

“You Can’t Take the Sky from Me”: An Ethnographic Case Study in Community Construction

A Senior Honor Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation *with Research Distinction in Comparative Studies* in the Undergraduate Colleges of The Ohio State University

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May 2010

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Take my love,
Take my land,
Take me where I cannot stand.
I don't care,
I'm still free,
You can't take the sky from me.
Take me out,
To the Black,
Tell 'em I ain't coming back.
I don't care,
I'm still free,
You can't take the sky from me.
There's no place I can be
Since I found Serenity.
You can't take the sky from me.

~ The Ballad of Serenity

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Contemporary Community Construction

“Community” is one of those words – like folklore, myth, tradition or ritual – that is casually tossed about in everyday speech, a word which is apparently readily understood by both speaker and listener. However, when imported into an academic atmosphere these words immediately become a source of difficulty. “Community” has become a point of contention within the social sciences, where scholars have been hard pressed to come to an agreed upon definition. Even lacking an agreed upon definition we are able to delineate certain commonalities in the studies of community which allow us to generate broad categories that permit us to create a useful means to discuss this complicated and troublesome concept.

The first of the types of grouping we can distinguish from the volumes dedicated to the study of community have focused on what many may consider the traditional interpretation of the word, namely those that are geographically based. For the purposes of this exercise I will refer to these as “communities of place.” This type falls closest to the biological and sociological definitions of the word – a group of people interacting in a common environment, often sharing a set of values and/or beliefs with regard to the shared location. This may range from the local – such as a neighborhood, suburb, or village – to the moderately sized – such as a town, city, or region – to the large – such as a nation. These communities are bound geographically and may have many additional communities nested within them, which may be further distinguished, whether geographically, ideological or otherwise.

The second type of community that has been widely studied has been the community that is predicated on a shared sense of essential cultural identity. These may include ethnic groups, religious groups, the elderly, the disabled, and so on. I will refer to these as “communities of identity.” These differ from communities of place in that they are not bound geographically, but

instead are based on a collective understanding of what binds the group. This may include a shared ritual, physical distinction, language, history, belief, and/or other characteristic.

These two types of community are not exclusive, and in fact are often nested within each other, for instance the Hmong in Columbus, Ohio or Muslims in Edison, New Jersey or the Elderly in Venice, California – all of these are communities of identity nested within communities of place. Each are part of two larger communities, for example Muslims as a community of identity formed around religious belief and practices and Edison, New Jersey as a community of place formed around the geographic boundaries of the city of Edison.

In his study of local storytelling in Aghyaran, Ireland (a community of place), Ray Cashman defines community as “a network of people brought into engagement by an idea” (2008:12). While communities of place and identity both fit that definition, they do not allow us to really deepen our understanding of community or how it is imagined, constructed and maintained. In discussing a definition one must consider all types of communities, not just the ones which most easily or commonly present themselves. In this study I intend to present a contemporary trend in community building, one that *does not* necessarily fit into the previously determined categories of geographic place or essential cultural identity but *does* fit the definition put forth by Cashman. It is my goal that in presenting a group dynamic associated with neither a geographic setting nor an essential sense of identity that we can further refine how we are willing to understand our definitions of community and in doing so be more open to reevaluating community construction in an increasingly modern world.

As technology advances it has more of an impact on how we communicate and how we build our identities both individually and communally. In techno-savvy societies electronic means of communication have opened immediate lines of communication within a variety of

communities. Neighborhoods have built email listservs. Online bulletin boards allow for shared personal and economic growth. Social networks place your neighbors no further than a click away. These technological wonders have allowed both communities of place and identity to become more connected than ever. However, these same technological marvels have smashed down the boundaries of traditional communities, in many ways rendering useless the idea of community as geographically based.

Furthermore, in an age where media is ever present ó accessible via computer and television, cell phone and iPod ó a shared sense of fundamental identity is no longer necessary for community building. Where communities are often based on ideas of religion or cultural and physical identity it has become equally possible to build communities on mass produced cultural artifacts. In the past these "artifact communities" have largely been linked to communities of place. An example may be communities built around comic books and the collection of comic books, which with the advent of the direct market created a nested community of comic book aficionados usually located in a neighborhood comic book shop. What differentiates "artifact communities" from "communities of identity" is that the identity of the individuals associated with the artifact community is not indelibly linked with the artifact as the case may be in a community of identity, which may be ethnically or religiously based for example.

Technology has played a huge part in the evolution of these groups. The internet has made it possible for communities to form around a cultural artifact without the necessity of being geographically bound. While it can be argued that some form of these communities did exist before the internet boom, the use of the web has not only allowed for these groups to flourish, but to build real communities in a virtual world.

Howard Rheingold refers to communities built online as “Virtual Communities” (1993, 1999, and 2000). While I disagree with the word “virtual” as a labeling element (it suggests that the community is somehow unreal) I agree with his fundamental assessment that such groups can possess the elements that build community, he writes “the collective goods” that bind [virtual communities] into “a community are [the] *social network... knowledge* and *communion*” (1993: 13; 1999: 283, emphasis mine). These three elements are the glue that holds a community together, that creates and maintains community after they have been brought together by an idea. The social network is necessary in forming relationships and communicating, knowledge of the community is necessary in understanding the group as well as understanding the individual’s place in the whole and communion is the shared experiences of the group as a community.

It is my belief that these cyber-communities (a term that I feel is more accurate in both its description for how the community operates and its semantic usage) are complete communities, which function in the same way we may expect any geographically or culturally bound community to function. It is also my belief that artifact centered communities can also be fully formed and complete communities. To that end, I will give an ethnographic analyses of an individual community that fulfills both these contemporary communal trends, an artifact centered cyber-community. It is my hope that in bringing these types of community dynamics to the fore it will be possible for us as scholars to continue to refine how we are willing to understand our definitions of community and in doing so be more open to evaluating how community is imagined, constructed and maintained in an increasingly modern world.

For this analysis I have chosen to study a group that refers to themselves as “Browncoats.” This community is centered on a particular set of cultural artifacts, these are: the short-lived science fiction television show, *Firefly* and its feature film follow-up *Serenity*. This

group truly embodies the concept of "fandom," right down to its Latin root, *fanaticus* (enthusiastic, frantic, frenzied, inspired). As a folk group they have built a global network of loyal fans, sharing a common set of texts, values, experiences and vernacular culture. To understand the Browncoats though, first we must understand the base upon which they have built the superstructure of their community. We must analyze the text and understand the context in which it has been produced and consumed to garner a greater appreciation for the vernacular culture of the group and its role in establishing and maintaining community.

Deconstructing *Firefly*

Firefly was a television show that first appeared on FOX networks in the autumn of 2002, and was cancelled in December of that same year. The fact that the program was cancelled so quickly, after only twelve hour-long episodes, is very important as it has become one of the focal points for the fan community. The genre of the program can best be describe as a hybrid between science fiction and western, creator Joss Whedon describes the show as "a mixture of genres, a *Stagecoach* kind of drama with a lot of people trying to figure out their lives in a bleak and pioneer environment" (2006: 6).

This "pioneer environment" that Whedon wished to project becomes evident upon watching several episodes of the series. The setting temporally is the distant future, circa 2517 CE, and spatially spans a solar system (or systems, it is unclear) that incorporates many planets and moons. The overarching narrative of the series makes it clear that this is not based on Earth, referring in several episodes to "Earth-that-was." Through various scenes during the course of the series it is established that long before the events of the program are shown, a large population had emigrated from Earth to a new star system, where they firmly established

themselves. Many of the planets and moons within the system were terra-formed, a process in which it is altered to resemble the Earth. The terra-forming process was only the first step in making a planet habitable, however, and often the outlying settlements often did not receive any further support in the construction of their civilizations. What resulted was that many of the border planets and moons were given inhospitable desert-like environments, well suited to the Western genre.

In the original on air broadcasts of *Firefly* there are two distinct pre-teaser openings that explain much of this history to the audience. The first is narrated by the Captain of the *Serenity* (a ship, distinct from *Serenity*, the film), Malcolm Reynolds (played by actor Nathan Fillion), he says:

Here's how it is: The Earth got used up, so we moved out and terra-formed a whole new galaxy of Earths, some rich and flush with the new technologies, some not so much. The Central Planets, them as formed the Alliance, waged war to bring everyone under their rule; a few idiots tried to fight it, among them myself. I'm Malcolm Reynolds, captain of *Serenity*. She's a transport ship, *Firefly* class. Got a good crew: fighters, pilot, mechanic. We even picked up a preacher for some reason, and a bona fide companion. There's a doctor too, took his genius sister out of some Alliance camp, so they're keeping a low profile, you understand. You got a job, we can do it, don't much care what it is (*Firefly* episodes: 1.05 "Shindig," 1.06 "Safe," 1.09 "Out of Gas," 1.10 "Ariel," and 1.14 "Heart of Gold").

