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“GOLD IS EVERY MAN’S OPPORTUNITY” CASTRATION ANXIETY AND THE ECONOMIC VENTURE IN DEADWOOD

KYLE WIGGINS AND DAVID HOLMBERG

In one of the most famous and quoted passages from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx observes, “Men make their own history, but not spontaneously, under conditions they have chosen for themselves; rather on terms immediately existing, given and handed down to them.”¹ While the historical

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conditions that engendered the Black Hills gold rush of the mid-1870s were more “forced” by and upon the participants than “handed” to them, Marx’s argument resonates loudly with the antiromantic project of HBO’s critically acclaimed Western, *Deadwood*. Series creator David Milch makes a similar point about the town of Deadwood: “The only reason the town of Deadwood exists is gold.”² Milch bluntly discards the Western genre’s foundational ideology of self-determination, considering these principles a delusion that obscures the material realities of the late nineteenth century. Were it not for the curious oscillation of history and economy, of time and theft, toward a mining free-for-all zone in the Black Hills, it seems unlikely that the war cries of noninterference and isolationism would have sounded so consistently throughout the camp of prospectors. To that end, Milch’s series goes to great lengths to remind viewers of the historical contingencies that underlie *Deadwood*’s dreams of separatism and self-rule. *Deadwood* contributes to recent revisions of the Western precisely by calling attention to the economic and historical conditions that incubated the illusory myth of self-reliant individualism in the frontier space.

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In part, what the series overturns is the popular and fantastical treatment of the frontier as a blank space where the rugged loner could test out his preformed codes of atomized republicanism. Or, as Richard Slotkin has put it, to promote the fabled version of the West is to “turn from the tragedy of fraternal strife” of labor and capital and embrace “the classic quest of the republic’s heroic ages, the mission to bring light, law, liberty, Christianity, and commerce to the savage places of the earth.”³ If Slotkin identifies a version of the West that is mythic representation, then certainly *Deadwood* is a sort of grimacing antimyth. The show foregrounds a distribution of power in the Great Plains that is gilded with gold. By focusing on the struggle of the camp and its individual inhabitants against state intervention, *Deadwood* forces us to consider the historical factors that placed the contested, lawless matrix of the Black Hills in conflict and eventual compliance with the nation and its capitalist harbingers.

In this article, we argue that the thematic movement of *Deadwood* hinges on the second-season episode “Almagation and Capital,” which marks the series’ transition from a concern with lawlessness to a focus on the economics of western settlement and incorporation. We explore how the episode’s curiously abundant representations of “castration” contain a fundamental anxiety over national annexation and loss of economic autonomy. Ultimately, *Deadwood* reconfigures phallic power, one of the dominant signifiers in the traditional Western, as a guarantor of financial independence rather than its axiomatic meaning of sexual longevity or destructive authority. In this way, *Deadwood*’s intervention into the American Western canon is its overt insistence on historical and economic determinacy as the prime shapers of frontier ideology.

ISSUES OF AUTONOMY

Within the series itself, there are two conflicting viewpoints on exactly what autonomy means to the people of Deadwood. On one side are de facto town boss and warehouse operator

Al Swearengen (Ian McShane) and, by and large, the general citizens of Deadwood, who have come to reinvent themselves outside the firm strictures of the nation. In the show’s companion book, Milch argues that “a gold strike promises a social space where the promise that all men are created equal will finally be fulfilled, and every man-jack among them will be king, outside the falsifying structures of social classes and legality” (45). The realization of this uplift is, of course, highly doubtful. It is a faulty dream of new beginnings, and Swearengen realizes as much when he sums up the town’s disdain for the national order and its willingness to battle the nation’s reaches: “If blood’s what it finally comes to, a hundred years from now the forest is what they’ll find here.”⁴ Swearengen spews a definitively *frontier-style* autonomy that prefers complete destruction over submission to any systemic rule or forfeiture of independence. Deadwood is a town outside and without law, and the citizens put a premium on maintaining this state of lawlessness in order to pursue their individualistic agendas.

Representing the alternate position of autonomy, best described as one of *economic self-determination*, is ubercapitalist George Hearst (Gerald McRaney). With the absence of law in Deadwood, the area’s surprisingly sturdy gold market becomes the organizing principle for settlement and subsequently throws the possibility of total frontier autonomy into a quandary. Hearst offers his economics of settlement as a counterpoint to the romantic independence of the frontier spirit:

Before the color, no white man[,] . . . [n]o man of any hue, moved to civilize or improve a place like this, [nor] had reason to make the effort. The color brought commerce here and such order as has been attained. . . . Gold is every man’s opportunity. . . . Gold confers power, and that power is transferable. Power comes to any man who has the color.⁵

