The Last Western: Deadwood and the End of American Empire
Paul Stasi and Jennifer Greiman, editors
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The Last Western’s Missing Piece
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The Last Western: Deadwood and the End of American Empire is almost everything for which a critic and fan of the HBO series Deadwood could wish. Through the nine essays collected here and the excellent introduction by editors Paul Stasi and Jennifer Greiman, the book demonstrates the immense value in serious critical approaches to popular culture. At the same time, however, The Last Western calls for more work to be done on a show that has received too little critical attention.

For readers who have not yet watched Deadwood — to whom I say, stop what you are doing and go do so — the show follows the titular mining camp as it is first annexed by the United States and then taken over by the Hearst corporation. The first few episodes suggest that Deadwood will hew close to Western genre conventions: there are lawmen (Seth Bullock and Wild Bill Hickock) opposed to criminals (Al Swearengen), hookers with hearts of gold (Trixie and Joanie Stubbs), and women who represent the stabilizing force of progress (Alma Garret and, later, Martha Bullock). But this is all quickly undone, as Hickock is murdered, and Bullock and Swearengen enter into an uneasy truce to protect the camp from the forces of nationhood and capitalism, a battle they will lose. As such, Deadwood not only rejects the traditional characters found in Westerns, but it also rejects the main plot structure of the Western: this is not the story of a courageous individual bringing civilization to a place with “no law at all.” Rather, it is the story of a community struggling against what others call “civilization.” As Stasi and Greiman write, Deadwood dramatizes “the advance of a modern totality that crushed an individuality which was never actually that heroic to begin with,” tracing “the evacuation of personal agency” in the face of the state and multinational capital (3, 9). They situate Deadwood in the context of HBO’s other
landmark series of the same era — The Sopranos and The Wire — arguing that the “three shows represent an anxiety over the decline of American power and the evacuation of the American subject at the beginning of the twenty-first century” (2).

Some of the essays do nothing more — and need do nothing more — than remind us of what good criticism is. For example, Mark L. Berrettini “Messages from Invisible Sources: Sight in Deadwood’s Public Sphere” examines repeated instances in which characters watch (or attempt to watch) each other from balconies, improvised verandas, and windows. Berrettini reads the abstract theme of the show through these moments, so that Swearengen’s, Hearst’s, and Garret’s struggle against or for nationhood and capitalism depends on their ability to see and read their manifestations. Justin Joyce’s “Listening to the Thunder: Deadwood and the Extraordinary Depiction of Ordinary Violence” likewise uncovers the materiality at the heart of the series. He argues that the sweep of the plot — which, on his account, concerns primitive accumulation, Manifest Destiny, capitalist expansion, the subjection of workers and non-white subjects to the will of the state and capital — plays out on the bodies of Deadwood’s residents. Both Joyce’s and Berrettini’s are, ultimately, examples of great criticism, reminders of what we can and should be doing when we look closely at a work of art. Further, they point to an aspect of the show that will be central to my intervention at the end of this review by highlighting Deadwood’s commitment to bodily materiality.

Other essays deal with the contemporary resonances of Deadwood on the register of both the nation and capital. For example, both Ronald Schmidt’s “Vile Task: Founding and democracy in Deadwood’s Imperial Imagination” and Erick Altenbernd’s and Alex Young’s “A Terrible Beauty: Deadwood, Settler Colonial Violence, and the Post-9/11 State of Exception” demonstrate how the development of the Deadwood camp provides viewers with a valuable heuristic for understanding US culture. Schmidt glosses the historical context of Deadwood: following the Civil War, the Black Hills were promoted as a site where the US might be “refounded” (26). The 1870s narrative of national rejuvenation depended, he argues, on two things: the discovery of gold to replenish the struggling economy and the shifting nature of race relations, both between white and black Americans and between American citizens and Native Americans. Swearengen and Bullock did not come to Deadwood to participate in this great renewal of the United States: both would prefer to be left out of the sights of the nation so that they can attend to their “bidness.” Nevertheless, the city is annexed, and the national narrative continues. Schmidt writes, “[t]he legend moves Bullock and Swearengen to enact this refounding, a fable of retroactive power that speaks to the audience about America through persuasively unlikely actors” (38). Meanwhile Altenbernd and Young demonstrate how the act of founding Deadwood speaks specifically to US foreign policy following 9/11. They argue that the establishment of community in the camp depends on otherwise law-abiding (if not law-upholding) citizens ignoring certain kinds of violence in moments of “exception” so as not to
disturb the progress of the camp. They cite a scene in which Bullock, who has just been named Sheriff, ignores a bloodstain — the blood having been only recently inside a South Dakota territory official — so as to preserve the tentative truce he and Swearengen have built. They write:

By allegorizing life in post 9/11 America through a violent yet redemptive narrative of the “terrible beauty” of American territorial expansion, Deadwood works to expose — and yet also reinscribe within a familiar representational tradition — the model of sovereign power that underwrites the contemporary state of exception. (145)

These two essays, then, speak to the way Deadwood reveals the lie at the center of US statehood; the occasionally heroic and redemptive violence is never all that occasional, let alone heroic or redemptive, and the characters do not enact it in service of building (or rebuilding) the nation.

Perhaps of more interest to readers of Mediations are the essays that concern capitalism directly. Economics is a major theme of the series. As Julia M. Wright argues in the opening paragraph of her contribution (which we shall return to shortly), "Deadwood... is centrally concerned with economics as ‘the camp’ moves from a mostly barter economy to a banking system, and from individual gold-prospectors such as Ellsworth to George Hearst, a corporate entity with agents and vast resources” (42). Jeffrey Scraba and John David Miles’s article, “‘It’s all fucking amalgamation and capital, ain’t it?': Deadwood, the Pinkertons, and Westward Expansion,” traces the transition from individual, local production — in the form of Swearengen’s saloon, Garret’s bank, and the prospectors — to multinational capital personified by George Hearst. While the main characters mostly survive the final episode, their autonomous economy does not.

Daniel Worden’s essay on race in Deadwood is perhaps the most innovative essay in the collection. In “‘Securing the Color’: The Racial Economy of Deadwood,” he reads the treatment of non-white characters against the commonplace belief in Left criticism today, namely “that multiculturalism has not created a more equal world but has instead fed into the neoliberal erosion of the welfare state and dramatic increases in economic inequality” (89). Because Swearengen becomes, over the course of three seasons, a force for the public and collective good, he unites the citizens of Deadwood, regardless of race, against Hearst’s forces. Worden argues that Hearst’s “racial awareness is more advanced” as “a marker of Hearst’s desire to exploit everyone,” regardless of race (100). He goes on, “[r]acial difference... is not central to Hearst’s desire to assert his dominance over others” (102). The threat to the camp posed by Hearst forces Swearengen to “dra[w] new lines of belonging and identification” that are opposed to the gold magnate. As such, Worden concludes ”Deadwood finds utopia in a very unlikely figure, Al Swearengen, who understands that social institutions
and collective belonging, not the politics of difference, may be the only ways to struggle against inequality” (103). His claim aligns with the conclusion to Scraba’s and Miles’s article, in which they argue that through Swearengen’s “resistance to corporate control through constructing strategic alliances, fostering democracy, and championing a free press,” he becomes “an ironic mirror image of the lone Western hero, one for whom community, not individualism, is both the end and the means of his frontier past” (80). According to these essays, then, the figure of Swearengen functions as the lost hero of the American past.

The fact that Swearengen is the hero of the series, unfortunately, glosses over the transformation of the character. When we first meet him, he is clearly the villain: he threatens Trixie with murder after she shoots a john in self-defense, hires out road agents to rob and murder families, and orchestrates the murder of Alma Garret’s husband once he discovers that Garret’s gold claim is rich. By the end of the series, he is transformed into a gruff and sometimes violent, but mostly caring patriarch. His final act of violence, when he murders Jen so she can take the place of Trixie and appease Hearst’s desire for vengeance, is presented as a difficult decision made with great regret. On the whole, this stunning transformation in the character is ignored in this otherwise excellent set of essays. In what follows, I will argue that ignoring this element of the show is emblematic of the other large gap in the collection: a thorough analysis of the role of women in the series.

This is not to say that gender does not appear. The final two essays of the collection — Paul Zinder’s “’The World is Less Than Perfect’: Nontraditional Family Structures in *Deadwood*” and David Greven’s “The Return of the Father: *Deadwood* and the Contemporary Gender Politics of Complexity” — offer opposing views on the presentation of gender, especially in romantic relationships, in the series. Zinder argues that the camp’s invasion by the US and capital is the anvil on which the non-traditional families that ground the show are forged. Governments, corporations, and families are, in creator David Milch’s vision, “ruled by… freedom-limiting interests,” while “non-traditional unions [are]... based on personal choice” (175, 178). For Zinder, then, the relationships — romantic, familial, and otherwise — between Sol and Trixie, Jane and Joanie, Alma and Sofia, and Al, Dan, Silas, and poor, dumb, sweet Johnny — are progressive representations of affective relationships that are strengthened, rather than destroyed, by the onset of nationhood and multinational capital.

