Elliott Bristow’s Road Dreams continue

Sylvia Plath’s Kitchen

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War, Captivity and the American Civilising Process on the Colonial Frontier of the Eighteenth Century

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Introduction

Throughout the eighteenth century, and on two continents, the British and the French fought one another for imperial supremacy. At first, during the conflict known as Queen Anne’s War (1702-13), the action in North America, though significant internally, was something of a sideshow to the greater contest being staged in the European theatre. Subsequently, the two imperial aggressors would fight each other in simultaneous European/North American conflicts in each consecutive decade until the 1760s. By the time of the Seven Years War, the final conclusive conflict in this trans-Atlantic sequence, as Gregory Nobles writes, “the North American frontier was the main theatre of fighting, and both the British and the French committed thousands of regular troops to the fight” (1998, p82). At its conclusion, France was eliminated from North America, forced to abandon its territories in Canada and its possessions east of the Mississippi River. The British, who gained all of these territories, were destined soon to lose them as well.

All this, however, obscures the various and variable fortunes of the conflict’s two distinctly American entities: the various Native American nations and the growing and rapidly American identifying, former European, settler populations. For Native Americans, deprived in the aftermath of conflict of the French, whom they had skilfully played off against the British over many decades of carefully contrived and cunning diplomacy, the result would be one of diminished diplomatic and political influence to go with their declining military power. Soon after, and despite incidents of armed resistance to white encroachment, they would be powerless to halt backcountry expansion across the Appalachians, which they had for so long sought to prevent. Crucially, so would their sometime former allies: the British. In the aftermath of conflict, alarmed by the swift and rapid resumption of trans-Appalachian migration by Anglo-Americans of the backcountry, the British authorities moved to stem the flow, creating a so-called Proclamation Line that they trusted would restrain the notoriously fluid backcountry habitats.

Almost inevitably this proved no barrier at all to a backcountry population believing itself justified by right in its claims to the commercial and territorial wealth of neighbouring habitats. That rights of trade and settlement were denied by the British authorities is significant to the general historical tide, since, as Stephen Aron argues, the determined colonisation of trans-Appalachia in the immediate post-war aftermath coincided with the first military skirmishes of the War of Independence: “In the same month that Massachusetts minutemen engaged British soldiers at Lexington and Concord, Daniel Boone led thirty men to the Kentucky River” (2007, p14). In Kentucky, Boone and his backcountry compatriots, against all prohibition by the British, proceeded to build a military outpost that they intended to become the headquarters of a new colony.

This article will examine the growing mistrust of and defiance towards British colonial authorities felt by backcountry inhabitants arising from the Seven Years War, which is then given political shape through a developing awareness of separation of European and Anglo-American destinies. I want to argue that significant here is the identification by Anglo-Americans of the frontier and borderlands with a distinctly American social milieu, in which interaction with Indians and with Indian modes of existence and cultural expression were of considerable historical importance. In so doing, I
agree with both Richard Slotkin (1973) and with Stephen Mennell (2005), that this historical interaction does not lead to greater interdependence and mutual identification with native inhabitants, but rather to the remorseless destruction of their societies and modes of existence.

The article is organised in four sections. Firstly, I will sketch out the background to the full eruption of the Seven Year's War in 1755, before focussing specifically on the particular contexts of the Ohio backcountry and giving some consideration to the distinctively frontier character of this theatre of conflict and habitation. Here I will briefly reference several of Mennell’s insights into North American state formation. Secondly, following accounts given by Colley and Anderson, I will describe British General Braddock’s doomed expedition leading a large force of English regulars and their few Indian and Anglo-American irregular troops into the Ohio country, and the subsequent massacre suffered by them at the hands of the greatly more acculturated French forces along with their Indian allies. Concomitantly, I will also describe the capture of one James Smith, a backcountry youth accompanying Braddock’s army, who is snatched by Indians allied to the French and forced into captivity. His subsequent captivity account enters a growing canon of North American literature that by the mid-eighteenth century is emerging as a cultural expression of a developing, distinctly American national character.

Braddock’s remarkable military defeat and James Smith’s account of his captivity and subsequent escape is, I argue in the third and fourth sections, instructive of a developing sense of national American identity in the decade leading to the full outbreak of the American Revolution.

Backcountry Settlement, Migration and Conflict

The French and British conflict in North America was, as it was in Europe, a clash of Empires, and as such was fought for territorial supremacy and control, and for the elimination of opponents. In the North American theatre, unlike in Europe, it was fought in an environment that was, to a greater or lesser extent, alien for the principal antagonists Britain and France. Indigenous peoples, as they had done ever since first contact, attempted to deploy their subtle and skilful diplomatic and military strategies, favouring one side or the other depending on the calculation of benefits to be gained from these tactics. Then there were the European settlers, who by the mid-eighteenth century were quite different from those of previous generations, and whose living space was often far from the Eastern coastal region and the established centres of British colonial governance. Indeed, recent European immigrants were not exclusively Anglos or even English speaking, but increasingly immigrants from central Europe, particularly German speakers (Hinderaker, 2003, p80).

Nonetheless, it was still Anglo-Americans who dominated, although, as Linda Colley notes, “It was now, in the era of the Seven Years War, that Britain learnt at first hand the sheer physical extent and complexity of the lands that they and their settlers had so casually accumulated … and the degree to which their own white settlers were more than simply mirrors of themselves” (2002, p172). By 1750, it is estimated that the population of the Eastern Seaboard to the Appalachian Mountains was 1.3 million. Increasingly, English-speaking settlers were coming from all parts of the British Isles, not just from England. Indeed, Pennsylvania, which became rapidly populated as a result of such immigration, was known amongst the so-called Scots-Irish “as the best poor man’s country” (Hinderaker, 2003, p80), immediately indicating, as McFarlane notes, that “unlike the Puritan migrations to New England or the Quaker movements into Pennsylvania (formerly), it was motivated more by hopes of material improvement than by flight from religious or political persecution, or the pursuit of utopian ideals” (McFarlane, p174).

McFarlane identifies these new immigrants as consisting “mainly of people of lowly social origin, drawn from the ranks of poor peasant farmers, farm labourers, artisans and petty traders” (174-5). What is clear is that by the mid-eighteenth century the settler population was more heterogeneous, more numerous and more culturally diffuse than it had ever been. Concentrated in the Pennsylvania backcountry, but increasingly spilling into the Ohio valley, first as traders, then as settlers, the consequences of Anglo expansion in the colonial west had two immediate effects.
First, Shawnees and Delawares, previously displaced by aggressive Indians of the Iroquois confederacy, returned to the Ohio country and built a string of settlements to take advantage of newly opened Pennsylvania trade routes. Second, and as Aron notes, “dwelling in similarly constructed log cabins and drawing sustenance from a comparable mix of hunting, herding and farming, Pennsylvania Indians and settlers seemed to converge not only geographically but culturally as well” (2007, p10). This growing state of affairs was viewed by one Boston based British official after the conclusion of the Seven Years War in the following terms: commenting on the inability of British authority to prevent settlers expanding into Indian territories from the backcountry, Sir William Johnson lamented that backcountry residents, “differed little from Indians in their manner of life,” and were “a lawless set of people as fond of independency as Indians and more regardless of government, owing to ignorance, prejudice, democratic principles and their remote situation” (Aron, p13).

The exasperation exhibited here refers to what Aron contends is the confusion produced through the political and spatial designation “frontier”, a physical and symbolic space “where political control was undetermined and boundaries – cultural and geographic – were uncertain” (p6). Central to Aron’s conceptualisation of the lands between the Appalachians and the Mississippi, what he refers to as “the first American west”, is the identification of distinct geo-political zones.

“Frontier,” he argues, “refers to territories where Indians and colonials intersected; borderlands delineate the overlay of imperial rivalries” (p7). Utilising these definitions, the Pennsylvania region at this time is most obviously described as a frontier region, whilst the Ohio valley region is both a frontier between Pennsylvania and Indian traders, and a borderland region between British/Pennsylvanians and the French and the Indians allied to them. Both terms are borrowed, famously, from Frederick Jackson Turner and have enjoyed a torrid history in American scholarship.

Aron states that he wishes, “to re-cast frontier in more neutral terms as the meeting point between indigenous and intrusive societies. Operating from this definition, historians have probed the intersection between Indians and Europeans and recovered a frontier past in which cultures not only collided, but also coincided” (p6). The Pennsylvania frontier, then, and the Ohio valley borderlands, represent two geopolitical and cultural zones under a single historical rubric, that of state formation and empire building.

Here I want to identify insights provided by Stephen Mennell (2007) in respect of state formation in North America that extend and develop the sociology of his collaborator and mentor Norbert Elias. Elias’s most enduring work, The Civilising Process (2000), details the long term historical processes of state formation in Europe, what Europeans themselves regard as trends towards civilised society at the level of the state and civilised values and manners at the community and individual levels. Following Max Weber, Mennell argues that state formation “successfully upholds a claim to a binding rule making over a territory, by virtue of commanding a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence”.

Internal pacification, what Mennell (following Elias) believes Europeans are referring to when they talk of the historical process of “civilising”, occurs at many levels. Some are obvious, such as restraints against the unauthorised use of violence, others, less so, such as increasing self-restraint in the conduct of one’s personal manners. Internal pacification additionally produces those features of state society derived from Western Europe, which “facilitates trade, which facilitates the growth of towns and division of labour and generates taxes which support larger territories and so on – a cumulative process experienced as an increasingly compelling, inescapable force by people caught up in it” (Mennell, p16-17).

At the level of individuals and communities, Mennell further adds that they become inextricably bound together, “interdependent with each other in a variety of ways. They may be allies or opponents. Sometimes
their interdependence is relatively equal, but more often it is unequal; and thus it always involves balances of power between the people and groups concerned, balances that change over time.” This leads him to conclude, [that] “central to history and the social sciences therefore, is the study of asymmetrical power balances that fluctuate and shift in the course of social conflicts” (p21). The conditions leading to the eruption of the Seven Years War in the borderlands of the Ohio valley and on the Pennsylvania Frontier are ones in which trends in migration and settlement of peoples of various origins and backgrounds, commerce, trade and contact between them and cultural modes of living, are showing increasing complexity of interdependence, and prior to the mid-1750s at least, developing pacification.

Here, however, Mennell identifies a crucial departure between the European civilising process developed by Elias, and the one he discerns in the context of North America. He makes the point that, according to the European civilising process, increasing interdependence should produce increasing mutual identification over time, though “what happened in North America, of course was the opposite” (p163). To account for this he identifies three variables of the North American context that he believes undermines mutual identification: the technology gap between European settlers and Native Americans; the rapid acceleration of the settler population against the long term decline of the indigenous one; and the equally rapid diminishing of European reliance on Indians. Each of these, by the mid-eighteenth century, is more and more apparent.

The Backcountry on the Brink of War

During the 1740s a fragile peace existed on the Ohio valley frontier, although Indians were becoming increasingly concerned and angered by the extent of Anglo incursions onto lands they considered to be theirs. The French, having been marginalised, now saw their chance to reassert their own territorial claims. The British, in the guise of the Ohio company and supported by the government of Virginia, were consolidating trade and acting upon designs to take full control of the Ohio valley, deceiving the Indians as to the true purpose of their presence there. However, as Nobles points out, “Indians did not need census figures to know that land-hungry Anglo-Americans were pushing westward” (1988, p82). This encroachment served ultimately to push the most influential Indians back into an alliance with the French, as events leading to the Seven Years War, and the imperial struggle for North America gathered momentum. Hinderaker and Mancall (2003) note that by 1754 French attempts to reassert their influence and control of the Ohio valley were almost complete, having defeated the British in a series of clashes in which British forces proved themselves inept against combined forces of French and their Indian allies (2003, p103). The French had previously overseen the building of a series of forts, including the heavy fortress Fort Duquesne strategically located in the upper Ohio valley. Alarmed by what they rightly determined were French attempts to control the flows of frontier trade and migration, the British responded by dispatching two full regiments from active service in Ireland, and appointing Major-General Edward Braddock as Commander in Chief for all British military operations on the continent. Braddock’s orders were deceptively straightforward. He was sent to North America with the express instruction to march on Fort Duquesnes as early as the following spring of 1755 and take it from the French, thus driving them out of the Ohio country for good.

For Anglo-Americans of the backcountry on the eve of this continent defining conflict we have already noted their increasing remoteness from colonial centres of power, their developing cultural interconnectedness with indigenous peoples, and the inevitability of their identification with the geography and special character of the North American frontier. Typical of them was Pennsylvania youth James Smith, employed as a road builder and sent ahead of Braddock’s redcoats to clear the way, when he was ambushed and taken captive by a branch of the Mowhawk Indians allied with the French. If this changed and changing habitus, to use the term employed by Mennell, was significant between the settlers of the frontiers and borderlands and the by this point settled and “civilised” Eastern coastal settlements, it was even more profound between that of frontier settlers and the British back across the Atlantic. Indeed, as Colley points out (2002, p176), by the 1750s the social and cultural gap between the colonies and the British “mother country” was far wider than the British realised.
James Smith was eighteen when he was made a captive and would subsequently spend four years living amongst various Indian tribes, before his escape. In the words of one of his biographers, he "was treated like a brother... [and] acquired a profound understanding of Indian customs and psychology, and a deep respect for Indians themselves" (Drimmer, 1985, p26). Smith would eventually publish the account of his dramatic captivity story, *Prisoner of the Caughnawagas*, and serve first Revolutionary forces, then American ones in numerous campaigns against Indians using the skills and knowledge he had learned during his captivity amongst them.