The second opening changes marginally mostly due to the narrative voice of Shepherd Derrial Book (played by actor Ron Glass). The Shepherd (a religious title) says:

After the Earth was used up, we found a new solar system and hundreds of new Earths were terra-formed and colonized. The Central Planets formed the Alliance and decided all the planets had to join under their rule. There was some disagreement on that point. After the War, many of the Independents who had fought and lost drifted to the edges of the system, far from Alliance control. Out here, people struggled to get by with the most basic technologies; a ship would bring you work, a gun would help you keep it. A captain's goal was simple: find a crew, find a job, keep flying (*Firefly* episodes: 1.03 "The Train Job," 1.04 "Bushwacked," 1.07 "Our Mrs. Reynolds," and 1.08 "Jaynestown").

The War of Unification, mentioned in both of these introductions, is an important plot point, both in terms of the series and the community that has grown around it. During the course of *Firefly* The Alliance is shown to govern the system through largely totalitarian means, organized primarily through a structure of core planets.

After unification the core planets prosper under a firm Alliance control, but the outlying border worlds resemble the nineteenth century American West, with little in the way of governmental authority. Settlers and refugees on the outlying worlds have relative freedom from the central government, but lack the amenities of the high-tech civilization that exist on the inner worlds. In addition, the outlying areas are rife with Reavers, a roving cannibalistic race.

It is in this world the stories are set, centered on the exploits of the captain of *Serenity*, Malcolm "Mal" Reynolds, and his crew. During the original pilot episode, "Serenity," it is established that Mal and his first mate, Zoe Washburne, are veterans of the rebel legions of the Unification War, a failed front organized by the outlying worlds to resist the Alliance's control. This group, who fought for independence, is referred to in most cases as "Browncoats." The loss

of the War is a driving motivation for Mal, and the critical battle of that war, The Battle of Serenity Valley, in many ways defines him as a person. We must keep this characteristic in mind as we continue to think about the community that is formed around the show. In the latter half of the series is revealed that Mal bought the spaceship, which he named Serenity, in order to continue living beyond Alliance control. He introduced the ship to Zoe, saying “We’ll never be under the heel of nobody ever again. No matter how long the arm of the Alliance might get, we’ll just get ourselves a little further” (“Out of Gas” episode 1.09). The background built throughout the series creates a narrative element that is both reflexive to American history while also reflected in the community base. This will become clearer later in the essay as I address the community response to the demise of the show.

The two major powers that formed the Alliance are the core planets of Londinium, based on America, and Sihnon, a Chinese inspired counterpart. This combination allows for the series’ unique linguistic and stylistic themes. *Firefly* takes place in a multi-cultural future, playing primarily this fusion of Oriental and Occidental cultures. It also focuses on the significant division between the rich and poor. As a result of the Sino-American Alliance, Mandarin Chinese is a common second language; it is used in advertisements, and characters in the show frequently use Chinese words and phrases. The commentary on the episode “Serenity,” explains this fusion as a result of China and the United States being the two dominant superpowers on Earth, and extrapolating from there Joss Whedon explains that it is those countries that expanded into space.

Having established a very skeletal outline of the show it is next necessary to understand the context in which it was produced. Joss Whedon had gained fame for producing the hit television programs *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*. Due to the popularity of these works

FOX offered Joss Whedon the opportunity to create a new program for their broadcast affiliates. Whedon developed the concept for the show after reading *The Killer Angels* by Michael Shaara, a historical novel that retells the Battle of Gettysburg from the perspective of various soldiers of the Union and Confederacy. The show was imagined as an insight into the lives and experiences of those who had fought on the losing side of the war. Largely *Firefly* functions in the same way as Reconstruction Era Post-Civil War America fiction. He also sought to create something that was more character-driven and gritty than the majority of televised science-fiction, which he felt had become too pristine (in *Done the Impossible*).

The new program faced difficulty from the beginning. The pilot episode, "Serenity," was not well received by FOX executives, who ordered a new pilot script to be created. This new episode would become "The Train Job" and would be the premier episode against the wishes of Whedon and executive producer Tim Minear. *Firefly* first aired on FOX affiliates on September 20th 2002 at 8PM EST.

It soon became clear to the fans that the show they enjoyed so much was in trouble, as the Nielsen Ratings (considered a television industry rating standard) were not good. Many of the fans would come to blame FOX for the poor ratings as the episodes were played out of their intended order more often than not, and occasionally preempted for sporting events or movie reruns. Adam Baldwin, the actor who played Jayne Cobb, described the situation as dire, saying:

We had all been sharing in this struggle to keep this project in the air. And in the early going, I think the people that were watching the show understood as well as we did, right away that we were struggling to stay afloat (quoted in *Done the Impossible*).

The fans of the show, having now dubbed themselves Browncoats, made many visible efforts to save *Firefly*. This included the Firefly: Immediate Assistance Fund, which raised money to place a full page ad in *Daily Variety Magazine*. The goal of the fund was to heighten awareness for the show while simultaneously showing the determined support of the fan base. The advertisement appeared on December 9th 2002. However, on December 12th FOX announced the cancellation of the series. In an interesting twist the intended pilot episode, "Serenity," was the last one to air on December 20th, 2002. The series had only lasted three months, but in that time it had built a vociferous fan base.

Whedon was given the opportunity to shop the series to other networks, however no other networks chose to pick the show up. Only twelve of the fifteen recorded episodes were originally aired in the United States by FOX. During an interview Alan Tudyk (who played Hoban "Wash" Washburne) reflected on the day the show was cancelled:

[Joss] poked his head into the bridge, "I need to talk to everybody." And it was one of those, kind of like "Ah, man." We just knew what it was because we had been beaten up for the, you know, last weeks and months. And frustrated just like anybody who liked the show, that that it wasn't on every week. It was on every third, I mean it was the most insane, non-chance of a TV show. And so, and we all liked it so much, and we were all fighting this evil empire alliance on the TV show that FOX immediately became. And then it was like we had lost to the Alliance.

That sentiment of loss to a mighty Alliance would be reiterated by the fan base for years to come. The context of the struggles of the show, combined with the struggles of the characters in the text of the series created an interesting dynamic for the community to build upon. The

struggle and loss of the war within the series was echoed by the struggle and loss between FOX and the *Firefly* fans and producers. One would expect the story to stop there, but for the Browncoats defeat was only the beginning.

Creating Spaces

While cyber-communities, such as the Browncoats, may not be communities of place as described above, they do have spaces in which they maneuver. Cyber-communities operate primarily in a virtual space created online. There are a variety of methods in which they communicate and organize including: social media, forums, discussion boards, listservs, chat groups and instant messaging. Prior to the launch of the show FOX created an online discussion board for *Firefly* (usually referred to as the OB or Original Board). Nine days after the first episode premiered, a thread on the board began the debate over what the nickname for fans of the television show should be. Browncoats, the nickname of the rebel faction during the shows fictional Unification War, was suggested on October 4th, 2002 and eventually adopted by the fans and endorsed by Joss Whedon. This virtual world was the first of many where the fans of *Firefly* could congregate.

After the demise of *Firefly* this online presence of Browncoats exploded. Fans clamored for *Firefly* and either found or created spaces where they could share their zeal for "the ÷verse." Nikolai Norausky was one of many fans to become involved with the Browncoats online; in an interview with fans he said "I signed a petition online and that's how I became involved with the Browncoats" (quoted in *Don e the Impossible*). In that same interview Jon Engel shared a similar indoctrination narrative:

I stumbled across a message board that FOX had set up. And that's how I met all these wonderful Browncoats and discovered the community and realized that there was still hope. That's also how I met Soonerdax [Amy Wilson] (quoted in *Done the Impossible*).

These spaces became an important nexus for the exchange of ideas and vernacular culture. They became a place where one could go to discuss *Firefly*, but also a communal place to discuss their everyday lives. These spaces of exchange are the areas in which I was able to study the Browncoats as a participant-observer. I situated myself within the community, and made my purpose clear in several posts where I requested information. Largely my participation was limited to simple questions directed to the community as a whole and "direct messaging" a method of contacting individuals in more private settings. Otherwise I maintained my distance through a process known as "lurking" a practice wherein one reads the threads of conversation without actively participating in the discussion.

An important aspect of participating in these virtual havens was the advent of a personal handle, or screen name. Screen names are identifiers that are unique to each individual within a particular forum or discussion board. Often these are ported between various websites and allow active members in the community to be recognizable through a variety of locations in the online world. [Soonerdax], [11th Hour], [LittleEwok], [Cavewitch], and [DVDGuy] are all examples of this performance of identity online. When available I attempted to use as simple a screen name as possible, often creating personal screen name such as [myc].

However, these identities are not only useful in the online world. I refer to these communities as cyber-communities because they are not restricted only to an existence on the internet. Instead they are communities guided by this technology, using it as a tool to

communicate and organize. The Browncoats operate in spaces beyond the virtual, and do so with remarkable success. The first organized meeting of Browncoats occurred in Las Vegas and included fans from the US and Canada. This gathering, called a Shindig after the episode of the same name (1.04), was organized to celebrate the birthday of one member of the community, who went by the screen name Lux Lucre. Joanne Gray described the organization of such an event as both completely natural and inevitable, saying:

We're on the boards and you know everybody's screen name, but we don't really have anybody else in our lives who is interested in it. So other than being on the boards, that's it. So coming down and meeting everyone, it's like getting together with family that you've never even met before (quoted in *Done the Impossible*).

