrary.org). Announcing this mission served to quell the nation's fears of losing the "space race" to the Soviet Union and the patriotic prose engendered actionable excitement:

> ...the United States was not built by those who waited and rested and wished to look behind them... no nation which expects to be the leader of other nations can expect to stay behind in the race for space...We mean to be a part of it--we mean to lead it. For the eyes of the world now look into space...and we have vowed that we shall not see it governed by a hostile flag of conquest, but by a banner of freedom and peace. (NASA.gov)

Kennedy's words draw their power and success from themes consistent with prevalent American ideals. This paper seeks to address the necessity and modern relevance of the frontier in American culture and will explore those broad themes of American Exceptionalism and Manifest

Destiny in the context of the space western genre, placing particular emphasis on the cult classic television series *Firefly*. Additionally, the scope of this report encompasses tangents to accordant historical events and visions for the future. See Appendix A for definitions of core terminology.

President Kennedy's declaration of United States-led expansion was expectably well-received, considering that 'onward and upward' is a core American value. As Tiziano Bonazzi writes in his piece, "Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis and the Self-Consciousness of America", our country has been guided by an expansionist principle since its inception: "...the distinctiveness of a nation like the United States, whose history is marked by expansion into ever new and different geographic regions..." (151). Prior to the United States' first centennial, the young nation grew from the Mayflower crossing the Atlantic Ocean, to spanning the eastern seaboard, to the Louisiana Purchase and Lewis and Clark, to the Oregon Trail. Beyond that, David Hamilton Murdoch, author of *The American West: The Invention of a Myth*, explains that "Americans were sold the idea that the conquest of the wilderness was the visible proof of their commitment to progress, of their manifest destiny, of their unique society. To this extent the conquest of the West provided moral and patriotic satisfaction and escapism..." (24). Americans have come to believe that their collective American identity is entangled with the very concept of expansion: contained within it, reflected by it, and fueled by it all at once. None have more famously put a label on this idea than Frederick Jackson Turner in "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (oft-shortened to the "Frontier Thesis"): "Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development" (Turner). Up to *our* own day, with "the official closing of the American frontier by the Census Bureau in 1890" and the Outer Space

Treaty of 1967 decreeing that "'the exploration and use of outer space... shall be for the province of all mankind'", Americans are running out of annexable territory (Gouge 1; Frakes 422). Since dates are continually mentioned throughout this report, **Appendix B** offers a centralized timeline.

Ever-decreasing availability of unsettled land invokes the earlier question of whether the American collective consciousness still requires a frontier. A unilateral answer does not exist, per se - even Turner's very idea is debated (i.e., the Bonazzi piece). Nevertheless, this report contends that there is an evidential answer found in the nature of the space western genre. David A. Johnson tells us in the introduction of "American Culture and the American Frontier" that the unexpectedness of an answer is independent of its adequacy. He notes that differing lenses for viewing the "American Frontier" all reach a similar conclusion:

> ...frontier scholarship has varied widely in scope, method, and focus, but it nonetheless shares the conviction that within the history of territorial expansion, the conquest of native America... and the reproduction of economy and society lies a key to understanding American thought, politics, economics, and society. (1)

In essence, Johnson clarifies that there is no singularly insightful avenue of exploration.

Many - including the research director of the Interpublic Group media network, as interviewed in Jack Feuer's analysis of post-9/11 entertainment - argue that "'...people are able to separate their entertainment from real life'", yet it is a far greater challenge to separate real life from entertainment (2). The industry undeniably reflects social trends and constructs in its products, in order to appeal to the general consumer.

II. STATEMENT OF PREMISE

Genre theory proffers a viable route towards addressing the idea of the frontier in American culture, and was even discussed at the "Meeting of the Frontiers" Conference. An excerpt from that conference, collected by the United States Library of Congress, discusses the intersection between Turner's Thesis and popular culture: "the Turnerian School of a hopeful, triumphant frontier reigned in history circles for almost a century. Its pop culture manifestation was probably the long running TV series, *Little House on the Prairie* [style added]" (Whitehead).

This report argues for the significance of another genre without refuting the significance of that series. The advent of the space western was a response to a generation born in the heyday of the Western and raised during the excitement of the Space Age. In simplest terms, a space western is the application of Western tropes and elements to a science fiction backdrop, and/or the converse. The legend of Gene Roddenberry pitching *Star Trek* (*TOS*) as "a wagon train to the stars" - coupled with the eternal "Space: The Final Frontier" monologue – marks the earliest example of a widely-known space western (Roddenberry).

Borne of shared themes of Manifest Destiny and expansionist American ideals, the very nature of the genre confirms that American society is not done with the frontier, even without a physical one left for the country to immediately conquer. Genre theorist Robert Murray Davis wrote an article entitled "The Frontiers of Genre: Science Fiction Westerns" (translated to English), in which he uses the frontier to highlight the link between those two genres:

> "…'horse opera' and 'space opera' indicate the western and SF have a good deal in common: not only plot devices and character types but a common setting on the frontier, a common theme of survival, and a common mechanism in which force is sanctioned as a means of survival" (33).