**Captivity and Defeat in the Ohio Valley**

In *Prisoner of the Caughnawagas*, James Smith explains how it was that he came to be a member of a road building gang. "In May 1755, the province of Pennsylvania agreed to send out three hundred men to cut a wagon road from Fort Loudon to join Braddock's road" (Drimmer, 1985, p26). In the course of this work, Smith was ambushed by Indians who had concealed themselves behind scrub and witnessed the death of his companion, who was subsequently scalped. Smith was spared, but forced to accompany the Indians who took him with them to Fort Duquesne, which was Braddock's target. Inside, Smith notes, "I concluded that there were thousands of Indians there ready to receive General Braddock" (p28). Smith was "welcomed" into the Fort by way of a ritual trial of personal fortitude in which he was forced to "run the gauntlet" between two lines of Indians and French where "I was flogged the whole way". Afterwards as he was tended by a French doctor, he was questioned aggressively as to the strength and intentions of Braddock's forces. He learnt that the French, using their Indian allies as scouts, were well aware of the approach of the British who, nevertheless, remained unaware they were being tracked.

The British plan, such as it was, proved wildly ambitious. According to Fred Anderson it was approved by men in London using fanciful maps of the North American interior and who, "in their ignorance of American geography, politics and military capacities had foredoomed it to failure" (Anderson, 2000, p88). Prior to setting out, Braddock had already alienated the few potential Indian allies the British had by "insisting that Native warriors would only interfere in the working of a disciplined army" (Hinderaker, 2003, 106). Ward observes that after this Indians subsequently raided the Pennsylvania backcountry and Ohio valley with particular ferocity. "The targeting of vulnerable groups and the acquisition of booty and prisoners in raids were traditional features of warfare for the Northeastern woodlands Indians" (p58). Ward goes on to make the further point that Indians also used "psychological warfare ... to destroy civilian as well as military morale, the interception of important supply routes, and the siege and even capture of isolated frontier posts" (p58).

He points out that such tactics were borrowed from the Europeans and provide further evidence of interdependency in operation on the frontier, and evidence also of the contrary flows that operate between and amongst interdependent communities (p58).

As James Smith would later learn from the triumphant return of Indians and French, Braddock's force, comprising about twelve hundred redcoats with little or no North American experience, a very few Virginia colonials and even fewer Indians was intercepted before it ever reached Fort Duquesne. Ward comments that during the march to Ohio, the practice of capturing stragglers from the main column and placing their mutilated bodies along the line of the march so terrified the British regulars that when Braddock was attacked, "the whoop of the Indians ... struck terror into the hearts of the troops." (p55). French forces subsequently dispatched from Fort Duquesne and using cover of the forest attacked Braddock's column, to which the British responded by falling back on their training and experience in the European theatre. In only three hours of battle they were defeated and routed. Braddock himself died of wounds during an unseemly retreat and was buried, unmarked, along the road. Captive all this time at Fort Duquesne, James Smith describes how in the immediate aftermath of the battle returning Indians and their French allies "had a great many bloody scalps and grenadiers caps, British canteens,
They brought news that Braddock was defeated (Drimmer, 1985, p30). For Smith, previously hopeful of British victory and with it his own early liberation, shock of Braddock’s defeat was accompanied by revulsion at the depredations exhibited by the victorious Indians. “It seemed to me that almost every one of this company was carrying scalps” (p30). In addition, they brought with them “about a dozen prisoners, stripped naked”, who were subsequently “burned to death” in a scene which, unsurprisingly, Smith describes as “shocking to behold” (p30).

Anderson (2000, p105) notes that the debate that Braddock’s defeat aroused in the colonies and further away in Britain was considerable. In the colonies a powerful argument emerged in which Braddock was blamed for what was considered his stubborn and “wrong” adherence to European modes of warfare in the very different conditions of North America. Indeed, Colley observes that “many of the British troops dispatched to North America were deficient in local knowledge, deficient in training and proper equipment” (2002, p172). When the British finally broke and ran, the Indians chased them through the forest, hacking, mutilating and taking captives as they went. Colley suggests that such was the ferocity of this assault it caused in the redcoats “a sort of torpor and insensibility … an enemy of a kind nothing in Europe had prepared them for” (2002, p179). This, she says, had a profound effect in Britain where “the romance born of arrogance, typical, one might say, of colonisers throughout history, and is the position taken ultimately by historians Colley and Anderson. However, using Elias’s sociology and particularly the insight that European societies have come to view their historically unfolding conduct as civilised, a further insight can be made into the developing separation between the European centred and Anglo-American societies co-existing on the North American continent of the eighteenth century. Colley observes that atrocities committed by Indians on Braddock’s forces and during other bloody conflicts of the Seven Years War, as well as the violence implicit in the taking of captives, “rubbed against western European’s heightened conceit about themselves at this stage … a sense that they were coming to conduct war more humanely, as well as on a much larger scale” (p181). This “heightened conceit” is important for European self-identity and in the belief in a trajectory towards what they define as increasingly “civilised” modes of conduct at all levels of behaviour including warfare, since what are described as atrocities committed by Indians against “civilised” British troops is greeted by shock, outrage and sorrow and a decline in former sympathies in Britain.

The public reception accompanying Braddock’s defeat in Britain is important for the contrast it provides with Anglo-Americans living on the North American frontier and the meanings that are made by them both of the conduct of “civilised” European warfare, and their perceptions of Indian methods of warfare and Indian modes of behaviour and conduct more generally. Quite clearly, as we have already seen, British warfare is contrasted unfavourably with the indigenous warfare conducted by Native Americans. Native American methods are precisely those adopted by both French and Virginian irregulars to better effect during Braddock’s campaign, and are accepted presumably as being the most effective or “authentic”
I want to argue that a significant aspect of this is the growing identifi-
cation by Anglo-Americans with Indianised forms of behaviour and
existence, prevalent in particular among those that dwell, farm, hunt
and trade along borders and fron-
tiers. However, as I have earlier
noted, along with Mennell, this does not lead to greater interdependence
and mutual identification as Elias
argues it does in the European Civi-
ising Process, but ultimately to the
destruction of Native American soci-
eties and the elimination of their
These historically developing trends
in the processes of state formation
in North America are able to be dis-
cerned through rapidly establishing
cultural genres and practices such
as the captivity narrative told by
James Smith.

Captivity and Cultural As-
similation.

Colley makes the point that “Ever
since 1689 ... wars between the
French and British had led the for-
er’s colonial authorities in New
France to sponsor Indian raids for
loot, captives and destruction
against the latter’s American colo-
nists” (2002, p169). She further con-
tends that by the 1750s the captur-
ing of British colonists had taken on
something of a routine quality; cer-
tainly it was now a much more for-
mal process based upon an econo-
my of exchange, since the French
would pay the Indians for British
captives and use them as political
barter with the British in turn. Indi-
ans had always taken captives, but
to replenish losses in war or more
usually by capturing women and
children from rival tribes, to affect
rapid population increase. Pauline
Turner-Strong further notes that
narratives of this period, including
Smith’s, keenly “demonstrates both
a familiarity with Indian ways and
the personal flexibility that came to
be called “Yankee Ingenuity” (2000,
p193). The kind of interdependence
enshrouded by these narratives
seems calculated to serve ends
through “an initiation not into Indian
life but into the savagery they asso-
ciated with the wilderness – a sav-
egery they produced and appropri-
ated in order to ‘chase the wily sav-
ge’ from his secret haunts and
claim his land” (p195).

After witnessing the horrific deaths
of British captives from Braddock’s
defeat, James Smith describes an
initiation ritual that he is made to
undergo and misinterprets at first as
death, but which in actual fact is a
rite that instead makes him a full
member of the tribe. From this point
onward, Smith’s narrative becomes
an instruction into the education of a
young man into the ways of wilder-
ness survival through the develop-
ment of personal resourcefulness
gained through direct lived experi-
ence. Smith goes on to describe in
anthropological detail how he is
tested by his adopted tribe for his
skills in hunting, tracking and survi-
val. Smith’s narrative then reads like
a rite of passage in which he com-
pletes a journey from novice initiate
to respected and honoured member
of Indian society. After having been
captive for three years or so, this
journey culminates in an episode in
which he is separated from his Indi-
an benefactors in a severe winter
snowstorm and forced to survive by
constructing a shelter in the hollow
of a dead tree. He survives the terri-
ble weather and is able once the
storm has abated to orient himself
and return uninjured to the tribe. At
this point Smith describes great joy
amongst the tribe. Smith is given a
feast which he says all members of
the tribe attend. He is asked by a
tribal elder to give a full account
of his adventures, which, when he is
finished, is loudly applauded and
acclaimed. Smith then describes a
speech this elder makes in praise of
him in which it is admitted that the
Indians assumed he would not sur-
vive, “as you had not been accus-
tomed to hardships in your country
to the east” (Drimmer, 1985, p48).
The tribal elder then goes on to de-

er what amounts to the significant
conclusion to Smith’s entire captivity
drama, and the meaning of it which
is made by Anglo-American audi-
cences, that “You have given us evi-
dence of your fortitude, skill and
resolution. We hope you will go on
to do great actions, as it is only
great actions that can make a great
man” (p48).

The character of the colonial back-
country, those uncertain zones of
“cultural fusion” to borrow Aron’s
term, (2007, p9) is characterised by
interdependencies formed through
encounters with Indians and by the
mid-eighteenth century is popular-
ised through narratives of the type
described by James Smith. Interde-
pendence, as previously mentioned,
plays a crucial determining role in
Mennell’s conception of American
state formation and the changes in
balances of power that occur within
territories between people. In his
influential book Regeneration
through Violence (1973), Richard
Slotkin provides a compelling analy-
sis of colonial cultural history
through a reading of its cultural texts
and (mainly) religious rites and
practices, and concludes that,
“Americans sanctioned the tempo-
rary immersion of frontier individuals
into ‘savage' society ... for the re-
form of their own culture” (p280).

Mennell describes this cultural inter-
dependency as being significant for
understanding the frontier contexts
of the emerging United States
wherein individuals may be periodi-
cally or permanently cast into a
“situation of extreme danger,” with
All this seems to have served to exacerbate a general sense of British frustration at what appeared to be an inability to maintain order and control over its farthest territories. A growing sense of backcountry identity with a separate character independent of the British and exemplified by the likes of James Smith was developing within a distinctly New World habitus of experience that appears at this juncture to be very much at odds with British designs and with European processes of “civilizational” development. Thus a divide created by distance, estrangement and by the experience of relative liberty and autonomy from domineering authorities amongst backcountry inhabitants, could not easily be reconciled with the observation by Nobles that amongst the British “the frontier was hardly intended to be an open space of unfettered freedom for the pioneer farmer or trapper” (1988, p59). For them “it was envisioned as an ordered environment in which productive settlers accepted the authority of their superiors and supported the economic strategy of their sponsoring nation” (p59). For inhabitants of the western back-country in the immediate pre-Revolutionary era after the conclusion of the Seven Years War the experience and legacy of that conflict was one of profound shifts towards greater social and cultural independence and estrangement from British colonial authority and rule. The emergence in war time of heroic cultural figures of a distinctly American type, whose wilderness skills were taught by Indians and whose experience of “de-civilising” processes were characteristic of the North American frontier habitus, provided archetypes for future nation building, of which James Smith is one, and in whose spirit iconic figures such as Daniel Boone would soon follow. Such figures and the narratives they would tell exemplify a backcountry patriotism described by McFarlane in which “political liberty was not based on ideas of tolerance or notions of community, nor ordered by internalised concepts of deference. On the frontier, far from centres of government on the coast, freedom from government and its agents was more important than freedom within the state, exercised through the apparatus of government and its institutions” (1994, p174). Within a few years of the Seven Years War, these backcountry citizens would establish new settlements further displacing Native peoples, often violently, openly defying British rule as it sought to impose legal boundaries to further expansion, and, as Nobles, observes, the portents of this were clear, “the sustained colonisation of trans Appalachia coincided with the beginning of the Revolutionary War” (1997, p13).

Works Cited

For Sylvia Plath, domestic concerns such as cookery are not the hidden and inferior underside of poetic practice. In fact, the hierarchy between the career-girl writer and the housewife is upturned as part of Plath’s literary remit. This reversal has concrete consequences for Plath’s aesthetic in its Cold War context, an era in which the woman’s sphere of the domestic was held to be utterly separate from the implicitly male arena of public service and global politics. I am interested in the more apparently “prosaic” aspect of Plath’s poetry, that of her preoccupation in Ariel with the quotidian and habitual housework and housewifery.

Diane Middlebrook in her biography of the couple, Her Husband – Hughes and Plath: A Marriage (2004) notes the extent to which the latter threw herself into learning cookery at the beginning of her marriage. Middlebrook (2004: 90) considers that ‘Plath… viewed cooking as a practice that advanced her aim...’

Confessional poetry has frequently been seen as a substitute for the therapist’s couch rather than a sustained aesthetic practice. Sylvia Plath is a much more political writer than she has been given credit for; and “Sylvia Plath’s Confessionalism: Housewifery and housework – from monotony to magic” aims to reveal the extent of that politicisation, through an investigation of her gendered view of the kitchen as a unique theatre of conflict.

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Sylvia Plath in 1957
of developing a writing style grounded in womanly experience.’ Recounting the period immediately after Plath and Hughes were married, Middlebrook goes on to describe Plath’s search for a specifically female moral philosophy not found in the John Locke of her Cambridge studies, but within Irma S. Rombauer’s *The Joy of Cooking* (1931) (Middlebrook 2004: 90).

It is apparent that Middlebrook too situates Plath’s aesthetic from an early stage in her writing career within the domicile, particularly the kitchen, and it is this domestic setting that proves revelatory with regard to Plath’s Cold War context: the era of the Norman Rockwell-esque vision of home and hearth, a vision that is not all that it seems.

**“Lesbos”: A female theatre of conflict**

I will begin with Plath’s “Lesbos,” which was left out of the 1965 edition of *Ariel*. In her Foreword to *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, Frieda Hughes notes that this poem was personally ‘lacerating’ in its ‘wicked’ depiction of a real-life couple that Plath and Hughes knew well (Plath, 2004: xiii). The title “Lesbos” would come to the fore of the world’s imagination when the USSR’s President Khrushchev and the US’s Vice President Nixon took place in the kitchen of the house itself, the heart of the domicile.