Browncoat Betsy Slusarski [BetsySlu], commented on the unique situation of meeting people for the first time and calling them not by their given name, but by their online handle:

You meet with Browncoats and most of the time you just know their screen name. So you walk around calling people things like "Cavewitch" and "Pip" and "I1th". You always wonder what people, like, sitting behind you think when you're like "Hey Fly!" [laughs] "Why are they calling her Fly?" (quoted in *Done the Impossible*).

Shindigs and *Firefly* parties are popular ways for the community to come together in order to meet in a physical way. There seems to be a distinct difference between the two however, a *Firefly* Party is organized with the express intention of bringing together a group to view the series. It can be seen as a ritualistic event wherein the act of watching the series creates *communitas*, an intense communal bond. This will be discussed in depth late in this essay, for now what is important is that it creates an additional space in which the Browncoats can operate.

A Shindig is somewhat less limited in scope. Often this can include watching *Firefly* or *Serenity* its major motion picture follow-up, but this is not a requirement. Shindigs act more as a general catch all meeting, best described as a meet-and-greet. They are a space in which the community can gather and perform any number of activities. When asked about Shindigs Browncoats often give similar answers, Rosie Leon [Fireflypassenger] describes them by saying:

The Browncoat community, it's a family. And what I like to tell people about Shindigs who haven't gone [is] a Shindig is a family reunion of people you haven't met yet. So get yourself to a Shindig, is what I always say (quoted in *Done the Impossible*).

Larger events are also organized by the Browncoat community. In 2007 and again in 2009 the Browncoats organized a Caribbean cruise for fans from around the world that also included cast members from the series. This event is more laid back than some of the other events which the community organizes. For instance the Browncoats have a history of opening their collective wallets for charity, creating a space for communal participation while asserting their economic might as a group. Each year since 2006 the Browncoats have organized the "Can't Stop Serenity" event. This event is a global charity effort that lasts several months and is aimed at raising money for Equality Now and other charities, while also allowing the community space in which to display their fan spirit. According to the CSTS website, in the four events from 2006 through 2009 these worldwide screenings of the film *Serenity* have raised a total of \$416,616.22 in charitable contributions donated by fans in the name of *Firefly & Serenity*. Over this four year period the Browncoats were able to organize 178 individual screenings in 8 countries around the world.

Browncoats also seek to create a space in which to operate as a socially relevant economic power. June 23rd 2006 was named *Serenity* Day within the community ó a date chosen to coincide with Joss Whedon's birthday. The goal on this day was to buy, or convince others to buy, copies of *Firefly* and *Serenity* on DVD to show the studios that there was still a market for this particular product. It was successful in that *Serenity* and *Firefly* finished ranked second and third, respectively, on the Amazon.com DVD Best Sellers list.

Understanding the spaces in which Browncoats interact with one another is key in understanding the vernacular culture that they create as a means of binding their community together. Having described the texts on which the community is founded and the method and spaces in which they interact, we can now begin to look at the productions formed by the community and how they are used before we analyze what they mean within and to the community as a whole.

Language

Like all folk groups communication is absolutely vital to the building of *communitas*. For the Browncoats communication occurs primarily through the written word, but also in spoken contexts. It becomes important to examine the multilayered nature of language used in both oral and written contexts of the Browncoat community. We can break down the language structures of the group into four distinct groupings that are combined to create a creolized Browncoat vernacular.

The first and most obvious of these language groupings is what I will refer to as the Base Language. This is usually English, and most often American English. This is the primary language in which the Browncoats communicate; this is then augmented by the addition of other

properties. I hesitate to state categorically that American English (which itself has several derivative variations) can be labeled the essential Base Language for the Browncoats as a whole. The community is truly international, and this complicates matters to a certain degree. A member from Scotland likely doesn't use the same verbiage as a member from New York, who may also use separate vernacular as a member from New Mexico. Ultimately the Base Language of the community as a whole leans toward a non-regionally based American dialect, with certain subtle variations. For our purposes we can describe the overall vernacular architecture as skewing in this direction.

Having established an idea for the foundation of language within the community, a Base Language, I would like to introduce the second aspect that of Browncoat vernacular, which modifies that Base: Internet Speak. Internet Speak is also commonly referred to as leet or leetspeak and has also been known to be called hakspeak, netspeak, and/or chatspeak. This form of communication is popular in many media formats including a variety of online spaces and through cellular text messaging. In online spaces this is usually done in order to save keystrokes, thus "I'd be right back" gets shorthanded to the abbreviation "BRB" (dropping the singular pronoun contraction). This language shorthand has made a move in recent years from being exclusively written to being a spoken aspect of language. For example "laughing out loud" originally used to denote that the writer finds something amusing was shortened to "LOL" in written text; in the move to its spoken state it has the diaphonic pronunciations / ləʊ l/, / l l l/, and/or / loʊ l/. However this move in language is not limited to the Browncoats. In fact this is quickly becoming the next paradigm shift in modern English as we move to a more technology based society. The true modifications to create a Browncoat vernacular come directly from the community's foundational texts.

A particular type of slang vernacular evolved during the course of *Firefly*'s run. False cognates were developed to give the world of the show a sense of gritty reality and allow the characters to act in a realistic manner. "Rutting," "banged," "humped" and "gorramn" are examples of words that were borrowed from the show into the community, their meanings never explicitly stated but their context making their use clear. The foreshortening of words was also common in the series, examples being "the -verse" and "atmo," referring to "the universe" and "atmosphere" respectively. Words were also borrowed by the show and given new meaning "the black" now meaning space, "shiny" a new word for aesthetics of attitude as in cool, and so on. An additional variation of this lexicon is the appropriation of archaic slang terminology. Examples of this are "peck" (a large amount), "doxy" (a prostitute), and "sly" (a euphemism for homosexual tendencies, "is he sly?" for instance).

As part of this vernacular we find changes in language rules. Some of the most obvious in the show and in the Browncoat community include: truncating the "g" in words ending in "ing" (schoolin'), the common use of double negatives, prefixing "ing" words (a-runnin'), dropping "ly" on adverbs (it's awful good), lack of subject-verb agreement, and using malformed verbs (he growed up). Other common intentional language changes include using odd or obscure words and word forms. This structure in combination with other slang terms and Internet Speak when used to augment the Base Language create a large part of Browncoat vernacular. However one of the most unique factors of this lexicon that creates a contemporary creole is the frequent casual use of Mandarin Chinese.

In the series Chinese was used frequently by the characters in a variety of situations, but according to Joss Whedon only in situations where "we didn't need to know what they meant" (quoted in *Here's How it Was*). Context was the key in determining what the Chinese

phrases meant in the series; however Browncoats often sought translations, even going so far as to debate nuances of meaning online to garner a greater appreciation for the usage of the language (Sullivan, 2004a: 204). Interestingly fans not only mimicked the phrases and usage they viewed in *Firefly*, they actively learned new phrases to add into their vernacular toolbox. Phrases such as *ōding haoö* (very good) and *ōkaoö* (fuck) have been widely used by the Browncoat community to great affect even though they never appeared in the series.

This Chinese usage has come under attack by some who are more familiar with Chinese as a spoken language. The argument is that the tones used by some practitioners are incorrect or that some words and phrases use Taiwanese or Cantonese variations as opposed to Mandarin (Sullivan, 2004a: 200). While this may be true from a technical standpoint what is more important is that the community is able to cull meaning out of this usage; that they are mutually intelligible to one another and that they understand what they are speaking is Chinese *as they see it*. Essentially if the community believes a thing to be real or true, then it is real or true in its consequences for them. For all intents and purposes the Browncoat vernacular is a creolized language formed from a variation of English dialects and lexicons merged with a communal understanding of aspects of Chinese. Having an understanding of this creolized method of communication is absolutely necessary to begin to understand the other cultural artifacts produced by the Browncoat Community; especially narrative.

Narrative

Narratives in the Browncoat community can be said to fall into two very broad categories: Real Narratives and FanFic. Real Narratives are the living narratives of everyday life. Under this category we may find several variations on narrative themes which may include:

conversions (how one came to be a Browncoat), histories (personal or communal), the fan response, self-reflexive communal narratives, and so on. Largely these narratives are the work of the community online. One may read a thread (a self contained discussion pertaining to a particular topic) on the OB as a meta-narrative for example. A thread may focus on one Real Narrative (perhaps a particular event, such as one member discovering they have cancer for example) the discussion also acts as a Real Narrative, telling the story of the Browncoats communal response to this situation. These stories of and for the community use the same language and same foundational texts previously described above. References to the television show, including direct quotes, or complaints in Chinese are not only common but expected in any given discussion online.