The former of the two operas began with *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903 and had its heyday in the 1950s; this is according to the National Film Registry and an article detailing the quasi-

replacement of the Western genre with science fiction (LOC.gov, Roddick 1). Choosing to go to the moon synchronously changed the course of human history the course of culture. Consensus holds that the "New Wave" boom of science fiction, a massive resurgence and rebranding, came in the 1960s (Encyclopedia Brittanica). That form persists still in contemporary popular culture, including both space operas and space westerns.

Cult classic television series *Firefly*, created by Joss Whedon, is a key example, a modern take on the genre that reinvigorated it for today's audience. Set roughly five centuries into the future and telling the story of an eclectic crew, *Firefly* had its limited, one-season run in 2002. **Figure 2** showcases *Serenity*, a vessel of the titular class.

Figure 2: *Serenity*, the main characters' spaceship, is often seen as a character in its own right
Image credit: Bing Images

Despite airing four decades after the division delineated in President Kennedy's address at Rice University, *Firefly* remains a prominent and epitomic example, and delving into this primary source reveals common "American Frontier" tropes and themes that are reflective of societal values. This television series is a common thread throughout the report, serving to introduce the space western genre as it showcases its own superficiality fits within those parameters. Furthermore, *Firefly* will be used to illustrate points of cultural relevance, with support from select other entertainment pieces.

III. *FIREFLY* AS A SPACE WESTERN

It is imperative to understand how *Firefly* exists as a space western, to best contextualize our understanding of the show as a source for our analysis of the interplay between the frontier and American identity. Concurrently, this section of the report grants exposition to readers possessing minimal familiarity with the space western genre. In their work, *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier*, Rhonda V. Wilcox and Tanya R. Cochran explain:

> …from the moment the [theme song's] guitar strings sound, followed by the fiddle and the voice of Sonny Rhodes, the show's Western heritage is announced. The opening credits combine the two genres, closing with a shot of the spaceship flying low over thundering horses, with creator Joss Whedon's name… evoking the burning title letters of… *Bonanza*... (5)

Figure 3: Capstone shot of Firefly's opening: Serenity sweeps over a herd of galloping horses
Image Credit: Bing Images

On the DVD commentary, Whedon proudly states that the final shot of the opening, captured in **Figure 3**, was "everything you need to understand about the series in five seconds" (Whedon). Viewers of the show can attest to the power of that distinctive visual flair.

A prime episodic example of that genre-bending flair comes in the cold open (pre-credits scene that kicks off the episode) of "The Train Job", the unofficial pilot. Mal, Zoë, and Jayne, described in **Figure 4**, are enjoying a quiet drink in a dirt-infused saloon.

A. Mercenary Jayne Cobb

B. Pilot Hoban "Wash" Washburne

C. Captain Malcolm "Mal" Reynolds

D. First Mate Zoë Washburne

Figure 4: *Firefly*'s core crewmembers aboard *Serenity*
Image Credit: Bing Images

There is a brewing disagreement over the Unification War - fought between the Alliance (the core planets) and the Independents (border systems, colloquially referred to as "Browncoats"). Chaos erupts when a rather inebriated patron realizes that "[Mal's] coat is kind of a brownish color" (Whedon). This bar fight is very much reminiscent of the brawl scene in countless Westerns, with nothing appearing out of place until the captain gets thrown through a holographic window. As it shimmers and reforms, he dusts himself off and ducks a punch; the fan-favorite scene pays homage to its classic roots, albeit with the underlying presence of science fiction influences. Suddenly, *Serenity* rises up from the valley below and hovers over the scene, thereby upgrades the classic line, "this town ain't big enough for the two of us" to "this *planet* ain't big enough". Not to mention the titular activity, an old-fashioned train robbery, is arguably one of the most iconic Western scenes. However, *Firefly*'s Train Job is performed in new fashion, displayed in **Figure 5,** as an intergalactic mercenary dangles from spaceship over a speeding Maglev train on a barren desert planet.

Figure 5: The Train Job
Image Credit: Bing Images

Another standout cold open comes from the episode "Our Mrs. Reynolds". As with "The Train Job", there are few indicators of science fiction influence until the crew returns to *Serenity*. Instead, we see a horse-drawn covered wagon wheel through a shallow wetland, ambushed by highwaymen. Demanding that the settlers turn over their valuables, they are met with a surprise when Jayne and Mal reverse the encounter and save the villagers (Whedon). Their firearms of choice, prominent in **Figure 6**, are another curious feature of this particular space western:

> …Whedon explains his concept of designing Mal's handgun: 'I was looking for clunky, old-fashioned. I had Mal's gun designed very specifically after a Civil War-era pistol... yet at the same time in a casing that gave it a completely futuristic outer shape' (1:62)... the weapons evoke the American West of reality... and [TV's] science fiction West (1:78-80). (Wilcox and Cochran 119)

Figure 6: Captain Reynolds aiming his distinctive firearm
Image credit: Bing Images

This, coupled with the primary mode of land transportation being on horseback, cements the intentionally direct ties between *Firefly* and the aesthetics of the more traditional Western. A list of the "10 Most Influential Space Westerns" credits Whedon with: "[exposing] the inherent traditional Western symbols in Space Opera that we often ignore... [the Western] survives in different 'dress'" (Lilly).