This domicile, as we have already seen, was defined as feminine, and yet was appropriated by the implicitly masculine geo-political power of the United States in order to further its own interests on the world stage.

The geo-political was characterised as masculine because of its public nature, in comparison to the private sphere of the feminine domicile. In this exhibition, the masculine collided with that which was held to be inherently feminine. Plath’s room of viciousness, with its ‘polished lozenges of orange linoleum’ (line 25) on the floor remind a modern reader of mid-century kitchen design and is suggestive of a site of combat between the two titans of the mid-late twentieth century, a deeply masculinist conflict. Plath has thus moved the sphere of conflict from a previously exemplary feminine zone, via its degradation due to the female speaker’s bitchiness, through to the patriarchal values of (Cold) war.

This implication of Soviet bloc versus American might is attributed a degree of absurdity, suggested in the aforementioned “bitchy” character of the argument.

In ‘Lesbos’, even vegetables are attributed a malign character, as the potatoes hiss, and the repetition in the second line of this ‘i’ sound in ‘hiss’ ensures the sense of histrionics in the first line is compounded. The potatoes hissing is suggestive of internal pressure ready to explode, and the next pair of lines depicting a ‘windowless’ room with ‘The fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine’ (line 4) further amplifies this sense of compression. It seems fitting that Plath should describe a theatre of claustrophobia in an age of Cold War conflict – an era when such
conflict supposedly did not spill over into hot combat, and instead remained resentful. The theatre of conflict in "Lesbos" is both the whole world insofar as nuclear weapons have the capability of annihilating the earth, and one that, like a pair of housewives' petty argument, is contained within one room like a pressure cooeker.

After describing the kitchen, Plath calls attention to the woman's work of childcare, or, more accurately, the failure of that work, in the figure of the daughter.

And my child – look at her, face down on the floor,
Little unstrung puppet, kicking to disappear –
Why she is a schizophrenic.
Her face red and white, a panic.
(Lines 8 – 11)
Added to this picture of the 'little unstrung puppet' child is an image of her mewing, helpless kittens outside the window that the speaker has sadistically placed 'in a sort of cement well'/Where they crap and puke and cry and she can't hear.' (Lines 13 – 14). The speaker's entreaty for us to 'look at her' forces a witness-bearing role on the reader/listener, one that is complicated by the dark comedy of the situation. This is a psychotic little girl who reflects back to the mother like a tedious echo, 'You say I should drown my girl./She'll cut her throat at ten if she's mad at two.' (Lines 21 – 22). The colloquialisms and bad language that Plath employs here – crap and puke and bastard – in tandem with frequent rhyming vowels ensures that this vision of domesticity and child rearing is attributed a sinister quality, an oscillation between control and explosion, pressure and its release.

In contrast to the unstrung puppet daughter, the baby son, a 'fat snail,' smiles serenely up at the speaker and her companion. Calling the baby boy 'fat snail' brings to mind the edible snails of French cuisine, and indeed the speaker notes of her companion that 'You could eat him. He's a boy.' (Line 25). Perhaps 'eat' in this context is a comment upon consumerism; indeed, the companion, now identified as female, is shown to be desiring a new model of husband, one less impotent than her current one who 'is just no good to you./His Jew-Mama guards his sweet sex like a pearl' (lines 26 – 27.) pointing towards the husband's impotency or emasculation by feminine forces, the mother violently guarding his genitals. It is once again shown to be a theatre of conflict in which the speaker imagines her companion to be a kind of colonial-era or Conradian cannibal bent on eating up the children. So, consumption has turned into a metaphor for colonialism via the image of eating or the mouth; the wife-figure, hungry for a new model of husband that can fulfil her sexual desires, and the woman-as-cannibal who is hungry for the speaker's baby boy. In this sense she is both modern day consumer of the new appliance-husband, and seemingly a member of the ancient cannibalistic tribes. It is worth noting that the old colonial world was where the Cold War frequently turned hot, as in the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya between 1952 and 1959.

If we return, however, to the apparently more pressing concerns of the mid-twentieth century housewife, that "new" kind of consumer identified by the ad men of the era, it is clear that Plath also situates this hostile and malignant kitchen in the 1950s. Plath's housewife speaker here is narcotized:

Meanwhile there's a stink of fat and baby crap.
I'm doped and thick from my last sleeping pill.
The smog of cooking, the smog of hell
Floats our heads, two venomous opposites… (Lines 35 – 38)
The doped and thick speaker is reminiscent of the Betty Friedan-esque suppressed housewife, anaesthetized on sleeping pills and sedatives. This image is compounded by the term 'smog', which has implications of both sedation and industrial haze, filling Plath's combative kitchen with a miasma of ominous gloom like evil emanations from a poisonous stove.

The speaker desires 'An old pole for the lightning./The acid baths, the skyfuls of you.' (Lines 48 – 49). It is twice that the speaker's female companion is referred to as 'acid'; she is also 'O vase of acid' (Line 73). The 'skyfuls' of you, however, remake this reference on a larger scale: the female companion becomes as big as the universe, shown on the scale of the Space Race and expanded far beyond the remit of the kitchen in which the events of the poem takes place. The third figure of the husband, the 'Flogged trolley,' (line 51) is barely a figure at all in the logic of Plath's poem, and serves only to occasionally mitigate against the violence and the hostility that resounds between the poem's speaker and the female companion within the domestic theatre of combat.

The scene shifts to a night-time context, and the three adults take a moonlit stroll along the beach. The sand that the speaker picks up in her hand is like silken 'grits,' (line 64), a peculiarly American foodstuff that would be unfamiliar in post-war Britain. This is also the sand that she has worked like 'dough' (line 63,) and for the second time Plath references baking and food metaphors, even though the scene of action has now moved from the kitchen. Thereafter, the speaker abruptly leaves the house of her companions, taking with her the paraphernalia of her visit like so many items of luggage.

I do not speak.
I am packing up the hard potatoes like good clothes.
I am packing the babies.
I am packing the sick cats. (Lines 67 -70.)
The hissing potatoes have solidified and become hard, and the children are absurdly compact, loaded up in suitcases. This paraphernalia of selfhood that the speaker packs away has a reverse effect on the poem: the stuff of selfhood spills out in lines that begin with four repetitions of "I". The narrative becomes
more markedly Confessional in the sense that it opens out a discussion of relationships, particularly primal, wounded relationships (Plath 2004: 40.)

It is love you are full of. You know who you hate.

He is hugging his ball and chain down by the gate

That opens to the sea

…. 

Every day you fill him with soul-stuff, like a pitcher. (Lines 72 – 74, 77.)

This passage reflects personal concerns of the speaker alluded to earlier in the poem (Plath, 2004: 38: ‘I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair. I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair.’ lines 29 – 30), but more importantly, it is a dismantling of the relationship and in turn the house of the speaker’s companions. Indeed, the female companion’s husband, the third adult, is banished outside, to the periphery of the property down by the gate, where he ‘hugs’ his ball and chain in a gesture of uxorious affection that is in sharp contrast to the atmosphere inside the house, the site of the ‘stink of fat and baby crap’ and ‘The smog of cooking, the smog of hell.’ I am particularly interested in this image of the husband as a pitcher, filled with soul-stuff by his antagonistic and hostile wife (line 77.) This image of the husband as housewife’s paraphernalia – a jug for the table for orange juice or lemonade – emphasises the extent to which he is emptied out of content without the stuff of the female domiciliary. In fact, Plath in “Lesbos” gives new meaning to the term “Cold War” as theatre of conflict of the domicile. Regarding her female companion, the speaker notes ‘I see your cute décor/ Close on you like the fist of a baby.’ (Lines 85 – 86). In this instance, the interior of the kitchen setting of the poem and the claustrophobia of the furnishings is reminiscent of the doctrine of Containment, a policy aimed at preventing the spread of Communism beyond the USSR. The décor may be cute. But it looms up upon the inhabitants of the room with a power persuasive and elemental as a baby’s grasp.

“A Birthday Present”: The marvellous against the backdrop of the quotidian

In “A Birthday Present” the speaker recounts her anticipation of receiving a birthday present that seems to be a sort of cipher, emptied out of content. This has a peculiar significance for the speaker, who, it transpires, has attempted or wanted to attempt suicide in the previous year. Moreover, the poem is addressed to a ‘you,’ the gift-giver, one who is never defined except by their reluctance to bestow the birthday present. Like “Lesbos,” the setting of “A Birthday Present” is also a kitchen; but this kitchen setting serves a different purpose. This kitchen setting is not immediately identified, and it is rather the mystery of the birthday present that is commented on from the beginning.

From the outset, the birthday present is attributed a strange and enigmatic subjectivity, indicated in the way in which it seems to embody masculine and feminine characteristics (Plath 2004: 65): ‘What is this, behind this veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful? / It is shimmering, has it breasts, has it edges?’ (Lines 1 – 2.) Whatever it is, the speaker speculates that it might have human qualities such as ugliness or beauty, or beauty in ugliness, and it may also be gendered – female, if it were to have breasts, but also male if it is to have the hard ‘edges’ of the masculine body. Either way, the birthday present intriguingly speaks to the speaker. She notes, ‘I am sure it is unique. I am sure it is just what I want.’ (Line 3). This is because, like desirability, the impenetrable object also emanates a strange and uncanny affect that precedes even its own definition or identification.

The present remains hidden behind a veil, its contours unfathomable. We know that it, like the combative speaker in “Lesbos,” must exist in a domestic setting because “When I am quiet at my cooking I feel it looking, I feel it thinking.” (Line 4.) Once again, affect is posited – the birthday present seems to have its own mind, its own subjectivity, one that gazes back on the speaker. What is left deliberately ambiguous is whether this gazing birthday present is also somehow contained within the cooking, as it seems that the speaker’s cooking emanates its own affect too. Indeed, the possibility of the birthday present being somehow at one with the cooking is compounded by the sense of it looking at itself as baking goes on. The speaker mouths the words of the object as it observes:

Is this the one I am to appear for,
Is this the elect one, the one
with black eye pits and a scar?
Measuring the flour, cutting off the surplus,
Adhering to rules, to rules, to rules. (Lines 5 – 8).

What is the effect of this curious animus that lies behind the object, an object that is increasingly amalgamated and associated with the female arts of cooking and baking?

These lines point towards a surreal aesthetic of the kitchen wherein the housewife is afforded magic helpers in order to keep the domestic front up to a standard of American, capitalistic Cold War-era exemplariness. Marsha Bryant (see Helle 2007: 222) has noted this tendency both in Plath’s writings and in advertisements of the days; she argues that Plath takes images from the latter in order to forge a unique aesthetic that fuses the world of female and domestic appliances with the tropes of male modernism. She coins the term ‘domestic surreal,’ in order to refer to the Platian appropriation of a post-war American construction of domesticity in the Ariel poems. Not just portraying a nightmarish vision of the “dream kitchen” gone bad, Bryant also links Plath’s domestic surrealism with an aesthetic influenced by the popular contemporary publication, Ladies’ Home Journal.

So, Plath has exploded the vision of domesticity at the heart of “Lesbos” and given it a new meaning based on the combative model of the
Kitchen Debates by recalibrating it. In other words, she does not just ‘transform the dream kitchen into a nightmare,’ in Bryant’s words, but in “A Birthday Present” also attributes it a marvellous and magical capacity. The previously suicidal speaker takes a childlike delight in guessing what this object, with its own weird affect, might be, not minding if it was ‘bones, or a pearl button’:

I do not want much of a present, anyway, this year.

After all, I am alive only by accident.

I would have killed myself gladly that time any possible way.

Now there are these veils, shimmering like curtains (Lines 13 – 16.)

In an era of annihilating weapons and species death, reflected on the individual level by the speaker’s desire to annihilate herself, this sense of fun and wonder in the mysterious object as Plath shows is an important facet of being human that is in danger of being lost. The domestic setting of the kitchen, with all its quotidian and commonplace character, is the ideal site from which to communicate this message, because of its ability to foreground the strange and wondrous against a background of familiarity.

The veil that obscures the birthday present shimmers ‘like curtains’ and is as white as babies’ bedding, and it is this description of the veil as resembling everyday and “womanly” objects such as sheets that paradoxically suggests that the object resides in a kind of other dimension, a world behind and beyond the shroud of the ordinary. This idea of there being another sphere, a place beyond, is an enticing one when we take into account the Cold War context of Plath’s writing. Perhaps, then, this characterisation of the veil behind which the objects resides as a domestic, household fabric is telling of the extent to which the fault lines of the Cold War are, for Plath, not geopolitical but pertaining to the domicile and the native.

The aura of the birthday present is such that the speaker, like any good housewife, would like to invite guests round to admire it, and make food (Plath 2004: 66.)

Let us sit down to it, one on either side, admiring the gleam, The glaze, the mirrory variety of it.

Let us eat our last supper at it, like a hospital plate. (Lines 24 – 26.)

The object gleams like a mirror and seems to reflect the desires of the speaker, the desire for it to be something of monumental importance. Indeed, the birthday present takes on a religious aspect when the speaker asks her guest to sit down to a last supper, sitting down to a meal being the exemplary delegation of the perfect 1950s housewife. However, the speaker denies the child-like aspect of opening the birthday present, like wrappings and trimmings as a mother might prepare for her child’s birthday, and as such disavows any maternal aspect of the object as fripperies.

I will only take it and go aside quietly.

You will not even hear me opening it, no paper crackle,

No falling ribbons, no scream at the end.

I do not think you credit me with this discretion. (Lines 33 – 36.)