Real Narratives, as I have described them here, are an expected part of any communal situation. Communicating through story telling is an essential part of the human condition. This has been discussed at great length in other works so I will not delve too deeply into it here; however it is important to note that the method of conveying these stories often conforms to the establish rules of language as previously discussed. We will come back to Real Narratives later in the chapter focusing on how these cultural productions build meaning and *communitas*.

For now I will turn my attention to the second broad type of narratives produced by the Browncoat community ó FanFic. FanFic is an abbreviated form of the phrase öFan Fiction.ö To define FanFic one must begin by describing it broadly. In the most basic sense FanFic is a story or stories produced by someone other than the original work's owner/creator/publisher. It must be related in some form to the -canonicalø fictional universe, but exists outside of that universe. It is generally written for other members of the community; as such it usually assumes a certain amount of familiarity with the -anonøtexts. This definition applies to virtually all fan groups,

and is not unique to the *Firefly* fandom. The stories, however, are works that are best understood in the context of the Browncoat community as they are generally produced by this group for this group. They have the additional impact of allowing the creators a certain degree of creative release. Julie Frost, a popular Browncoat writer, said of FanFic:

[T]he fan fiction thing is, itø, it gives me, for me it gives me a creative outlet that I wouldnø get otherwise. And it lets me answer the øwhat ifö questions and do fun things with it (quoted in *Done the Impossible*).

FanFic has dozens of subgenres such as crossover (i.e. *Firefly* meets *Star Trek*) and slashfic (a romantic or sexual narrative usually identified by the romantic pairing ønamed character/named characterö). Slashfic has several nested genres contained within it falling into three broad categories: slash (male homoerotic), femslash (lesbian homoerotic) and het (hetero-romantic or sexual). One of the most popular subgenres of FanFic in the Browncoat community is VS, or the virtual season. *Still Flying* is one of the more popular FanFic series produced and consumed by Browncoats the world over. It is a series of twenty-seven øvirtual episodesö that encompass a hypothetical ending to Season 1 and a complete Season 2 of *Firefly*. These stories are written in a teleplay format utilizing several of the tropes from the show, as well as much of the language that the community has come to easily recognize.

There are thousands of narratives utilizing the æanonøuniverse created by Joss Whedon, and these can be divided into a number of genres that cover the widest spectrum of tastes imaginable. Adam Baldwin (who played Jayne Cobb in the Series) said øWith no new episodes of *Firefly* being aired í fans turned to themselves to fill the gapö (quoted in *Done the Impossible*). Almost every online forum or discussion board has an area dedicated to FanFic, and there are even sites dedicated exclusively to creating a home for these works. The FanFic

narrative offers a cultural artifact that allows the community to grow beyond its foundational texts. It opens a place for discussion and interpretation, and brings the community closer together in a variety of ways. I will come back to this later in the essay when exploring these cultural productions in terms of community building.

Visual Art

Film and television are visual and aural narrative mediums, and while the narratives told through these forms are important to the community (as we can see above), the visual aspect is equally as important. Browncoats have sought to fill the void by creating a variety of art that is utilized for a plethora of purposes, including guerilla marketing.

Jay Conrad Levinson describes guerilla marketing as “an unconventional way of performing promotional activities on a very low budget” (24). This was accomplished in several ways by the *Firefly* fans, but most notably through a flyer campaign created by Susan Renée Tomb [11th Hour]. 11th, as she is commonly known, created her first series of flyers to use as a marketing tool for the original release of *Firefly* on DVD. These posters were distributed online with instructions on how to display them in retail locations near the electronics section. Her second series was to promote a *Firefly* marathon on the Sci-Fi Channel in anticipation of the release of the film *Serenity*. The goal in each of these cases was to raise awareness of the text to a wider audience, so that increased sales and ratings (respectively) could potentially lead to the creation of more official material.

Guerilla marketing is not the only artistic production the Browncoats have created. Most fan art tends to function as proxy, rendering homage to the source material. Artists like Jason Palmer, Kerry Pearson [Lux Lucre] and Mike Phillips create pictorial representations of

characters of the series, either in completely original poses or in on-screen captures or reproductions of popular scenes from the series. The homage art tends to be the most frequently seen style in Browncoat communities. A subset of this is the homage comic, a combination of the written narrative and visual artistic media that performs the work of both expressive materials at once.

Some art, however, is not homage to the series, but to the community. Typically this is called "Fan Service" and tends to appear in works that are not necessarily part of the Browncoat community strictly speaking. Scott Kurtz, a webcomic pioneer and creator of the popular comic "PVP" featured *Firefly* in a series of daily strips that ran from March 16th to March 19th 2004. In this series characters or scenes from *Firefly* are not shown, but what we are given is a glimpse of the conversion narrative in comic form. Mike E. Russell, creator of "Culture Pulp" produced a documentary style comic that focused exclusively on the fan community and the hoopla surrounding the release of *Serenity*. These stylistic representations are more the exception than the rule; however it does allow us to see additional genres of visual representations in the Browncoat community. The visual aspect is not limited strictly to pictorial representations as Browncoats have also created sculptures and miniatures. There has also been a movement to recreate props from the films in the form of weapons, vehicles and most important clothing.

Clothing

Browncoat created clothing falls into one of three major categories: licensed, casual, and costume. Licensed clothing is a garment that is officially produced through accompany affiliated with the *Firefly* and *Serenity* copyright holders. These are comprised primarily of T-shirts and carry bags or totes. Usually licensed products carry the logo for either the film or series and

rarely feature the characters from the series. This type of clothing tends to be the rarest, and is often viewed as collectable. The production of officially licensed products was limited due to the lack of demand and the limited success of both the series and the film. Occasionally these garments are available in online and are usually sold as collectors pieces.

The most popular variation of clothing worn by Browncoats is produced and sold by the fans themselves. Browncoats produce a variety of *Firefly* inspired accoutrements including: hats, totes, sweatshirts, T-shirts, and even onesies for children. These artifacts may seek to duplicate clothing worn in the series to an extent (for example the "Blue Sun" shirt worn by the character Jayne Cobb, which is not officially licensed but is available online). However more common are references to the series in other forms. Quotes such as "I am to misbehave" (from the film *Serenity*) or "Curse your sudden but inevitable betrayal" (from "Serenity, Part 1" episode 1.01) often appear on Browncoat clothing with no context whatsoever. Even more abstract images may appear, with references that are only understandable to the initiated. The style produced by the community for itself often seeks to distance itself from officially licensed products. Chiefly this is an aesthetic choice, allowing the community to cater to its own taste ó however it also serves a secondary purpose, it protects the community. This protection aspect will be discussed in some detail later in the essay.

This independently produced clothing has found its niche online and at conventions. Browncoats are able to order a variety of styles, colors, sizes, and patterns through online shopping centers such as ThinkGeek.com or they can find retailers at Shindigs or cons. Selling to one another through online message boards is also a common occurrence and the trading of patterns and designs has become commonplace in the Browncoat community.

In my opinion the most interesting aspect of Browncoat apparel is Costuming. Costuming is the intentional creation of an outfit that mimics or reflects the fictional universe of *Firefly*. There are several manners in which Costuming presents itself. One may attempt to dress as a specific character from the series, usually one of the nine main characters, but this is not always the case. Many Browncoats choose to dress as ancillary characters, affording them slightly more freedom in their costuming. Another option is not to imitate a particular person from the series but to create a persona based on an archetypal character from the series. One may choose to dress as an Independent Soldier, aping the style of uniform worn during the fictional Unification War (as seen in episodes 1.01 and 1.13, "Serenity, Part 1" and "The Message" respectively). Others may choose to replicate the "fancy duds" and "layer cake dresses" that the social elite wear to grand events on Persephone, a fictional world in the series (as seen in episode 1.04 "Shindig").

Wardrobe can be very competitive amongst the Browncoat community, each member often seeking to have the most "authentic" outfit. Few Shindigs or conventions are complete without a costume contest, and several Browncoats will spend months preparing an outfit for a particular event. These costume contests often involve a small amount of acting as members seek to impersonate a specific character or character-type. Usually the community decides together who should win the costume contest with a simple majority vote earning the winner prestige within the community and occasionally "swag" (prizes).

Costuming and other clothing is an outward artistic expression of communal belonging for the Browncoats. As we have seen this community produces a large amount of cultural artifacts. However the community produces more than just visual art. Music, considered an exceptionally important aspect of the series also has its place in the community. So does newer

forms of expression that are currently in the infant stages of scholarly study - being a technologically savvy community affords them additional opportunities to create new media from communal consumption.

Music and Multimedia

The opening credits of *Firefly* features a theme song known as "The Ballad of Serenity." Commonly referred to as a "folk song," this song has become a hallmark of the Browncoat community and has been known to be sung at Shindigs, *Firefly* parties, and conventions around the globe. Other "folk" songs have been appropriated by the community from the series, including the ever popular "Hero of Canton" (occasionally referred to as "The Ballad of Jayne"). These songs begin to form the ever expanding repertoire of music housed within the Browncoat community.