Milch himself echoes this sentiment, although with decidedly more cynicism: “Why do men

and women hold gold as an object of value? There is no purpose to gold. Gold doesn't do anything except serve as a repository of emotion" (45-46). As such, economic autonomy demands some form of organization, consequently forming hierarchies based on capital profit. Seemingly these two autonomies could coexist without conflict, but autonomy free from capitalist restrictions remains at odds with one structured around economic priorities. When Hearst establishes gold as the dominant social organizer *and* the property of a single, primary owner, the entire structure of the town shifts from a kind of swarming multitude to a more starkly delineated class hierarchy. Milch's visuals change along with it, as the third season abandons shots of isolated mining outposts in favor of racially demarcated voting lines, ethnic ghettos, and labor brigades. While gold was always present in the camp, individual agents pursued their own prospecting ends without external forces codifying the cooperation or antagonism among the miners. Their freedom did not correlate to the size of their holdings. Though Hearst does not introduce gold per se, he establishes the importance of gold as symbolic power, and through that economic might, implants a different kind of autonomy.

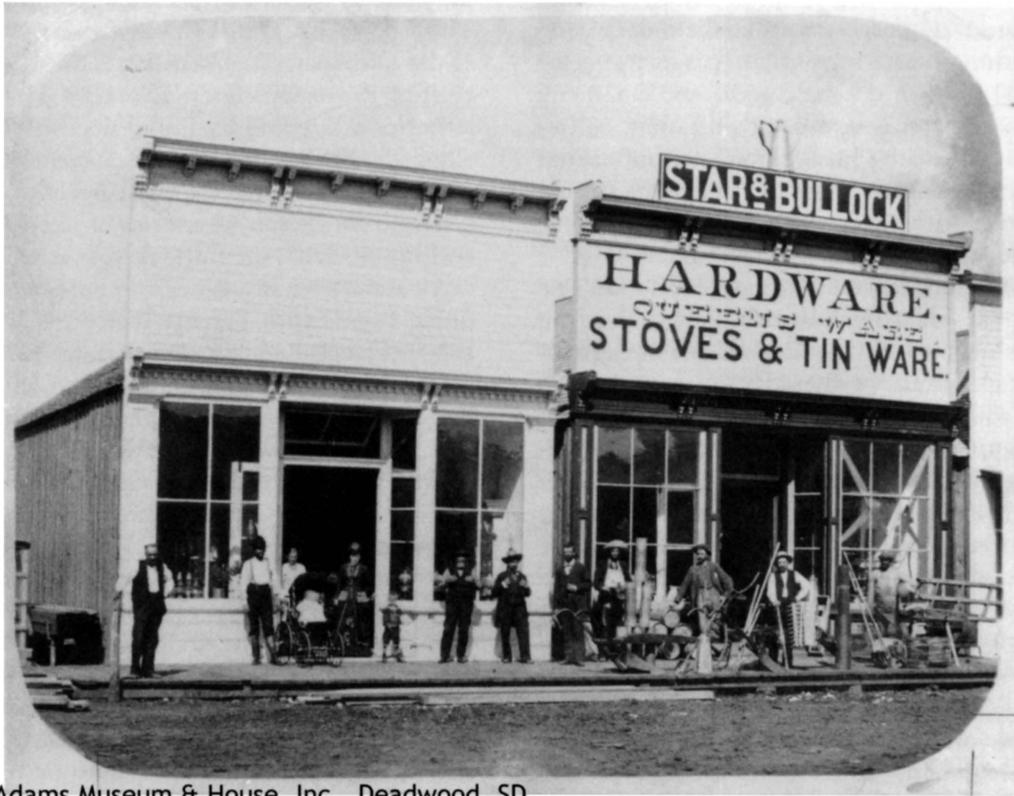
"AMALGAMATION AND CAPITAL": A
TURNING POINT

The second-season episode "Amalgamation and Capital" marks a crucial transition in *Deadwood* as the series begins to concentrate on the economics of autonomy.⁶ The episode centers around two critical events: the imminent annexation of the town to one of the bordering states and the accidental death of Sheriff Bullock's stepson, William (Josh Eriksson). Concerned that the various parties interested in Deadwood's annexation are "after our nuts," Swarengen frets over the camp's fate should Yankton incorporate the Black Hills within its county lines. Meanwhile, "Nigger General" Fields (Franklyn Ajaye) has found a wild stallion in a box canyon and aims to sell

the horse to the U.S. Army after castrating it. The widow Alma Garret (Molly Parker), owner of the town's largest gold strike, is involved in creating the region's first bank, and the installation of a safe and its initial deposit occur alongside the episode's climatic moment.