As with the veil behind which the object resides, the presence of ribbons and wrapping paper would seem to indicate that the importance of what lies beneath or beyond insofar as they cover and overlay the object, making it enshrouded. This time, however, the speaker denies its possibilities, and wants to avoid any of the fanfare of trying to find what’s beneath – ‘You will not even hear me opening it.’ (Line 34.) If the veil or shroud is wrapping paper and ribbons, this time the speaker chooses not to rend them. As Plath shows, the speaker may draw attention to the world as polarised, as “us versus them” and what lies beyond, but she also does not necessarily want to change it. In this respect, Plath shows the speaker on this occasion to be participating in the logic of the Cold War that defines the enemy as wholly other, and the home side as wholly and self-evidently the right way to live. This is because the Manichean logic of the Cold War is reflected in this enshrouded present and its wrapping paper and ribbons: she cannot or will not tear through the wrapping as that would denigrate that which lies beyond. The American housewife’s domicile, then, is not to be put into question.

Moreover, the speaker adds that trying to guess what is behind the veils is slowly poisoning her.

… They are carbon monoxide.
Sweetly, sweetly I breathe in
(Lines 40 – 41)

Carbon monoxide, that silent killer in the home, shrouds the object and poisons the speaker. This is an interesting image in the era of death by irradiation, another colourless, odourless and tasteless silent killer that continued to claim victims after the fires had died out over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is important to note that it is not the object itself that emanates this poison, but rather the shimmery glitter (Plath 2004: 65) of the thing that shrouds it. This complicates the previous and conservative metaphor wherein the speaker disavows the image of the shroud as wrapping paper and ribbons waiting to be torn off, preferring instead to ‘take it and go aside quietly,’ inferring her wish for things to remain unchanged.

This makes an explicit political comment on this era of death by irradiation and other “silent” killers. The speaker has previously expressed her wish for things to remain unchanged, but the image of the poisoning via the carbon monoxide of the veils is suggestive of a sense of being sickened by the atomic weapons that devastated the two Japanese cities. The ‘dead breath’ of the veils is an image that also points towards the sickening, deathly quality of the modern atomic era.

The carbon monoxide of the veil, by contrast, is indicative of the partition between gift and the ordinary world itself being poisonous. By inference
then, if the partition is a metaphor for the Iron Curtain, then it too is a poisonous apportionment, and as such is one that is in need of alteration, a different permutation. This is at odds with the speaker’s expressed desires. In this way, Plath disavows the notion of the Confessional speaker as being wholly herself, and instead demonstrates that the speaker is also “other” to the voice of the poet. This distinction between speaker and poet is a particularly important one in an era of Cold War and a uniquely 20th century violence: it underscores the polarisation of the world into two mutually exclusive camps. More importantly, it also allows for the possibility of a more critical and self-aware aesthetic: one in which the poet is able to comment even upon her own artistic motivations, in something akin to a literary version of Brechtian theatre.

Conclusion

Here, Sylvia Plath’s kitchen stands as a metaphor for a new aesthetic that is borne out of Cold War conflict. Marsha Bryant’s term, the ‘domestic surreal,’ is useful for analysing “Lesbos” and “A Birthday Present” because it helps to build a picture of Plath’s complex and nuanced poetic of domesticity, and in particular cooking. Plath neither despises the so-called woman’s work of cooking and housework as described in the poems, nor does she celebrate it as an exemplary female virtue. Moreover, the domestic realm is a site where two aesthetics collide: the implicitly “male” modernism of Plath’s poetic forefathers, and a poetic practice grounded in female experience.

This collision of the male and female worlds within a singular poetic puts into question their separation in Cold War America: on the one hand, the patriarchal arena of public geo-politics, and the private sphere of women, home and hearth on the other. While the domicile was held to be a primary defence against Communism, particularly during the Eisenhower era, it and its female occupants were never afforded the freedoms of the masculine geo-political arena, and as such these spheres remained separate from one another. The domicile-as-defence, in spite of its apparent import in the militaristic campaign against the values of Soviet Communism, never collided with the masculine arena. Plath in her domestic surrealism seeks to overcome this bifurcation: poetry is a place where these two worlds can come together, resulting in a fairer and more democratic calibration of gender roles. This in turn has consequences in the Cold War era: by bringing together the genders in her poetry, Plath also points the way towards a less bifurcated and more holistic vision of humanity that was perpetuated in the Manichean logic of the Cold War conflict.

Finally, it is apparent that the kitchen and the domicile as a metaphor for the Cold War conflict itself surfaces at the level of the text or poem. The kitchen in “Lesbos,” as I have shown, calls to mind the ‘Hot Kitchen’ debate of the Eisenhower era, which is rendered absurd by the female speaker’s ‘bitchiness’ towards her antagonist. The Cold War also surfaces in the enigmatic birthday present of the second poem: the domestic setting of the kitchen is the ideal place for the speaker’s sense of wonder in the mysterious object to reveal itself against the background of the quotididian. The quotidian, in this case, is not just a mere woman’s kitchen, but also the constant and daily awareness of the possibility of annihilation at the hands of the superpowers, and their arsenal of nuclear weapons.

Notes

1 Deborah Nelson, in her 2013 chapter “Confessional Poetry” for The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry Since 1945 has advanced a similar argument regarding Anne Sexton’s poem “The Kitchen Debates” and the Nixon-Khrushchev exchange. Nelson uses the similarity between the name of the poem and the debates that were broadcast on American television to argue her case for ‘how confessional poetry participated in the wider examination of the meaning and value of privacy in the Cold War,’ the home being a unique space that was both a retreat from public life and subject to invasion.

2 The Foreword to Eyewitness Testimonies: Appeals From the A-Bomb Survivors, a Japanese publication issued by the Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation: Hiroshima notes the long reach of radiation over the bomb’s survivors – ‘The atomic bomb is characterized by the fact that even today, more than sixty years since the explosion, the effects of radiation continue. All has not been revealed yet as to the effects of radiation in the human body, but we do know that people exposed to radiation suffer from various illnesses.’

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Introduction

In 1982 Channel 4 began broadcasting as the UK’s fourth terrestrial TV channel. It soon developed a reputation as a channel prepared to produce programmes that were both inventive, original, challenging and provocative. This was not only in areas such as popular music with programmes such as *The Tube* (1982-87), or in science with *Equinox* (1986-2001), in politics with *Black Bag* (1991-97) and *Dispatches* (1997 to date) and eventually in comedy with *Father Ted* (1995-98), to name but a few, but also in its promotion and the support of British made film. This was to pay dividends in a series of major productions such as *The Draughtsman’s Contract* (1982) and *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) thus providing a welcome shot in the arm for the industry. However, it was not just the major film projects that Channel 4 supported: for smaller independents it also provided a welcome boost and stimulus to artists and producers and a vehicle for the broadcasting of their work.

Channel 4 therefore offered opportunities for independent programme makers that again, at that time, was original and clearly showed its commitment to the promotion of the arts in Britain. Whilst many of these did not receive the recognition or critical acclaim they perhaps deserved, many nevertheless made their mark on their audiences, often on a highly personal level.

Road Dreams

One of these was *Road Dreams*, a series of six 30-minute films by Elliott Bristow. Filmed over a 14 year period between 1968 and 1982 and eventually broadcast in 1989, Bristow’s films catalogued, in a highly original manner, his 500,000 mile (800,000 km) wanderings and travels around America. Shot on Super 8mm film, the programmes very quickly established Bristow as a filmmaker of some ingenuity and talent. However, it was not just the stunning images of the rural and urban landscapes, but it was also the filmmaker’s eye for the ordinary, everyday and occasional, weird aspects of America, its people and landscapes. He had, to many, followed the mantra of Agee and Evans, in *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*, of “…ignoring nothing…”

The structure of the programmes was also highly innovative in that there was no overriding verbal narrative. Being shot without formal soundtrack, (and having a visual quality only Super 8 could provide)

Bristow presented a visual narrative, open to the viewer to ‘read’ and to set their own meaning. The soundtrack eventually provided on the finished production consisted of readings from writers such as Jack Kerouac (in particular and unsurprisingly, *On the Road*) and Thomas Wolfe, and an evocative musical soundtrack by musicians such as Leo Kottke, The Penguin Cafe Orchestra, Rick Wakeman, Francois Godfrey, Rick Loveridge and Richard W Gilks. This provided the series with an intense power and mesmerized a generation, many of whom had spent summer holidays travelling America on Greyhound buses, rental or drop-off cars or by thumb (dangerous though this could be in some states, as well as illegal in others) and listening to rock, country or fundamentalist religious radio stations. Bristow himself gave a minimal verbal narrative, often to seemingly just set a context or provide a gem of understated insight. (One in particular, that firmly stands out to me, is when he says he approached his film diary as a way “…to look at the present as if it were a memory.”)

Brief audio snatches from radio stations and phone messages also add an appealing and sometimes bizarre edge.

Criss-crossing America, from north to south, and east to west, Bristow captured both an America of its time and a seemingly timeless panorama. Whilst almost no mention is made of the Vietnam conflict, or the struggles of African Americans, women and others for civil rights, those issues are there in an unspoken background, while the everyday and ordinary is recorded in an evocative manner. But it is not just the
historical or physical landscapes that draw the viewer in; the human context sees many faces go by, then return to our view. Although generally unacknowledged, they are seemingly familiar to the viewer and presented in an endearing and often affectionate manner.

Bristow had accumulated enough material during his travels to make a longer film, *Codachrome - a Time of Road Dreams* a project he is still working on, but it was clear that what had become the *Road Dreams* archive had significant potential to explore and support other forms of production and consequently open up his work to a wider audience. In 2007 Bristow produced a DVD, *Retro Road Trips*; a compilation of re-edited footage and music based on the original TV series but still retaining all the hallmarks of the six-part series. This again brought his work not only to those who had followed him from the 1990s but also to a new generation.

Extracts from *Road Dreams* were subsequently used by a number of TV documentaries, including a BBC 4 series on British rock bands in America and for educational purposes, such as a promotional DVD by the British Association for American Studies (BAAS). An accompanying web site *Retro Road Trips* (http://www.retroroadtrips.com/) provided an extra element to the video and the original series; and one that again embraced the new technology available. In 2013 Bristow published *Road Dreams: an American Adventure*. This multi-media book, available now on-line through the iBookstore for iPad and Mac, takes not only film clips from the *Road Dreams* archive, but also a large number of beautifully selected still images, most of which are screen grabs, that capture the essence of the author’s American adventures. Again, it is often the everyday and ordinary that transfix the viewer: road side small town life, desert sunsets and snow storms, abandoned shacks, advertising hoardings, college students, farmers, endless roads and cars, railways, forests and mountains, communities and families and workers, cityscapes, improvised art (isn’t it all really?) and the list goes on. The video clips in each chapter have also been re-edited and come with new soundtracks, each one showing (in Bristow’s own words) a time when the world was analogue and the promise seemingly endless.

The book is presented in seven chapters (see below for titles), with chapters two to six exploring different routes or themes Bristow covered over his fourteen years of travels. The written sections of the book do not detract from the images but again, as with the TV series, add to and complement the work whilst not restricting the reader. Consequently, each reader will have their own way of finding meaning from this collection, much as they had the opportunity to do with the original TV series. It is, however, the ability of the still to capture or freeze a moment or memory that, in the words of the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, provides photography with, “...the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event...” that is notable.

This was a highly enjoyable, rewarding, evocative and, for me, a somewhat melancholic journey through memories of my own and surely that of many others...but as already indicated, the strength of Bristow’s work is that each reader can discover their own meanings and readings and consequently create their own narrative.

**Chapter Headings**

Chapter 1: Details; Viewing; Cars; Introduction.
Chapter 2: New York to Los Angeles and beyond
Chapter 3: On the road in winter
Chapter 4: Iowa to Oregon
Chapter 5: New England to Washington, DC.
Chapter 6: Los Angeles and the desert.
Chapter 7: Endnotes.
‘Sometimes forbidden fruit tastes the sweetest, doesn’t it?’ Breaking Bad: the transgressive journey of Walter White

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Abstract

This article addresses some of the key moments in the first two seasons of Breaking Bad (2008-2013). It utilises the concept of the liminal subject to address the ways in which protagonist Walter White’s actions disrupt and trouble the boundaries between criminal and conforming behaviour; in so doing, it suggests that the series’ narrative framework orients viewers’ attention toward a sociological, rather than a populist understanding of crime and deviance.

Introduction

Protagonist Walter White’s decision to ‘break bad’ takes viewers on a narrative journey that can be understood in terms of Jeff Ferrell, Keith Hayward and Jock Young’s criminological approach, which focuses on ‘the phenomenology of everyday life: the experiences of joy, humiliation, anger and desperation, the seductions of transgression and vindictiveness, the myriad forms of resistance and the repressive nature of acquiescence’ (2008: 205). In addition to representing these experiences, Walt’s narrative allows insight into both a socio-structural and phenomenological understanding of criminal behaviour. Breaking Bad develops a sociologically-informed narrative about the ‘delicately balanced’ relationship ‘between crime and convention’ (Matza 1964: 63), which provides viewers with a complex moral discourse about the social character of deviance, conformity and transgression. This discourse is developed through Walt’s attempt, in light of his decision to ‘break bad’, to maintain both a conventional and a criminal identity, thereby problematizing clear-cut boundaries between conforming and deviant behaviour. The series illustrates the plasticity of moral boundaries and demonstrates that the lines between crime and convention are socially produced and defined; by so doing, Breaking Bad challenges the orthodox or common-sense understanding of criminal behaviour reproduced in many popular cultural forms.

Framework of the narrative

In Breaking Bad, Walter White (Bryan Cranston), a former research scientist and overqualified high school chemistry teacher in Albuquerque, New Mexico, is diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer. He is 50, has a teenage son, Walt Junior (RJ Mitte) who has cerebral palsy, and his wife Skyler (Anna Gunn) is expecting an (unplanned) baby. To make ends meet, Walt has a second, after-school job at the local car wash; a job more suited to a high school student, and a fact which is not lost on Walt. His family’s precarity is reinforced by the fact that Walt has inadequate health insurance and cannot afford the medical treatment necessary to treat his lung cancer.