IV. CULTURAL RELEVANCE: SEEKING AN ANSWER

Evidently, *Firefly* visibly embraces the innate parallels between space operas and Westerns. Now, we shall further uncover how the show equally embraces fundamental genre themes and tropes. Given the recent airdate of *Firefly*, scholarly discussion is ongoing, contrasting with the thoroughly analyzed and extended history of Westerns. The aft-cited book co-authored by Wilcox and Cochran, *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier* serves as one of my primary sources. Part of an "Investigating Cult TV" series from the publisher, it breaks down *Firefly* and *Serenity* (the show's movie sequel) and examines a range of topics, including visuals, genre, and socio-cultural themes:

> "...*Firefly* adopts a distinctive Western iconography alongside iconography, themes, and narratives from science fiction... The combination... in *Firefly* offers both a familiar past detached from its historical period and a recognizable future (that is, recognizably science fictional) unsettled by anachronism" (Wilcox and Cochran 101)

This section of the report will examine four applications of our aft-mentioned core themes, as well as a brief acknowledgement of several counterarguments. Together, these subsections compile the report's primary discussion: common frontier themes in (Space) Westerns and their relevance to American culture and collective identity.

a. Cowboys and Indians: Otherism and Savagery in (Space) Westerns

Similarly positioned alongside the train robbery and the saloon brawl in the Western trope hierarchy, "Cowboys and Indians" is an immensely iconic (and violently disparaging) aspect of innumerable Westerns. Often, "science fiction (re-) presents the frontier as a site of freedom, since the uninhabited space of this retrofuture enables a guilt-free colonization scenario with no indigenous population to suffer from expansion" (Wilcox and Cochran 103). Space

westerns buck this trend, instead tackling the issue with aliens or genetically altered humans allegorically standing in for the supposed "savages": "There can be no doubt that the Reavers represent 'blood-thirsty Savage Redskins' in Whedon's futuristic Cowboy-and-Indian narratives, *Firefly* and its movie sequel *Serenity*" (Wilcox and Cochran 127). Reaver backstory is provided in the film *Serenity*, wherein the audience learns that they were once humans exposed to a chemical designed to reduce aggression that backfired disastrously. The Alliance attempted to civilize and created barbarians in the process, meaning "...the origin of the Reavers is Whedon's metaphor for the creation of the savage in the imaginations [of those that encountered them]..." (Wilcox and Cochran 135). In Whedon's universe, the Alliance are the Cowboys - forcibly expanding from the core systems - and the Reavers the Indians, and it is the direct fault of the former that the latter are as "savage" as they are. **Figure 7** intensely highlights such savagery.

Figure 7: Reavers in *Firefly*
Image credit: firefly.wikia.com

Described and depicted as horrific, monstrous creatures, they are a literal personification of the way Native Americans were falsely personified by colonizers and perceived by their progeny. Historical accounts tell us that Native Americans were not hostile at first contact, and tensions arose in the face of attempts at forced civilization-proselytization by an encroaching entity. Sometimes, space westerns can do more than reflect, choosing instead to educate and inform. In

the midst of showcasing a time in our history, the opportunity arises for the entertainment to reveal events of a darker nature, rather than allowing them to fade from memory and leave only the glory.

Frank Scheide, writing for *The International Journal of the Arts in Society* in response to that year's biggest film release, *Avatar*, affirms that *Firefly* is not the sole instance in which a space western is able to explore this: "[Director] James Cameron claimed that a lifelong interest in science fiction prepared him to make this film, but thinly veiled parallels between the Na'vi and Native Americans has resulted in *Avatar* being associated with another genre…" (198). Granted, the argument grows complex, for *Firefly*'s protagonists are a band of invaders, per se, the likes of which end up demonized in *Avatar*. In fact, this is an oversimplification, given the moral ambiguity intentionally woven into *Firefly*. *Avatar* is simpler, with clearly delineated good and evil stances. The pioneering humans, save a select few (i.e., our heroes), are assuredly at fault in the audience's reference frame, their greed causing them to kill indiscriminately in search of rare minerals. Contrast with the Natives (note the extant phonic similarity between "Na'vi" and "Native"), who are not the oft-depicted savages. Any violence, however, is solely to protect themselves, their homeland, and their beliefs. The traditional trope is mostly inverted here, portraying the bulk of the American Cowboys in negative fashion. *Avatar*'s place as the highest grossing movie of all time is curious, considering this role reversal and dominant moviegoer demographics (BoxOfficeMojo.com). Recall the ultimate heroes are still Americans, even though they fight for the "other" side.