"Amalgamation and Capital" careens toward a frantic conclusion in a series of jump cuts, ending in William Bullock's death. The intricate weave of scenes in the episode's finale begins with Francis Wolcott (Garret Dilahunt), agent and proxy for George Hearst, inciting the shooting of a miner who he earlier duped into murdering his own brother. The fate of the miner, Mose Manuel (Pruitt Taylor Vince), highlights the supreme power of gold—particularly when wielded by a capitalist magnate like Hearst—to precipitate even fratricide. The next scene swings to Sheriff Bullock (Timothy Olyphant) inside his hardware store, where Mrs. Bullock teaches Sofia her "numbers" by cutting a sausage (one of the episode's many blatant phallic symbols) into pieces while the new safe is installed. The arrival of a legitimate bank, backed by Alma Garret, means to give some permanence to the town by ensuring the local investment of the Dakota gold. Meanwhile, the owner of the No. 10 Saloon, Tom Nuttall, receives William's help in testing the town's first bicycle in the muddy thoroughfare. Along with the arrival of the telegraph lines, the bicycle attests to the pressure of a modernized, networked future on Deadwood. The penultimate scene features the Nigger General and town livery owner Hostetler (Richard Gant) preparing to castrate the wild stallion. The General asks the horse, "Don't you wanna serve your country? Good as they been to you, I bet you don't even vote," before the stallion breaks free of its bindings, rampaging through the streets of the town and ultimately fatally trampling young Bullock. This castration, or its attempt, becomes a pivotal event, both in its diagetic and metaphoric significance, regarding the redirection of the show's narrative drive.

Each of these elaborately connected scenes hinges on its relationship to the castration of



Adams Museum & House, Inc., Deadwood, SD

FIG. 1. *Star & Bullock Hardware Store on Main Street, Deadwood, SD.* Courtesy of Adams Museum, Deadwood, SD. [72-456-1]

the wild stallion. While Milch rarely resorts to established Western conventions, the use of the wild stallion stands as an exception. The opening credit sequence uses the image of the horse to particular effect, featuring a galloping stallion alongside various images we understand to represent the West (with a capital W): shots of whiskey, prostitutes, and nuggets of gold. Every episode begins with the image of the horse, and in the final moments of the sequence we see the horse reflected in a puddle along with the title of the show. Milch explains this use of the horse as symbol:

Our sense of ourselves as separate is an illusion within this large expression of energy, and our symbols are ways of transcending the illusion that we are separate and alone.

If you look at the title sequence of the show, that's what happens. The horse is the electricity, is the life, is the beating heart, and then the horse looks into the mud, and up comes Deadwood. (137)

The motif of horse-as-Deadwood, or Deadwood's life-force, which Milch suggests becomes analytically germane with the introduction of the threat of castration, establishes for the first time the castration anxiety that will remain pathologically relevant throughout the remainder of the series.

The circumstances of this particular stallion should be considered as well because they correlate nicely with the conditions of Deadwood's annexation. After the horse was found loose in the wilderness, the Nigger General intends

to sell the "nuttred" stallion to the cavalry. Hostetler explains, "I can nut him, but the moon is wrong, and he's gonna take it badly," to which the General responds, "I ain't gonna lose my chance at a hundred waiting on the fuckin' moon." The implication here is that the horse revolts because the timing is wrong, not necessarily because the castration itself is flawed; similarly, the annexation of Deadwood might be less of the issue than the timing of its appropriation. By conflating the town and the horse, the revolt of the stallion conveys the unwillingness of Deadwood to be forcefully "unmanned" and sold into the army (an obvious metonym for the nation). When Al remarks that Yankton may be "after our nuts," the connection between the town's annexation and the stallion's castration becomes clear. In many respects annexation to the United States would result in the loss of the town's autonomy, a feature the town ironically values over everything but money. The horse implies the town (or its populace) possesses some mobility, which is a powerful capacity in a frontier show that is so intensely claustrophobic. In each episode, the camera rarely leaves the perimeter of the town proper. Even when Deadwood is welded to the nation surrounding it, the camp will still desire sovereignty. Hostetler's assertion that the "moon is wrong" for castration suggests that Deadwood can be annexed, but that if the circumstances are wrong, the town's future will be jeopardized. And ultimately, whether from the mistimed annexation or other external forces, Deadwood's future is ultimately compromised by the same economic and political forces that helped create it.

CASTRATION AND PHALIC VIOLENCE

Images of castration and phallic violence persist throughout *Deadwood*. The Western genre has always hosted conversations about the role of masculinity, and in this sense the series is quite traditional, as it too engages in these sorts of discussions. However, *Deadwood's* discourse focuses almost squarely on representation of the phallus and, specifically, castration.