Television coverage of a recent bust of a crystal methamphetamine ‘factory’ opens Walt’s eyes to an alternative and far more lucrative career. As a gifted chemist, Walt sees the production of crystal meth as an avenue through which he could provide for his family after his...
death. After a ride-along with his brother-in-law Hank (Dean Norris), a Drug Enforcement Administration officer, Walt seeks out a former high school student, Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul) who is a low level manufacturer and dealer of poor quality crystal meth. A partnership is forged and the series details the journey the amateurs take into the field of drug production and distribution, deviance and criminality. Crucially, Walt fails to tell his family he has lung cancer until a month after his diagnosis and his first foray into the production of crystal meth; the deceit and lying this engenders, sets the emotional tone through which much of the resulting drama of the first two seasons is played out.

**Dream on**

The White family reflects the economic situation of many Americans today who are experiencing falling income levels, rising unemployment and an overall rise in the levels of inequality. As Lawrence Katz states, ‘This is truly a lost decade. We think of America as a place where every generation is doing better; but we’re looking at a period when the median family is in worse shape than it was in the late 1990s’ (quoted in Usborne 2011: 31). Walt’s diagnosis throws into relief the gap between the expectation of a lifestyle congruent with the ideology of the American Dream and the reality that, after a life-time of conforming to social expectations, he has nothing. Under these circumstances, Walt’s decision to produce crystal meth seems, to him, to be a rational one. The Whites’ economic situation thus provides the structural framework for Walt’s foray into criminal behaviour, but it is important to note that Walt also has an emotional investment in his criminal activity, to protect his family from economic hardship. As the narrative progresses, however, we also see that his foray into a deviant career includes a ‘range of sensual dynamics’ (Katz 1988: 5) such as pleasure, power, risk and excitement that lead us beyond the confines and relative safety of crime and criminal behaviour, understood as a rational choice. This choice can be contained and made safe because it is regarded as calculated and in some sense reasonable. In *Breaking Bad*, we are confronted with a character whose age, illness and economic situation contribute to his liminal state, where one is positioned between different states of being. This fluidity in Walt’s sense of self has a greater potential to destabilise and challenge orthodox ideas about conformity, order and containment than crime understood as calculative rationality alone.

‘...trust me; this line of work doesn’t suit you’

Walter White has worked all his life, yet on his 50th birthday he cannot afford basic maintenance in his house, his wife takes him to task for putting $15.88 on a credit card they do not use and he is humiliated by his socially demeaning position at the car-wash. His perception of his social status colours many of his decisions regarding his subsequent forays into criminal behaviour. We are also given the sense that Walt has conformed to normative expectations all his life, for example, not eating junk food and not smoking—either cigarettes or joints (see episode two, ‘The cat’s in the bag,’ series 1). According to his brother-in-law, Walt is a ‘straight man’, who wouldn’t know a criminal if he was close enough to check you for a hernia’ (episode six, ‘Crazy handful of Nothin’, series 2) Yet, by the time of this comment, Walt has killed two men and has committed himself to producing 2lb (0.9 kg) of crystal meth per week for Tuco Salamanca, a local Mexican-American drug lord with connections to Juarez. Walt’s very conformity helps to ensure that he is immune from suspicion; the label of deviant is not attached to him because he does not fit standard behavioural codes that would classify him as such. This sense of
conformity is further reinforced by the dullness of his home, his staid clothing, his non-descript car and his beige moustache. In these ways, Walt challenges the populist notion that the deviant is somehow distinguishable from the ‘normal’ person, and his character reinforces the more complex sociological idea that conformity and deviancy are unstable, socially produced categories.

The suggestion that conformity and deviancy are not fixed categories is reinforced in episode seven, ‘A no-rough-stuff type of deal’ (series 1). Hank (DEA) and Walt discuss, while smoking illegal Cuban cigars, ‘How we draw that line’ between legality and illegality. The conversation ranges from the cigars, through prohibition to the period in time when crystal meth was sold in pharmacies across America. Walt argues that the definitions of legality and illegality are arbitrary, with Hank retorting that he hears the same arguments in ‘lock up’. In this exchange, Walt is symbolically aligned with counter-hegemonic discourses of crime and deviance, yet his position is much more complex than this alignment may suggest. Walt is attempting to negotiate a sense of self between the conventional and criminal world and, despite the fact that he is clearly invigorated by his criminal behaviour, his rationale for ‘becoming deviant’ is inextricably linked to his commitment to the norms and values of the ‘straight’ world as husband, father and provider. Moreover, Walt’s diagnosis of inoperable lung cancer facilitates his decision to become this other deviant self. His diagnosis situates him in the no-man’s-land between life and death, and the ontological insecurity that this status engenders grounds decisions that Walter White, chemistry teacher would not or perhaps could not contemplate.

**I am awake**

As a man in between, Walt is a liminal entity, defined by Victor Turner as entities that are ‘neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned by law, custom, convention and ceremonial. This liminality is frequently likened to death’ (1969, 2011:95). Liminality is associated also with transition and change, with *Breaking Bad* drawing on Walt’s liminal status to explore ideas about the relationship between conformity and deviancy and how we define and interpret the moral qualities and moral boundaries of our actions.

This sense of transformation and change is brought to the fore in the opening episodes when Walt is teaching his chemistry class. He argues, in the pilot episode, that chemistry is the study of change, of ‘solution, dissolution, transformation.’ Walt ‘breaks bad’ because he needs the money, but his journey into the badlands is also facilitated by the emotions he experiences when carrying out relatively minor acts of deviant behaviour; these include his use of violence to defend his son, the manner of his resignation from the car-wash and his act of revenge upon the driver of a sports car. These acts suggest a small man acting out or fighting back and they make Walt feel that he is actually living rather than merely existing. So, transgression for Walt becomes associated, both literally and metaphorically, with life rather than death, and his assertion, ‘I am awake’, represents the beginning of his transformation.

The idea of transformation is inextricably linked to the creation of another self. In the second episode, ‘The cat’s in the bag’ (series 1), Walt begins his chemistry lesson by talking about CHIRAL compounds, which are ‘identical but opposite’; they ‘look the same but don’t behave the same.’ The idea of the double is of course a classic theme in popular culture, but *Breaking Bad*’s account of doubling moves beyond a simple dichotomy of good and evil, black and white. Here, the idea of the double may also be viewed as a metaphor for the fluidity of the relationship between conformity and deviancy. Indeed, Walt’s two selves may look the same but they are opposites: on the one hand, straight family man, teacher and conformist, and, on the other, drug producer, liar and (reluctant), murderer. The ‘classificatory boundaries’ are troubled because it is difficult to see Walt as an ‘other’ monstrous self since the conformist and the deviant are ‘creatures of the same culture, inventions of the same imagination’, or two sides of the same coin (Erikson 1966: 21).

**Cancer man**

Walt ‘slips through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space’ (Turner 1969, 2011: 95), as is made apparent in the dialectic between the deviant personas he adopts: ‘cancer man’ and ‘Heisenberg’, his alias as the wizard of crystal methamphetamine production. One of the main tensions in the narrative is Walt’s increasingly desperate attempts to retain and maintain the boundaries of his normative self against the demands of his criminal career. Walt and Jesse’s actions in the criminal world lead to a chain of unintended consequences, the effects of which push against and infiltrate the boundaries of Walt’s ‘straight’ life.

Labelled as a terminally ill person, Walt enters into a landscape in which he is expected to conform to the ‘sick role.’ By refusing to respond to his diagnosis in a socially acceptable manner, Walt becomes a ‘doubly deviant’ cancer man. Walt’s stoicism in the face of death is unacceptable to his family and possibly unpatriotic. In *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World* (2010), Barbara Ehrenreich details the social pressures placed on patients to conform to the role of cancer patient. To conform, one must show the ‘correct’ outlook, most notably, an optimistic response to diagnosis and a positive, up-beat attitude, despite the fact that there is no scientific evidence to suggest that there is a causal connection between a positive outlook and survival rates (Ehrenreich 2010:42). Furthermore, notes Ehrenreich, patients should be willing to engage in a range of health strategies to assist in the ‘battle’ against the disease. In extremis, cancer is viewed as a gift, a positive experience, survivors are
heroes, and by implication, those who die are failures. Walt’s stoical response does not fit into this narrative and as such may be coded as un-American; his realism is coded as pessimism and ‘a kind of treason’ (Ehrenreich 2010:31) that goes against the grain of this medicalised version of can-do individualism.

Walt’s reluctance to play the ‘sick role’ is reinforced by his overall attitude toward the disease. He does not take the group therapy sessions seriously and adopts a sceptical attitude toward his wife’s search for alternative remedies, unless they serve as an alibi to cover for his criminal activities.

At the same time, however, there is also a sense in which Walt’s stoical response is a marker of his adherence to dominant norms and values. His attempt to downplay the effects of the cancer is linked to his desire to maintain a sense of himself as a productive individual. As Chris Shilling (2002:623) reminds us, the sick role is viewed as ‘dysfunctional’ because it disrupts social roles and productive capacity, so one has to adopt the sick role to be released from the expectation of productive labour. Walt’s inability to relinquish this role and be ill is linked to his desperate attempt to ameliorate the impact of his failure to provide for his family in legitimate ways. His response to the diagnosis and his drive to produce enough crystal meth to provide for his family conforms to the ‘cultural value placed on instrumental action’ (Shilling 2002: 623), a form of action, which is used, in part, to legitimate both criminal and conventional behaviour within the series as a whole.

I am not the same
Walt’s diagnosis is the catalyst for self-analysis, but his actual self-transformation is anchored in his experiences as Heisenberg, the ‘artist’ of crystal methamphetamine production. The development of a heightened sense of awareness is facilitated through Walt’s emotional responses to his acts of deviancy, and he comes to the realisation that, up until this ‘fateful moment’, he has been sleep-walking through his life.

These responses are also embedded in Walt’s sense of discontentment since he feels that his true worth has not been recognised. In the fifth episode, ‘Gray Matter’ (series 1), we learn that Walt was once a member of a cutting-edge group of scientists, but is excluded from their financial and material success. His prodigious talent is ‘wasted’ teaching chemistry in a high school, with this episode providing cues to Walt’s sublimated rage at his situation, most tellingly perhaps when he intimates that his colleagues stole his ideas, and by extension his true worth as an exceptional chemist. Walt reinforces his profound sense of alienation in ‘Gray Matter’ (1:5) when he explains his rationale for not undergoing treatment:

But what I want, what I want, what I need is a choice.
Sometimes I feel like I never actually ... make any of my own ... choices. ... I mean.
My entire life ... it just seems I never, you know, had a real say about any of it.

We may question what constitutes an ‘authentic’ life, but it is clear that Walt’s decision to produce crystal meth provides him with a sense of autonomy and control, which had previously been missing from his life.

Walt’s revitalised sense of self is reinforced later, in episode eight, ‘Better Call Saul’ (series 2) when Walt states, ‘There’s more than one kind of prison’, to Jesse’s befuddlement. Walt has come to see his existence as Walter White as a deadening experience, smothering his creativity beneath a veneer of conformity. Walt is experiencing what Katz (1988:8) terms a ‘genuine experiential creativity’, which allows him to use his knowledge of chemistry to produce innovative responses to the dilemmas that his criminal activity produces. His creativity has shaken him out of his lethargy and has led him to question the nature of his existence. This representation of his criminal behaviour as a form of awakening taps into a more complex understanding of criminality framed in terms of pleasure, emotion and risk. The fact that Walt is willing to become a drug producer and dealer, yet unwilling to accept financial assistance to pay for medical treatment from his former friends and colleagues, reinforces the extent to which Walt’s foray into crime is about more than the money. His techniques of neutralisation disguise a more complex set of motivations: he gains a certain pleasure from the fact that he has the knowledge to produce the best crystal meth on the market, but this brings its own problems since in the latter half of the second series he is unable to tell his family that he paid for his treatment. Indeed, his actions have made his family, in the event of his death, financially secure. In the end, however, Walt’s front stage persona (Goffman 1959, 1975), the self he presents to his family, continues to be the man who is at the mercy of others, and he succumbs to familial pressure and undergoes treatment. This moment of acquiescence and conformity is shadowed by Walt’s other self: to pay for the treatment, Walt must produce more crystal meth. This need draws him inexorably toward an alternative moral universe, a universe from which he naively hopes he can remain detached. This detachment is equivocal, and it involves another doubling, a dark mirroring, because success in both worlds is defined by instrumental action, supply and demand, profit and violence.

Seven thirty seven
The instrumental rationality that drives production, distribution and profit under capitalism is mirrored in the production and distribution of drugs. After the initial drug deal goes wrong, Walt expresses concern about their ‘non sustainable business model’ and declares, ‘This is unacceptable; I am breaking the law here. This return is too little for the risk’ (1:6). The solution for achieving a sufficient return is obvious to both Walt and the audience: ‘We have to move our product in bulk, wholesale. Now, how do we do
that? The attempt to increase profit is also matched by a concern with levels of ‘market penetration’ and in episode seven, ‘Negro y Azui’ (series 2), Walt persuades Jesse to expand their operation into untapped areas of Albuquerque.

The language he uses mirrors many of the clichés of enterprise capitalism: ‘Now, this is our territory, right? Currently. Now, look at this. Here, here, here and here. What does that look like to you? Opportunities, golden ones; that’s what it looks like’. Instrumental reason is deployed against the boundary crossings and dangers necessitated by greater interaction with the professional inhabitants of the drug world.

Walt’s asphyxiation of Emilio (Pilot) and the eventual murder of Krazy8 (1:3), both of whom are professional drug dealers, are necessary because it is a, ‘them or us’ situation. The attempt to kill Tuco Salamanca is also understood within this framework of self-preservation and shows that the logic of the drug business engenders violent and morally ambiguous behaviour, behaviour that is rooted in and emerges out of the same logic that drives capitalism. As Pat O’Malley argues, ‘risk-taking crime can appear not as an affront to the very image of the responsible subject, nor even as a form of resistance to dominant morality, but more frequently a mirror image – a subterranean expression of mainstream values’ (2010: 54). This subterranean expression of mainstream values is mapped out through Walt’s relationship with Gus Fring. Saul, described by Jesse as a ‘criminal lawyer,’ puts Walt in touch with Fring, an ‘honest-to-God businessman’. Somebody who treats your product like the simple-high-margin commodity that it is’. While this ostensibly straight businessman, the owner of Hermanos Pollos, a fast food chain, is reluctant to deal with Walt, largely because of Jesse’s own drug use, he agrees to a deal because of the potential for a large margin of profit on the ‘purest… most chemically sound product on the market anywhere’. This deal leaves Jesse and Walt with a haul of $960,000 dollars and it is loaded with personal and moral consequences for both of them.