Serenity's crew is not the Cowboys in the "Cowboys and Indians" trope. The show's core characters are a disjointed fit within the binate dynamic, maintaining characteristics of both settlers and natives in their moral and legal grey area. They come out to the frontier and exhibit

some typical behaviors of invaders, but they are also the natives that were forced to defend themselves against the assimilation efforts of the Alliance. When *Serenity* touches down, it may appear as an invasive action, yet the crew frequently ends up helping locals and standing by their moral code. They do not adhere to the Cowboy tendency of exploiting the disadvantaged and needy, as seen in "The Train Job" when they return the heisted goods in the end; upon realizing they were hired to steal medicinal supplies from a suffering mining town, they turn on their employer. Their honor makes them civil, yet they "aim to misbehave" and that makes them lawless (Whedon). The conflict between civilization and barbarianism is inherently paradoxical, for civil people may devolve into barbarians in their attempts to civilize - given two civilizations, an outside observer cannot definitively say which is the civil one and which is the barbaric.

American Exceptionalism, as the supreme form of othering, offers quasi-resolution to that quandary. As Hilde Eliassen Restad puts it when evaluating how that ideology shapes U.S. foreign policy, "American identity is most usefully defined as American Exceptionalism because the belief in American Exceptionalism has been a powerful, persistent, and popular myth throughout American history" (55). Adherence to that philosophy grants American civilization continuous triumph, resistant to tarnishing, and those that disseminate cannot be barbaric. American audiences watching *Avatar* see evils committed by the film's Americans, but they can leave the theatre content in their infallibly golden culture. In a "good guys / bad guys" scenario, American Exceptionalism says that no matter how bad Americans get, they can never be the real "bad guys", by way of natural superiority and a well-intentioned effort to let others share in their self-decreed glory. Whether those efforts are truly well-intentioned is a valid concern, though American Exceptionalism will not hear it; a *ForeignPolicy* article detailing the idea's history phrases it in colloquial terms: "All countries have their own brand of chest-thumping

nationalism, but almost none is as patently universal - even messianic - as this belief in America's special character and role in the world" (Friedman 1). Even the fact that the United States took "America" as a synonym and "American" as their demonym is telling, for the terms should theoretically apply to two continents and a culturally distinct region. There are clear signs of belief in and action on the premise that the country is markedly superior, especially with presidential rhetoric. Former President Kennedy's speech at Rice University is a prime example, as part of his *New Frontier* policy platform. Former President Ronald Reagan gave several speeches to similar effect, ironically noteworthy because of his former career starring in Westerns. Former President Bush acknowledged rhetoric of the past, whilst simultaneously suggesting the importance of continuing our space exploration: "'Like generations before us, we have a calling from beyond the stars to stand for freedom. This is the everlasting dream of America.' - George W. Bush" (Friedman 5).

b. Universal Human Culture

In the 26th century, the universal human culture is an amalgamation of present-day American and Chinese cultures. As the story goes, they were the two most major superpowers of Earth-That-Was. Granted, the presence of Chinese culture is considerable, its influences seen primarily throughout the aesthetics and dialogue of the series.

Figure 8: *Firefly*'s Logo
Image credit: firefly.wikia.com

Figure 8 clearly indicates this Sino-American fusion. Nevertheless, it is not derogation to say that said amalgamation is imbalanced, considerably skewed toward the American side. Going back to "Our Mrs. Reynolds", the episode sees the crew struggle to understand the strange local customs of the world they are on. Some characters find humor in them, seeing them as more primitive and underdeveloped when compared to those of America. This idea, that no matter what happens in the future, the United States will still be dominant, is not exclusive to *Firefly*, or even to dramas. *Futurama*, an oddball animated comedy set in the next millennium, sees the preserved head of former President Richard Nixon serving as President of Earth; presidential addresses begin with "My fellow Earthicans" in front of Earth's flag: an American flag wherein the stars have been replaced by a drawing of the globe (Groening). *Interstellar*, a more recent science fiction film, has almost no mention of any other nation on Earth, save an Indian UAV spotted during the extended prologue (Nolan). By the end of the film, it is revealed that the characters' efforts to save humankind are part of a self-serving NASA operation. *Interstellar* is actually another prime example of a space western: the core team of astronauts is a team of pioneers, self-reliant and spreading outward to find a new home (a new world and a New World).

c. Manifest Destiny and Rugged Individualism

Those two principles - American Exceptionalism and expansionism - coalesce around Manifest Destiny:

> The editor John L. O'Sullivan is credited with coining the concept of 'Manifest Destiny' in a column he wrote for the June 1845 issue of the journal *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, which stated that the annexation of Texas was '...the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.' (Scheide 200)

