

“Let’s See What’s In There”: Unlocking the Containers of *Firefly*

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In an article entitled “Inhabiting the Icon: Shipping Containers and the New Imagination of Western Space,” Sarah Hirsh cites an impressive array of examples from history to economics, from films to community projects to argue that “the container as a transnational entity is a counterpart to the post-West and introduces a new facet by positing it as a place of transgression”; “containers unsettle notions of borders, urban space, and ‘frontiers’ as places to fear and conquer, due to the paradox of containerization” (18). Though meant for storage, the container “is not rooted but rather routed,” explains Hirsh (18); it is not only “intriguing but also potentially alarming precisely because what awaits you is unknown” (20). From the ship *Serenity* to the nesting dolls drawn by River (“Ariel”), from the small wooden box containing the strawberry given to Kaylee to the large and technologically sophisticated box containing River (“*Serenity*”), from the stolen strongbox full of golden-bricked nutritional supplements (“*Serenity*”) to the subliminal message contained within the Fruity Oaty Bar commercial (*Serenity*), containers (whether literal or figurative, whether physical or digital) abound in *Firefly*’s universe, repeatedly transgressing borders with their unanticipated cargo. Hirsh’s paradox of containerization is most obviously illustrated in *Firefly*’s “The Message” when Mal and Zoe receive, via regular postal service, a crate containing a casket containing the body of a former comrade, Tracey. “Let’s see what’s in there,” says Mal as Simon begins the autopsy. Contrary to all expectations, Tracey is alive—a living container transporting manufactured human organs. “So your innards ain’t your innards?” asks Mal of Tracey, thus uttering a paradoxical statement to the container about its disconcerting cargo. Though Whedon scholars have explored various “objects in [*Firefly*’s] space,” no one has yet focused primarily on the relationship(s) between the container and the contained. Through the lens of container theories offered by Hirsh and others, I propose to explore the “transgress[ive]” and “unsettle[ing]” role of *Firefly*’s many and varied containers.

Works Cited

Hirsch, Sarah. “Inhabiting the Icon: Shipping Containers and the New Imagination of Western Space.” *Western American Literature* 48.1 (2013): 17-40.