‘We don’t got the street cred to survive it’

Willem De Haan and Ian Loader argue that ‘We need to insist that perpetrators of crime are moral subjects striving reflexively to give meaning to their actions before, during and after a crime’ (2002: 245). The narrative of Breaking Bad turns on moments of crisis in which Walt and Jesse have to negotiate their actions in the spaces between the alternate moral universes they occupy. These moments of crisis evolve out of their status as novitiates in the world of serious drug production; they stumble into scenarios where the solutions to their crises are dependent upon an alternate set of rules to those that govern their everyday lives. These rules are dependent upon the will and when necessary the capacity to do violence. Herein lies the problem for
both characters: neither Jesse nor Walt have, at this stage in their criminal careers, the moral will nor the physical and symbolic resources to do violence effectively.

After the deaths of Emilio and Krazy8, Walt tries to distance himself from violence, telling Jesse, ‘No matter what happens, no more bloodshed’. This statement is interspersed with a scene of carnage and devastation which is the opening salvo of Jesse and Walt’s interaction with Tuco Salamanca. This montage of images provides viewers with the foreknowledge of the functional impossibility of Walt’s desire for no more bloodshed, and an anticipation of the violence to come. The series suggests that ‘violence can tame violence’, echoing Richard Sparks’ 1992 analysis of the use of violence in television crime drama. As Sparks (1992:52) argues, such a suggestion leads one towards the ‘necessity of the imposition of force,’ thereby affirming the status quo. However, this depiction of violence may be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, we can see, following Sparks (1992), that the series may legitimate the ideology of order over law through the ‘poetic justice’ meted out to certain characters (Tuco, Spooge and Tortuga). On the other hand, however, if we understand that the ‘violence of things’ is ‘due to class and the kinds of conflicts it engenders’ (Thompson 1993:136), Breaking Bad can be understood as articulating the wider logic of the system as it negotiates a relationship between the legitimate social order and its ‘other’. The moral and emotional register of each moment of violence differs, however, and this process of differentiation means that the deaths in the series have different values and levels of worth attached to them. Alongside the characterisation of Walt and Jesse as reflexive moral subjects responding in a haphazard and often darkly comic fashion to the unintended consequences of their actions, there is another discourse where we are confronted by the crimes of psychopaths, monsters and low-life ‘skanks’. It is in the representation of these characters that we are led, in part, toward an orthodox understanding of violence, deviance and criminality. This understanding is reinforced by Walt and Jesse’s desire to see Tuco dead and in their attitude toward the consumers who buy their product, exemplified by Jesse in the episode ‘Peekaboo’ (2:6) where he is clearly disgusted by the way in which two junkies treat their child.

Roaches and beans

Perhaps the most obvious indication of this orthodox understanding is in the representation and death of Tuco Salamanca. In ‘Crazy handful of Nothin’’ (1:6), Tuco beats a man to death in front of Walt and Jesse because of a perceived slight. To them, this action is irrational, an expression of rage that is unbound-ed. Jesse describes Tuco as an ‘insane ass-clown … dead eyed killer’ and a ‘psychotic piece of shit’ (2:1). Tuco’s violence is vicious, so there is ‘virtue’ in his death, a death which is framed within the narrative as a form of poetic justice. Viewers are not provided with any other frame of reference to understand Tuco, and he becomes the symbol of and cipher through which we are introduced to the psychotic and ‘animalistic’ workings of the cartels operating on the border-line between Mexico and the United States. In the episodes ‘Breakage’ (2:5) and ‘Negro Y Azui’ (2:7), Hank, as the authoritative voice on law and order, provides the audience with two classic metaphors about crime as ‘other’ and therefore outside the parameters of normal, civilised behaviour. In ‘Breakage’, (2:5), Walt, who is by now an established dealer and reluctant murderer, asks Hank his opinion on criminals: ‘What do you think it is that makes them who they are?’ Hank’s response, ‘Buddy, you might as well be asking about the roaches. All I know is there’s a whole world of them out there’, reiterates an established metaphor of crime as aberrant infestation rather than a product of the social order itself. In ‘Negro Y Azui’ (2:7), Hank is at the centre of a drug meet in Juarez that goes bad, and involves, tellingly, the use of an Improvised Explosive Device, decapitation, tortoises and loss of life and limb. It is a surreal, grisly act of violence, which is discussed by Hank and Walt in ‘Better Call Saul’ (2:8). Walt suggests that the experience was ‘terrible’, to which Hank replies: ‘What do you expect? Bunch of freaking animals. It’s like Apocalypse Now down there. It’s like Colonel Kurtz holed up in the jungle’.

Both of Hank’s statements serve to define the Mexican-American drug dealers as the irrational, inferior, criminal ‘other’; the hell of ‘down-there’ speaks to the dangerous limi-
nality of deviant behaviour, the failure of the ‘war on drugs’ and, ultimately, the failure of containment. The porous US-Mexico border is unable to contain a criminality which is portrayed as more violent, more savage and pathological than its American counterpart. It is a contagion which seeps through the fissures, challenging both the geographical and moral boundaries of the United States. This is evidenced in Hank, Walt and Jesse’s reaction to the violence perpetrated by the Mexican-American drug dealers, which is constituted as different and untameable. This reiteration of racial and criminal tropes is undermined, however, by the narrative contexts in which Hank’s statements are uttered. Hank’s authority to define crime and criminality is weakened by his failure to recognise his brother-in-law as a criminal. Despite this challenge to Hank’s authoritative voice, it remains the case that Walt’s and, to a lesser extent, Jesse’s violence is framed within alternate moral boundaries to those of Tuco and his associates, although all are playing variations on a theme. As the episode, ‘Negro y Azul’ (2:7) suggests, Walt and Jesse have yet to understand the full score.

In contradistinction to the Mexican-American drug dealers, Walt and Jesse’s moments of crisis are contained, in the text, within a complex narrative framework. We see them as fully rounded human beings responding to the context and consequences of their actions. Walt’s sorrow works to ameliorate his violence, for instance, when he cries and apologises while killing Krazy8. When it comes to the death of the junky, Spooge in ‘Peekaboo’ (2:6), Jesse reveals his fundamental reluctance and ineptitude for the blood work associated with the drug trade. His short-lived reputation as a killer is based upon a nasty death that has nothing to do with him. Viewers are subject to a process of interpelation that ensures that we identify as far as possible with Walt and Jesse. This attempt to maintain an idea of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is undermined, however, by the way in which the actions of Walt and Jesse cannot in and of themselves be confined to this type of binary opposition. This blurring of the lines between an ‘us’ and ‘them’ is demonstrated most clearly in the closing episodes of season two. We have watched Walt and Jesse hook up with a criminal lawyer and an ostensibly ‘straight’ distributor, we have watched their ‘foot soldiers’ sell drugs to every social class on the streets of Albuquerque, but it is in the fate of Jesse’s junky girlfriend, Jane, that Walt’s actions challenge the attempts to maintain a boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Walt’s failure to act in the episode ‘Phoenix’ (2:12), leads indirectly to the deaths of many innocent civilians (‘ABQ’ 2:13). Jane’s death in the episode ‘Phoenix’ (2:12) is due, in part, to Walt’s decision not to intervene: he allows her to choke to death on her own vomit, thereby neutralising her threat of blackmail and preserving his partnership with Jesse. As she begins to choke, he utters ‘No, No, No’, but allows her to die. A line is crossed, and viewers see the consequences of Jane’s death as her grief-stricken father is distracted from his job as an air traffic controller and causes a mid-air collision that drops plane debris on Albuquerque. Walt is not aware that his actions have led to the passengers’ deaths but in some senses the outcome is the same: we see the widening scope of what he is prepared to do, an expansion of his moral universe to encompass acts that cannot be so easily neutralised by some attempt at ‘us’ and ‘them’ or by staking out the moral high ground in his rejoinder to Skyler, ‘Do you know what I’ve done for this family?’ (‘Down’ 2:4).

**Oh God! All the lies**

The outcome of his failure to intervene and save Jane signals to the audience that Walt is in the process of becoming someone different. It is here that we see the working through of the logic of a liminal persona, a persona which sheds the attributes of the past as it moves toward a new but not yet formed state (Turner 2011:94). In this process, Walt finds it increasingly difficult to maintain the boundary between his two lives. The failure to maintain classificatory boundaries is regarded as ‘polluting and dangerous’ (Douglas in Turner 2011:109), and so it proves to be. The defence and maintenance of the boundary between Walt’s personas rests on the capacity to lie successfully, but this mode of defence proves fragile and unstable. The weight of the lies told and retold through the series proves to be a polluting force, the taint of which corrodes what Walt wishes to preserve: his family. From the outset, his wife Skyler is alert to the nuances of Walt’s behaviour and unbeknown to him she is aware, at an early stage in the narrative, that he is lying, but does not know what he is lying about. There are a number of occasions in *Breaking Bad* when Walt is called, in passing, to account for his behaviour. He explains his actions in relation to the effects of his treatment for cancer, an explanation accepted by his family. However, as the inconsistencies in his behaviour mount, Walt is confronted by Skyler and painful conversations full of lies and denials ensue. The scene in the episode ‘Down’ (2:4) is perhaps one of the most difficult to watch because Walt continues to lie under sustained pressure from his wife to tell the truth, to which Walt finally retorts, ‘Tell you what?’

One may argue that the act of lying is given greater symbolic weight here than murder and violence because the lies are the catalyst for the break-up of Walt’s family. Skyler cannot conceive of the actions behind the lies, so the lies themselves become the polluting force. At this stage in the narrative, Skyler generally exhibits a populist sensibility that suggests that the line between legitimate and illegitimate behaviour is unequivocal, rather than contextually and circumstantially defined. Her response to Walt’s lies is to maintain the boundaries of her symbolic and moral universe by leaving the family home, which, for her, has been contaminated by his deceitful behaviour. The fact that Walt seems
to lose what he is trying to preserve works to reorder the moral frame of the acts carried out by the characters; the lies resonate because the audience can relate to lying and being lied to, the scenes of lying and deceit are, despite their quantity here, mimetic. The viewers’ discomfort may also be linked to this fact. This discomfort reinforces another important feature of the narrative of *Breaking Bad*, in that it attempts to ‘undercut viewer affect’ by eschewing ‘satisfying, emotionally charged conclusions’ (Klein 2009:179).

In the first two seasons, in the episode ‘4 Days Out’ (2:9), where we see Walt break down and really question his actions up to this point. He and Jesse are trapped in the desert after the battery of their Winnebago fails, and, after numerous attempts to rectify the situation, Walt states, ‘I have this coming, I have it coming, I deserve this.’ Jesse responds by saying, ‘everything you did, you did it for your family. Right?’ Walt responds by stating ‘All I ever managed to do ... was worry and disappoint them ... and lie. Oh God all the lies, I can’t even, I can’t even keep them straight in my head anymore’. Jesse challenges Walt on his ‘loser cry baby crap’ and their dire situation is resolved by Walt’s knowledge of chemistry, his construction of an improvised battery allowing them to escape certain death.

This solution allows Walt to bolster the narrative that underlies his actions as Heisenberg. At key moments in the series, Walt’s knowledge of chemistry gets both characters out of deadly spots, reinforcing the gap between Walt’s position as a high school teacher and his actual capacity and skill as a gifted chemist. His criminal activity allows for some form of recognition of his true talents and this recognition allows him to frame his actions in a manner that appears as deserving and righteous, at least to him. This emergent self challenges earlier incarnations of him as an acquiescent and weak person. It is in the gap between the instrumental and experiential that Walt’s character challenges the viewer’s empathy. In spite of his disclaimers about his family there is, to some degree, the sense that his criminal activities are, in reality about him. This suggestion of selfish, rather than self-less, acts works to counter-balance the claims of familial bonds made throughout the series and ensures that the moral complexities of the narrative are expanded and developed as Walt’s transgressive journey continues. A measure of his commitment to this journey is found in his response to the news in the episode ‘4 Days Out’ (2:9) that his tumour has shrunk by 80% and there are signs of remission. Walt responds with disappointment and anger, also asking, ‘Why me?’ (2:10). Walt’s life has been planned around his death and because he thought he was going to die, his actions were redeemable in his eyes. This unexpected diagnosis raises questions about the nature of his being in the world. The fact that he may survive rewrites his story and invalidates some of the neutralising techniques he has heretofore used to legitimate his criminal activity. A ‘tragic’ tale of a gifted teacher forced into criminality to pay for his unsuccessful cancer treatment elicits a different response to a tale of a seemingly improbable but committed criminal.

In this moral tale, disorder and disequilibrium are markers of the complexity of the social world and it would be difficult to imagine a resolution to *Breaking Bad* that successfully establishes the restoration of order, aside from the nods to the punitive forms of justice found within the narrative (Sparks, 1992). Viewers have to come to their own conclusions about the nature and the character of the behaviour shown to them, and, in so doing, we remain in the territory of the subversion of affect: where moral certainty is not offered as a ‘viable solution to the otherwise complex realities of contemporary social problems’ (Klein 2009:179). In the playing out of this narrative, the relationship between conformity and transgression is framed as complex and nuanced. In this way, *Breaking Bad* shows us that the line between crime and convention is not as neatly drawn as we are encouraged to believe.