In contrast, Greven argues that *Deadwood* masks an “inescapably conservative and orthodox” position on gender and sexuality with “complexity” (194, 197). He writes,

> Complexity is the layered, multifaceted, expansive, and generally humanizing process through which difficult, even morally reprehensible characters... are made acceptable to the critical audience... Richly textured and realized, Al Swearengen cannot simply be denounced as a villain because [he] suffer[s] too much and, moreover, [is] introspective enough
to question not only [his] own moral failings but those of their larger social world. (197)

That is, because Swearengen suffers at the hands of Hearst and recognizes his own failures, we are primed to forgive his more reprehensible actions. Just as Bullock ignores a bloodstain to avoid disrupting the tentative peace of the camp, viewers ignore the stack of bodies Al has created and number of lives he’s ruined because he is portrayed as a complex character who has reasons for and is haunted by the violence he commits. Greven goes on to argue that the presence of figures more violent and retrograde than Swearengen and Bullock (Hearst, but also Francis Wolcott, who murders three women) allows Deadwood to present the normatively patriarchal Swearengen and Bullock as heroes: “Deadwood ends up arguing for a primitivist manhood as the only hope for the oppressed in a brutal barren world” (207).

Zinder and Greven, then, offer diametrically opposed readings of the gender and sexual politics of the show. It is a nice addition to The Last Western that both are presented. Unfortunately, however, they are the two weakest entries in the collection, as both rely on character generalizations that viewers of the show will find hard to swallow. For example, Greven argues that Alma possesses “formidable business sense” that is both grounded and weakened by her affective tie to Sofia (209). He offers absolutely zero evidence for this claim. In fact, careful viewers will immediately remember scenes in which Garret demonstrated her formidable business ignorance: when, for example, Ellsworth has to explain to her what “A.G.” (her initials) signify as she signs a legal document, or when she presents her plan to sell Hearst minority shares in her holdings only to be humiliated and threatened. Zinder likewise misrepresents Swearengen, again ignoring the his transformation from gruesome overlord to town patriarch. Further, although these two authors take up the issue of gender, they do so only under the rubric of how the female characters relate to the male characters — Zinder shows how those women who “choose […] their mate[s] based on [their] own free will” are happier than those who bend to social conventions (180); Greven is most interested in masculine violence and male homosociality, and not interested in the ways that the female characters are depicted as negotiating that world.

The absence of women in the collection is especially troubling because the women of Deadwood are so integral to the end of the series. It is, ultimately, not Al Swearengen, but Alma Garret — who owns the largest and richest of the mines around Deadwood — who stands between Hearst and his desire to dominate the camp. If Hearst fails to convince her to sell her claim, his time in Deadwood will have been wasted. Further, the only character to confront Hearst with the kind of violence viewers have come to expect is Trixie, who, horrified by Hearst’s outsourced murder of Ellsworth, shoots him in the shoulder. It is, finally, the female residents of Deadwood who confront Hearst on the register of both economics and violence. Trixie’s failed assassination
sings with lost possibilities: not just for history (what if George Hearst had been killed in Deadwood?), not just for the series (what if the camp won? what if there had been a season four?), but also for viewers whose love of Deadwood is founded on the series’ portrayal of female agency.

While the series may describe, on the whole, the curtailment of Swearengen’s and Bullock’s personal agency as they are increasingly boxed in by the encroaching and impersonal powers of state and capital (“what some people think of as progress,” as Swearengen describes the arrival of the telegraph), the arc for the female characters runs almost precisely in reverse. Martha Bullock, who arrives in lawless Deadwood to suffer in a loveless marriage to her late husband’s brother, becomes the camp’s schoolteacher and symbolic mother to the children. Calamity Jane, trailing after Wild Bill Hickock in the premiere, ends the series at the start of what seems to be a very good relationship. Her friend, lover, ward, and protector — Joanie Stubbs — has finally left the sex work that made her so miserable. Alma Garret, who arrives trapped in another loveless marriage and engaged in her own kind of sex work, is liberated by the death of her first husband and founds the Bank of Deadwood. And Trixie, literally under Swearengen’s boot heel when we meet her, leaves the Gem Saloon to work as an accountant (for a short while, she is a clerk at the Bank of Deadwood, making it perhaps the only female-owned and -operated financial institution in history, fictional or otherwise). Of course, this summary leaves out a lot: Martha’s heartbreak over the death of her son; Jane’s alcoholism; the murder of Joanie’s business partner and employees at the Chez Amis; Alma’s laudanum addiction and second loveless marriage; Trixie’s own drug relapse, her reluctance to leave sex work, and her near miss with death following her near miss of Hearst’s heart in the final episode. But despite the tragedies that befall the women, the female characters end the series with greater personal agency than with what they began. In charting this opposite path, the female characters on Deadwood provide a counter-story to the main plot that only makes the series’ relationship to contemporary politics and economics richer and more complex.