The music from the show has been the foundation for the music produced by the community commonly referred to as Filk. Some of the first musical productions created by the community were parodies of the music pulled from the show. "The Bedlam Bards," a popular band amongst Browncoats, produced one of these first parodies "The Ballad of Joss" based on the composition from "The Hero of Canton." James Hazletig [Cedric] of the Bards recalls writing the song while on the road traveling to a convention:

And I thought [sings] "Joss, the man they call Joss." I thought, "Oh, somebody's written that already. I'm sure, come on that's way too obvious." But no, nobody had. So I spent that drive working up lyrics. And before I knew it I had written several more, and I just couldn't stop. It was a strange thing, but I'm happy it happened (quoted in *Done the Impossible*).

Parody is popular amongst the Browncoats and hundreds of songs have been written using the melodies from a variety of sources ó original lyrics set to more traditional (and in some cases very nontraditional) music. Usually the Filk produced by Browncoats is self referential. It tends not to be written in an ðin-worldö manner as some of the narratives may be. Instead Browncoats write about their struggle, about the actors and producers, and/or about their hopes for more *Firefly*. For example the song ðBig Damn Trilogyö written James Hazlerig and performed by the Bedlam Bards speaks directly to the struggle of the fans, their love for the actors (in particular the female actors Gina Torres, Jewel Staite, Morena Baccarin and Summer Glau), and their desire for a continuation of the movie *Serenity* into a film franchise:

CHORUS: Trilogy, O trilogy, I want my trilogy, / Don't stop at one, Don't stop at two, / Gorrarnit, gimme three! / Trilogy, O trilogy, that's what I want to see, / Someday I'll own a boxed set / Of that Big Damn Trilogy!

VERSE 1: They said we couldn't do it, / They said our show should die, / They took our love, they took our land, / They cancelled our *Firefly*. / But one thing they didn't reckon, / in our fan psychology: / Browncoats carry Greenbacks, / And we want our trilogy!

CHORUS

KAZOO AND BOWED PSALTERY BREAK

CHORUS

VERSE 2: They say the best things in this 'verse, / Always come in threes, / Musketeers and stooges, / L-O-T-R DVDs. / When a show's got ships and shepherds, / The Alliance and Blue Sun, / And Gina and Jewel and Morena and Summer, / It's too pretty to stop at one!

CHORUS2

AMEN FINISH

This song, and others like it, has been released on CD by Bedlam Bards for the community. Compilations such as their album "On the Drift: Music Inspired by *Firefly* and *Serenity*" have become increasingly popular with Browncoats. Others have followed suit, taking the opportunity to build a living through entertaining the community in which they belong.

Producing music is only a part of the media created by Browncoats, and there are several other variations on how music is used to create cultural artifacts. A variety of "mashups" have been created and dedicated to the Browncoat community. A "mashup" is a fairly recent innovation, usually created using computer programs such as iMovie then posted to a site like YouTube. The author typically uses clips from *Firefly* and *Serenity* to create a short pseudo-film that is set to a popular song, most notably "Firefly" by Breaking Benjamin. The goal of a mashup is to use the lyrics and melodies of the song in combination with the chosen clips to create a small narrative film. Often any narrative that can be gleaned from a mashup is only readable to someone familiar with the original text. Browncoats cull a variety of songs for this purpose to create a variety of narrative threads.

An extension of the mashup is the film, and several have been produced by members of the Browncoat community. *Mosquito* is a filmic behind the scenes parody of *Firefly* created by The Emerald City Storytellers, a Canadian theater group. The film spoofs many of the motifs in other community productions, and lovingly mocks the history of *Firefly*'s production. This film gained extraordinary popularity with fans of the series and is frequently referred to in discussion forums. Other types of films have been produced by the community, including the forthcoming *Browncoats: Redemption*, a fan-film follow up to *Serenity* to be released in September 2010.

This film is not a parody, and works in much the same way as FanFic, seeking to continue the story and fill the gaps left by the lack of a true sequel. Interestingly this film has not been created for profit. While DVDs will be sold, all proceeds will be donated to charity.

Browncoats are a very self-aware group—with that in mind they have created documentaries that seek to collect and maintain their history while also attempting to offer some definitive definition of what it means to be a Browncoat. The first such film (which has been quoted several times during this essay) is *Done the Impossible: The Fans' Tale of Firefly and Serenity*. The primary focus of the film is the fans themselves, and they explore how they came to love the show and, ultimately, how they played a part in getting the film *Serenity* made.

Films and mashups are still only a part of the technological cultural artifacts created by Browncoats. Podcasts like “The Signal” and “Firefly Talk” spread news, reviews, features, interviews, chats, and anything else they can think of relating to the *Firefly* and/or *Serenity* across the virtual airwaves. “The Signal” is currently in its sixth season having begun broadcast on June 6th 2005 and continued uninterrupted since. Currently they have produced 148 total episodes broadcast to (English speaking) Browncoats around the world. “Firefly Talk” is also in its sixth year ó even though they have not maintained a consistent monthly broadcast schedule they have broadcast 65 episodes. These podcasts allow the community to have an active stream of information sent to them on a regular basis, updating them on the happenings in the community even if they can’t make it to a Shindig or find time to post online.

The variety and quantity of cultural artifacts produced by the Browncoats are truly astounding. The range of these productions is amazing, and the subjective emic “quality” is a mark of pride for many in the community. Having attempted to gain an understanding of *Firefly* as a foundational text for this community (their cultural substructure), and then stepping outward

to view the form and use of the cultural artifacts communally produced around that text (the cultural superstructure), we must now take another step outward and ask the questions: "What does this all mean?" and "How does this imagine, create and/or maintain community?"

Creating & Maintaining Community through Meaning

I would like to posit that the heaving lifting done by the vernacular culture produced in the Browncoat community boils down to one thing, what I call the tradition of folk drama. I must raise the question: does this community, and others like it, essentially function as a massive folk drama? For example, in looking at traditional mummers' plays we find that they often deal with the underlying themes of duality and resurrection, and usually involve a battle between two or more characters, often representing the dichotomy of good against evil. Mummers often acted in disguise, and were commonly referred to as "guisers." For my purposes this element is important as I define mumming as also containing an element of imitation; that in the disguise of the actor is the representation of a culturally important thing.

This seems to be reflected in the community of the Browncoats. By looking at each of the cultural artifacts produced in this community, each of which was described in limited detail earlier, we are able to see these themes of duality, resurrection, and mimicry though perhaps not in exactly the same way as in mummers' plays of old.

It would appear that the purpose of appropriating these themes is to direct attention back to the original artifact, the foundational item that forms the substructure of community. In essence the performative nature of these social constructs is meant to draw attention to the community, and then once that attention is given, to direct it toward the center of the community and say "this is important to us!" In the case of *Firefly* the Browncoats are able to serve two

masters. They are able to resurrect their culturally important artifact in their own folk community but by continually drawing attention to themselves and thus to the base upon which they have built their community they are able to later affect a larger economic market. *Serenity* is in many ways a film that owes much of its existence to the work that the community has done.

In looking at some of the aspects of communal folk drama reflected in the Browncoat fan group we can see that they have built a dichotomy between two opposing forces; a good and an evil, the Browncoats and the Network (FOX). From the beginning the expressive actions of the community (the language, narratives, art and music) are filled with references to fighting against an unbeatable foe. This bipartite narrative strain represented in the community existed not only as a communal rhetoric but as a very real situation. The fans of *Firefly* were losing their series and they knew it. Interestingly this was a reflection of the back story of the series, where the main characters were on the losing side of an unwinnable war. The fan community in a self-aware moment consciously chose to emulate the Browncoats of the fictional *Firefly* universe. The community began to reproduce the drama of the television show and had chosen to reenact that drama in their communal lives. In effect what they have created is an elaborate folk drama which they can play out in the virtual spaces they have created online.

To continue this analysis let us look at how the community utilizes the concept of resurrection. Relighting *Firefly* is a common theme in Real Narratives, music, and art. The resurrection of characters is common in FanFic, art and clothing. "Wash," "Book" and "Mr. Universe" who were all characters killed in *Serenity* are commonly brought back to life in the stories and art created by the fans. As are occasional villains like "Dobson," an alliance mole killed in episode 1.02 ("Serenity, Part 2"). In fact the fan community may have had something to

do with the return of Dobson in the now canon comic book series "Serenity: Those Left Behind."

The language, clothing, narratives, art, music and multimedia productions all function to some extent as mimicry of the series; mummifying the original and creating a means of drawing attention constantly to that which is at the heart of the community. Speaking or writing in a manner that duplicates the program intensifies the connection between performer and text, performer and interlocutor, and interlocutor and text. It does this by constantly returning attention to the text. For instance, amongst Browncoats quoting a line from the series turns the performer's and interlocutor's attention to the text, asking them to examine the current conversation in light of the context of that quote.