Firefly's vast universe allows Whedon to imagine this domination and colonization on a larger scale, applying the same principle to "Earth-That-Was", as well as post-Earth colonies. This aligns with what Murdoch tells us in the section of his book examining the manufacturing of the image of the West; he characterizes the frontier as the place where the hero figure must fight against that which would impede, so as to continue pushing civilization forward:

> The West was where anything could happen. For most of the nineteenth century it was a land of infinite possibility, not because its immense resources could be exploited with ease - it was soon found they could not - but because it was a stage on which some of the nation's more important dreams could be focused. [sic] (24)

More than anything, the frontier is a sandbox for progress, wherein pioneers are uninhibited - maybe even fully supplied - in their efforts to achieve it. *Firefly*'s vast universe also allows Whedon to insert increased complexity to the relationship. Considering that the primary entity promoting expansion, the Alliance, is also a significant obstacle to progress, these conflating ideas are also contrasting ideas in *Firefly* and *Serenity*. As it turns out, that is more a function of the absence of black-and-white construction in Whedon's projects. Regardless, the process of progress includes the application and realization of the nation's collective desires, those very same American ideals we see again and again.

The process is a self-reliant one, with pioneers and settlers untethered (loosely so at best) to existing bodies of governance and/or developed communities. President Hoover, in yet another instance of presidential rhetoric, is remembered for his response to the Great Depression: calls for Rugged Individualism - "to pull oneself up by one's bootstraps". That philosophy, as much as American Exceptionalism, is seen in those living on the frontier. Whedon envisioned life on the border worlds (recall: the ones most directly resembling 19th century frontier life) as

tapping into a "familiar part of Western history" by highlighting the way in which "hard physical work [allows] ordinary people to achieve extraordinary things" (Wilcox and Cochran 107). Here again, *Firefly* reflects a typical Western trope that, in turn, reflects a key American ideal, this time in the form of being able to work to achieve for oneself. The core cast work for themselves, striving to achieve outside of Alliance influence and without subordinating themselves. Even with the Alliance spearheading expansion efforts, carrying out interstellar Manifest Destiny and building terraformers on distant planets, this idea of self-sustenance holds. The conglomerate may be the supplier of basic precursors for settlement, but it is left to the residents of those frontier worlds to harvest naturally occurring resources, tame the environment, overcome obstacles to progress, and make civilization happen. "The Train Job" opens with a bit of world-building, as Shepherd (in-universe term for 'Pastor') Derrial Book states the following: "A ship would bring you work. A gun would help you keep it" (Whedon). An updated take on *Have Gun - Will Travel* (Rolfe and Meadow). Or, rewatching "Our Mrs. Reynolds", that very act of saving the villagers is vigilante justice, also known as frontier justice: taking matters into one's own hands.

The second component of individualism on the frontier is perseverance, naturally. An equally important societal value, it is made clear by what comes next in Book's narration: "A captain's goal was simple: find a crew, find a job. Keep flying" (Whedon). Against all odds, the speaker still has the frontier to go to, somewhere they can be free. That idea, that no matter what, one must keep moving forward and treasure their freedom, is another reflection of what is ingrained in our society.

d. Underdogs and Sons of Liberty

Finally, we take a step back and look at the most-salient identity of *Firefly*'s integral characters: a motley assortment of charismatic rogues fighting what appears to be an oppressive, authoritarian regime. Once again, this is reminiscent of *Star Wars*, with its farmer boy protagonist and his gunslinger friend (Lucas). Admittedly, Whedon has "downplayed the sinister nature of the Alliance... 'Well, it's not really an evil empire.' The trick was always to create something that was complex enough that you could bring some debate to it..." (Wilcox and Cochran 97). *Firefly* remains an underdog story, the kind that inevitably has appeal. We like to watch these kinds of stories, although many do not realize why. In point of fact, they distinctly resemble the Sons of Liberty fighting the Redcoats: the plot of the American Revolutionary War. We cannot say for sure if the Alliance is truly evil, nor can we say if the British Redcoats were truly evil either. Human nature tends to prefer dealings in absolutes, so we often decide that the present regime is entirely to blame for present problems. American politics provides proof, as the president's party is virtually guaranteed to lose seats during midterm elections (Busch 45-59). That frame of mind paints the Alliance and the British with the same brush, grouping the Browncoats and the Founding Fathers together as well. In other words - those of Peter S. Onuf, a University of Chicago faculty member who published a piece exploring the relationship between American Exceptionalism and national identity - "Ever since, Americans have been reenacting their revolution..." (80). Yes, reenacting through our entertainment, just as we have been projecting some of our most prideful ideals through Westerns and space operas and space westerns.

e. Counterarguments and Costs of the Frontier

A dilemma of unfairness limits the genre theory analysis of space westerns as vehicles of Exceptionalism. The preceding examples – *Firefly*, *Avatar*, "Dollars Trilogy", etc. - are products of the American entertainment industry; based on the previous discussion of consumerism, it is expected that American entertainment caters primarily to an American audience. That, like modern English being a universal lingua franca, is merely another mechanism to make the content more appropriate for its audience. It is not fair to say the sole motivation in crafting these programs and films is to promote American dominance, when escapism is a factor in any fantasy universe.