Jane Tompkins argues that while the Western genre is predominantly a narrative of male violence, it also unremittably "worships the phallus."⁷ Tompkins illustrates how the anti-feminist, secularist impulse of the Western constructs a power dynamic in which male virility, violence, and self-rule are often collapsed into a single system. She argues that the Western "doesn't have anything to do with the West as such" and is less about the confrontation between civilization and the frontier. Rather, the familiar narrative "is about men's fear of losing their mastery, and hence their identity, both of which the Western tirelessly reinvents."⁸ In a similar vein, David Lusted argues that the classic Western should be primarily understood as "a male action genre exploring changing expectations and notions of masculine identity through fantasy."⁹ In short, Lusted claims that a genre "concerned with men in society as much as in myth" cannot avoid addressing the legion of working-class men in the frontier who lack social power. Lusted correctly locates working-class deprivation of social power in psychoanalytic terms, citing the lengthy critical engagement with this issue in Hollywood cinema and Western films (especially those produced in the 1950s). Class warfare often plays out in Western films in a reductive pairing in which weaponry symbolizes social power and empty-handed laborers are equated with feminized domesticity.¹⁰ The Western's propensity for crudely literalizing psychoanalytic dilemmas notwithstanding, frontier visual art similarly pays little attention to the West's economic circumstances. One of Frederic Remington's most famous oil paintings, *What an Unbranded Cow Has Cost* (1895), depicts the aftermath of a shootout (catalyzed by ostensibly unmarked cattle that wandered into greener pastures) in a series of dying male embraces. Richard Etulain writes that the painting "represents Remington's vision of the frontier as an arena of masculine courage—and violence."¹¹ Though Remington's painting glorifies the West in less certain terms than his earlier work, and is "more complicated and freighted with greater significance"

in Etulain's estimation, it seemingly works in two conflicted directions. On the one hand, the title gestures toward a causal relationship between free-range ranching and rampant frontier violence. The economic motivations of bloodshed are clear. On the other hand, *What an Unbranded Cow Has Cost* eschews the encroaching fences of a closed range or the fringes of town buildings. Instead, Remington's painting interprets the closing of the frontier as violent exhaustion rather than poverty, rising industrialization, displacement, or economic uncertainty. The painting is reluctant to fold the signposts of obsolete separatism into the symbolic register of the frontier's endgame in which the adroit gunslinger is the enduring figure.

If we extend the insights of Tompkins and Lusted further, applying the genre's schema of tireless and timeless masculine violence to *Deadwood*, we will see how Milch's series "re-invents" the struggle for mastery and identity in the Western. Milch pushes the representation of "unmanning," as it is referred to at times within the series, toward a discernibly economic register. By tracing the evolution of this motif backward through the series, a pattern begins to emerge, which illuminates the purpose that castration serves within the symbolic framework of the series. This reverse analytic movement also reveals the specific moment when the act of castration took on a symbolic meaning for the characters beyond the substantive act.

In *Deadwood's* final season, a plethora of scenes and images meditate on this castration theme. During a meeting with Hearst, Swearingen is grabbed and held from behind by the strongman Captain Turner (Allan Graf) as Hearst demands information on Alma Garret and how to acquire her claim. Swearingen offers a terse reply, at which point his middle finger is severed by Hearst with a mining pick.¹² It is a representative castration, not just for the phallic implication in losing a finger, but also its attempt to ruin Swearingen's ability to wield his weapon of preference, the blade. That Hearst chooses a mining pick, his

tool of choice for excavating gold, to maim Swearingen establishes the economic implications of this symbolic castration. Swearingen agonizes over the helplessness he felt at that moment in a conversation with one of his prostitutes, Dolly (Ashleigh Kizer):

Swearingen: I knew it was coming, too.

Fuckin' Cap'n. Holding me down. I knew what the fuck was next. . . . They hold you down, you can't get out of it to help yourself. . . . They hold you down from behind then you wonder why you're helpless. How the fuck could you not be.

Dolly: I don't like it either.

Swearingen: No, huh? Why?

Dolly: When they hold you down.

Swearingen: I guess I do that, huh, with your fucking hair?

Dolly: No.

Swearingen: No? Well bless you for a fuckin' fibber.¹³

A sexual energy is imparted to the chopping off of Swearingen's finger, reinforced here in dialogue comparing that act of disfigurement to rape. It is, above all, an act of emasculation at the hands of the capitalist Hearst. Later, Hearst's man Turner and Swearingen's man Dority (W. Earl Brown) engage in a furious hand-to-hand combat, sanctioned by their bosses as a kind of extended contest of manliness. The fight effectively ends with Turner having his eye ripped out, an ocular castration of sorts. Turner, with his eye hanging out of its socket, then has his back broken and head bashed in by Dority's suggestive weapon, a large log. Milch says of the battle, "By the end of the fight, Dority is naked, and the entire truth of what life is like absent civilization has come home to him" (169). Swearingen summarizes this series of interrelated events over whiskey: "Hearst organizes violence between his man and Dority . . . Orchestrates combat between them, mutilates me, plants that organizer's body like a flag in the fuckin' thoroughfare . . . Makes of me and Tolliver a two-headed beast to savage what might be healthy born out of the

fuckin' election and gnaw its own privates off ours." The involvement of Hearst, the paragon of capitalism, in all of these events highlights an intricate relationship within the series, fully developed and in this scene repeatedly reinforced: *the symbolic connectivity between forced economic consolidation and violent castration.*