The one article in the collection single-authored by a woman, Julia M. Wright’s “The Gothic Frontier of Modernity,” shows the potential upshot of taking the female characters more seriously. She argues that Deadwood is a gothic reading of Enlightenment political economy that represents the benign self-regulation of a market economy and inexorable progress of civil societies as founded upon gothic maneuvers of counterfeiting, the invisible hand’s overturning of individual agency, and the more overtly gothic figure of tyrannical violence in the series’ “gory finish.” (43)

As such, it both aligns with the editors’ claim that the series traces the “evacuation of personal agency” and expands on it. The men, who have access to the public sphere, find themselves increasingly unable to impose their personal interest on
it. Adam Smith would argue that in acting in their own self-interest they act in the common interest of the camp, and Wright explains that from the first episode, the series is marked by men who not only do not know how their self-interest relates to the public good, but often do not understand what their self-interest is. Progress comes “through hidden violence, the restraint of patriarchal figures, the magical transformation of self-interested actions into public benefits, and a cast of powerful men who ‘sit mystified’”: Smith’s “invisible hand” is returned to its gothic source (55). The female characters are excluded from the public sphere by virtue of their gender and so cannot act in their own interest. But, as Wright argues, they are central to the economic development of the camp, both as sex workers and as the “foundation of a banking economy... by Garret, the daughter of a con-man” (47). Banking is, of course, a confidence game: depositors must trust the bank; creditors must trust their debtors. The whole arrangement depends on another gothic trope: counterfeits. As Wright explains, banking is fundamentally “the substitution of a less authentic thing for a more authentic thing (deposit slips for currency, currency for gold)” (49). She carefully traces the counterfeits throughout the series, from the very first episode — in which Al blames an attack by road agents on the Sioux tribe — to the camp leaders’ false tranquility following Hearst’s brazen attack on Alma Garret on the main thoroughfare. And, of course, the show concludes with one last, life- and future-saving act of counterfeit: the substitution of Jen for Trixie to satisfy Hearst.

This moment brings together all of the threads we have been tracing throughout Deadwood, The Last Western, and my review. The substitution reveals, ultimately, how value is distributed through the social structure of the camp: Hearst’s wound is valued the same as the life of a woman; one woman’s life is more highly valued than another’s; one male character’s affective relationship to a woman (Al’s relationship with Trixie) is given more weight than another’s (Johnny’s relationship with Jen). Because Jen’s murder preserves the life of the camp — for now — it also suggests the way “the substitution of a less authentic thing” can satisfy, however briefly, the appetite of multinational capital. The final episodes of Deadwood depict Trixie’s lack of restraint and how her impulsive attempt on Hearst’s life requires that another die in her place. That is, it depends on the development of the female characters’ personal agency that is countered by the fact that, despite their forays into the public sphere, their bodies continue to be valued less than the men’s.

As such, we might read what Daniel Worden has to say about the non-white characters of the show and apply to the women. He writes:

Ultimately, what Deadwood dramatizes is the dual reality of race in our neoliberal era. Race persists as a site of difference, and that difference connotes historical inequality. However, today, racial distinctions are more often employed in the service not of equality but of increased inequality. (103)
Gender persists as a site of difference; but the easing of gender inequality seems to mark increased inequality generally: the women only gain personal agency as the advance of the nation and capital curtail the agency of the male characters. But what Worden leaves out in his account of race applies equally to my account of gender: the site of difference marked by race and gender is also a site of physical domination. It is a site where non-white and female bodies are counted less in the capitalistic exchange of biopolitics. Or, as Wright argues, “[m]odernity is itself revealed to be a counterfeit — a ‘pretense to civility’ through elections and a banking economy, with the ‘murderous engine’ [Hearst] continued unimpeded” (58). What I would add to Wright, and to The Last Western generally, is that the murderous engine of capital is fed by human bodies — bodies that are disproportionately female and non-white.