The artistic representations of the show in any medium would seem to be a continued act of reproducing a folk drama. Even after the loss the community continues to resist the superior forces; and in doing so focus their attention on the central texts. Whether placing characters in new situations, imitating popular scenes from an episode, or recontextualizing scenes in a mashup, the performer-creator is turning attention back to the original — asking those who read any given work to understand the new artifact in terms of the foundational one(s).

This constant mimicry is necessary in a community that is artifact-centric. By consistently acknowledging the original, by making allusions to the series, Browncoats are constantly reminding themselves that these texts are the center of their community, and that it is an artifact that was nearly taken away from them. In banding together they are able to modify and come to grips with the circumstances of their collective struggle. Whether this merely results in a continual strain of new cultural artifacts created by and for the community or a new motion picture that moves to a realm outside of it, like *Serenity*, the vernacular culture of the

community serves to underscore their sense of communion. It reinforces their communal knowledge by constantly returning attention to the knowledge base. Finally it strengthens and grows their social network by using technology to guide and shape the dissemination of communal information.

We must look at folk drama closely though. In most folk drama it would seem that there is reconciliation at the end, that everyone is incorporated into the same community at the conclusion of the play. For the Browncoats this is not as obvious as it may seem. I would argue that the dichotomy between FOX and the Browncoats is ultimately reconciled in some ways. FOX created the DVD collection for the series, they allowed Universal Pictures to produce the film *Serenity*, and they allowed Joss Whedon to shop his show to other networks. While FOX is still thought of as the Great Alliance that defeated the Browncoats, it is still necessary to deal with them, to incorporate them into their community. Without FOX there would be little possibility for the Browncoat community to flourish. This would seem to be an obligate symbiotic relationship; the Browncoats *require* FOX to produce material vital to their survival, in turn FOX is helped financially. This necessary relationship requires that FOX be incorporated within in the community to a certain extent.

We can see how Browncoats build and maintain their community by creating meaning in vernacular culture. I believe the "meaning," if it can be called that, behind this vernacular culture would seem to be best understood as an expression of the folk drama tradition. However, we must attempt to determine how this tradition, and in turn these artifacts, allow Browncoats to fully imagine their community.

Imagining Community

Above we may begin to understand how these artifacts build *communitas* among members of the Browncoat community by turning the attention of the community constantly inward. However the community exists over a network that stretches across the globe. While the artifact at the center of the community acts as the substructure upon which the vernacular culture making up the superstructure is built, the systematized method for imagining, creating and maintaining that structure is equally important. The artifacts are only useful to individuals without the mechanisms in place that allows for its circulation to the community as a whole.

Allow me to return briefly to the theme song of *Firefly*. This song is vital to the community in terms of understanding what is at the foundation of who they are. Certainly it is an aspect of the text that the community focuses on; however it is more than that. It sets up the dynamic not only for the series but also for the community as a whole. Christopher Neal writes "the theme song is, in many respects, a traditional folk tune with guitar, solo voice, and a soulful fiddle. Since viewers know this is a science fiction story set in outer space, the traditional theme song immediately establishes the conflict between modern and primitive" (191). This dialectic between modern and traditional in the form of a song helps the Browncoats build a communal identity. It is one of the factors that allow them to create what they consider a traditional community using modern techniques "part of being a Browncoat means being able to access the technology of the Browncoat community.

The technology that is at the heart of the community that allows for the vernacular culture of the group to travel is the element that shapes and steers the community toward its common goal. The internet and its expansion over the last thirty years is the key technology in allowing cyber-communities to build a fully functional group dynamic.

However one must also consider that the technology for the propagation of the show itself has existed for less than 15 years. The DVD format, which is responsible for the proliferation of the Browncoat community by keeping *Firefly* in a compact semi-permanent state, is still a new technology in historical terms. The DVD release of *Firefly* in 2003 is a fundamentally necessary step in the growth of this community.

Watching the DVDs of *Firefly* and *Serenity* are an absolutely indispensable rite of passage for members of the Browncoats. One simply cannot be a Browncoat without experiencing these texts. This experience of watching these DVDs acts as liminal state, where one is not yet a Browncoat but no longer necessarily an outsider. This experience may be better described as what Victor Turner calls liminoid, an experience that has many of the same characteristics of a liminal experience, but is entirely optional and does not necessarily involve the resolution of a personal crisis (50-1). However describing the watching of the DVDs as liminoid rite of passage is still problematic. Even after this experience one is not Browncoat. It is still necessary to make a choice to become a Browncoat. To clarify, one must make the effort to *find* the community online. Generally they must actively *seek* to participate in the community, and once they have found a space to participate they are usually welcomed with open arms. The general exception to this would be a case wherein the potential Browncoat is introduced to the texts and community simultaneously, usually by one already within the community.

There is a wide variety of conversion narratives each deals in some way with how the narrator is exposed to the texts. But if it is not simply exposure to the texts or understanding them at a more than superficial level that indoctrinates a member into the community we must question how does the community imagine itself, and who can claim to be a Browncoat?

In an email conversation with a Browncoat named Robyn Haaf I asked these questions of communal identity and who is a Browncoat. She wrote:

Browncoats are regular, everyday, flawed human beings who will fight for what they believe in despite the possibility of being the underdog. We'll give a hand up to those who need it and defy attempts of global decisions to restrict freedom. We're not above doing what is necessary to survive but we have our moments of grace as well. I've been involved in various fandoms over the years ó Trekkers, Ringers, etc., but I'm most proud of being a Browncoat. We actively support others and that appeals to my liberal, humanist, socialist tendencies. It's a reachable goal on the bridge between fantasy and reality.

Browncoats seem to imagine their community in terms of people who lost a battle for something they believed in, but who are still willing to fight for their beliefs. Their unselfish nature is evident in their charitable contributions. They believe that their group can act as an extended family and that they so be willing to do things for one another. In short they imagine themselves in terms of quotes spoken by Browncoats from the series:

I got people with me, people who trust each other, who do for each other and ain't always looking for the advantage. There's good people in the ÷erse. Not many, lord knows, but you only need a few (quoted by Mal in "Our Mrs. Reynolds" episode 1.07).

And:

When you can't run any more you crawl, and when you can't do that you find someone to carry you (quoted by Tracey and Zoe in "The Message" episode 1.13).

Quotes like this, and the sentiment expressed by Robyn Haaf above allow us to better understand how the Browncoats imagine their community. Only after passing through the liminoid phase can one determine if these values are personally important. If they are one may seek out the camaraderie of like-minded individuals and build community together. The act of imagining the community as a reflection of values from the show would again appear to be an act in the folk drama tradition as I have previously outlined, in that the community imagines itself in terms of a cultural identity extrapolated from the series, acting out the fictional communal values of the show in a real communal value structure.

The Dynamics of Cultural Consumers and Producers

As we have drawn from the center of the Browncoat Community outward we have focused on the cultural artifact that is the base of the community, examined some of the vernacular culture that the community builds around that artifact, and explored how the Browncoats build meaning out of these artifacts and shape their community. However it is important to note the complicated capitalistic interplay between consumers and producers of such mass culture before we draw to a close.

We must never forget that at the heart of the Browncoat community is a capitalistic struggle. *Firefly* and *Serenity* are properties of mass culture produced for a profit and the Browncoats made such a connection with these cultural artifacts that they have built a community around them. There are a number of potentially unforeseen problems with this sort of community construction. The fact is that producing material culture out of a legally protected intellectual property such as *Firefly* could have significant legal ramifications.

Earlier I mentioned Susan Renée Tomb [11th Hour], a Browncoat and artist who produced several pieces of artwork for guerilla marketing campaigns. In 2006, after the release of *Serenity*, she was threatened by Universal (the studio responsible for the film) with legal action for creating and selling clothing that contained references to the film in conjunction with the film's title. Even though the work of fans like 11th that made *Serenity* a possibility the studio felt it needed to protect its intellectual property. After complying with the requests of the studio 11th headed straight to the boards to make the community aware of her situation. In response the fans created "The Browncoat Invoice," this was a list of volunteer hours spent by members of the community promoting *Serenity* in 2005 prior to the film's release. The Invoice was posted online and contained 28,000 billable fan-hours totaling 2.1 million dollars (Cochran, 2008: 246-7). While the invoice was not "real" in that it could be enforced or litigated it does show an interesting dynamic between the fan-studio, consumer-producer relationships. The fans felt used by the studio in promoting a film that they believed was the result of their efforts. The studio felt that it owned the rights to that intellectual property and that they should protect their rights. The fans felt that they kept *Firefly* alive, and that it was their property and their cultural productions. The studio felt they were the only entity with the right to produce any material relating to *Serenity*. Derek Johnson suggests that this is a battle over hegemony:

Fans attack and criticize media producers whom they feel threaten their meta-textual interests, but producers also respond to these challenges, protecting their privilege by defusing and marginalizing fan activism. As fans negotiate positions of production and consumption, antagonistic corporate discourse toils to manage that discursive power, disciplining productive fandom so it can continue to be cultivated as a consumer base (298).