**Breaking Bad’s disavowal of a sentimental journey is linked to the fact that Walt White does not come across to the viewer as a particularly likeable character.**
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S
teven Belletto’s No Accident, Comrade is a fascinating critical study of American Cold War fiction embracing a veritably imposing range of literary texts and secondary material. There are, naturally, imperfections. Sometimes the reduction of text to context seems perfunctory (e.g. ‘another reason for Shade’s [the Nabokov character’s] probing the finality of death could be the acute cultural fear of global destruction made possible by the atomic bomb’ – p. 71). Occasionally, the components of the argument are fitted together awkwardly. For example, the notion that the authorial imposition of structure on a literary text is not only potentially ‘totalitarian’ but also violent is not so smoothly integrated in the Thomas Pynchon chapter. But the first difficulty is to be expected in a study of such breadth, while the second is understandable given the intricacy of some of the conceptual connections attempted.

There is also the study’s originality unanimously trumpeted in the back-cover blurbs. Actually, this is somewhat exaggerated. For instance, ideas about the inhumanity of the scientific outlook or political paranoia are familiar to readers of the period’s fiction. Even the touted ‘chance and design’ theme is not exactly new. Belletto writes in an endnote: ‘No critic, to my knowledge, has written an extended analysis of V. that focuses on chance as such, although nearly all critics register the importance or presence of chance and accident in Pynchon’s work’ (p. 164). This may be true, but what is ‘chance as such’? No Pynchonian has failed to write something about conspiracy. And what is conspiracy if not another name for the problematic of chance and design? Still, even such established themes are invested here with an air of freshness.

For the source of this refreshing breeze one should look to the (unstable) opposition between ‘absolute’ (i.e. ‘real world’) and ‘narrative’ chance. Here, I believe, is the single most important idea in the book and one that is also (in its political extensions) genuinely original. It is this concept that allows Belletto to unlock the primary ‘chance vs design’ contradiction, for, as he astutely indicates, there is a tendency for narrative chance to disguise itself as ‘absolute.’ What is particularly interesting, then, is not the reflection or refraction of Cold War ‘realities’ in this text or that, but the politically motivated exploration by some authors of ‘that odd space – somewhere between what we know to be fiction and what we are certain is real – that characterized so much literature trying to grapple with the strange realities of the Cold War’ (p. 145). Here (and in the ‘game theory’ chapter which could, however, use a synoptic exposition of that theory’s basic principles), the author is pushing into uncharted territory. Strange-ly, this angle is not held onto, in the course of the book, as steadfastly as one would wish and expect.

A study about anti-communism is also (or should be), to however limited an extent, a study about communism. This is the one point where Belletto truly disappoints. Two ‘snapshots’ (as he admits on page 16) from Engels and Bukharin will simply not do to convince us that Marxism was always on the side of ‘design’ and determinism, period. It could be easily argued that, early on, communism was itself entangled in the throes of the chance/design paradox. Lukács and, more recently, Žižek have written eloquently about Leninist revolution as a transcendence of the ‘laws of history’ logic. Belletto is missing here a vital link that could have enriched his analysis considerably. In any case, there is something unappetising about the nonchalance with which he lets his sources stick their little pins into their clay effigy of communism. Indeed although, as the study progresses, America (nominally posited on the side of ‘chance’ and freedom) comes to resemble the USSR more and more, the latter is never allowed to resemble anything but ‘itself.’ Such reification of the enemy was of course a trademark of professional (anti)Sovietology. Unfortunately, in this respect, Belletto reproduces its logic rather than challenging it. This also begs a question pertaining to the whole field of Cold War cultural studies. If communism was indeed that utter monster, impervious to reason, negotiation or change, then those American ‘excesses’, usually criticised by liberal scholars like Belletto, were, perhaps, not excesses at all but necessary sacrifices. The destruction of thousands of lives, reputations and careers might
What they have in common, argues Lyn Hejinian are the authors studied. William Burroughs, Kathy Acker and Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, William Burroughs, Kathy Acker respectively, are divided into five chapters, each focusing on the work of an author. The chapters are similarly structured. Each section of literary analysis is preceded by one of political analysis. This is an efficient way of providing context. Since about half the book concerns the 1960s, that means a lot of 60s history. From the space race to Black Power and from Chicago 68 to the attempted levitation and exorcism of the Pentagon (the eventual failure of which attempt, spoiling any possible suspense, I reveal) this history makes for fascinating reading whether one is familiar with it or not. The book has things to offer even if one is not a student of literature.

The author’s argument is mainly with the type of Marxist analysis that sees the promise of the 60s as illusory, their utopian moment as the starting point in an uncontrollable slide towards apolitical commercialization. On the contrary, Houen argues, what the “potentialism” of the authors studied manifests is a turn towards another sort of politics, a turn from the total to the local. This is not a new argument but is handled with skill. How do the writers in question seek to liberate potential? Houen is good at highlighting the operating principles employed by the respective authors and those turn out to be fairly similar. For whether one talks of looping in Ginsberg, a circular economy in Baraka, cut-up and plagiarism in Burroughs and Acker respectively or a celebration of gaps in language poetry, the underlying idea is comparable. The author intervenes more than he or she ‘creates’ and the intervention comes in the form of a snag, a breach, a glitch in the matrix. Recasting this familiar, postmodern aesthetic via potentialism is another of the study’s merits.

For a concept that proposes to supplant the avant-garde and even postmodernism as an analytical tool, however, potentialism is somewhat “undertheorised”. Not that there are not enough references to the usual antiauthoritarian authorities, the concept is simply not explained enough. As a result one is left wondering whether in some instances potentialism links the case-studies in a sense more meaningful than the studied authors’ use of the term “potential” or “possibility” at this place or another in their work allows. There is finally the question of the political influence all this literary work might have. What Houen does here with “affect” and “performativity” seems to me rather ingenious. But can we really know what influence, say, Burroughs’s work had on audiences of his day? Can literary affect, despite its social-scientific dream of concrete impact, be measured retrospectively, if at all? This seems arguable. In all, Houen’s book is not to be passed by light-heartedly by those interested in post-war American literature.


Did the (American) 1960s represent a liberation of the imagination or an imaginary liberation? How useful (politically speaking) might liberating the imagination be in the first place? Can literary texts change the world or at least help in that direction and how? These are some of the questions addressed by Alex Houen’s Powers of Possibility, a work of substantial scholarship, breadth and erudition. The study is divided into five chapters, each focusing on the work of an author. Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, William Burroughs, Kathy Acker and Lyn Hejinian are the authors studied. What they have in common, argues Houen, is that they engage in “potentialism” (Houen’s coinage), a “literary practice” which “builds a world of possibility that can act as an affective force to combat the effects of social and political power on individuals’ capacities for thinking and feeling.” (16)

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In 1819, writing about recent emigrants to the United States, John Quincy Adams admonishes them “to cast off their European skin, never to resume it. They must look forward to their posterity rather than backwards to their ancestors.” A staunch supporter of republican values, Adams – like many others before and after him – promotes the view of the United States as a revolutionary country that must reject the corrupting influence of its European forebears in order to fulfill its democratic promise. Yet, paradoxically, the encouragement to break off old family ties is accompanied by a reference to the continuity of generations, and the attendant duty
Her book alerts us to “the peculiar sensitivity to nuances and ambiguities. more compelling because of its sensitivity to nuances and ambiguities. Jackson invites the reader to consider alternative interpretations. Jackson invites the reader to consider alternative interpretations.

Jackson’s declared aim is to “sensitize readers to an antifamilial impulse in American literature” (22); her study thus taps into a rich vein of scholarship, going back to Leslie Fiedler’s canonical thesis about the American novel’s suspicion of marriage plots, and its privileging of homosocial and interracial relationships played out in a masculine sphere, away from the ‘sivilizing’ and domesticating influence of women. Still, American Blood does not merely revisit well-trodden ground; rather, it offers a fresh take on a range of carefully selected, and interestingly diverse, primary sources – all expertly contextualized, often through a generous history of reception against which Jackson invites the reader to consider alternative interpretations.

Jackson’s own argument is all the more compelling because of its sensitivity to nuances and ambiguities. Her book alerts us to “the peculiar American doubletalk that denounces some blood distinctions and cherishes others” (14). In this respect, it is reminiscent of – and, indeed it makes occasional reference to – Carol Singley’s 2011 study of the adoption trope, whose appeal to the American imagination is also fundamentally mired in contradictions.

The chapters in American Blood, however, are not mere variations on the same theme – the fraught American investment in, or disavowal of, the rhetoric of kinship. While their chronological order shows the development of debates about different models of family structures, each chapter focuses on specific aspects of the conceptualization of kinship, ranging from inheritance law to voluntary childlessness and celibacy, and from the idea of “imaginative literature as a non-familial vehicle for cultural transmission” (130) to interracial relationships, both conjugal and parental/filial.

This latter cluster of themes exemplifies most clearly the other main thread that – perhaps inevitably – underpins this study: the link between genealogical paradigms, with their insistence on blood ties, and the configuration of racial difference. “Race” and, in this particular context, the cognate idea of “nation” are concepts that – in the historical period under scrutiny – inform key American debates and policies: the abolition of slavery, the Reconstruction narrative of national solidarity between North and South, and the turn-of-the-century apprehensions about “race suicide” (the much feared outnumbering of white Americans by racial minorities).

Weaving her way through these complex themes with confidence and flair, Jackson invites us to reconsider our own investment in the rhetoric of blood relations, as well as the effects of the elasticity of redefinitions of the family beyond consanguinity and conjugality, to encompass friendship, political affinity, and civic solidarity. Her study makes for a fascinating and thought-provoking read.

New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011

Reviewed by Krystina Osborne, a PhD student at Liverpool John Moores University working on engagements with female autoeroticism in contemporary women’s writing.

The Art of Cruelty demonstrates Maggie Nelson’s persistent refusal to confine her writing to one genre; her previous publications include the autobiographical The Red Parts: A Memoir (2007) and 2009’s critically acclaimed experimental lyric essay Bluets, in addition to several books of poetry. Published in 2011, The Art of Cruelty represents an intriguing hybrid of art, literary and cultural criticism, as Nelson guides the reader through a whistle-stop tour of instances of ‘cruelty’ in culture, drawing real and fictional examples from an extensive range of sources, from performance art to reality television. Like The Red Parts, The Art of Cruelty opens with a quotation from Friedrich Nietzsche: ‘One should open one’s eyes and take a new look at cruelty’ (3). Indeed, Nelson uses her text to encourage the reader to reconsider cultural constructions of violence, arguing against moralistic calls for censorship whilst simultaneously decrying artists who strive, under the protective umbrella of the avant-garde, to shock for the sake of being shocking. Nelson, by her
The text is notable for its breadth of examples. Nelson deliberates on the worth of cultural cruelty through the work of proponents as diverse as the Marquis de Sade, Otto Dix and Diane Arbus, to name but a few of her many, many brief case studies. It is a testament to Nelson’s skills as a writer and as a critic that her study manages to encompass such a wide range of texts from high and popular culture without its tone feeling too rushed or its analysis too superficial. On the other hand, there were occasions when I would have appreciated further elaboration, a fleeting mention of female subjectivity Pauline Réage’s Story of O (183) being one such example. At such times, I was inspired to carry out my own research, thus formulating my own personal response to the material; perhaps this was Nelson’s intention. However, whenever Nelson does allow herself the space to ruminate on a specific text at length, it only adds to her argument’s effectiveness, and I particularly enjoyed the extended discussion devoted to the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Nelson wrote her undergraduate thesis on Plath’s confessional writing and this long-held respect is evident through the numerous references to Plath that pervade the text. As I share her enthusiasm for Plath’s work, I found these sections especially illuminating. Similarly, as my own research has a feminist theoretical perspective, I found the chapters entitled ‘Everything is Nice’ and ‘A Situation of Meat’ to be the strongest, as they focus on critiquing gendered interpretations of violence and the ‘spectacle of meat’ (183) in pornography respectively. Nelson’s occasionally acerbic tone is generally directed at artists whom she considers to be misogynistic, with the films of Lars von Trier dismissed for displaying ‘chaudivist malevolence’ (196). For Nelson, male authors and artists who exercise their power over women ‘for sport’ (195) are beneath contempt.

I did not agree with all of Nelson’s opinions; considering the book’s abundance of examples, this is only to be expected. Whilst her attempt to incorporate as many sources as possible is admirable, her habit of simply listing further relevant examples becomes slightly frustrating. For example, David Mamet and Philip Roth are allied to von Trier without any critical analysis whatsoever (196); perhaps by this advanced point in the book, Nelson was (not unreasonably) confident that the reader would be on side. Faced with such an unrelenting barrage of brutality, it is possible to imagine the reader to be mentally exhausted upon finishing The Art of Cruelty. For me at least, this was not so. As a writer Nelson never fails to be engaging and stimulating, and I read the book in only a couple of sittings, despite the often difficult subject matter. In The Art of Cruelty, Nelson blends the academic and the accessible, ensuring that the book is compelling regardless of whether or not the reader is familiar with each of her examples. I eagerly await Nelson’s next project, The Argonauts, which promises to be equally as fascinating.


Reviewed by Dr Teodora Domotor, University of Surrey

This brilliantly written and well-constructed book sets out to examine the works of immigrant writers in the contemporary United States, their great contributions to shaping American fiction and the meanings of Americanness, for example, the ‘All American’ citizen. The introductory section of Trailing Clouds provides the reader with the focal point of the author’s investigation in a clear, direct manner, with Cowart highlighting how American national identity is constructed in relation to foreign yet assimilatable identities, and the first American writers were themselves European immigrants. The portrayal of America in early literature was often based on how European settlers saw the New World, which helped to shape the country’s image, values and future development. Cowart’s study concentrates on the contemporary immigrant imagination as witness to postmodern America in works by Bharati Mukherjee, Ursula Hegi, Jerzy Kosinski, Jamaica Kincaid, Cristina Garcia, Edwidge Danticat, Wendy Law-Yone, Mylène Dressler, Lan Cao, Chang-rae Lee, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Nora Okja Keller.