Obviously, these scenes of castration involve the potential loss of manliness, and, whether imminent or implied, they create a climate of fear that pervades *Deadwood*. Yet, continuous contemplation of Deadwood's annexation and what is jeopardized by national inclusion runs concurrently with the insistent castration motif. Deadwood exists in a zone outside the national sphere, and its incorporation into the nation becomes problematic because of the conflict inherent in the lawless welter in which Deadwood thrives. Annexation only becomes an issue for the town when U.S. politicians realize the potential economic gain that can be realized by exploiting the town's primary natural resource: gold. Milch explains that the "Dakota territory was absolutely dependent for all of its revenues on theft from the Indians. There were no crops you could rely on" (137). Milch argues that this resource is the motivating symbol for settling the West: "At the center of Deadwood is the nineteenth century's most mind-bending symbol of value: gold. . . . Gold drives the camp's economy, and it serves to organize the experience of being on the frontier, where the uncultivated landscape would otherwise seem meaningless" (39). Gold and its economic implications become the town's calculus of power, and this overdetermined symbol reinforces its status through a variety of threatened amputations.

THE ANNEXATION OF DEADWOOD

The attempted gelding in "Amalgamation and Capital" conflates annexation and castration at a deciding moment in the series. If the town's autonomy is represented by the stallion's "manliness," then the looming annexation of Deadwood by the national community, replete with economic codependence, guarantees a loss

of virility. The anxiety over castration within the show reflects the realities of what annexation might mean to the people of Deadwood. Far from being a festive union with the body politic, annexation threatens to deprive the citizens of Deadwood of one of their primary motivations for settling the town. Milch sees this process rehearsed throughout the settlement of the West:

Deadwood, like other gold rush towns, was a kind of reenactment of the founding of our country. When gold was discovered, there was a rush toward a new territory, followed by a collective regression from society—thus, the Wild West. And later, there was a regeneration of society seemingly *de novo*, from new. That happens in the hopes that the contradictions of the old social order will finally be resolved. But once the news comes of a strike, settlement patterns immediately change. Waves of prospectors and parasites, merchants, fortune hunters, displaced persons, and government bureaucrats rush in to this new space, bringing with them all the old forms of civilization from which the first wave of adventures had fled. (41-43)

Milch suggests that escaping the national community becomes an impossible fantasy with the introduction of gold, because that community continually reincorporates escapees in times of economic need. The series posits that without a doubt the primary reason that the Dakotas, Wyoming, and Montana all vie to integrate Deadwood into their respective states is the financial boost the camp would bring. Gold ironically then becomes the driving force behind annexation and, by association, the metaphoric castration of the town's potency, which is wholly indebted to the existence of that gold.

The history of the region is essentially the history of gold and the race for its appropriation. In 1873 prospectors confirmed a long-standing rumor that the Black Hills territory contained gold. At the time, President Ulysses

S. Grant disliked the idea of breaking the United States' treaty with the Lakota Sioux and allowing rampant mining. The Treaty of Fort Laramie, signed in 1868, rearticulated the exclusive rights of the Sioux nation to hunt and cultivate the Black Hills. In exchange for allowing the "civilizing" introduction of agriculture and the installation of English-speaking schools and institutions, the Sioux would receive financial stipends from the national government. However, the discovery of gold five years later by Indian and white prospectors came at a particularly volatile time in U.S. economic history. In 1873 the Great Plains suffered widespread "bank panics," caused in large part by the rampant forgery of monetary notes and national industrial upheaval in the wake of the Civil War and Reconstruction period. The Black Hills, like much of the Great Plains, was stagnating economically. Though President Grant purportedly opposed delimiting the Sioux land, he eventually succumbed to pressure to relieve the economic depression and in 1874 authorized Gen. George Custer to investigate the veracity of claims that gold was hibernating in the hills of the Dakota Territory.

Custer's expedition reported back that the rumors of gold were true, and by the winter of 1874 illegal miners occupied the Sioux lands. Over the next year, Grant vacillated on the Black Hills issue. He appointed Custer as the area's standing cavalry commander, but in 1875 ordered the battle-hungry general to evacuate all white prospectors squatting in the hills. This move particularly irked Custer since the general had grown weary from inactivity and massive troop desertion. Custer wanted nothing more than to oust the Sioux and catalyze a gold rush to the struggling region. In 1876, seeing or trying no alternative, Grant finally caved into the intractable depression of the region and attempted to resuscitate it by rescinding the treaty and opening the Sioux land to white prospectors.

Soon after, a large cache of gold was discovered near Deadwood, and the rush was on. Grant immediately ordered a complete