Murdoch, at one point in his book, claims: "despite their interest and pride in it, the West was where most Americans chose not to live. True for the nineteenth century, this is still true..." (24). Later in his exploration of how *Avatar* connects to the Frontier Thesis and Hollywood portrayal of First Nations People, Scheide suggests another potential limitation:

> [*Avatar*] has a member of the army 'going native'... [unlike the two movies it is most frequently compared to,] neither [*Pocahontas*' John] Smith nor [*Dances With Wolves*' John] Dunbar chose to remain... the avatars of Cameron's picture are so alienated from their own beleaguered world and its representatives they welcome losing... their earthly identities. (208)

Herein, the author tells us that the downside of the frontier is its distance from main society. Given enough separation, it may be harder for settlers to maintain their former identities as members of that culture, instead adopting a new one. Nonetheless, such adoption is highly irregular, meaning Scheide also tells us that Americans would not forsake their proud identity outside of especially extreme circumstances. It is a possibility with massive-scale expansion, albeit an unlikely one, given the introduction of Exceptionalism.

V. MARS: A GLIMPSE OF THE FUTURE FRONTIER

Our quadripartite exploration of the cultural relevance of *Firefly* centers on the idea and practice of a civilization's expansion. Those notions of othering, a singularly universalized culture, and rugged individualism will travel with and arguably define humanity's proposed massive-scale expansion. *Firefly* takes place in 2517, when humanity is already an interstellar race. Although we are not there yet, our voyage must begin somewhere: Mars. Recently realized in novel and film as *The Martian*, this project is still transitioning from fictional to hypothetical to actualized. Humanity has not achieved the level of technology necessary to replicate some of the more innovative aspects of *Firefly*'s canon - namely terraforming and ion drive engines - though our mission to Mars will take advantage of several other space westerns' ideas. Indeed, this transition from science fiction to scientific reality can be seen in a Discovery Channel-produced feature-length documentary detailing the many influences *Star Trek* has had on modern scientific and technological advances; several notable examples include the communicator existing as an early form of the now-ubiquitous cellular phone, Dr. Mae Jemison listing *Star Trek* as inspiration to become the first African-American in space, and the naming of the first Space Shuttle: *Enterprise* (*How William Shatner Changed the World*). That is to say, a leading space western has already inspired our present ambitions, including several ventures to space: the final frontier. When the United States sought, once more, to venture and take giant leaps, many looked to the fiction of entertainment for ideas and insight.

While Andy Weir's *The Martian* takes place around 2047, the United States intends to reach the Red Planet by 2030, highlighted in an op-ed published by President Barack Obama:

> We have set a clear goal vital to the next chapter of America's story in space: sending humans to Mars by the 2030s… with the ultimate ambition to one day remain there… Getting to Mars will require continued cooperation between government and private innovators. (Obama)

Inventor Elon Musk, founder and CEO of SpaceX, Tesla Motors, and more, is one such private innovator. SpaceX has already begun work on this ambitious moonshot, testing their Dragon capsules (visible in Figure 9) and reusable rocketry platforms. The science fiction influence is visible in the design of the various crafts, as proposed models mirrors the cloud cluster, en masse design of long-range fleets in *Battlestar Galactica* (SpaceX.com). Moreover, the christening of the first ship to sail invokes another famous work of science fiction: "asked what he might call the first of the new spaceliners, Musk said he liked 'Heart of Gold,' the name of a starship in Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* [style added]" (Harwood). **Figure 9** contains concept art of a different vessel in the SpaceX fleet.

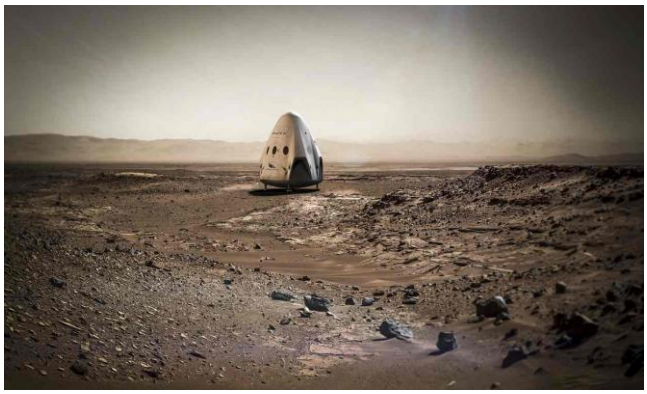


Figure 9: "An artist's concept photo of a SpaceX dragon capsule on the surface of Mars" (Yadron). Image credit: Handout/Reuters

Musk, as well as Astronaut Jemison, is also attached to a new television series, the aptly-named *Mars*, as a science and engineering consultant. In a natural fusion of the reality and fiction discussed above, the National Geographic Channel is sponsoring this documentary/drama hybrid detailing a hypothetical 2033 homesteading mission. Executive Producer Ron Howard explains the guiding vision of the series, saying: "'we wanted to be as cinematic and propulsive as we could be, but verisimilitude was a grounding principle and an obligation'" (Moore). This series is

a crucial example of the cultural relevance of entertainment, particularly space westerns, and recognizes its obligation to both entertain and educate.