As we look at this community and explore their artifacts of production and consumption we must keep in mind that the community is not an isolated entity. They must interact and compete with outside groups whose interests and values are not necessarily the same. In the struggle for hegemony between consumers and producers of mass culture, and consumers and producers of related folk culture as we may see in the case of the Browncoats, we must take these relationships into account. This nature it is critical in understanding the dynamics of cultural production in communities in a variety of settings.

The Contemporary Community in Review

At this point I have firmly established that the Browncoat community is an artifact centered cyber-community. The community is built on a particular set of artifacts and is controlled via an electronic communal tool box. The language and material culture produced within this community in some cases has a greater breadth and depth than what we may see in some contemporary communities of place. It is time we began to reevaluate what we mean when we say "community." In many definitions of that word the rich cultural productions created by the Browncoats would be ignored, or worse relegated to some inferior level of production not worthy of study.

As the world changes around us we must be willing to change. Ethnographies of so-called primitive cultures are still popular, but we must be willing to look at ourselves and find meaning in the everyday life of contemporary cultures. Each day technology changes and as it does so too does the world. Cyber-communities like the Browncoats are becoming more and more relevant and powerful as technology expands and connectivity improves. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have permeated all levels of techno-savvy societies

and built new ways of communicating, interacting, learning and sharing the things we find most important in life.

We are at the front of this revolution in human interaction. Boundaries have been broken, and geography no longer determines who we view as our neighbors. As the printing press eventually changed the nature in which people interacted and folk groups were imagined in the fifteenth century, so too has media technology begun to make that change again here and now. We have an immensely important opportunity here, to study the changes in community construction as they are happening. Contemporary communities are becoming more and more reliant on technology to manage the tasks of everyday life, and we must be ready to understand how these changes may or may not alter what we believe to be fundamentally true about the social nature of the human condition or community building.

While I am more than willing to concede that there may be yet another shift in how communities are formed over the next years and decades what I am advocating is that we be aware that these shifts *are happening*. Technology changes so rapidly that in the near future the cyber-community structures we see now may be gone, permanently erased by some new paradigm. It is important for us to take the time to gain the knowledge that we can about how our technological advances alter essential aspects of the construction of culture. Whether we focus on fully cyber-communities like the Browncoats who function on a global scale or examine how communities of place are now using technology to create shared garden plots we must be willing to evaluate how technology has and will continue to alter our definitions of community.

A Supplemental Catalog of Images

All images listed below are used with the best practices of fair use in mind. Each image is the respective property of its copyright owner and should not be misconstrued as the intellectual property of the author.

- Figure 1: The *Firefly* Complete Series Box Set
- Figure 2: A screen capture taken from "Serenity, Part 2" episode 1.02 showing the western style terrain common in the planets of the series.
- Figure 3: Serenity, a Firefly Class transport ship from the series taken from "Out of Gas" episode 1.09
- Figure 4: The cast of *Firefly*. From left to right: Adam Baldwin (Jayne Cobb), Jewel Staite (Kaylee Frye), Ron Glass (Shepherd Book), Sean Maher (Simon Tam), Morena Baccarin (Inara Serra), Nathan Fillion (Malcolm Reynolds), Gina Torres (Zoe Washburne), Alan Tudyk (Hoban Washburne), and Summer Glau (River Tam).
- Figure 5: A Promotional poster for *Firefly*.
- Figure 6: The advertisement created by the Browncoat community. The ad appeared in the December 9th, 2002 edition of *Daily Variety* and is © SGC Web Design / FanGeek 2001. Ad Designer: Kristen Reidel
- Figure 7: One of the promotional flyers created by Susan Renée Tomb [11th Hour] to help market the release of *Firefly* on DVD.
- Figure 8: A series of posters created by Susan Renée Tomb [11th Hour] to promote a *Firefly* marathon on the Sci-Fi Channel.
- Figure 9: Artwork by Jason Palmer that has become an icon for Browncoats around the world.
- Figure 10: A scene recreation of Mal and Inara, taken from the "Shindig" episode 1.05 © 2007 Mike Phillips.
- Figure 11: A series of fan service strips from the PVP webcomic, © Scott Kurtz 3/16-3/19 2004.
- Figure 12: Art created by Kerry Pearson [Lux Lucre] includes all 9 of the main characters on *Firefly*.
- Figure 13: A page from "Culture Pulp" © 2005 Mike E. Russell
- Figure 14: Canvele in his replica Browncoat. Photo courtesy of www.Abbyshot.com
- Figure 15: San Francisco Browncoats at a Shindig. From left to right Arielle Kesweder, Ramzi Kawar, Chris Mogannam, Anthony Mogannam, Alan Saade and Joey Saade. Photo by Liz Hafalia.
- Figure 16: An additional example of the "fancy duds" at a shindig. Picture courtesy of <http://signal.serenityfirefly.com>.

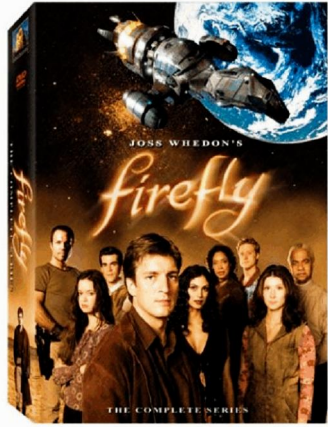


Figure 1



Figure 2




Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



"...Put it together...you got a Firefly.
Thing'll run forever they got a
mechanic that's even half awake."

The fans would like to thank Joss Whedon,
Tim Minear and the cast and crew of "Firefly"
for their continued hard work and dedication.

We would also like to thank Gail Berman and
Sandy Grushow for their faith in the extraordinary
talent of this diverse ensemble cast and crew,
as well as their ongoing commitment to the series.

And we would like to thank the following
sponsors for supporting groundbreaking television:

Alberto-Culver USA, AOL Time Warner, AT&T, Bayer, Best Buy,
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The Pillsbury Company, Progresso, RadioShack, Saab Cars USA,
Sears Roebuck and Co., Sony Computer Entertainment America,
Sony Pictures Entertainment, Subway, Taco Bell, Target, Toyota,
Verizon, Visa, The Walt Disney Company and Wendy's.

You keep flying.
We'll keep watching.

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Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

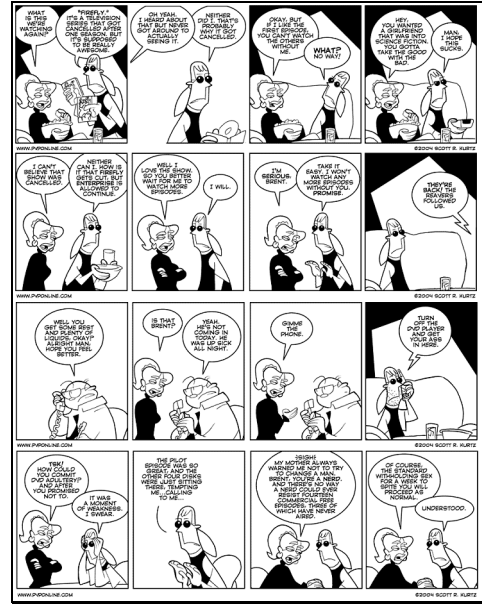


Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16

A Common Browncoat Lexicon

Creating a complete list of words used by the Browncoats would be a difficult task. This list was compiled in early 2007 with the assistance of a team of friendly Browncoats through a variety of email and message board conversations. This would have been impossible without their generous assistance.

- Academy - The Academy was where River Tam was sent to study. It was suppose to be a mentally challenging academic facility. Instead it is where the Allied government experimented on her.
- Anglo-Sino Alliance - The government in charge of the Allied Planets
- atmo - Foreshortening of the word "atmosphere".
- Big Damn Heros - Sometime represented as BDH, originally a line spoke by the character Zoe in episode 104, Safe. Now used by Browncoats to refer to the cast of Firefly, both as actors and as characters.

Big Damn Movie	- Sometime represented as BDM, refers to the long awaited movie followup to Firefly, Serenity.
black, the	- Outer space or perhaps deep space, beyond planetary orbit.
Blackout Zones	- Originally areas on Core worlds off the Cortex network, synonymous with regions where illegal activities, crimes or treason are performed.
Blue Sun	- A company that sells food products (and certainly more). Blue Sun logos are seen on food cans and advertisements throughout the 'verse. The motto from their commercials: Live life with Blue Sun.
Bowdens Malady	- A degenerative affliction of the bone and muscle. Afflicts the settlers of Paradiso in the Georgia System.
Browncoats	- A reference to the "independents" or rebels against the Alliance, likely in reference to their military uniform.
bughouse	- Slang. A "mental health facility".
byphodine	- A drug which can induce a state of reduced metabolic function. Unexamined, a person under the effects of Byphodine is easily mistaken for a cadaver.
Captain Tight Pants	- A term of affection both for the character Malcolm Reynolds and the actor who portrayed him, Nathan Fillion.
carrion house	- A scrap shop. Outlaws set these facilities up and capture space ships with a high-powered electric "Net". These arrangements are used to immobilize a ship and kill or stun its crew, then strip parts off the ship or simply steal the whole thing.
central authority	- Judicial courts of the Alliance.
Companion	- An academy-schooled prostitute practicing legally as part of The Guild, a socially powerful pseudo-religious organization. Companions are highly respected by almost everyone. Their schooling is long and arduous and covers everything from psychology to sword fighting. They can converse with anyone, and make anyone utterly at ease, from a dirt poor farmer to a

planetary president. They live by the Guild code and only engage in transactions with customers of their choice.