The book is divided into ten chapters focusing on interlinking themes such as the formal and temporal elements of storytelling by émigrés, their physical and mental struggles to succeed in the new country, the emergence of an exilic self, the cultural shifts that enable immigrant writers to narrate the old country, rather than providing idealized stories of their American experiences, and the portrayal of the immigrant as adolescent.

One of the most interesting analyses in Trailing Clouds appears in the chapter about Jamaica Kincaid’s novella, Lucy. Cowart argues that the disorientation and displacement
the immigrant experiences resembles that of the teenager trying to find his or her way in the adult world, and an alien on an unfamiliar yet keenly observed planet. Kincaid's West Indian protagonist, young Lucy, is subjected to this 'alien' experience and, as Cowart rightly points out, she sees continuity between the British and American empires and their patronising behaviours and attitudes towards colonised subjects. Moreover, anger, irritation, and a desire to escape from home, family and politics characterise adolescence, which is how Cowart also understands Lucy's experiences as a migrant in America.

Trailing Clouds represents an original critical guide which also provides comprehensive, careful readings. The book succeeds in demonstrating the victimisation of immigrants in America, as well as their appreciation of their new home once they have managed to assimilate more into society.


Reviewed by Mark Rathbone FHA, teacher of History and Politics at Canford School, Wimborne, Dorset, and Head of Academic Administration.

Not to be confused with The Fog of War, the 2005 study of Robert McNamara's career by James Blight and Janet Lang, Fog of War is a reconsideration of the influence of the Second World War on the Civil Rights Movement. It begins with a concise summary of the historiographical background by the editors, Kevin Kruse from Princeton University and Oxford’s Lecturer in American History, Stephen Tuck. The eleven essays which follow consider the relationship between the war and the Civil Rights Movement from a variety of perspectives.

So, to take only a few examples: Mills Thornton points out that the pattern of segregation varied considerably between one city and another in Alabama; Julian Zelizer outlines the building of a liberal coalition in Congress in the 1940s; Jane Dailey examines the sexual politics of race; Elizabeth Borgwardt looks at the relationship between international human rights rhetoric and domestic civil rights organisations at the 1945 San Francisco conference which drew up the UN Charter; Kimberley Phillips shows how segregation of the US armed forces did not end with Truman’s Executive Order 9981 in 1948, but all-African American units, often with inferior supplies of weapons, ammunition and even food, fought in the Korean War.

One of the pleasures of reading this book is the richness of the details and anecdotes which the authors employ to illustrate their arguments. Senator Hubert Humphrey, newly elected in 1948, caused a furore in the Senate dining room by insisting that he eat with an African American aide, despite being told by a waiter (himself African American) that service was only for whites. So literally did white southerners take their antipathy to the intermingling of races that there were ‘Jim Crow blood banks’ with donations being carefully labelled with the donor’s race for fear that African American blood might end up flowing through white arteries. The 1942-43 Governor of South Carolina, Richard Jeffries, apparently seriously, ordered police to search for evidence that the First Lady was organising ‘Eleanor Clubs’ to recruit African Americans to take part in a Communist revolution in the state.

As a survey of the state of historical research into the relationship between the Second World War and the development of the Civil Rights Movement, this is an admirable book. If ultimately it poses more questions than answers, that is merely a reflection of the ongoing nature of this historical controversy. Overall Fog of War is an excellent book, which anyone interested in the history of the Civil Rights Movement would do well to read.


Reviewed by Mark Rathbone FHA, teacher of History and Politics at Canford School, Wimborne, Dorset, and Head of Academic Administration.

Larry Sabato is well known to students of US politics as the director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia, and author of the weekly e-mail newsletter,
Sabato’s Crystal Ball. In The Kennedy Half Century, published to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of President Kennedy’s assassination, Sabato shows himself to be no mean historian.

The Kennedy Half Century is three books in one: a clear, concise account of JFK’s election and presidency; a minute examination of the tragic events in Dallas on 22nd November 1963; and an assessment of the continuing influence of Jack Kennedy on American politics over the last fifty years. Associated with the book is the excellent website, TheKennedyHalfCentury.com, as well as an online study course.

Professor Sabato carefully sifts through the Dallas evidence, grassy knoll, picket fence, ‘Badge Man’, Zapruder film and all. While giving several of the more bizarre conspiracy theories a fair hearing, he retains a healthy scepticism about them all and offers a new revelation about the ‘dictabelt’ recordings of police messages on the day. Sabato successfully avoids the prurient sensationalism of so many accounts.

The analysis of JFK’s posthumous reputation and of the Kennedys’ influence on subsequent politicians also makes fascinating reading. Some, like Gary Hart, consciously modeled themselves on Kennedy, while others made good use of any JFK connection they could plausibly deploy. When Dan Quayle unwisely compared himself to Kennedy in the vice presidential debate in 1988, he was put firmly in his place by Lloyd Bentsen’s classic rebuke: “Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy, I knew Jack Kennedy, Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you are no Jack Kennedy.”

The famous photo of a 17-year-old Bill Clinton shaking hands with JFK in the White House garden in 1963 was heavily featured in his presidential campaign three decades later, and Barack Obama’s endorsement by JFK’s brother Ted and daughter Caroline helped him secure the Democratic nomination in 2008. Less obviously, Sabato also looks at Kennedy’s influence on Ronald Reagan, which was surprisingly strong, and reveals that George W Bush’s first choice of film to be shown in the White House cinema during his presidency was the Cuban missile crisis movie, Thirteen Days.

More books have probably been written about JFK than the number of days he had in the White House, but if you only read one Kennedy book, you would do well to make it The Kennedy Half Century.


Reviewed by Lee Ruddin, Roundup Editor, History News Network

The disclosures by fugitive National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden have gripped all, including those hitherto uninterested in spies and surveillance. But versed and unversed readers would do well to look beyond In Spies We Trust when searching for a gripping history of the Anglo-American intelligence relationship. I say this, less so because of the misleading subtitle, which purports to tell The Story of Western Intelligence, but because the professor’s prose and publisher’s printing leave a lot to be desired.

This will surprise many since the combination of Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, author of The CIA and American Democracy (1989) and The FBI: A History (2007), and Oxford University Press would appear, on paper at least, to be a most desirable partnership. And yet, it is on paper that both fail to impress in (un)equal measure: the former for his dry hand and for failing to whet the appetite; the latter for their poor proof-reading and for failing to correct a litany of errors. Talk of ‘Robert’ Walsingham as Queen Elizabeth I’s spymaster (when it was Sir Francis who played a prominent role in the organisation of British intelligence in the sixteenth century) and President Lyndon Johnson riding ‘rough shot over the policy preferences of the [Harold] Macmillan’ Government (despite him resigning when Johnson’s predecessor, John Kennedy, inhabited 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue) are, of course, forgivable. The same, alas, cannot be said for the omission of an examination relating to post-9/11 UK-US intelligence sharing.

Most, if not all, of the British and American intelligence failures of the past decade are well-known. What is less well-known, however (notwithstanding much open-source material), is the extent to which the aforementioned countries successfully cooperated in the pursuit of Osama bin Laden. Jeffreys-Jones is convinced that America has “pivoted to the Pacific” and therefore looks beyond Britain’s Atlanticist frame of reference towards possible alternatives for an intelligence relationship, namely with the United Nations and the European Union. Yet failure to highlight how effective this international liaison is does readers a disservice when they read what is an otherwise intelligent discussion spanning three of the final four chapters.

For those interested in the historical as opposed to the more contemporary, the preceding eight chapters will be of great interest. From the “hot” war of 1914-18 to the Cold War of c.1947-89, the author chronicles the ups and downs of transatlantic cooperation. It will surprise few to learn that the bulk of material


Reviewed by David Seed, Liverpool University

Americanizing Britain engages with the broad issue of how U.S. culture influenced Britain from the beginning of the twentieth century up to the Second World War. It is divided into clear sections, opening with a chapter on ‘Ameritopias,’ or a selection of works focusing on America as the embodiment of the future. The author then moves on to considerations of the impact of jazz and of Hollywood. For their breadth of reference and well-informed discussion, these are the two most successful chapters in the book and the ones which draw out the importance of writers like Elizabeth Bowen and - unusually for this context - Virginia Woolf. The final chapters examine the formation of English Studies through the largely hostile attitude of F.R. Leavis towards Americanization and the cultural dynamics of T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets. The latter is read as an attempt to reclaim ownership of an English past through a strategy which virtually excludes America.

On the positive side, the materials covered in this study are discussed in a consistently interesting and suggestive way. However, despite its title, this book presents a very selective series of case studies within a large complex dialogue which had been going on throughout the nineteenth century and which developed urgency as British imperialism and commercial confidence passed their peak. There are surprising absences in the discussion, for instance of W.T. Stead’s The Americanization of the World (1902), and of key writers like Henry James and D.H. Lawrence, who only receive very brief mention. More importantly, this book gives inadequate recognition of the extensive scholarship on the complex engagement with America by figures like Rudyard Kipling, H. G. Wells, or Aldous Huxley. Nevertheless, Genevieve Abravanel does give us many useful insights along the way and helpfully alerts us to the importance of figures like Virginia Woolf, who we might have expected to be hostile to Americanization.


Reviewed by Dr Antonia Mackay, Oxford Brookes University

Whilst teaching a module on American theatre to undergraduate students at London University, I was struck by the unflattering focus placed on early twentieth century theatre. Firmly rooting their beginnings in the works of Eugene O’Neill, most American theatre courses and criticism move from the Provincetown Players into the 1900s, and examine the emergence of this ‘new’ theatrical form. In contrast, Theresa Saxon’s text sets out to expand this focus by exploring a diversity of texts through detailed analysis of social and cultural issues, for example, racial, ethnic, gendered, national and individual identities. Saxon’s text also attempts to examine the limitations placed on Native American and African theatrical ‘facts’, and analyses debates about the performed versus printed word in order to
move beyond a distinctly European lineage in American theatrical history. In this way, Saxon’s text steers away from canonical theatre studies, questioning the reliance upon early twentieth-century dramatical forms and evaluations of ‘good’ and ‘unworthy’ plays. As Saxon writes, “part of my purpose... is to reintegrate analysis of the dramatic with the theatrical and to reinvigorate critical approaches to theatre as a performative literary production and a relevant and viable area of academic study” (3).

Indeed, Saxon seems intent on rebuking claims in recent years to the coming of age of the American theatre from O’Neill onwards, and cites studies from critics such as Bigsby and Wilmeth as contributing to the fallacy of a Eurocentric theatre lineage, which recasts recognised American theatre as ‘new’ or ‘discovered’. Instead, Saxon’s emphasis shifts to a consideration of the role played by ritual and spiritual performances prior to the so-called emergence of American theatre. Her chapters range from an examination of Native American drama and African forms of the ‘new’ world to a consideration of the influence of the imposed ‘behaviours’ of European colonies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, citing these influences as instrumental in the attempt to eradicate the existing artistic performances and theatre. Her analysis of nineteenth-century dramatic forms is particularly engaging, evaluating both institutionalised and mainstream productions in terms of ‘legitimate’ and ‘non-legitimate’ forms. Saxon goes on to consider how this hierarchy creates divisions between race, gender and class, and in particular her consideration of the increased prevalence of prostitution in urban areas, posits a theory where women played an integral part in theatre discourse and social proprietary. Her final chapter returns to reassessing the notion of ‘good’ canonical theatre and questions what makes American theatre worthy of study - ultimately, however, she concludes ‘there is not one ‘American’ theatrical space, dramatic type or gestural language. There are, as always there have been, many ways of producing and consuming theatricality in, across, for and about America” (168).


Reviewed by Teodora Domotor, University of Surrey

This book analyses a series of modernist and postmodernist cultural productions including novels and films while utilising methodologies such as Lacanian psychoanalysis and its philosophical adaptation by Slavoj Žižek. The author reveals how America is perceived - idealised or criticised - in selected texts.

America in Literature and Film comprises two main sections. Firstly, Elbeshlawy investigates modernist perceptions of America in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Seymour Martin Lipset, D. H. Lawrence, Franz Kafka, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. The second part is concerned with postmodernist representations of the new world available in written texts by Susan Sontag, David Shambaugh, Charles W. Brooks, Edward Said, Ihab Hassan, as well as in films by D.W. Griffith and Lars von Trier. In each chapter, the author turns to psychoanalysis assessing levels of human well-being. He pays close attention to strategies involved in the chosen narratives to unpack related issues. He shifts the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan into the context of national consciousness portrayed in narratives which gives rise to the dilemma whether America (and Americaness) itself can actually be defined. Exploring the idea of symbolic America is in focus throughout the entire book. Nonetheless, Elbeshlawy concludes that articulating the inarticulable remains as unattainable as the country’s dream of democracy and freedom.

The book proves to be a compact, well-organised guide to modernism and postmodernism. The interdisciplinary chapters test and extend a variety of methodological approaches to literature and film. The argument is coherent except for the introductory part, which is at times repetitive, inconsistent and slightly contradictory. The first line emphasizes that America has always been an object of Europe’s imagination - a statement that keeps recurring in the rest of the Introduction - which suggests to the reader that the texts will be examined from American and European perspectives. However, Elbeshlawy’s inclusion of European perspectives could be more thoroughly explored.

This said, I recommend this book to scholars and students who are interested in transatlantic literary studies and/or Lacanian psychoanalysis.


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Reviewed by Cheryl Hudson

A decade ago, I co-organised a conference on the themes of Americanisation and Anti-Americanism at the Rothermere American Institute, Oxford. David Ellwood was one of the conference participants and made a major contribution to the debate, returning to the RAI as a research fellow soon
The book represents a life’s work for Ellwood and is a stunning achievement of detailed research, mastery of material from many national debates and is awash with fascinating insights. My only quibble with Ellwood’s approach is his heavy reliance on the words and actions of elites on both sides of the Atlantic. But perhaps elite actors have, in the final analysis, defined our modern conceptions of democracy, production and communication even as they responded to the mass desire aroused by American culture.