troop withdrawal from the Black Hills so that free-market mining could operate unimpeded. Of course Custer's surveillance was no longer required in the area, and his regiment was no longer held in abeyance by any borders, demarcations, or adherence to national sovereignties. His subsequent short-lived war against the Sioux and defeat at Little Big Horn actually did little to slow prospecting activity in Deadwood. In fact, by June of 1876, roughly 10,000 whites had flocked to Indian Territory, which was *not* part of the United States and not privy to the laws and jurisdictions of the nation, nor backed up by the army. As Richard Slotkin has convincingly argued, "the chief consequence of the discovery of a gold and farming country in the Black Hills would be the expansion of the national basis of credit—gold and the value of public lands—and the development of a Frontier alternative to the confrontation of labor and capital for control of the contracting resources of the depressed East."¹⁴ Slotkin points out that the Turnerian frontier "process" acts as a national escape route away from the battle between the forces of labor and capital, which were ossifying in the closed urban space of the East and suffering from the lack of new industry in the Plains.¹⁵ Instead, the deregulation of the Black Hills and its subsequent invasion by white miners provided a sort of release valve of economic pressures while simultaneously contributing to a gold reserve against which the United States would draw for decades. The frenzied excitement over the gold rush, depicted in newspapers as the ultimate crucible test of frontier self-determination, gave focus to many regional residents without jobs. Overnight an unsanctioned, ungoverned nodal point emerged where all the financial burdens of the region could be gathered. In effect, Grant's administration located an extra-national repository—a "new Eldorado"—where the country could relieve itself of a restless lower class while charging them with the task of extracting a new financial base for a reconstructing economy.

Deadwood was, in effect, a disavowed outpost. Essentially, Grant's decision to deregulate

the territory turned Deadwood and the Black Hills into a "closed system" that could in theory self-sustain its interior market exchanges through mining. And as Milch has rightly pointed out, economics was the grand organizing force in the camp.¹⁶ The town did not want to appear as secessionists, establishing their own government and law, so for years they avoided doing so, and let matters of justice, health codes, fire safety, and the like deteriorate as they would. Focus remained on economic perpetuation and a protectionist doctrine that sealed off the camp from outside influence.

As the narrative progresses in *Deadwood*, the plausibility of complete self-rule outside the bordering nation proves more and more unlikely. Judging by the abundance of anxious scenes over castration, the denizens of Deadwood struggle to articulate what Karl Jacoby has identified as a "middle ground between subsistence and capitalist engagement."¹⁷ According to Jacoby, rural folk in unpopulated regions of the United States in the late nineteenth century commonly battled invasive legislatures and occupancy by the modern administrative state. In short, non-market ideologies of subsistence living and hunting practiced by residents in land recently acquired by conservation movements were in polarized opposition to national encouragement of a capitalist market. Rural folk were often forced to construct, with great difficulty, a hybrid position that placated national adherence to the market economy while cohering with an "image of themselves as independent pioneers." While *Deadwood* does not address the enclosure overtures of conservationism, the show does treat the tension between frontier autonomy and the market imperative of the national order in terms similar to Jacoby's. As we have seen, Swearingen perpetually voices concern over the town's way of life, its impending obsolescence, and the uncomfortable position of wanting to resist collapse into the nation but ultimately depending on it for the town's long-term survival. Herein lies the paradoxical trajectory of Deadwood in Milch's series: the vacuum of deregulated mining, an

ad-hoc economic structure, and a message of unfettered self-determination in the Black Hills usher in a perfected version of mercenary capitalism in the form of George Hearst, who ultimately undermines the very power of the marauders who preceded him. In other words, Deadwood's members, as Milch tells it, were too successful at securing their own autonomy on the outskirts of the capitalist national order, leaving the town vulnerable to defeat by the foremost practitioner of their ideology.

THE ARRIVAL OF GEORGE HEARST

In the historical arc of the show, George Hearst rides into Deadwood in the late summer of 1877. By the beginning of the following year he has purchased the majority of gold claims in the camp, buying out the most willing holders on the cheap and muscling out the most recalcitrant miners with scare tactics and hired goons. The shape of the camp is inexorably altered. In the show's third season Milch purges the narrative of campfire shots and profiles of the individuated prospect operations. In their place is the quasi-mechanical mining line of Cornish workers and routinized extraction processes that Hearst has brought to the Black Hills. After the episode "Amalgamation and Capital" midway through the second season, the mining composition of Deadwood is discernibly industrial. Accompanying Hearst's industrial makeover is a brutal transformation in the utility of frontier singularity.

In the third episode of *Deadwood's* final season, "True Colors," sheriff Bullock and deputy Charlie Utter (Dayton Callie) must address Hearst's violent union-busting tactics. A Cornish worker sobbingly recounts how the guards at Hearst's mine sawed off the legs (another phallic image) of a fellow employee who "talked union." Bullock vows to punish Hearst and his men for their crime. Hearst casually shrugs off the warnings of the ersatz sheriff, reminding Bullock that he hasn't broken any laws. Of course, Hearst is correct, as in keeping with the purgatory status of the camp, there are no statutes prohibiting maimings or murder.



FIG. 2. A. W. Merrick (Jeffrey Jones) (left) looking on while Blazanov (Pasha D. Lychnikoff) crouches beside dead Cornish miner. Deputy Sheriff Charlie Utter (Dayton Callie) stands at the right. From *Deadwood*, season 3, episode 29, "A Two Headed Beast." Courtesy of Home Box Office, Inc. (HBO). Photo by Doug Hyun/HBO.