- Con / Convention - Refers to the gathering of the community of fans of science fiction, fantasy, comics, movies and television.
- core - Refers to any major city/planet in the Alliance, usually located within the central solar system.
- Cortex - The visual/textual Interactive Network of the 26th century.
- credit - A type of currency. Alliance-based, with no 'solid' component, and used to the exclusion of all else for legitimate transactions on all core worlds. I.e.: all standard transactions on the Core worlds are electronic in nature -- no one can physically hand you a credit. Per unit, a credit is worth more than any other type of currency.
- cruiser - Type of Alliance military vessel. A very large, vertically-aligned vessel that resembles nothing so much as a small city in space.
- cryo - Foreshortening of the word "cryogenic", especially in the context of cryogenic suspension. By the 26th century, cryogenic technology has advanced to the point that suspension can be sustained in a self-contained mobile unit. This makes for an ideal means by which to smuggle living human cargo in a temporary state of suspended metabolic function. Awakening suddenly or prematurely from cryo can result in severe system shock.
- dedicated source box - The DSL / Personal File Server of the Firefly setting.
- doxy - Slang, a female lover or mistress, or a sexually promiscuous woman. This term is distinct from the word prostitute, which is a profession, and is more similar to courtesan or concubine.
- Dermal Mender - A piece of medical equipment used to repair damage to the dermis, skin, and cartilage, and to reattach limbs or smaller appendages. Presumably it uses molecular nano-technology to re-weave the fibers of the dermis at a molecular level.
- drops - Slang. Drugs, possible a particular type of drug.

encyclopedia	- A palm-sized reference work. It can display information in hypertext form.
fed squad	- A unit of twenty Alliance soldiers.
genseed	- A type of genetically engineered crop seed issued to those sent to settle terraformed planets and moons.
gorram	- An expletive; usually seen as a replacement for "god damn", used to express extreme displeasure, anger, or surprise.
grapple	- Slang. Vulgar. To have sex with.
grizwald	- A grenade about the size of a battery; responds to pressure.
gurtsler	- Type of engine used in space ships, considered to be of somewhat shoddy construction.
hover-plane	- A mode of transport.
humped	- Slang. Expletive with meaning that varies depending on context.
hydrozapam	- A particularly valuable pharmaceutical.
I.A.V.	- Interstellar Alliance Vessel. Standard prefix on all Alliance military craft.
ident card	- Alliance identification card carrying personal information in electronic format.
Independents	- Political/military party opposed to the Alliance. Also called Browncoats.
isoproblyline	- A pharmaceutical used to boost the immune system.
kick	- Slang. To die (As in "kick the bucket").
medvault	- A secure area for the storage of pharmaceuticals.

mule	- Four-wheeled all-terrain vehicle used to transport goods and crew. Seats a maximum of two people. Top speed approximately 40 to 50 k/m.
Oh-two	- Oxygen.
Operative	- High-level agent of the Alliance government.
pasceline-d	- A type of medicine used to treat the degenerative affliction Bowdens Malady. Pasceline is valuable on the black market. The word Pasceline has its origins in Dutch, a language native to Earth-that-was.
pipeline	- A communications channel.
platinum	- A type of hard currency, typically used on border worlds and for most clandestine dealings. For the purposes of conversion, a credit (see above) converts to platinum on approximately a 4:1 ratio, and a platinum coin converts to paper scrip (1 "dollar") at approximately 10:1. (1 credit = 4 platinum = 40 bills).
propoxin	- A pharmaceutical.
purple belly	- An Alliance soldier or officer. The Alliance's official colors include purple and are used on the abdomen (belly) of Alliance troop body armor.
reader	- Short for mind reader.
Reavers	- Space pirates with a twist -- the twist being they're insane. They routinely torture and rape their captives, and practice cannibalism and self-mutilation.
roller	- A weapon used in the war, presumably a tank or some other conveyance moving on treads.
rutting	- Expletive. Fucking.
seeker	- A small heat seeking missile used by the Alliance, that gives off a whining sound when acquiring a heat source, which makes the missile

detectable. More likely used to take out infantry than anything else due to the size and the explosive yield of the missile.

- shepherd - Term for a religious minister, preacher, or priest.
- shiny - Slang. "Good", "great", "neat", "wonderful", "cool" etc.
- shuffle - Slang. To die.
- sly - A Male that is homosexual.
- Sky Plex - A space station that has optimized a large portion of it's habitable space for client services such as shopping, entertainment, and so forth.
- terraforming - Means of bestowing a planet or moon with conditions essential to sustain human and nonhuman life.
- triplex - Slang. A planet side shopping and entertainment megaplex.
- U-Day - Short for "Unification Day"; the holiday celebrating the Alliance's defeat of the Independents.
- 'verse - Slang. Shortened form of "universe".
- vitals - Slang. Medical shortening for vital signs.
- wave - Audio-visual transmission sent over the Cortex. Full waves (audio and visual) are generally only available within major Alliance systems. Once a ship has left a major system (or is traveling in a system too unimportant to have a Cortex beacon), the sender must resort to more primitive means of communication.
- weave - Medical term, presumably referring to a skin weave. A skin weave is a highly advanced medical procedure that uses nano-technology in re-knitting the dermal fibers at a molecular level.

Browncoat Chinese with Translations

These translations are a collection created using a variety of sources. Most importantly was the translations made by Kevin Sullivan, however some words were added after consulting Browncoats online and additional resources such as the *The Official Firefly Companion Volumes I & II*. This list is by no means exhaustive but represents a small portion of the Chinese spoken amongst Browncoats. The numbers in the Chinese pronunciation guide are guides to the appropriate Chinese tone that should ideally be used to communicate the correct word.

<u>Phrase</u>	<u>Chinese Pronunciation</u>	<u>Rough English Translation</u>
ai ya	(ai1ya1)	- damn
bao bei	(bao3bei4)	- sweetheart
bi zui	(bi4zui3)	- shut up
chui niu	(chui1niu2)	- bull crap
chur ni-duh	(qu4 ni3 de5)	- screw you
dang ran	(dang1ran2)	- of course
dong ma	(dong3 ma5)	- understand?
fei-oo	(fei4wu4)	- junk
gos se	(gou3shi3)	- crap
guay	(gui3)	- hell
hoe-tze duh pee-goo	(hou2zi5 de5 pi4gu5)	- monkey's butt
hoo-tsuh	(hu2che3)	- shut up
hun dan / hwoon dahn / hwun dan	(hun2dan4)	- damn / jerk / bastard

Phrase	Chinese Pronunciation	Rough English Translation
jien huo	(jian4huo4)	- cheap floozy
jing tsai	(jing1cai3)	- brilliant
kao	(cao4)	- fuck
kwong-juh duh	(kuang2zhe3 de5)	- nuts (as in crazy)
kwong-run	(kuang2ren2)	- lunatic
lao tyen	(lao3tian1)	- oh God!
luh-suh	(le4se4)	- garbage
ma-shong	(ma3shang4)	- now
mei mei	(mei4mei5)	- little sister
nee hao	(ni3hao3)	- hello
nyen ching-duh	(nian2qing1 de5)	- young one
niou fun / niou-se	(niu2fen4 / niu2shi3)	- cow dung
pee-goo	(pi4gu5)	- bottom, backside
peow-liang	(piao4liang5)	- pretty [young] lady
qing jin	(qing3jin4)	- come in
run-tse duh fwotzoo	(ren2ci2 de5 fo2zu3)	- merciful buddha
sagwa	(sha3gua1)	- idiot
sha-sho	(sha1shou3)	- killer
shee-niou	(xi1niu2)	- cow sucking

Phrase	Chinese Pronunciation	Rough English Translation
sheh-sheh	(xie4xie5)	- thank you
shi	(shi4)	- yes / affirmative
shiong-tsan	(xiong1can2)	- ruthless / ass kicker
shuh muh	(shen2me5)	- what? / I'm sorry?
suo-shee	(suo3xi4)	- petty
swai	(shuai4)	- cute
ta ma de	(ta1ma1 de5)	- dammit
tyen shiao duh	(tian1 xiao3de2)	- heaven knows what
tyen tsai	(tian1cai2)	- genius
uh-muo	(e4mo2)	- monster / demon
wah	(wa1)	- wow!
way	(wei4)	- hey!
wuh de ma	(wo3 de5 ma1)	- mother of God
xiao mei mei	(xiao3mei4mei4)	- little sister
yao noo	(yao1nü3)	- fairy enchantress
yu bun duh	(yu2ben4 de5)	- stupid

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