Notably, the two most prominent figures in this new space race stated Exceptionalistic views as partial motivation for their expansion efforts, with "…[President] Obama [becoming] the first sitting U.S. president to use the phrase 'American Exceptionalism' publicly" (Friedman 4). Elon Musk has publicly described himself as "nauseatingly pro-American", expounding upon that with the following:

> …I think the United States is the greatest country that's ever existed on Earth. And I think that it will be difficult to argue on objective grounds that it is not. I think the facts really point in that direction. It's the greatest force for good of any country that's ever been. (Wattenberg)

President Obama and Elon Musk offer ideas and motivation consistent with aforementioned themes, tropes, and concepts of the frontier; America's path to their next frontier, Mars, is definitively predicated on the expansionism and expansion from before, as well as the imagination encapsulated within (space) westerns.

VI. CONCLUSION

President Barack Obama recalls an early childhood memory of gazing upon the stars and the heroic astronauts returning from their stellar journeys, saying:

> I still have the same sense of wonder about our space program... It represents an essential part of our character – curiosity and exploration, innovation and ingenuity, pushing the boundaries of what's possible and doing it before anybody else. The space race we won not only contributed immeasurably important technological and medical advances, but it also inspired a new generation of scientists and engineers with the right stuff to keep America on the cutting edge. (Obama)

Perhaps it is that same childlike wonder that allows entertainment to so fluidly work with exploration and pushing the proverbial envelope.

According to genre theorist Robert Murray Davis, the truly important part of space westerns lies in their ability "to move beyond the limited examination of human beings in stereotyped environments and social conditions to make the form comment, however indirectly, on contemporary values, using past and future to triangulate on the present" (40). In other words, as much we consumers inform our entertainment, our entertainment is capable of informing its consumers. Philosopher George Santayana tells us, "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it", and (space) westerns help us recall even the darker aspects of America's storied history (Santayana). While this nation gazes out into the void and charts a course for the beyond, it is imperative to consider the impact of Exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny, and Rugged Individualism; our entertainment offers inspiration for our newest mission, in terms of vision and technology, and we cannot heed its wisdom without also heeding its warnings. Consider National Geographic Channel's *Mars* series, which producer Justin Wilkes describes with the following:

> '[Earth won't support us forever.] In terms of the long game,' Wilkes says, 'it seems like a pretty good bet that we should try to become interplanetary. But in the process maybe we'll also find a way to get along with each other to do what we need to do on this planet.' (Moore)