The abrogation of law that germinated the camp in the first place ostensibly legitimates Hearst's murder of unionists. Bullock counters with the moral reprobation that "there is a sanction against murder." Hearst discards this empty threat as well, telling Bullock that two of his guards were murdered in Swearngen's saloon just a few days prior, and the killings went unpunished. The exchange between Bullock and Hearst, the paradigms of interventionism and libertarian market-determination, indicates the thematic shift in *Deadwood's* final act. The series explored a celebration of deregulated economic play and secured autonomy in its early episodes, but by the final movement has come to confront the nadir of this attitude. Hearst's financial dominance and eventual

monopoly of the Black Hills mines are enabled, if not encouraged, by the frontier mandate of ceaseless expansion. Hearst even mimics Al Swearngen's surveillance of the camp by creating his own open-air hotel foyer from which he can observe the street. Yet his domination turns back on the inhabitants of Deadwood and seemingly threatens their individual sovereignty. As such, the Cornishmen's attempt to unionize, Bullock's attempt to corral Hearst under the auspice of some unstipulated law, and the coalitional arrangement among the town's competing entrepreneurs signifies a renouncement of noninterference libertarianism by the series' conclusion. Hearst is too potent a player in that game, and the town's (literal) survival becomes contingent on orga-

nizing forces against his unchecked consumption.

In the third-season episode "A Constant Throb," Hearst quips to a Yankton official (who is exploring Hearst's stance on Deadwood's eventual annexation to the Dakotas) that he "values efficiencies and economics of consolidation."¹⁸ The term "consolidation," the series concludes, operates as the unforeseen telos of deregulated, transborder economics. Hearst fetishizes consolidation because it indicates a centralization of power under a single agency. In the case of the Black Hills in 1878, that agency is Hearst. The Missouri capitalist (and father of San Francisco newspaperman) sauntered into a zone that romanticized the free rein of the individual, and he left that zone as the lone ruler of all of its participants and economies. In the very first episode of *Deadwood*, the to-the-point prospector Ellsworth (Jim Beaver) relays to Swearingen that he enjoys working his own "payin' fuckin' gold claim," and "not the U.S. government sayin' I'm trespassin' or the savage fuckin' red man himself or any of these limber-dick cocksuckers passin' themselves off as prospectors had better stop me."¹⁹ There is much to say about Ellsworth's speech, not only in contrast to Hearst but within its own terms. First, Ellsworth deploys a limited, though undeniably heinous, pragmatism of noninterference. For him, what is great about living in Deadwood is his ability to mine his lucrative site without the meddlesome interference of the nation (that the camp is not a part of) or the Sioux (whom the prospectors stole the land from). In the later episodes, Hearst similarly toasts this feature of Deadwood, but he does so on his way to violating any claim to autonomy that Ellsworth brandishes in the opening episode. Near the series' end, Ellsworth is shot to death by a Hearst gunman in part because the prospector refused to relinquish one of the last claims that Hearst had yet to acquire. Secondly, in his speech Ellsworth situates noninterference within phallic terms. Ellsworth's financial livelihood can only be jeopardized by the return of the state, the Indians, or the "limber-dick" competition of pseudo-prospectors.

CONCLUSION: AUTONOMY AND THE FEAR OF CASTRATION

In the Western, autonomy is commonly signified by a proficiency with firearms, which in turn gets morphed into the phallic worship that Tompkins and Lusted identify. Death and reproduction conflate, and the key instrument in the Western's crude symbolic order is something wielded by individual agents.²⁰ However, this ideology is supremely dehistoricized, even within the genre's own timeless logic, and effaces the economic or material circumstances that dictate who can access power in the frontier. Here is where Milch's *Deadwood* makes another of its multiple interventions. In each of these cases—Ellsworth's speech to Swearingen, the attempted castration of the horse, Al's guarded expectation that the courting states are "after our nuts"—*Deadwood* invokes the phallic form that power takes in the Western legacy. Yet, in each utterance, capitalist forces jeopardize the camp's economic sovereignty. That is to say that castration in *Deadwood* is not seen exclusively in the classic Western terms of disarming a gunman, such as in the case of Zane Grey's pulp classic *Riders of the Purple Sage*.²¹ Instead, in *Deadwood*, gold and economics conjoin with the genre's standard phallic tropes to construct the cynosures of autonomous power in the frontier. George Hearst reminds us of such when, in the third-season episode, "Unauthorized Cinnamon," he lectures about how "gold confers power, and that power is transferable. Power comes to any man who has the color."

Deadwood resituates the markers of individual autonomy to include the systemic conditions that enabled their emergence. Milch's series modifies the dominant Western trope of phallic power to embody financial freedom. In effect, the series recalibrates the genre's recurrent anxiety over castration to signify the simmering concern among frontier outposts in the post-Civil War period that their local sovereignty would be subsumed by a more powerful national or capitalistic order. The trauma for *Deadwood*'s characters is evident

in the slow realization that their own projects of capitalizing on the delimited space of the Black Hills and authoring their developmental script come from precisely the same impulse that motivated capitalism and the nation to colonize the place from the outset. In her terrific study of manifest destiny, *The Legacy of Conquest*, Patricia Limerick points out that the “dominant motive for moving West was improvement and opportunity.”²² Ironically, individual pioneers seldom recognized the synchronization of their motives and those of national capitalism. For the conquering spirit, Limerick argues that “the ends abundantly justified the means; personal interest in the acquisition of property coincided with the national interest in the acquisition of territory.” For the residents of Deadwood, this lesson is delivered by Hearst’s thugs as a knife in the chest of a Cornish unionist.²³ The man is found murdered in the street, with a knife protruding from his chest like an erection; yet this symbol, standing as it does for virility and manliness, endures as an obvious affront to the subject, who is emasculated in death. The unmitigated violence that secured Deadwood as a stolen gold farm is precisely the mechanism that destroys the camp’s mastery. Milch’s *Deadwood* effectively counters the Western’s treatment of “rugged individualist” ideology as primarily *an expression or determination of the will*. The series exposes the historical, economic, and material conditions that produced that ideology and enabled its mythic application. In the process, *Deadwood* offers us an important revision to the phallic power dimension central to the Western, and the pervasive castration anxiety that haunts the genre. In *Deadwood*, the symbolic loss of masculinity is not the removal of a capacity for violence, but the excision of unfettered economic sovereignty by like-minded forces. In a line laden with the quintessential venom of *Deadwood* dialogue, George Hearst drives home the economically motivated logic of frontier ideology when he remarks about an unpurchased gold claim that “opportunities suit me or I neuter them.”²⁴

NOTES

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1. Karl Marx, *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. Eugene Kamenka (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1983), 287.

2. David Milch, *Deadwood: Stories of the Black Hills* (New York: Melcher Media, 2006), 45. Further citations to *Deadwood* appear in parentheses in the text.

3. Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 8.

4. “A Rich Find,” episode 30, season 3, of *Deadwood*, first broadcast July 30, 2006, by HBO, directed by Tim Hunter and written by Alix Lambert.

5. “Unauthorized Cinnamon,” episode 31, season 3, first broadcast July 23, 2006, by HBO, directed by Mark Tinker and written by Regina Corrado.

6. “Amalgamation and Capital,” episode 21, season 2, first broadcast May 1, 2005, by HBO, directed by Ed Bianchi and written by Elizabeth Sarnoff.

7. Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 28.

8. *Ibid.*, 45.

9. David Lusted, “Social Class and the Western as Male Melodrama” in *The Book of Westerns*, ed. Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye (New York: Continuum, 1996), 66.

10. For an example of the strange equation of arms and social/economic class, see *Shane*, produced and directed by George Stevens, screenplay by A. B. Guthrie Jr. (Paramount Pictures, 1953).

11. Richard Etulain, *Re-Imagining the Modern American West: A Century of Fiction, History, and Art* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996), 56.

12. “I’m Not the Fine Man You Take Me For,” episode 26, season 3, first broadcast June 18, 2006, by HBO, directed by Dan Attias and written by David Milch and Regina Corrado.

13. “Full Faith and Credit,” episode 28, season 3, first broadcast July 2, 2006, by HBO, directed by Ed Bianchi and written by Ted Mann.

14. Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, 358.

15. See Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” in *Does the Frontier Experience Make America Exceptional?*, ed. Richard W. Etulain (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1999), 17-43. The impact of the Turnerian thesis (1893) on histories and mythologies of the

frontier has been explored in innumerable texts. For a succinct examination of the frontier and American exceptionalism, see Richard W. Etulain's collection.

16. David Milch provides a brief but useful gloss on the historical and economic engines that drove Deadwood's formation in his DVD commentary on the series' first season ("The Real Deadwood," *Deadwood, The Complete First Season*, DVD, directed by Michael Schwarz, Kikim Media [New York: HBO Video, 2004]).

17. Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 54.

18. "A Constant Throb," episode 34, season 3, first broadcast August 13, 2006, by HBO, directed by Mark Tinker and written by W. Earl Brown.

19. "Deadwood," episode 1, season 1, first broadcast March 21, 2004, by HBO, directed by Walter Hill and written by David Milch.

20. For a prime example of the gun/phallus trope, see Lawrence Kasdan's film *Wyatt Earp*, directed by Lawrence Kasdan, written by Dan Gordon and Kasdan (Warner Brothers, 1994). Upon riding into town for a night of whoring, Earp informs a group of bandits that the city forbids the carrying of firearms. The leader of the group grabs his crotch and remarks, "The only gun I need is between my legs."

21. For a compelling reading of the correlation between guns and masculinity in Grey's novel, see Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 33.

22. Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 36.

23. "A Two-Headed Beast," episode 29, season 3, first broadcast July 9, 2006, by HBO, directed by Daniel Minahan and written by David Milch.

24. "A Constant Throb," episode 34, season 3, first broadcast August 13, 2006, by HBO, directed by Mark Tinker and written by W. Earl Brown.