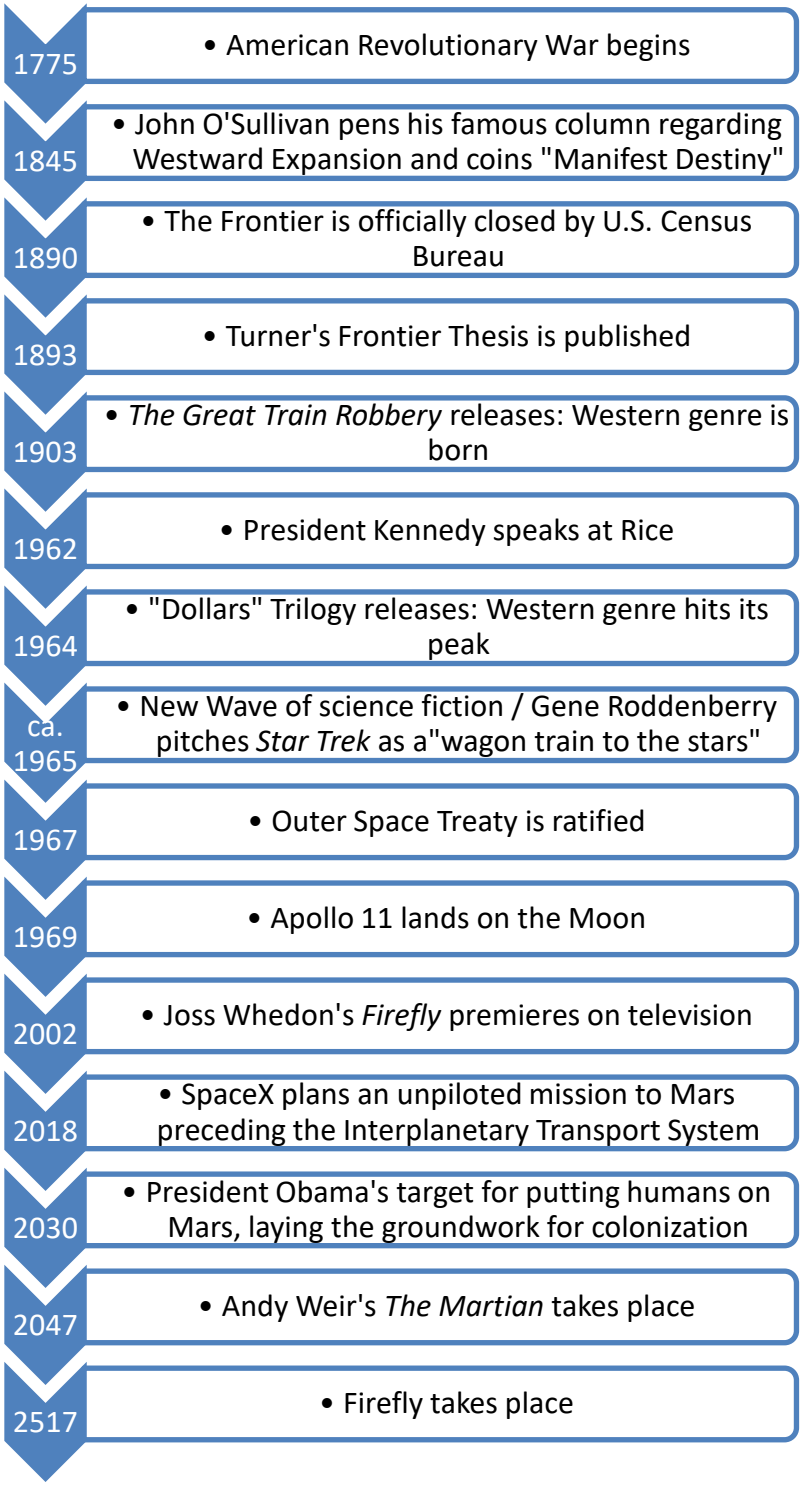
That is to say, perhaps it would be best to leave othering, invasion, extreme nationalism, and other darker themes in our past and in our fiction, and move forward with greater insight.

We now return to our premise by looking through an unexpected, albeit rather appropriate, lens: the American identity desperately requires a frontier - a place to expand its presence to - in order to spread its ideologues' Exceptionalistic values and bring (their) civilization to allegedly untamed lands. Preceding President Kennedy's speech at Rice University, without a new frontier in sight, holders of that American identity celebrated a romanticized version of the Western frontier in an attempt to relive perceived glory days. Following that speech, once given a glimpse of what was to come, they began to imagine what "Space: The Final Frontier" might hold, legally and technologically restricted from physically satisfying that need (Roddenberry). As our society advances and the technological restrictions become less daunting, we are now able to invert the pattern and apply the content of the genre toward real-world efforts as the United States begins its journey to the farthest frontier yet.

VII. APPENDIX A: Glossary of Core Terminology

- **Frontier**
  - "In American historiography the frontier has been defined as… open and free land where settlement is sparse – sometimes defined as land settled by less than 2 people per square mile. The way this… has been viewed over some two centuries has been shaped… based on the acquisition of several different frontiers." (Whitehead).
- **Turner's Frontier Thesis**
  - In essence, the idea that the frontier, as a physical and metaphysical entity, is fundamentally interwoven into the development of American identity and society; chasing that boundary of civilization and culture, pushing to find what comes next, is a driving force with widespread ramifications (Turner).
- ***Firefly***
  - A space western set 500 years in the future. This show, cancelled before its 14 episode first season even finished, is widely viewed as the epitome of a modern cult classic. Critically beloved, *Firefly* has a dedicated fanbase and has remained relevant for over a decade (IMDb.com).
- **American Exceptionalism**
  - The theory that what we call the United States of America is Earth's premier nation, inherently different from (and superior to) the rest. This is inextricably linked to nationalism/jingoism in this country, and a recurring theme in presidential politics (Friedman).
  - In other words: "the unshakeable belief that if America does it, then it must be right. America is beyond reproach and is better than everyone else" (Bimrose).
- **Manifest Destiny**
  - Coined by John O'Sullivan, Manifest Destiny is the belief that the United States was destined, in adherence to the will of the Christian deity, to expand coast to coast and broaden the scope of their so-called "City Upon a Hill" (History.com).
- **Nationalism/jingoism**
  - Nationalism is both the crowdsourced phenomenon of national identity formation and the expression of such an identity in a variety of ways. Often, this parallels the rapt allegiance many feel towards a particular sports team, such that all other teams and their fans are deemed interlopers. Jingoism is an especially aggressive form of nationalism, often in the form of foreign policy (Miscevic 1, Merriam-Webster.com).

VIII. APPENDIX B: Timeline



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